

Tuesday
23 June 2026

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 23 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

Tuesday 23 June 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Household Budgets

1. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of her Department's policies on household budgets. [900554]

14. **Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): What steps she has taken to help support households with the cost of living. [900567]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): The Government recognise that energy costs, inflation and global pressures continue to squeeze household budgets. That is why we have taken careful, targeted action through the great British summer savings package which launches on Thursday, cutting VAT on summer activities so that adventure parks, soft play centres, cinemas and theatres will be cheaper, alongside the work we are doing to maintain the triple lock and to lift children out of poverty.

John Lamont: The Chancellor has overseen huge tax rises for those who work hard and do the right thing. Now they have been hit by soaring energy bills—a situation that is even more acute for many of my constituents who rely on heating oil. How does the Chancellor think that squares with the Government's pledge to cut energy bills?

Rachel Reeves: The measures I took in my Budget last year took £150 off energy bills by getting rid of some levies altogether and moving others to general taxation. If we look at the most recent inflation numbers, inflation in the UK was 2.8% last month, which compares to 3.2% in the eurozone and 4% in the US. Food inflation was at its lowest rate for 17 months.

Josh Newbury: The Chancellor will know that I have raised the need to take action on the costs faced by farmers and families alike, both of which she has done. The great British summer savings scheme will be a brilliant help with the cost of giving kids a great school holiday, particularly the free bus travel for five to 15-year-olds throughout August. Does the Chancellor agree that continuing to look at how we can support affordable bus travel for constituents like mine in Cannock Chase will be very important even beyond the great summer break to come?

Rachel Reeves: As my hon. Friend knows, we are investing £3 billion in local bus services to both improve the service for passengers and freeze bus fares until at least March next year. This summer there will be unlimited free travel for children aged between five and 15 in his Cannock Chase constituency and across the country. I also give a special shout-out to my mayor, Tracy Brabin, for the beautiful Weaver Network of electric buses, manufactured in Northern Ireland and Yorkshire, and serving the people of West Yorkshire.

Loan Charge

2. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Reform): What steps she has taken to support people adversely affected by the loan charge. [900555]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): The Government introduced legislation in the Finance Act 2026 to provide for a new settlement offer for those affected by the loan charge. The Government will write off the first £5,000 of liabilities, and that is in addition to the proposals put forward by the independent reviewer, Ray McCann.

Andrew Rosindell: The Minister will be aware that tens of thousands of people continue to suffer because of the loan charge scandal, and that successive Governments, both Labour and Conservative, have failed those people. They have dithered, delayed and ignored reviews, causing confusion, worsening the financial harm and anxiety for so many people. Surely the Minister must agree that the victims deserve resolution and closure, so that they can move on with their lives?

Dan Tomlinson: I do agree that those who have been affected by the loan charge need to be able to move on with their lives. That is why the Government put forward a generous settlement offer at the last Budget that went further than the proposals set out by the independent reviewer. I would just note that it was a Government that the hon. Gentleman supported for 14 years who introduced the loan charge and did not do enough to reform it for those who were affected by it.

Cost of Living: Falkirk

3. **Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): What steps she has taken to help support people with the cost of living in Falkirk. [900556]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): The Government remain dedicated to raising living standards for people in Falkirk and across the UK by driving economic growth and bearing down on inflation, which I know continues to squeeze household budgets. Measures announced in my Budget last year are already taking effect: raising the national living wage and the national minimum wage; maintaining the triple lock on pensions; and extending free school meals to more families. Our great British summer savings package builds on that, reducing VAT on a whole range of summer attractions, including, I believe, Airthrill in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Euan Stainbank: The cut to VAT for family days out this summer starts along with the summer holidays later this week. This is a Labour Government acting to bring down the cost for families visiting Falkirk's fantastic

tourism, leisure and hospitality attractions. Many families are anxiously looking at the other side of the summer, with energy bills rising as a direct consequence of the illegal Iran war. Does the Chancellor agree that any forthcoming targeted energy bill support must similarly extend to working families?

Rachel Reeves: We timed the great British summer savings so that they start on the first day of the Scottish school holidays and continues to 1 September, when children in England, Wales and Northern Ireland return to school. We hope that the scheme has a big impact on families around the country, alongside the free bus travel in England in August.

We did not start the war in the middle east, we did not join it, and I have been clear about my views on it, but the war is clearly having consequences here at home. We will continue to monitor the situation and take every action necessary to support families.

Temporary VAT Reduction for Hospitality: Northern Ireland

4. **Alex Easton** (North Down) (Ind): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the temporary reduction in the rate of VAT in supporting the hospitality sector in Northern Ireland. [900557]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): I thank the hon. Member for giving me another chance to talk about the great British summer savings scheme, which the Chancellor has just talked us through. It is fantastic that it is coming into place in just a couple of days' time and will run until the end of the summer holidays. It extends across all four nations of the United Kingdom, benefiting businesses in Northern Ireland as well as in Great Britain.

Alex Easton: Given Northern Ireland's unique position in the United Kingdom, sharing an open border with the Republic of Ireland where the VAT rate is 13.5% for the hospitality industry, will the Chancellor look to reduce the rate of VAT for the hospitality sector in Northern Ireland—at minimum for a trial, if not permanently—to maintain price competitiveness, safeguard UK jobs and businesses, and make us more competitive with the Republic of Ireland?

Dan Tomlinson: I understand that the VAT rate in Northern Ireland is different from the rate in Ireland—there are different rates of VAT across Europe. It is important to remember that VAT is a national tax in the UK, at 20% across the country. It is important to have consistency for businesses operating across the UK. Significant cuts to VAT come with significant fiscal costs. For example, halving the rate of VAT on hospitality would cost the Exchequer about £11 billion.

Business Rates

5. **Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): What steps she is taking to reform business rates. [900558]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): I am very busy today, Mr Speaker, as ever. I thank the hon. Member for asking about business rates. She will know that we have already started the work of reforming

the business rates system so that we can put in permanently lower multipliers for high street businesses. As part of tax update day, we will be consulting on ways to collect more of the VAT that online sellers dodge by making online marketplaces liable for VAT on both UK and overseas business sales of goods. We will put every penny of the additional revenue raised into improving the business rates system for high street businesses.

Claire Young: When I met Chipping Sodbury chamber of commerce recently, business owners told me that the business rates system is broken and unfair, in part because it is based on turnover, not profit. In response to a letter, the Exchequer Secretary promised to bear in mind the points that I had raised ahead of future Budgets. Does he now accept that the business rates system is broken, and that rather than being reformed it should be abolished and replaced with a fairer system?

Dan Tomlinson: We have a tax on profits in the UK, which is corporation tax. In our corporate tax road map, we have committed to keeping that stable in this Parliament, rather than having it jump around as it did in the last one. It is important to have a broad tax base, so it is reasonable for business rates to continue to be—as they have been since the late 1980s—set in accordance with an estimate of the rents of properties. I do not think it would be right to change that.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): The Minister will know that coastal towns, such as Poole, which I represent, rely on small businesses. Poole would not be Poole without its restaurants or ice cream parlours. Polling this week shows strong public support for higher levies on big tech. Could this be a way to raise revenue to cut business rates and support the bricks-and-mortar shops that give life to our high streets?

Dan Tomlinson: I understand my hon. Friend's point. There are many businesses in rural and coastal communities across the country that we want to see thrive and grow, which is why the Chancellor announced the great British summer savings scheme, which will run until 1 September. On the point about the online giants, we are looking at further ways to raise more revenue by going after those online giants dodging VAT. In the last Budget, the Chancellor changed the multipliers in the business rates system so that the tax rate paid by a small high street business would be 33% lower than that paid by large properties, such as those occupied by online giants.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): It was recently reported that the newly elected hon. Member for Makerfield had pledged that he would cut business rates for pubs, clubs and music venues by 20% if he became Prime Minister. Given that the hon. Member is facing the near certainty of becoming Prime Minister, I ask those on the Front Bench whether the Treasury has started modelling the numbers to deliver on that pledge, and if not, when that work will begin.

Dan Tomlinson: I have to correct the Liberal Democrat spokesperson—I do not think that this hon. Member has a near certainty of becoming Prime Minister any time soon. [Laughter.] It is good that my newly elected

right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) has taken inspiration from the decision that we made in January to cut business rates for pubs, bars and live music venues by 15% so that we can back the great British pub and other hospitality venues.

Green Book Wellbeing Guidance

6. **Peter Lamb** (Crawley) (Lab): Whether she plans to update the Treasury Green Book supplementary guidance on wellbeing. [R] [900559]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): The Treasury published the Green Book supplementary guidance on wellbeing, which helps officials to assess how their policies and projects affect the wellbeing of citizens, in 2021. In February, this Government published an update to the Green Book that reaffirms the importance of considering wellbeing. Most importantly, my new Green Book will support fairer and more balanced decisions on investment in every part of the country, including outside London and the south-east, across urban, rural and coastal communities, so that projects have a better chance of securing Government funding.

Peter Lamb: I thank the Chancellor for her response. With the constantly growing evidence base behind it, wellbeing economics offers Governments an increasingly sophisticated means of supplementing conventional economics in decision making. It reveals that big-ticket items very often offer little wellbeing benefit to our constituents, while much cheaper interventions can have a dramatic impact. Wellbeing levels have even been shown across Europe to be a better predictor of electoral outcomes than traditional economic measures. Would the Chancellor be willing to meet me and other members of the all-party parliamentary group on wellbeing economics to discuss how wellbeing economics can enhance the work of the Treasury?

Rachel Reeves: I will ensure that the relevant Minister meets my hon. Friend and others to discuss how we can make further enhancements to the Green Book. Something that has held Britain back for too long is that projects outside London and the south-east, including in rural and coastal communities, have missed out on funding because of the way in which the Treasury used to evaluate those projects. I have changed those rules so that we can make investments in all parts of the United Kingdom.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): In my constituency, Chess Dynamics, part of Cohort, is a world-leading developer of counter-drone and air defence technology, yet like much of the defence sector, it has been left waiting for clarity on future investment. Given the recent turmoil at the top of the Labour party, can the Minister assure us that the vital defence investment plan will not be pushed back even further and finally give defence manufacturers the go-ahead—

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not relevant to the question.

Defence Investment Plan

7. **Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): What fiscal steps she is taking to support the defence investment plan. [900560]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): I am pleased to update the House that I met the Secretary of State for Defence and the Chief of the Defence Staff yesterday to talk through the defence investment plan. The Ministry of Defence is producing a defence investment plan that will meet the scale of the challenges and meet the moment with increased readiness. I am confident that the new defence investment plan will be published before the NATO Ankara summit. It will involve more money spent more effectively and will meet the scale of the challenges facing our country.

Rebecca Smith: The former Defence Secretary has blown apart the defence investment plan, revealing that the Treasury was prepared to offer only a pitiful increase in defence spending—just 0.08% by 2030—despite growing threats across the world. At the same time, the Treasury continues to fork out billions for welfare and the net zero agenda. Innovative small and medium-sized enterprises in defence are effectively locked out of MOD contracts and denied the opportunity to scale their capabilities. As the Chief of the Defence Staff put it, “the price of peace is increasing”.

Will the Chancellor commit this morning to filling the £28 billion gap in defence investment by 2030 to secure our position on the world stage, or will she stand in the way of the delivery of the DIP that we need?

Rachel Reeves: As I just said, the DIP will be published before the summit. It will involve more money spent more effectively, and it will meet the scale of the challenges we face. Frankly, I will take no lectures from the Conservatives, who left our armed forces, in the words of their former Defence Secretary, “hollowed out”. Our forces hit rock bottom for pay, morale and numbers. The Tories do not like to mention the £12 billion of cuts that they made to defence in their first five years in office. We are turning that around with the biggest uplift in defence spending since the end of the cold war. This Labour Government will continue to invest in defence, with contracts awarded to firms here in Britain to keep our country safe.

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

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is right to highlight those challenges. Throughout the 10-year equipment plan, there was always a £14 billion deficit that never seemed to go away. It is great that we are seeing more investment, but could the Chancellor update the House on what conversations she or her Ministers are having with Governments in Europe and with Canada about the Defence, Security and Resilience Bank and the multilateral defence mechanism for funding and procuring defence across NATO?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. As Members will know, this Government are working on plans with our NATO allies for a multilateral defence mechanism. We have already signed a treaty agreement with Finland and the Netherlands, and we are working closely with Scandinavian, Baltic and eastern European countries. The multilateral defence mechanism will enable us to procure jointly and stockpile equipment off the balance sheet, ensuring better value for money for taxpayers and enabling innovative forms of finance to

fund our defence. We are also working closely with Canada on the multilateral defence mechanism and the Defence, Security and Resilience Bank, which lends to smaller businesses in the supply chain, so that we have one model to help us better fund defence in our country and across Europe.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): It is good that the Chancellor has had those meetings, but perhaps they have come too late, because when the former Defence Secretary resigned, he said that the Treasury was “unwilling” to provide the resources needed to defend the country against rising threats. The Chancellor has said that national security always comes first, so why this dereliction of duty? Why is she failing to tackle the ever-expanding welfare budget and blocking the defence investment plan from getting the funding needed to meet the threats that we face?

Rachel Reeves: The hon. Gentleman is literally sitting two places away from the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Sir Mel Stride)—the former welfare Secretary who presided over a record increase in welfare spending.

We have commissioned Alan Milburn to do a review—the first part of which was published recently—to address the problem that we inherited of young people not in employment, education or training and get young people back into work. I am proud to be the Chancellor who has overseen the biggest uplift in defence spending since the end of the cold war. We funded that through our difficult decision to reduce overseas development assistance, but that was the right choice. When we set out the defence investment plan ahead of the Ankara NATO summit, the whole House will see the further changes we are making in order to better support defence in an increasingly unstable world.

Youth Unemployment

8. **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): What assessment she has made with Cabinet colleagues of the potential impact of her Department’s policies on levels of youth unemployment. [900561]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): UK employment levels are strong by historic and international standards. The hon. Member is right, though, to highlight a structural challenge when it comes to young people being out of work and, for that matter, education. That is why we have committed £2.5 billion over the next three years to the youth guarantee, helping to deliver up to 500,000 opportunities to earn and learn.

Bradley Thomas: Some 42% of employers have cut back on graduate recruitment, and across Bromsgrove and the villages there has been a 25% increase in youth unemployment over the last two years. With unemployment undoubtedly weighing heavily on the Chancellor’s mind, does she regret the choices she has made and the impact that they are having on young people’s futures?

Torsten Bell: The background to this is that employment is up 920,000 since the election. As I just said, there are structural challenges when it comes to youth unemployment. I gently refer the Tories to the fact that we saw a 250,000 increase in the number of those not in education,

employment or training in the last three years that they were in office, and youth apprenticeships saw a 40% fall when they were in office. This Government are getting on with supporting young people. That is why this month will see the introduction of a £3,000 hiring bonus for firms that take on someone aged 18 to 24 who has been looking for work for six months.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Friern Barnet) (Lab): What is the Minister’s assessment of the unemployment issues for graduates? Will he and the Treasury team pledge to consider carefully the evidence that the cross-party Treasury Committee took from thousands of graduates, and come up with a fairer system that equalises plans, so that the year in which graduates enrolled in university does not matter, and graduates pay more or less the same for their graduate loan?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend has done significant campaigning on this issue in recent months, and we all know why. The Government obviously inherited the student loan system situation, and we have already acted to cap the interest rate on student loans. We look forward to reading her Committee’s report, and, I am sure, to her ongoing campaigning on this issue.

Venture Capital Trust Income Tax Relief

9. **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of reducing up-front venture capital trust income tax relief on VCT fundraising. [900562]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Rachel Blake): At the Budget, the Government announced a comprehensive package of entrepreneurship tax measures, designed to provide substantially enhanced support for scaling businesses across the UK. That includes doubling the maximum amount that a company can raise through the enterprise investment scheme and the venture capital trust scheme. Overall, the changes to those schemes are forecast to generate about £100 million per year of additional investment in high-growth, scaling companies, thanks to the increased scheme limits in the Budget.

Alan Mak: A recent industry survey revealed that 62% of VCT founders are scaling back growth plans, 45% are cutting headcounts, and 25% are leaving the country. Will the Government reverse the Chancellor’s plans to cut this relief, or will her legacy for Britain’s tech sector be lower growth, fewer jobs and lasting damage?

Rachel Blake: Absolutely not; we have real confidence in the British venture capital sector. In the 2025 Budget, we doubled the investment limits and gross assets threshold for the enterprise investment and venture capital trust schemes. Those changes are supporting growth and development.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): May I start by congratulating the former Economic Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Lucy Rigby), on her promotion to Chief Secretary? In the eight months that I shadowed her in her previous

role, she made a strong impact and gained significant, well-deserved respect from those in the financial services industry. May I also welcome my fourth Economic Secretary, and wish her the very best of luck in the role?

As the Leader of the Opposition said in a speech last week, tax and regulation is getting in the way of financial services lending and investing in the UK economy. Does the new Economic Secretary think that the next Chancellor will do a better job of ensuring growth for this country?

Rachel Blake: This Chancellor has secured six interest rate cuts. We are creating the conditions for investment in business. Investment in skills and innovation is up; investment in regional infrastructure is up; and whole-economy investment is up by 4.9% since the election. This country is the best place for start-ups and scale-ups, thanks to the economic stability that the Chancellor has been securing.

Transport Connectivity: Border Communities

10. **Matt Bishop** (Forest of Dean) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on potential funding for improving transport connectivity for border communities. [900563]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby): Effective transport links are vital to the prosperity and wellbeing of people across the country, including in our border communities. We have been working closely with the Welsh Government to deliver a plan for Welsh rail, and we continue to work with devolved Governments to ensure that border communities stay connected.

Matt Bishop: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Forest of Dean sits on the English-Welsh border, and many of my constituents rely on cross-border transport links to access work, education and healthcare. Does she agree that improving connectivity in border communities can play a significant role in driving economic growth? What consideration is the Treasury giving to supporting investment in key cross-border transport infrastructure?

Lucy Rigby: Border communities rely on strong transport links, and my hon. Friend is a strong advocate for the interests of his constituency and those in the surrounding area. The Government are delivering for people in all parts of the UK, including investments that will benefit those on both sides of the English-Welsh border. That includes the investment in places like Padeswood, on the Wrexham to Liverpool line, as part of the £445 million of investment allocated for rail enhancements in Wales at the 2025 spending review.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The TriLink scheme, which connects north-west England with the south of Scotland and upgrades the west coast main line—the busiest railway line in western Europe—has been deferred by this Government and their predecessors for years. This very likely contributed to the near-fatal derailment at Shap just a few months ago. Does the Minister think that the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) believes that the north-west of England exists beyond the M62, and if he does, will he invest in upgrading the railway line, for the good of everyone in England and Scotland?

Lucy Rigby: My right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) will speak for himself, but I am confident that his view is that growth extends far beyond the area that the hon. Gentleman referred to. Most importantly, this Government's approach is to ensure that growth can be generated right across the country, rather than in just a few postcodes.

Transport Infrastructure: North-west England

11. **Mrs Elsie Blundell** (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): What fiscal steps she is taking to help develop transport infrastructure in the north-west. [900564]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): This Government are committed to improving transport connectivity right across the north of England, and we know that part of how we can deliver that is by recognising that decisions about local transport are better made locally. That is why we are giving mayors and local leaders the powers and the funding to make decisions locally; through the transport for city regions fund alone, there will be £4.1 billion for Greater Manchester and the Liverpool city region between 2027 and 2032, and there will be further devolution through the integrated settlements.

Mrs Blundell: As the Chancellor will know, northern powerhouse has been spoken about since 2014, which is 12 years ago. If we are to get Northern Powerhouse Rail off the ground and delivered, we cannot let valuable land that could create tens of thousands of jobs and boost the northern economy be used as a cheap option. What recent conversations have there been with local leaders regarding the proposed underground station at Manchester Piccadilly?

Rachel Reeves: This Government, for the first time, have backed Northern Powerhouse Rail with actual money in the spending review. The programme will improve connections between key cities—Liverpool, Manchester, Bradford, Leeds, Sheffield and York. We have not yet taken a decision on the type of station that we will deliver at Manchester Piccadilly, but I recognise my hon. Friend's preference for an underground station. I recently met Bev Craig, the leader of the city council, to discuss how the Government can support Manchester's ambition for an underground station at Manchester Piccadilly.

Support for Industry

12. **Cat Eccles** (Stourbridge) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support industry. [900565]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): We are cutting electricity costs for up to 10,000 businesses through the British industrial competitiveness scheme, and expanding the supercharger scheme. We are also strengthening key supply chains and protecting jobs through the steel strategy, the new £350 million critical chemicals resilience fund, and the £120 million in support for our ceramics sector.

Cat Eccles: I welcome the decisions taken by the Chancellor and Government colleagues to revise the electric vehicle targets for 2030, following representations from the industry, unions and MPs. Targets are really

great, but they need to match capabilities and market realities. What assessment has she made of how the change will safeguard jobs in the automotive supply chain in my constituency of Stourbridge and across the UK?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend, and other MPs who speak for constituencies with automotive businesses, for their representations. As she said, we are bringing forward the review of the zero emission vehicle mandate, so it will now take place this year—a year earlier than planned. In that, we will look at a slower phase-in of those targets to bring us closer, for example, to where the EU is. Automotive is the crown jewel of British manufacturing. We must not let targets damage our sector; that would lead to money being paid out to foreign companies, such as those in China, that produce more electric vehicles. That is why we have made the changes, and why we are having the review.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Mid Buckinghamshire is home to a number of businesses that are part of the supply chain for the aerospace and defence industries. Those businesses rely on steel that is categorically not made here in the United Kingdom. If the Department for Business and Trade fails to rectify the cliff edge that is coming on steel tariffs, what will the Treasury do to backfill that and ensure that many businesses, such as those in my constituency, do not become completely unviable?

Rachel Reeves: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about making sure that we get the balance right. We are supporting steel made in Britain, which the previous Government neglected; we are backing it through the nationalisation of the steelworks in Scunthorpe and more support for Port Talbot and Sheffield, but I also recognise the challenge that some British companies will face. This is why, for example, as is shown by the work that we are doing with the EU on the upcoming EU-UK summit, we want a steel alliance, to reduce tariffs on steel.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Next week, those swingeing 50% tariffs on steel imports will hit manufacturing businesses across the country, putting thousands of jobs at risk. While they are intended to protect domestic production, industry is warning that many grades simply are not made in the UK in the quantity needed. It is a simple question for the Chancellor: will she guarantee that tariffs will not apply where businesses cannot get steel in the UK?

Rachel Reeves: Our steel strategy protects the UK steel industry, so that more orders can come to British Steel and other steel manufacturers in the UK. We will not allow our steel sector to be undercut by cheap foreign imports.

UK-EU Economic Co-operation

13. **Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD):** If she will make an assessment of the potential merits of increasing levels of economic co-operation with the EU.
[900566]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): At a time of great global uncertainty, it is more important than ever that we deepen ties with our closest allies and biggest trading partners, whose values we share, and whose interests are bound to ours. It is 10 years today since the Brexit referendum, but the economic impact from the deal negotiated by the previous Government is stark. Indeed, recent studies indicate that its impact could be as great as an 8% reduction in GDP. I have worked closely with my counterparts across the EU as part of this Government's commitment to resetting the UK-EU relationship, most recently at meetings of the G7 in Paris, and meetings with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in Riga. They have been clear that they would welcome closer ties, which will be in all our interests. At the upcoming UK-EU summit, we hope to be able to conclude deals on food and agrifood, on linking to the EU emissions trading schemes, and on an ambitious youth mobility scheme.

Rachel Gilmour: Today does indeed mark 10 years since Britain voted to leave the European Union. One of the consequences of Brexit has been to bury my constituents in red tape. My farmers cannot export without doing reams of paperwork, and small businesses are seemingly locked out of European markets. The EU remains the world's largest trading bloc, and it sits on our doorstep, so will the Chancellor set out a path to an ambitious UK-EU reset—something that my party has called for—including a new customs union that would slash costs for British businesses, open markets for our farmers, and bring down prices for the British consumer? Or will we have to wait for her successor to show that ambition?

Rachel Reeves: I have been working hard in this Labour Government to reset the relationship so damaged by the choices of the Conservatives. That is why we have committed to this second UK-EU summit, after the agreement between President Ursula von der Leyen and our Prime Minister last year to finalise the deal on food to help our farmers, on youth mobility to help our young people, and on emissions trading to help keep the cost of energy down.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Given what my right hon. Friend has rightly said about the disastrous deal negotiated by the Conservatives once we left the EU, when the next UK-EU summit does eventually happen, will it not be time—after we have successfully concluded discussions on the priorities of the UK-EU reset—to discuss the opportunity, costs and benefits for more key parts of our economy of rejoining the single market?

Rachel Reeves: I understand why my hon. Friend makes those arguments; we are clearly poorer outside the European Union than we otherwise would have been. We made a manifesto commitment that we would not rejoin the single market or customs union, or return to the free movement of labour. Those red lines stand, but within them there is an awful lot that we can do to improve relations. We are doing just that.

Cost of Living: Wythenshawe and Sale East

15. Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): What steps she has taken to help support people with the cost of living in Wythenshawe and Sale East constituency. [900568]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): The Government are committed to easing cost of living pressures for people in Wythenshawe and Sale East, and across the UK. Budget measures are already helping households; we are freezing prescription charges for the second year in a row, freezing rail fares for the first time in 30 years, and taking £150 off energy bills, as well as protecting pensioners through the triple lock and lifting half a million children out of poverty.

Mike Kane: My constituents Darren and Nicole shared with me their story of hardship in raising five children on one income. Like me, they are grateful to this Chancellor for ending the two-child benefit cap. Will she consider an independent process for advising the Government on how much universal credit needs to be, if people are to afford everyday items?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing the story of Darren and Nicole to this House. I hope that they and their children will benefit from the change I made to the two-child limit for universal credit, as well as from the rolling out of free breakfast clubs to all primary schools, and the introduction of free school meals for all children whose parents are on universal credit, which will start in September and be available at primary, secondary, nursery and further education levels. As the Trussell Trust has said, the decisions I made in my Budget mean that the cruel two-child limit, which drove countless families into hardship and forced them to turn to food banks to survive, will end.

Heathrow Airport Expansion: Economic Growth outside London

16. Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of Heathrow airport's expansion on economic growth in regions outside London. [900569]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby): We have been clear that Heathrow expansion needs to benefit everyone, not just London. The Department for Transport has shown that expansion would deliver UK-wide support for trade, with 40% of the estimated GDP benefits from expansion being outside London and the south-east.

Munira Wilson: When the Chancellor announced her support for Heathrow expansion last year, she claimed that it would deliver 0.43% GDP growth. The Heathrow expansion national policy statement snuck out last week predicts a 90% reduction in that figure to just 0.05% growth; what little growth there might be will largely be sucked out of other parts of the country, such as Birmingham and Manchester. Will she now finally admit that Heathrow expansion is not the grand growth plan she thought it was, and that it will hurt areas outside London the most?

Lucy Rigby: Nothing was snuck out. A third runway at Heathrow means more than 60,000 good local jobs, and more than £40 billion for the British economy. The hon. Lady's question rather highlights the Lib Dems' curious approach to growth. When they were in government, they decimated our economy with austerity, and now they oppose all the investment in infrastructure needed for growth. This Government are taking a wholly better approach.

Economic Strength

17. John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): What progress she has made on strengthening the economy since July 2024. [900570]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): Since I became Chancellor, our economy has grown by 2.3%—the fastest growth among European G7 economies in that period. Over that time, we have progressed our strategy for stronger and more secure growth through fiscal stability by bringing in an additional £120 billion in public investment, by crowding in private investment through the National Wealth Fund and the British Business Bank, because I changed our fiscal rules; and by removing structural barriers to growth, including through big reforms to our planning and pensions systems and through progress on reducing regulatory burdens, particularly on smaller businesses.

John Grady: The long-term strength of the economy depends on long-term investment in the UK. UK growth companies still struggle for capital, while UK savers' money flows to trackers, which are concentrated on a small number of US stocks. That is bad news for our future. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has made brilliant progress on reforming pensions, but can she reassure me that the Treasury is looking at further reforms, to increase the amount of UK savers' money that is invested in our future?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his work on the Treasury Committee. On pensions reform, through the Mansion House accord and Sterling 20, we have got pension funds to commit to investing more in British businesses, both through British venture schemes and in British infrastructure. Those changes were secured by the Pension Schemes Act 2026 taken through Parliament by the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell). That, for the first time ever, requires investment in UK businesses and in infrastructure. We are also making reforms to how our ISA system works so that for people under the age of 65, after investing £12,000 in cash, any additional money has to be invested in stocks and shares, helping start-up and scale-up businesses grow and stay in Britain.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): The Chancellor has obviously had to make some tough decisions since 2024, but the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) wants her to go further by aligning the capital gains tax rate to the higher rates of income tax. Did she examine the behavioural effects of such a policy before she made a much more modest increase in her first Budget?

Rachel Reeves: In my two Budgets, I have raised an additional £30 billion through taxes for more wealthy people, whether that is through the changes to the non-dom rules, VAT and business rates on private schools,

taxes on private jets, the high-value council tax surcharge or, indeed, the increases in capital gains tax. Combined, that is an extra £30 billion secured for our public services, to stabilise our public finances and get debt down as a share of our economy by asking those with the broadest shoulders to pay more.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): I am sorry, but the Chancellor's recollection of her record is fantasy economics from a fantasy economist. Is it not the case that her true record is poor decision making: with U-turn after U-turn on winter fuel payments, business rates and family farm taxes; tax after tax on jobs, investment and savings; a country more indebted with higher interest rates; and a Chancellor unable to cut welfare and unwilling to fund our defence?

Rachel Reeves: I am incredibly proud of my record as Chancellor of the Exchequer: the fastest growing country in the G7 within the EU, wages rising faster than inflation every single month since I became Chancellor, record investment coming into the United Kingdom, rolling out free breakfast clubs and free school meals, 500,000 children lifted out of poverty, creating the National Wealth Fund and leveraging in private sector investment. Those things are only possible because of the decisions I have made as Chancellor. As a result, for the first time since 2019, Government borrowing was less than 5% of GDP—a far change from the mess I inherited from the Conservatives.

Topical Questions

T1. [900579] **David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): This Government have the right economic plan—the fastest growth in the G7 at the start of this year, the second fastest rate of growth in the G7 since the election, and inflation lower than forecast, with food inflation at its lowest level for 17 months despite the disruption in the middle east. Wages have risen faster than prices in every single month since I became Chancellor. I am tackling the cost of living challenges with rail fares, prescription charges and fuel duty frozen, and with money off energy bills. Our economic plan is the right one, and I will continue to deliver for the British people.

David Williams: Sometimes we do not say thank you enough, so I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to the Chancellor for listening. She listened to me, my fellow MPs, our pottery workers, our GMB union and especially Sharon Yates by offering a £120 million support and growth package for our ceramics sector. Can the Chancellor now outline how she will ensure that smaller manufacturers benefit from this fantastic new scheme?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and for the representation that he and other MPs representing ceramics constituencies have made. It was a real honour for me to meet the impressive force of nature that is Sharon Yates when I visited Dunoon, a ceramics business in Staffordshire, a couple of months ago. I pay tribute to her and the campaigning trade union, GMB, Ceramics UK and all campaigning Labour

MPs on their efforts. As a result, they have been heard, and our £120 million package of support for ceramics announced earlier this year will give a positive future for the sector.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: May I remind everybody that we are on topical questions, and lots of Members need to get in? I call the shadow Chancellor.

Sir Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): Given all that is going on, this could be the last time. The legacy of this Chancellor has been the highest taxes on record, a benefits bill spiralling out of control, and unemployment 300,000 higher than it was at the last general election. The right hon. Lady trumpets 2.8% inflation, but that is still well above target, and only last year it was the highest in the G7, to the detriment of millions up and down our country. Under her plans, how much more does she intend to borrow in this Parliament than under the plan she inherited?

Rachel Reeves: Let's talk about my record: six cuts in interest rates; wages rising faster than inflation; trade deals secured; investment delivered; support for our energy-intensive industries; half a million children lifted out of poverty; record investment in our national health service; more money for local transport infrastructure right around the country; the biggest uplift in defence spending since the end of the cold war; and an economy that has constantly beaten the forecasts—an economy that is growing, and an economy where inflation has come down. Compared with the disastrous 14 years when the Conservatives were in office, I would take our record any day.

Mr Speaker: May I repeat what I just said? Chancellor, there are lots of Government Members who need to get in. I have to get through this list. You have to help me to help them ask their questions.

Sir Mel Stride: The right hon. Lady cannot bring herself to answer the simple question I asked. I will tell her: she is borrowing one quarter of a trillion pounds more than the plans that she inherited—that is her legacy. We hear that the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) is considering borrowing even more. Does she agree that that would be utterly reckless and that the bond markets will not wear it?

Rachel Reeves: When the Conservatives were in office, in the last Parliament they borrowed more than the G7 average every single year. This year we are borrowing less than the G7 average and have brought down Government borrowing to 4.2% of GDP in the most recent data. We have brought forward our fiscal rules so that they kick in two years earlier, and we are meeting those fiscal rules, to ensure that we have sustainable public finances—a far cry from those that I inherited.

T2. [900580] **Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Staffordshire's MPs hunt as a pack, and we are all grateful for the package of support for the ceramics industry. It is important for jobs and livelihoods in Newcastle-under-Lyme, where we make excellent British bricks. May I urge the Chancellor to do whatever possible to increase the use of British-made bricks in construction projects right across our United Kingdom?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for the representation that he makes on behalf of the ceramics industry in Newcastle-under-Lyme. The £120 million funding will be launched in the autumn. We are working with the sector now, and it will be available for firms of all sizes, because it is important that small ceramics manufacturers can benefit, as well as larger ones.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Today is exactly 10 years since the country voted to leave the EU, and thanks to the Conservatives, the post-Brexit red tape has created 2 billion pieces of extra paperwork for British businesses—enough to stretch around the world 20 times. The hit to growth is the equivalent of the Treasury losing out on £90 billion every single year. Surely by now the Labour Government and the Labour party must recognise that if they want to go for growth and raise revenue, they should drop their red lines on Europe.

Rachel Reeves: With all respect, the Liberal Democrats backed that referendum 10 years ago, and they were part of the Government who legislated for it. Unlike the Liberal Democrats, the Labour party actually sticks to its manifesto commitments.

T4. [900582] **Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): The loss of Grangemouth's refinery was a loss to Scotland's economy. The Chancellor rightly consulted on including refined products in the carbon border adjustment mechanism to level the playing field for domestic refining—a level playing field the Tories did not pursue before the closure of Grangemouth was announced in 2023. Will the Chancellor meet me and other colleagues to discuss the merits of accelerating the inclusion of refined products in the CBAM?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): I thank my hon. Friend for his strong representation on behalf of his constituency and the important refining industry. I have seen the letter to the Chancellor that has been sent by colleagues and I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend and other interested Members.

T3. [900581] **Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Will the Chancellor explain why she is now clawing back VAT on the compassionate medicines scheme, which means that this Labour Government are taxing free cancer drugs given to children? Will she reverse that decision? Patients are starting to miss out on the treatments they really need.

Dan Tomlinson: I regret to inform the hon. Gentleman that that policy was implemented by his Government—[*Interruption.*] It was in 2023 that HMRC wrote to businesses that were not paying the VAT, unlike some others that were, and began the enforcement action—it started under his Government. However, I recognise the challenges that these rules are causing, so today I confirm that the Government will soon bring forward a new approach, consisting of either changes to the VAT rules or a reimbursement scheme. The changes will be effective for donations of medicines made on or after today.

T6. [900584] **Liam Conlon** (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): In all our constituencies, small hospitality businesses, such as Shotsmiths in Beckenham and the Alma pub in Crystal Palace, provide important third spaces, bringing life to our high streets and providing good jobs. The Chancellor has visited my constituency to outline additional support for local pubs. Will she set out what further steps she is taking to ensure that these small businesses can grow and thrive?

Rachel Reeves: I have not only visited my hon. Friend's constituency, but I went to school there and I am well aware of many of the pubs in Beckenham and Penge. This summer, from this Thursday, the great British summer savings programme will benefit businesses in Beckenham and Penge and around the country. VAT rates on children's food in restaurants, pubs, cafés and bars will be cut, and children's entertainment venues in Beckenham and Penge and around the country will also see cuts in VAT.

T5. [900583] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): Today marks 10 years since the Brexit referendum. Since that date, we have had 10 Home Secretaries, nine Foreign Secretaries, eight Chancellors, seven Defence Secretaries and 6 Prime Ministers. Does the Chancellor agree that such instability has acted as a break on growth in this country and can she set out what she plans to do to reverse that trend?

Rachel Reeves: In the first quarter of this year we were the fastest growing economy in the G7. Since I became Chancellor, we have had growth of 2.3%, which is the second fastest rate of growth in the G7. We are growing our economy by bringing investment and stability back to the UK, and businesses are following our lead by investing in our country.

T7. [900585] **Mark Sowards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Last week, the Chancellor announced the biggest insourcing of Government caterers, cleaners and security officers that we have seen in a very long time, when the current contract ends. Does she agree that that move will finally recognise workers who have been undervalued and under-appreciated for far too long?

Rachel Reeves: When we were in opposition, I promised the biggest wave of insourcing in a generation, and we are now working in government to deliver exactly that. The Government Property Agency contract that expires in 2028 will come back in house, so people working at around 40 locations across government in London and around the country will find that instead of being employed by an outsourcing company, they will be employed directly by the Government. They will have the same terms and conditions as other civil servants, making a huge difference to them and their families.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): In an earlier answer, the Minister ruled out a VAT reduction for hospitality businesses across the United Kingdom. Will he at least meet me, Hospitality Ulster and the Northern Ireland Food to Go Association to discuss the concept of a Northern Ireland-specific pilot?

Dan Tomlinson: I would of course meet the hon. Member.

T8. [900586] **Sarah Edwards** (Tamworth) (Lab): My constituency has been extremely lucky in getting £20 million for Glascote Heath and Stonydelph under the Pride in Place programme, which gives local people the ability to choose how the funding is to be spent. Will there be more rounds of this funding or similar schemes so that local people can be put in charge of how their money is spent?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby): The Pride in Place programme provides £5.8 billion of support to 284 neighbourhoods right across the country, including five places in my hon. Friend's constituency, which she does so much to advocate for. We will set out more details of further funding in the Budget.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): In my constituency, we have lost the Scotbeef abattoir and the famous Donald Russell butchers in recent months, both of which were crucial to the agricultural supply chain. Both blamed high energy costs and the increased costs of doing business, such as the huge rises in national insurance under this Government and big business rate rises under the SNP. What steps is the Treasury taking to support, not suffocate, the agricultural supply chain and other crucial elements of the farming sector?

Dan Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Member for the representations she makes on behalf of the businesses in her constituency. This Government are taking every step we can—within the tight fiscal constraints that we

inherited from the previous Government—to reform, and invest in, our business rates system so that we can raise revenue in a fair and sustainable way. I am sure that the Chancellor and colleagues across Government will continue to listen to representations and consider what further changes we can make at the Budget to support businesses.

T10. [900588] **David Burton-Sampson** (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): The Tory Government squandered billions of pounds of public money on covid fraud, waste and corruption. Will the Chancellor tell the House what measures she is taking to address this issue on behalf of taxpayers?

Rachel Reeves: Today the Government have responded to the covid counter-fraud commissioner's recommendations in a report that I commissioned, which confirms that the Conservative Government left the door open to more than £10 billion of pandemic fraud. That is money that could have gone into our NHS and our schools, and we have acted in the last two years to claw it back. Today we set out how we will go even further, launching a powerful new public authorities fraud investigation and enforcement service, with new powers to ensure that we get that money back directly from fraudsters' bank accounts. Nearly 2,000 directors have been disqualified and 86 criminals have been prosecuted in actions that will bring more money back to the public purse. I want those who have defrauded the taxpayer to know: there is nowhere to hide; we are coming after you; you will pay that money back.

Opposition Day

[1ST ALLOTTED DAY]

Defence Spending and Readiness

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

I call the shadow Secretary of State.

12.32 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House regrets the chaos in Government which means a temporary Prime Minister will be attending the NATO summit; further regrets that at such a dangerous time globally this country is not being properly governed; calls on the Government to spend 3% of GDP on defence by the end of this Parliament, or at a minimum to act to provide the £28 billion that the Ministry of Defence has asked for primarily by cutting welfare and to publish the Defence Investment Plan immediately to deliver this; agrees with the former Secretary of State for Defence that any Defence Investment Plan which included a rise in defence spending of 0.08% from next year to 2030, with no date for raising that spending to 3% and no path to an increase to 3.5%, would fall short of what is required, particularly as intelligence assessments note there could be an attack by Russia on NATO as soon as 2030; further calls on the Government to ensure that the Defence Investment Plan prepares the UK for future conflicts; and also calls on the Government not to proceed with the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 (Remedial) Order 2025 and the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill which is unfit for purpose as it fails to protect veterans who risked their lives to protect this country.

It is a pleasure to open this Opposition day debate. Before I commence my speech, I wish to respond to the point of order made by the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry yesterday—not least as neither myself nor the Leader of the Opposition were able to respond to his point of order because we were not given advance notice of it. That may not be mandatory, but surely it would have been in the spirit of proceedings, given that it related to the urgent question to the Secretary of State for Defence tabled by the Leader of the Opposition last Monday.

As a reminder, last Monday's urgent question from my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition concerned the extremely serious situation regarding the previous week's resignations of the two most senior Defence Ministers at the time. In her questions, my right hon. Friend asked why the Secretary of State was not responding, given the severity of the circumstances. The DRI Minister said at the time:

"The Defence Secretary is currently with His Majesty the King".—[*Official Report*, 15 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 571.]

That point was repeated a little later in good faith by you, Mr Speaker, in response to a question from the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). In the DRI Minister's point of order yesterday, he admitted that that was not true.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Shameful!

Mr Speaker: Order. I will not have that. Do we understand each other? I am not being funny; you are a shadow Minister, Dr Mullan—I expect better.

James Cartlidge: The DRI Minister admitted in his point of order yesterday that what he said last Monday was not true. He said that the Secretary of State

"arrived back in London from Windsor earlier that day, prior to the UQ".—[*Official Report*, 22 June 2026; Vol. 788, c. 71.]

That begs the question: why did the Secretary of State not respond? To quote chapter 21, paragraph 20 of "Erskine May", His Majesty

"cannot be supposed to have a private opinion, apart from that of his responsible advisers; and any attempt to use his name in debate to influence the judgement of Parliament is immediately checked and censured."

Given this, not only should a Minister of the Crown surely desist from raising the monarch in the Chamber in such a context; it is particularly inappropriate to do so when the facts prayed in aid are not correct.

Mr Speaker, this is cowboy stuff—very sloppy, very disrespectful to this House—and it is not the first time. The Armed Forces Minister, in her previous role as Veterans Minister, also had to correct the record from the Dispatch Box after saying at oral questions that my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) was "not a details man" and that the Prime Minister had not worked with disgraced lawyer Phil Shiner. In fact, as she admitted at the Dispatch Box, the Prime Minister did indeed work with that traitor to the British Army, who tried to have our soldiers put away for war crimes on the basis of fabricated evidence. Finally, the previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), had to correct the record after he justified not giving me prior sight of the strategic defence review because I had supposedly not allowed him prior sight of the defence Command Paper refresh when I was a Minister. Petty as this was, it was also—again—wholly untrue.

This is not acceptable; Ministers must tell the truth from the Dispatch Box. I said that I had the greatest respect for the new Secretary of State, and I meant it. I hope he will ensure that his Ministers show—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am a little bit worried about using the language of "truth" and "facts". In fairness, both the Minister in question and myself were told that the Secretary of State was down at Windsor last Monday. We did not know what time he was coming back; we were not told—none of us. I want us to be careful when talking about "truth" and "facts", because I really do worry about how we attack each other in this House. In all the cases that the hon. Member has highlighted so far, the record has been corrected. This debate is about defence spending, and I am not quite sure how going back in history fits into that. Hopefully, we will get to the topic of the debate soon.

James Cartlidge: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I informed your office about this issue earlier, because we feel it is very important.

Mr Speaker: Telling my office is one thing; unfortunately, my office has not had time to tell me.

James Cartlidge: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have made the point and I hope Ministers are listening.

[James Cartlidge]

It is particularly special to be debating defence today, on the second day of Armed Forces Week. In Armed Forces Week, we recognise—

Mr Speaker: Order. To finish off our discussion, what I was offended by on the day in question was the calling of a Member who served in the armed forces—a gallant officer of this House—a coward. I did not think that was appropriate and I am sure that all of us will regret such comments against each other.

James Cartlidge: Noted, Mr Speaker.

As I was saying, it is particularly special to be debating defence today, on the second day of Armed Forces Week. In Armed Forces Week, we recognise the extraordinary commitment made by our brave servicemen and women, past and present, to keep this country safe, and I pay tribute to all serving today, to their families and to our veterans.

The last time I spoke in an Opposition day debate on defence was in March, on the subject of the long-delayed defence investment plan. Since then, we have still had no defence investment plan. Instead, we have had chaos: the resignation of the Secretary of State for Defence; the resignation of the Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns); and yesterday, the resignation of the Prime Minister himself. These resignations are not unconnected. On the contrary, for a Prime Minister who thought that national security was his strong suit, those resignations from the Ministry of Defence were fatal for his career, and they have a common thread—namely, Labour’s massive strategic mistake of prioritising an ever bigger welfare state over properly funding defence, despite war in Europe and the middle east. As the previous Defence Secretary said, he simply could not put his name to a defence investment plan with a financial settlement that “falls well short” and would “make the country less safe”.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making his case. Does he share my concern that, during last week’s urgent question, the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry and the Secretary of State could not commit to delivering the capital ship programme that has already been set out? I am hearing rumours that the new Type 83 destroyers were being mothballed in plans six months ago. At a time when defence is so critical, does that concern my hon. Friend?

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend, who served in the Navy, was a Defence Minister and speaks with expertise, has made an extremely serious and important point. This is why we want to see the defence investment plan. We have been waiting for it for months, and we have been promised it repeatedly from the Dispatch Box. We need to see the details, whether they relate to the Navy, the Army or the Royal Air Force.

Of course, the previous Secretary of State knew that this was a problem. Let us just remind ourselves of what else he said. He said that he was being

“forced to make decisions that would reduce the readiness of our Forces and increase the risk to personnel on operations”.

That is a staggering indictment. The Prime Minister was seriously considering a financial settlement for defence that would, in the words of the man responsible for defence in this Government until less than two weeks ago, make Britain “less safe”. But the former Defence Secretary he was not alone in that warning. Last week, the Chief of the Defence Staff issued a stark message of his own when he said:

“We’ll have to dial back our activities; our exercise, operational activity, if the level of resource funding that is available to us does not increase”.

That is the stark reality. If the financial offer stays the same at a time of war and the most profound threats to our nation since the cold war, defence will have to be cut and our country made less safe. Last year the Government cut £2.6 billion from defence, and they are cutting £3.5 billion this year. How much more is to come, when our country needs the complete opposite?

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that Ankara is going to be extremely interesting this year, especially at a time when characters like Foreign Minister Sikorski are pointing out that Poland will be spending 4.8% of its GDP on defence while we spend £4.5 billion on cycle tracks? Mr Sikorski has pointed out that that is indicative of the priorities of this Government, and, as a committed Anglophile, fears that it is indicative of this country retreating into the shadows. It is difficult to avoid that conclusion, isn’t it?

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend—who also served in the Navy and as a Minister—speaks with great expertise. He is absolutely right to remind us that the problems with the defence investment plan relate to our international prestige and how our allies see us, and they are worried. Poland is a close ally of the United Kingdom. I am proud of the strength of our relationship, and I think that we should all listen to what our allies are saying about the need for more funding. However, the question that we have to ask ourselves is: why? Why would the Government have to cut defence?

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab) *rose*—

James Cartlidge: I will come to that question when I have taken this intervention.

Dr Arthur: Of course, this is not a debate about whether or not we increase defence spending; it is a debate about how much we increase it by. The hon. Gentleman has talked about our standing with our allies, which is incredibly important. What did our allies think when his Government were cutting defence? Can he tell us?

James Cartlidge: That is a nice try, but the question that the hon. Gentleman needs to answer is this: if things are so good, why did both the Secretary of State and the Minister for the Armed Forces resign?

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

James Cartlidge: I will give way to my right hon. Friend in a minute, especially as I am coming to an area of policy that she knows only too well. As I was saying, we ask ourselves: why would the Government have to

cut defence? And the answer is: because they will not cut welfare. With that, I give way to the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

Esther McVey: Can my right hon. Friend clarify the financial offer that the Prime Minister made for the defence investment plan? Can he confirm that it was only 0.08% of GDP, which was £10 billion in real cash terms, not the £13 billion on offer? That was what prompted the Defence Secretary to resign, because it was not enough to keep our nation safe.

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend is literally on the money. That is exactly right. It was a derisory increase to 2.68%, when the 2.6% figure already includes elements such as the intelligence budget, which have been used to inflate it.

I was speaking about welfare—

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Cartlidge: I will in a bit, but first I want to make an important personal point. I did not have the privilege of serving in the armed forces, but I did have the privilege of being Defence Procurement Minister, and I hope that what I did before entering Parliament helped a little in that role. I ran a small business; I employed people—and I will never forget the time when I offered pay rises and extra hours to my staff, and they turned me down. Why? Because the crippling expensive tax credit system that we inherited from Labour created a massive disincentive against work. The country was literally paying billions to put a ceiling on people's aspiration, but I was brought up to believe that we should smash the ceilings that hold people back from success, so that instead of trapping them in dependency, we set them free to make the most of their talents.

Luke Akehurst: Will the hon. Gentleman accept that welfare is only part of the story when it comes to where we might need to find the money? It would provide valuable revenue resource, but much of what we are talking about is an equipment programme that needs to be funded from capital. When I speak substantively later, I will suggest where I might like to find the money, but I should like to know now which capital budgets the Opposition would look at in order to increase capital spending.

James Cartlidge: I will take the hon. Gentleman's question in the spirit in which he asked it. He is being very open and is asking the question: where are we going to get the money? We have been debating that. We think welfare is incredibly important, but it is not just about the quantum; getting people into work instead of on welfare would make us a more resilient country. He asks about capital. We have said—people may disagree, but it is a clear commitment—that we would take £11 billion from the National Wealth Fund that will currently be going to net zero, and ringfence it for defence. That is our priority, given the world we are facing.

Dr Mullan: The challenge we have at the minute is that not only do we have a shadow Opposition, but we have a shadow Government—a whole set of Ministers

who will soon be in place. We have someone who is potentially about to become Prime Minister, but we know almost absolutely nothing about his priorities on defence, on the strategic challenges or on welfare. Does it concern my hon. Friend that we are going to get somebody new, when we know very little about his position on these incredibly important issues?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, because what this all creates is massive uncertainty. Defence is a massive industry in this country. That uncertainty is damaging for our defence businesses and dual-use companies right across the nation, which employ thousands and thousands of people, so we need far more certainty, whoever is going to be Prime Minister.

I was talking about welfare reform. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) reformed the system of tax credits through the introduction of universal credit. Before the pandemic, we saved billions of pounds from welfare, all in the face—as my colleagues will remember—of unending and total opposition to any reduction in welfare dependency from the Labour party. But Labour Members cannot go on like that, setting their face against welfare reform. It must be obvious that, in the national interest, we have to reform welfare.

Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister, knows that we need to cut welfare to fund defence. Lord Robertson, the former Defence Secretary, knows it too, saying that we cannot keep Britain safe with an “ever-expanding welfare Budget.” That is why the Leader of the Opposition wrote to the Prime Minister last week to offer our support, in the national interest, to cut welfare and fund defence. Last week, I repeated that offer to the Secretary of State during his statement on Monday. He did not answer, so I wrote to him last week with the same offer, and I hope he will accept. I hope he will now confirm that he wants to put politics to one side and work with us to make the difficult decisions, so that the defence investment plan can finally be funded and published.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Is it not the truth that we have a Government who said they were prepared to meet the threats that we face as a country, yet are simply dithering and delaying? With all the infighting on the Labour Benches, what hope is there for our country at a time when we need sustainability and certainty, not chaos?

James Cartlidge: That is an excellent question from my right hon. Friend. Dither and delay have been the theme all the way—we have been waiting for months. I have stood up at every single oral questions and asked the Government when they will publish the defence investment plan. It feels like they have replied hundreds of times, “We’re working flat out,” and we still do not have it.

Can the Minister tell us if the DIP will definitely be published before the NATO summit in Ankara? In particular, can he tell us who is deciding the timetable for publication of the defence investment plan? Is it the acting Prime Minister, or the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham)? It was reported today by the political editor of *The Times*, Steven Swinford, that there is now an argument between the two about when

[James Cartlidge]

to publish the defence investment plan—they are working flat out, having this discussion. Mr Swinford said on X:

“The first conflict of the transition period: Sir Keir Starmer is planning to push ahead with announcing the Defence Investment Plan despite Andy Burnham wanting it delayed until he is in office.”

It is a simple question: who is in charge of defence in the United Kingdom at a time of war on two fronts? Is it the Prime Minister, or the right hon. Member for Makerfield?

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. Is not the real risk here that the defence investment plan, which the Government promised, will now be treated like a political football? The end result will be that defence supply chains in this country, and those of our international allies, will see that we are not worth doing business with.

James Cartlidge: As loath as I am to talk about political footballs, given that our football team is in action tonight, it is nevertheless pretty obvious: whether it is football, rugby or a tug of war, we already have a massive argument between the heart of Government and the shadow Government over who is in charge. At a time when we face serious threats, that is an extraordinary position for Labour to have us in.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is right to hold the Government to account, because the plan is massively delayed. He is surely aware that all of us here, including those from my party, who spent time in government in the last few years, know that ever since the fall of the Berlin wall, we have been complacent as a country about the scale of the threat we face. Do not all parties need to recognise that? We have the smallest Army since Napoleonic times. We have 8,000 drones in stock, while Ukraine is using 8,000 drones a day. Is it not time that we worked together across the parties to make sure we defend our country in the way we all need to in the years to come?

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman because, to be fair, I have always said that we do need to work together in the national interest. I have said repeatedly that spending on defence fell under successive Governments since the fall of the Berlin wall. That must be blindingly obvious. There are decisions that Labour made, that we made and that the Lib Dems made us make in the coalition—for example, about the nuclear submarines—so everyone has some culpability in this record.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

James Cartlidge: I am responding to that intervention, if hon. Members will allow me. The key issue is what we do now to fund defence. I am going to take one more intervention, and then make some progress.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the shadow Minister and the Conservatives for what they are bringing forward today. Warfare is changing, and the shadow Minister knows that. As an example of how warfare is changing, the papers today are talking about

warfare that could be done by artificial intelligence, with maybe some 10,000 drones. The Minister for the Armed Forces who resigned mentioned that in his personal statement in Parliament last week. When it comes to deciding the defence strategy, does the shadow Minister agree that we must look at new technology and at how wars are going to be fought? They will be different, but we need to be on the winning side, so is it not time we did that?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Member's interventions are always at the cutting edge, and he was spot on there. It is not just about the funding. As he says, with warfare changing so fast, we need to prioritise capability.

Put simply, the defence investment plan must be genuinely transformative, so it is incredibly worrying that, once he finally got to see the defence investment plan, the previous Minister for the Armed Forces resigned not long afterwards, stating that the plan was “not built for the threat we face.”

This country led the way in supplying Ukraine with cutting-edge drone tech produced by UK small and medium-sized enterprises. I cannot emphasise enough that we were a leader.

When we consider the progress we were making in supplying drones that were so effective on the battlefield in the spring of 2024 and in bringing forward extraordinary counter-drone capability such as DragonFire, it was another strategic blunder by Labour to put procurement on hold while we waited for the strategic defence review, and now while we are still waiting for the defence investment plan. With war changing so fast, we cannot afford to waste two years paralysing procurement.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): My hon. Friend is talking about the future of warfare, and this issue was very much raised when we attended Space-Comm earlier this year: how the delay in the DIP is affecting our ability to keep up with advancing space technology. Does he agree that this is an important point, and that the Government should set a space strategy, as the previous Government did in 2022?

James Cartlidge: That is exactly why we have announced a policy of a sovereign defence fund, with £2 billion extra per year for drones, AI and tech, alongside £11 billion, as I have said, from the National Wealth Fund—repurposed from net zero to defence—to fund our sovereign industrial base, so that it can scale up and meet the level of output we will require to be war-ready.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has raised air defence. Does he regret the cuts made to air defence under the last Government, when funding for defence reduced so dramatically, and does he welcome the investment this Government are making in air defence, learning the lessons we are now seeing in Ukraine?

James Cartlidge: I do not know what the hon. and gallant Gentleman is talking about. What investment in air defence? We procured Rapid Sentry. What does he think is being used on our bases in the middle east right now to defeat drones? It is the stuff we procured when we were in government. Who procured DragonFire laser? I did, and it is going to be the most cutting-edge

air defence. I procured the radio frequency directed-energy weapon, which could also be incredibly cutting edge in frying—literally frying—entire swarms of drones. This is where we need to be at the cutting edge. We invested in it; this Government specialise in dither and delay.

As important as drones and tech are, our most important capability remains the people who serve. While it is critical that the Government rapidly embrace the uncrewed revolution right across our armed forces, we must also back our people. That is why, when we were in government, we increased pay for junior ranks by 9.7% in 2023, and I took the decision to buy back the defence estate from Annington Homes when I was a Minister.

On housing, I want to ask Ministers a very important question that they did not answer yesterday. Until very recently, they have consistently repeated a pledge to invest £9 billion in military accommodation over the next 10 years. With rumours that this funding will be cut, as reported in the press, yesterday the shadow Minister for the Armed Forces, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford, asked if this commitment stood. Will the Minister say in her speech whether that is the case—yes or no?

In Armed Forces Week, I must of course pay tribute to those who serve in our reserves. Back in 2023, we also increased the bounty for reserves personnel by 5.8%, and with the threats we face, I believe we must continue to strengthen our reserves.

Finally, we agree wholeheartedly with what the previous Minister for the Armed Forces said in his resignation statement about the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. He said that

“the IRA failed to achieve its political ends through the use of terrorist tactics, and we must be exceptionally careful that we do not help them achieve those ends through other means.”—[*Official Report*, 16 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 733.]

Can the Minister say whether the Secretary of State for Defence—a veteran of Operation Banner himself—agrees that, whoever is the next Prime Minister, a top priority must be to scrap the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill and back our veterans?

To conclude, assuming that the right hon. Member for Makerfield becomes Prime Minister in the coming weeks, he will have many items in his in-tray, but the first duty of any Government is defence of the realm. Given that Labour’s own Secretary of State for Defence until a few days ago resigned, saying that Labour’s defence investment plan would make the country “less safe”, it must be obvious that this is the top item for the new Prime Minister’s attention. If the new Prime Minister is to succeed, the quantum of cash on the table will need to be far more substantial, given the threats we face, and that means finding the money without increasing our national debt or taxes. Instead, to make our country stronger and more resilient, we are offering to work in the national interest to cut welfare and fund defence.

In Armed Forces Week, we all agree that the men and women who serve our country are second to none, so I ask Ministers again: are they prepared to work together with us to find the cash to fund defence, so that we can give our brave personnel the tools to do the job and keep this country safe?

12.56 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Louise Sandher-Jones): I beg to move amendment (a), to leave out from “House” to the end of the Question and add:

“looks forward to the publication of the Government’s Defence Investment Plan; recognises the Government’s commitment to providing the resources the UK’s military needs; welcomes that the Government has provided the biggest uplift to defence spending since the Cold War; supports the Prime Minister’s commitment to hitting 2.6% of GDP on defence spending in 2027, and 3.5% by 2035; further recognises that taking such decisions is never easy and will mean significant reallocations of funding from across Government departments because strong public finances are also part of what keeps the UK safe; endorses investment in the capabilities that the UK’s armed forces need, after they were hollowed out by the previous Government; and further endorses the signing of more than 1,400 contracts since July 2024, with 94% of that total contract spend going to UK-based companies.”

On 5 May 2013, I joined the British Army as Officer Cadet Jones, joining the mighty 29 Platoon Alamein Company at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. I was joining an Army with a full-time strength of just under 100,000 personnel. Operation Herrick in Afghanistan was still ongoing, although soon to draw to a close, and ISIS was on the offensive. It had been several years since the invasion of Georgia by Russia, but perhaps that would prove to be a one-off. The Army’s main platforms—apart from those procured for Afghanistan, such as the light role Foxhound—were Challenger 2, Warrior, AS90 and CVRT, the combat vehicle reconnaissance tracked. Those were all ageing platforms, including some bought before I was born.

In 2015, now Lieutenant Jones, I was posted to Germany, serving with the indomitable 44 MFMI Company. I was now part of an Army of a strength of just 82,000. Operation Shader had been launched to counter ISIS to great effect. Herrick had ended and been replaced by the more limited Operation Toral. I was attached to the 20 Armoured Infantry Brigade, which was still made up of Challenger 2, Warrior, AS90 and CVRT.

Crucially, by then Russia had launched its first operation in its evil assault on Ukraine and had annexed Crimea in 2014. It was clear then what Russia’s ambitions were, and its tactics of little green men showed that warfare was already changing. Most importantly, this clearly showed that, once again, war was on the doorstep of Europe. How useful, hon. Members may think, to have an armoured infantry brigade based in Germany, with a railhead connecting to the whole network of Europe, and able to move armour quickly and at short notice, as a sign of our commitment to defence. Alas, however, the decision had been made in Westminster, and I watched as, instead of readying for the new threat, our bases closed down around me and our troops moved back to the UK.

When, as Captain Jones, I left in 2020, troop numbers had dropped to the mid-70,000s. The main Army platforms were still the same as when I had joined, but troop numbers were down, morale was down and our footprint was down.

Alex Ballinger: I recognise similar circumstances at that time when I served, which was for a shorter period than my hon. Friend, but does she recognise the massive impact on morale of the successive real-terms pay cuts that the Conservatives gave our brave armed forces during that period?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I do recognise it, and also the wider impacts of the state of the housing that I, like my hon. Friend, had to live in. I also recognise the relentless pressure on our fantastic people, who were being asked to dig out blind every day just to keep the show on the road—a story that was repeated across many of our public services.

Paul Holmes: The Minister mentions the fact that troops were being removed from Europe back to the United Kingdom. I may be interpreting this wrongly, but she seems to be slightly critical of that. May I remind her that that was because of the ever-changing geopolitical landscape we faced at the time and that our allies were doing the same? At the time, the Labour Opposition did not oppose it and did not criticise it. Is she criticising us for doing that, or is she just making an observation?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I am criticising the decision makers for that decision and, on reflection, I think that others would agree with me.

All of this occurred under Conservative Prime Ministers, whether in coalition or as a Conservative Government. They attempted to crush the proud British Army with their mismanagement.

Michelle Scrogam (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): We have talked about the changes after 2014. Might we also look back to what was referenced earlier, under the 2010 coalition Government, where the blame seemed to very suddenly shift to the Liberal Democrats? It was a joint decision to delay what was happening with our submarines. I will take no arguments from the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), because it was his party that helped to damage Barrow-in-Furness. If they had not, with Conservative Members under the coalition Government, made the commitment to pause, we would have our boats in the water now and our submariners would not be spending 200 days at sea.

Louise Sandher-Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight those who were responsible for the defence of this country and the decisions they made.

Dr Murrison: I am fascinated by the Minister's remarks about the withdrawal of troops after the cold war, many of them to Salisbury plain in and around my constituency where they continued to train for current operations. Is she seriously saying that she would recreate the British Army of the Rhine? Is that Government policy—for this Government, or for the Government to come? If so, how is she going to fund it?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's trying to conjure up me saying something that I have not said—I do appreciate that. He will be aware that I was talking about decisions made in the mid-2010s and I am critical of those decisions. He will also know that being able to undo something is not the same as never having done it. I hope he will appreciate that I am sincere in what I am saying there.

The Conservative Government attempted to crush the proud British Army with their mismanagement, short-sighted cuts, shameful negligence and refusal to adapt to new threats, and members of the current shadow team played key roles in that record of failure.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for taking my intervention. I, too, served with 20th Armoured Brigade and was deployed in operations from Germany over to the Balkans. She talks about mismanagement. She is in a position where, unless more funding comes forward, the Government are about to make some of the biggest cuts to the armed forces during the most hostile situation since the second world war. How does she square that circle?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I am proud of what we have already achieved in government on defence. We have raised defence spending, despite the record of previous Governments. I am in a position to argue every day for our armed forces to get what they need to have, and I will continue to do so.

The Labour Government were elected in places such as Aldershot, Portsmouth and Plymouth to fix the Conservatives' mess, and we have begun to do so. Recruitment is up, retention is up and morale is up. Personnel have received three above-inflation pay rises, and there has been real action to improve housing, enabling our armed forces to focus on national security.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I am going to make some progress.

RAF pilots recently flew over 3,000 hours of defensive missions, intercepting drones and missiles to protect our people and our allies in the middle east. The ground-based air defence crews protected UK and allied bases under fire, shooting down more than 100 drones. Our Royal Navy and Royal Marines expertly intercepted a Russian shadow fleet vessel, and they work around the clock to protect our underwater infrastructure.

Dame Harriett Baldwin: Will the Minister give way?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I am going to make a little bit of progress. I think I have been quite generous.

From the High North to the far east, as our world becomes more dangerous, demands on defence grow. As usual, our armed forces are responding with incredible professionalism and effect. Our forces continue to deliver vast amounts of military equipment to Ukraine, including our largest ever numbers of drones, and they are ready to lead the multinational force to bolster Ukraine's defences in the event of a ceasefire. In the middle east, we have HMS Dragon and RFA Lyme Bay deployed, along with autonomous mine-hunting equipment, to play our part in a multinational mission to secure freedom of navigation in the strait of Hormuz and bring down prices for families across the UK.

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I thank the Minister for giving way. If everything is so great, why has Lord Robertson described the Government's situation as one of "corrosive complacency"?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I am proud of the record we have achieved so far in Government. I think we all recognise that there is more to do and we are working hard to do that.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for giving way. She is giving a really passionate speech and talking about her personal experience of being in the armed forces. It is important that the Conservative party hear again the figures she quoted in respect of the number of armed forces personnel at the start of her time in the forces and the number at the time she left, and the difference in the amount of officers. Will she also talk about what the Labour Government are doing to support our armed forces personnel and to increase morale, which is hugely important?

Louise Sandher-Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to talk about the importance of our armed forces personnel. I am very proud to be able to point to the improvements we have made in recruitment, retention and morale, which show that we are being effective in delivering for them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Louise Sandher-Jones: I will not give way; I am going to make some progress.

The motion before us may claim otherwise, but the facts are that the work being done by our armed forces on multiple deployments speaks for itself. Every hour of every day, our armed forces are out there across the world serving their country, serving UK interests, and protecting our freedoms and prosperity. It is business as usual for them, and it is business as usual across defence.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The Minister talks up the effect that our armed forces deliver in various different theatres, but they are doing so on a shoestring. While the DIP is delayed, apprentices will not start this August in Scotland or this September in England. Investment by primes will not happen this financial year because of the delayed DIP. More important than that, our allies look at the United Kingdom and see an investment plan that does not exist and a Government in disarray. More important than that, those who would seek to do us harm look at the UK now and see a country that either does not know how to, or cannot afford to, defend itself. Is she proud of that legacy?

Louise Sandher-Jones: It is on the hon. Gentleman as well. He has questions to ask about his party's support for defence—for example on its refusal to fund the welding school that would have brought us vital skills.

The Defence Secretary is working through the DIP line by line, so that our personnel have the kit and technology they need to deter, fight and win. He has been clear that he will get the DIP right and will publish it before the NATO summit in Ankara.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I think I have been generous. I am going to keep going—thank you.

Unlike the suggestion in today's motion, the DIP has not halted this Government's investment in turning around our hollowed out armed forces. Since the election, we have signed over 1,400 major defence contracts, with 94% of that total contract spend going to UK-based companies as we deliver on our commitment to back British.

James Cartlidge *rose*—

Louise Sandher-Jones: I have given way enough times; I will keep going.

The Opposition want to use the wider situation in Westminster for political grandstanding—it is all they can do and it is all they know how to do—but we are rebuilding our armed forces for our age of big data, AI and autonomy, and have reclaimed our position on the world stage. We have committed to an uplift in defence spending. We have delivered the biggest export deals for decades and fuelled defence as an engine for growth, benefiting communities across the UK. That is a record to be proud of, and one that we will build on as we build warfighting readiness.

Wendy Morton: Will the Minister give way?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I will keep going. Rather than debate the issues constructively, we have a motion urging orderly government from the party that gave us five different Prime Ministers and five different Defence Secretaries in 10 years—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. The Minister has made it clear that she is not taking any more interventions.

Louise Sandher-Jones: We have a plea for defence spending to hit 3% by 2030 from a party whose manifesto committed to spending just 2.5% by that date, and calls for a fully funded defence investment plan fit for the modern battlefield from a former Government whose fantasy equipment plan was overcommitted, underfitted and unsuited. They left 47 out of 49 major defence programmes delayed or over budget.

It is a motion that claims to understand the delicate legacy issues in Northern Ireland, from a party whose own plan was struck down as unlawful—it protected nobody. We have had many debates on the issue that the Government are reflecting on. I have set out my position many times, and in partnership with colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office, we will progress the Bill in due course. As I have said before, I am mindful of the responsibility to get it right.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Will the Minister give way on that matter?

Louise Sandher-Jones: No, I am going to finish. Armed Forces Week is a moment to give thanks. But the best thanks a Government can give our servicemen and women is not warm words from these Benches, but our full backing. There are more officer-cadets, lieutenants, and Captain Joneses serving today—we are a big family. I say to them that the Conservative Government failed me; this Labour Government will deliver for them.

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

1.11 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate at the start of Armed Forces Week, and as a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme—it has been the honour of a lifetime to be a member for the past couple of years. It has been wonderful to get to know friends and colleagues across the House on that programme. There is truly no better way to

[Dr Al Pinkerton]

understand the challenges and opportunities of our armed forces than through participating in that scheme. I encourage all Members to consider it.

In that spirit, I also encourage Members to engage with the defence showcase currently being held in Speaker's Court. I had the privilege to speak to the bomb disposal unit based in Aldershot today, who do incredible work in hugely dangerous circumstances.

The Liberal Democrats have tabled an amendment because Britain needs a serious defence policy for a dangerous age. That sentiment is shared across this House, even if we sometimes disagree about how to get there. I will be clear about our position on the Conservative motion, because parts of it identify genuine and real problems. Britain does, undoubtedly, need to restore its military capability. Recruitment, retention and morale must be rebuilt. Service personnel and veterans deserve dignity, from suitable housing to mental health support.

Recognising a problem, however, is different from offering a credible solution. We cannot support a motion that asks this House to forget—or at least fail to properly acknowledge—who hollowed out our armed forces in the first place. The motion talks of rebuilding the Army, after the Conservatives cut troops by 10,000. It proposes to pay for new commitments by punishing struggling families and targeting the two-child benefit cap, sacrificing human security for strategic security without doing the hard work to genuinely move people into the workplace.

The motion fails to meet the central strategic reality facing Britain: Europe is rearming, the United States is less reliable than it once was, and Britain must be at the heart of European defence co-operation.

Paul Holmes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Pinkerton: I would absolutely be delighted to.

Paul Holmes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for saying that—not many people do! I remind him that his colleagues on the Liberal Democrat Benches also marched through the Lobby and made the savings in the armed forces budget when they were in Government. His party policy is £20 billion of so-called defence bonds. Can the hon. Gentleman outline to the House how he would intend to fund that—it is borrowing, is it not? Would that not make the economic situation in this country a whole lot worse at this troubling time?

Dr Pinkerton: The hon. Member is absolutely right. As my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) acknowledged, parties across this House sought to leverage too much from the so-called peace dividend. While my hon. Friend and I have acknowledged that, will the hon. Member's party do the same? On the question of defence investment bonds, it is about engaging the wider public and private finance institutions in common participation and the recognition that we need to invest more in defence. It is borrowing, but it is money that can be injected into the defence economy instantaneously, whereas the proposals from the official Opposition will take years to filter through, because cuts to welfare are not instant.

James Cartlidge: I am grateful that the hon. Member is entering into the semi-consensual spirit that we have seen from some. I recognised in my speech that spending had fallen under successive Governments. Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), it is important to point out that the Lib Dem position is to raise £20 billion extra through war bonds, but that is not their only policy; their other policy is for international aid to rise to 0.7%. Where is the money going to come from for that? Is it aid bonds, or other borrowing—how will they fund that massive black hole?

Dr Pinkerton: I do not believe that there is a black hole, because international aid is not a zero-sum game. We cannot have defence and security in the modern world unless we are tackling the very challenges that drive contemporary conflict at source. International aid is a fundamental part—

James Cartlidge: The money is not free—where is the money going to come from?

Dr Pinkerton: The money is there. If we do not spend it up front, we end up spending it further down the line in not only treasure but blood.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Will the hon. Member give way?

Dr Pinkerton: I am going to make some progress.

The Liberal Democrat amendment recognises the reality that I have outlined on Europe, the United States, and Britain's role at the heart of European defence. It speaks of the scale of the threat, the urgency of investment, and the need for deeper, pragmatic co-operation with European allies. The threats facing the United Kingdom are the greatest since the end of the cold war.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): The Defence Committee has just come back from Norway. It worries me that some defence programmes may be withdrawn in the DIP. Does my hon. Friend agree that the defence programmes set out in the defence investment plan are important for not only our national security but maintaining and deepening the UK's relationships with our allies and partners?

Dr Pinkerton: My hon. Friend has asked me to speculate on elements of the DIP that I have not seen; he has the privilege of the insights he has gained from his recent visit. I simply point out that investment in the kind of structures and networks that he talks about pays multiple dividends in defence co-operation and long-standing and sustainable defence diplomacy. At a time when the threats facing the United Kingdom are the greatest since they have been since the end of the cold war, that is particularly important.

Vladimir Putin continues his brutal invasion of Ukraine, while expanding hybrid war, sabotage and disinformation across the United Kingdom and Europe. At the same time, Donald Trump's wavering commitment to European security casts doubt on NATO's collective defence. That is the world in which this debate takes place: one that is more fragmented and unstable, and in which Britain cannot afford delay, drift or self-deception.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): So far, the debate has been about how much funding should be found for defence. We should also think about the resignation speech by the former Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), who said last week that the DIP, which he has seen, does not strike the right balance between high-end sophistication and low-end mass. He said that “the defence investment plan does not strike that balance”.—[*Official Report*, 16 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 732.]

Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to think about the balance between sophistication and mass?

Dr Pinkerton: My hon. Friend speaks from a position of authority from his personal experience and his role in Committees in this House. I defer, as always, to his superior insights on the matter, and would not differ on anything he has suggested.

Britain’s European allies share our values and commitment to collective defence. We cannot be a spectator while Europe rebuilds its defences; instead, we should shape and lead that effort.

On the Conservatives’ watch, our Army fell to its smallest size since the Napoleonic wars, while the Navy’s surface fleet fell to its smallest size since the English civil war. We saw crises of recruitment, retention and morale and a failure to look after our service personnel and veterans properly, with shoddy housing and one of the worst privatisation deals in British political history.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on women in defence, I know that women make up only 11% of the regular forces. We cannot talk about defence readiness while failing to recruit and retain half the population. Does my hon. Friend agree that the defence investment plan must include a concrete plan to reach the women in defence charter’s 30% target by 2030?

Dr Pinkerton: My hon. Friend puts her finger on an incredibly important point that is intrinsic to the publication of the DIP. We should never ignore the experiences of women in our armed forces, who perform brave service every day.

Mr Francois: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time. I want to turn to legacy. Our motion calls on the Government to drop the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill, which the Liberal Democrats, like the Conservatives, voted against on Second Reading. That Bill has now famously been described by the outgoing Armed Forces Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), as “unfit for purpose”. Is the hon. Gentleman’s party, like us, still opposed to the Bill, and does that also apply to his colleagues in the House of Lords?

Dr Pinkerton: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman—and, if I may say so, my friend; he has supported me in debates in the past—for his intervention. We are opposed to the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill, which delivers neither justice for victims nor protection for veterans. I will talk a little more about that as I conclude my speech—in fact, I will move on now to talk about the issue of legacy.

James Cartlidge: Ah! My right hon. Friend knew that, obviously.

Dr Pinkerton: The right hon. Gentleman clearly knew exactly the structure that I would adopt today.

This is where the consensus briefly ends. I contend that the Conservatives’ Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 failed victims, survivors and veterans alike. It removed legal avenues for justice, eroded public trust and, through its conditional amnesty, established a shameful equivalence between British service personnel and members of the IRA. Key provisions were found to be incompatible with the European convention on human rights, which matters because a country that asks its armed forces to serve with honour must legislate with honour, too. The ECHR is too often characterised as a threat to those who serve, but in truth it helps to protect service personnel, families and veterans who seek accountability when the state has failed in its duty, and withdrawing from it would remove a vital safeguard and route to justice for victims and families, such as those in the Snatch Land Rover case.

This is where the consensus returns. The Liberal Democrats are firmly on the side of veterans, which is why we voted against the carry-over motion for the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. As drafted, the Bill lacks the safeguards that veterans deserve, including protection against repeated investigations without genuinely new evidence. The Government’s Bill should be human rights compliant and rooted in transparency and independent oversight, upholding victim’s rights while importantly ensuring that no process is used to discredit those who serve with honour and integrity.

Lincoln Jopp: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Given what he is saying about Northern Ireland, would he support a private Member’s Bill that would set out in law that there should be no further investigations, inquiries, inquests or prosecutions unless, in the view of a Supreme Court judge, new and compelling evidence has come to light? If so, I can only recommend that he come to the Chamber on 4 September, when my Northern Ireland Troubles (Criminal Investigations etc) Bill will have its Second Reading.

Dr Pinkerton: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman—my near neighbour and friend—for his intervention. The private Member’s Bill that he describes sounds entirely consistent with the argument that I am making today. I shall take the opportunity to study the precise wording of the Bill before fully committing to it, but it certainly sounds consistent with my argument today, and I am grateful to him for bringing it to my attention.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) and I have engaged extensively with veterans associations. The amendments we will propose reflect their concerns by calling for enhanced oversight and the protection of veterans’ rights.

At a time of acute threat, our military needs urgent restoration, but Labour has previously moved too slowly to undo the damage. The delay to the defence investment plan has created uncertainty for our armed forces, our industry and our allies. I note that His Majesty’s Opposition failed yesterday to back our new clause 22 to the Armed Forces Bill, which would have required a report into the damage done to British business by the delay to the DIP. That was a missed opportunity.

Luke Akehurst: As he comes to his conclusion, I invite the hon. Gentleman to take the opportunity to express his specific regret for the role that the Liberal Democrats

[*Luke Akehurst*]

played in the coalition Government in slowing down the nuclear continuous at-sea deterrent programme; indeed, they actually argued to scrap it entirely and replace it with Biggles-type aircraft taking off from aircraft carriers, which would have put us in a very dangerous position. As it was, they used the influence that they had to delay it, and one of the reasons why there is such difficulty in the MOD budget now is that we are catching up on that essential spending on the continuous at-sea deterrent.

Dr Pinkerton: Both my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale and I in my role as spokesperson today have acknowledged the mistakes that were made in the past. Frankly, I think that those mistakes need to be shared across the House, because they are shared across this House.

Defence cannot be switched on overnight. We cannot rebuild industrial capacity, train personnel, modernise equipment or restore deterrence through vague promises about working at pace. Small and medium-sized businesses have told me plainly that investment decisions are being delayed, expansion is on hold and contracts are being lost overseas. Ministers must publish the defence investment plan immediately to reassure partners and provide a road map for regenerating our armed forces after years of mismanagement.

At a time when Europe is rearming, Britain is hesitating, and hesitation sends signals—to our armed forces, to industry, to our allies and, most dangerously, to our adversaries. The resignations of the former Defence Secretary and the former Armed Forces Minister were a clarion warning from those who have scrutinised the numbers that they were left wanting.

Dr Murrison: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time. The Liberal Democrats are famously known for their love of bicycling. Does he agree that it would be a good idea for the Government to drop their plan to spend £4.5 billion over five years on creating cycleways and rededicate that money to defence?

Dr Pinkerton: The right hon. Gentleman makes a curious argument. The United Kingdom is a modern 21st-century European nation. I had a very pleasant cycle to and from Fulham this morning on a Lime bike using our cycleways. Frankly, I do not think it is a choice between one and the other—I am perfectly happy for the Government to spend money on both cycleways and defence. It is a very strange equivalence that the right hon. Gentleman seeks to make.

The right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) is not in his place today, which is disappointing and shows a failure to engage with issues affecting our armed forces and defence. I would implore him to urge the Treasury to unlock the funding that we need as urgently as possible.

Strength in this moment will be measured by investment, industrial renewal and the courage to deepen defence relationships with our European allies. That is why our amendment calls for the defence investment plan to be published urgently, alongside a plan to issue £20 billion of defence bonds, which would help to rebuild our armed forces, unlock investments, strengthen our industrial

base and give Britain's businesses the confidence that they need to expand and hire. However, the investment cannot stop there. The Government must commit to spending 3% of GDP on defence by 2030 at the latest and convene cross-party talks in the spirit of collaboration across this House, which the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) has talked about today—only then can we have responsible and sustainable defence spending.

Britain must lead, and Britain must lead in Europe. Our European allies share our values, our geography and our commitment to collective defence. They are partners with whom we share intelligence, defend our sea lanes, protect our skies, secure our infrastructure and confront the same threats. Britain should now be leading European defence. That is why we have proposed a growth and defence partnership with the European Union. This is not about building an alternative to NATO, but ensuring that Europe carries more of the burden of collective defence.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I can see that you are eager for me to conclude, so I will. We must never forget the people who serve our nation in our armed forces. The Government were right to accept the Liberal Democrats' proposal that the decent homes standard be applied to service family accommodation, but it must now be extended to single living accommodation, too.

The Liberal Democrats are clear that Britain needs the defence investment plan to be published now. Defence spending must reach 3% of GDP by 2030. A £20 billion defence bonds programme should rebuild capability and industry, and could do so quickly. Northern Ireland needs a fair, lawful and trusted legacy framework, including protections for our UK veterans, who served with honour. Our armed forces deserve the highest standards, so the decent homes standard must be extended to single living accommodation. Britain needs a new growth and defence partnership with Europe that places us at the heart of defence co-operation.

1.30 pm

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton), who is both gracious with his time and entertaining to listen to. I thank him for that.

I begin by thanking all armed forces personnel who are protecting our country at the moment. Importantly, this debate is taking place in Armed Forces Week; I give credit to the Opposition—this once at least—for bringing forward this debate today, though I am not sure that we have quite reached the level of consensus across the House that we might hope for on defence.

Mr Francois: Perhaps we can achieve some consensus on this: yet again, we are debating defence, our armed forces, and the people who keep us safe, but the plastic patriots of Reform cannot be bothered to turn up. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that people who wrap themselves in the flag should at least turn up to debate the future of the people whose job it is to defend it?

Graeme Downie: I was slightly concerned that I was going to have to disagree with the right hon. Gentleman at this early stage, but I absolutely agree with him. Any politician who wraps themselves in a flag, without there

being any substance to their reason for doing so, is not worthy of leading any constituency or party—and certainly not any country.

As I have mentioned previously in the House, I grew up in Berlin from 1987 to 1990, and I was there when the Berlin wall came down. That gives me an unusual insight for someone of my age. I grew up hearing Russian artillery one mile away, and seeing Russian helicopters testing and firing. I was there when Rudolf Hess died, and I saw the various security measures in place. That makes me unusual among people who are my age or younger, most of whom have not seen what a cold war threat is. Most have been used to a safe world, and have not seen the necessity of increased defence spending, unless they have a member of the armed forces in their family, or have served in the armed forces themselves. The majority of people in this country who are my age or younger do not know what a threat from Russia, or indeed any other country, looks like.

I have said before that I believe that the UK is already in a conflict with Russia. Not only that, but we are a frontline nation and should always consider ourselves as such, whether we are talking about our RAF jets taking off from Lossiemouth or Coningsby to defend our airspace, or our Royal Navy ships and Royal Air Force aircraft in the High North protecting our subsea cables from Russian threats. This country is in conflict with Russia, and Russia considers itself to be in conflict with us. We must always respond accordingly. The attacks extend into cyber-space. Every day we see thousands of attacks, whether on private businesses or on our defence and energy infrastructure. The threats are there. We also see misinformation peddled online that seeks to undermine our democracy. This country is in conflict with Russia. In order to respond effectively to that, the public need to understand the direct implications for them. They must recognise that a cyber-attack on Jaguar Land Rover has consequences for our economy. A cyber-attack on Marks & Spencer has consequences for people's ability to buy a jumper, and for the staff working there as well, but these attacks also have a direct impact on our economy and society every single day.

It is always slightly daunting to be in the Chamber for debates like these—there are Members present who have served in the military, and who know far more than I do—but I believe that there is a conversation that we must have across this House. We must, wherever possible, draw lines between the threats that we face, and the detailed military programmes that we talk about, and what they mean for the day-to-day lives of people in this country. Otherwise, those people will not grant any Government the licence to increase defence spending and capability in the way that Members from across this House want.

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman always speaks on defence matters. He has a unique passion for them, which I very much respect and admire, as a result of his upbringing near the Berlin wall. It has just been reported by the BBC that No. 10 has said that no new major policy or spending decisions will be made until the new Prime Minister has been appointed. If that is the case, how can the defence investment plan be delivered before the NATO summit? Does he agree that that question now has to be answered?

Graeme Downie: That is not something I want to be drawn on in the Chamber. I have not seen the news report, and I believe that the answer to that question would have to come from the Government.

As well as making sure that we are speaking to the public about the things that matter to them, we must broaden out the conversation. When we talk about national security and defence readiness, we are not only referring to Ministry of Defence budgets; we should also be talking about what it means for energy security, food security and everything else that makes our country safe—from economic security to delivering the skills and apprenticeships that we need for the future. We must engage the public on why this subject matters to them. If we say that we must spend more on protecting our North sea or national grid infrastructure, we must also say that if we do not, it will put up household energy bills by even more and cause blackouts—those are the consequences. When it comes to, say, energy infrastructure, we must always be clear that some things cost money. If we want a more energy-secure, resilient nation, people will be asked to pay more, in one way or another. That is the nature of defending our nation properly and effectively.

I am very proud of the steps that this Government have taken to prepare our armed forces for the future, having been left a hollowed-out armed forces when they took over. The Conservatives have talked about parties across the House not spending on defence since the end of the cold war, and to a point I agree with what they are saying, but the threats were there in 2014 and beyond, and there was no mass drive from any party in government to increase in defence spending. The warning signs were there already. It is this Government who have had to pick up the mantle, move forward and make the kind of changes that we need. We have awarded 1,400 major defence contracts since July 2024. In Scotland, we have a £10 billion frigate deal with Norway that will secure jobs on the Clyde. We have been pressing for the £8 billion Typhoon deal with Turkey, and for the upgrading of Typhoon jets.

We must look after our people as well, so I am very proud that this Government are updating recruitment policies, and making sure that we have better recruitment and retention. As the Minister mentioned, recruitment is up and pay is increasing. We are turning around the decade of decline under the Conservatives; there has been a cumulative pay award of 10.5% since July 2024—the largest on record—and new recruits are receiving a pay boost of 35%.

Jim Shannon: I see the former Veterans Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), in his place. We need to ensure that our veterans are looked after. Many have mental health issues, and I regularly come across people who are affected by what they have seen during their service. It has affected them physically, emotionally and mentally. When it comes to the spend that is necessary, does the hon. Gentleman agree that there must be a commitment to ensuring that those veterans who have served and are suffering are looked after?

Graeme Downie: The hon. Gentleman always picks out the issues that really matter to our people. The Ministry of Defence's Op Courage does exactly the kind of work that he is talking about. I am sure that

[Graeme Downie]

Members from across the House see correspondence on that in their constituency mailbag all the time. We must make sure that we are properly protecting our veterans. Not only is it important because of our responsibility to them, but it is how we ensure that we have effective recruitment and retention in the future. We must be a nation that looks after our serving soldiers.

I have mentioned that I believe we are already in a conflict with Russia. I praise the focus of, and work done by, the previous Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), on the joint expeditionary force in the High North. We are a frontline nation, and our frontline is in the North sea—the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap. We need to tackle the threats we face there. We have a partnership with Norway on the Type 26 frigates; that is exactly the type of capability that we must focus on, as well as focusing on the other work done with joint expeditionary force nations.

I want to ensure that the debate about defence in the House, and about budgets, does not become focused solely on a number. We must not think that just because we have hit a particular number by a particular date, our country is safe. It is not. The country is safe when we have the right capabilities in each domain to fight against the threats that we face, be it in the air, on land, at sea, in cyber-space or in any other domain. In our discussions, we must focus on capability. If we have the correct capabilities to defend our nation, we will have spent the amount of money we should spend to defend our nation. I believe that amount is higher than what we are spending at the moment, but the discussion must stay on capability, and should not be about spending money for its own sake. The Government are doing a good job on defence procurement, and on turning issues over to ensure that is not the case, but I urge hon. Members from across the House to please keep that point in mind when we discuss defence spending.

When it comes to defence spending, I hope that we will continue to focus on consensus, where possible, and protecting our nation. I end by again thanking those serving in the armed forces, and all those veterans who served in the past.

1.41 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): May I say what a pleasure it is to follow the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie), who was speaking a great deal of sense? He mentioned the threat that we face in the High North. He might be interested to know that the Defence Committee was in Norway last week. We went up to the Arctic circle, to the Combined Air Operations Centre at Bodø, where we were told an extraordinary story. When the forces there were doing a security exercise, they put a baddie on the roof of a sangar near the air base's gate, and took a dog round to find the baddie. The dog did not want to know about the bloke they had put on the roof of the sangar; he would not stop indicating an issue with the sangar itself. He kept on indicating, "There's something there." They thought, "Oh blimey, we'd better go and get the keys." They got the keys and found a Chinese spy, who had been in there for a week. He was arrested and is doing time in prison in Norway—pre-trial, I believe, on remand.

That brings home exactly what the hon. Member said: we are talking about real threats and real enemies, and in that case, they were literally at the gate.

I joined the Army in 1986, and it generously paid for me to go to university to study theology and philosophy—that was very broad-minded of it at the time. I went back to Sandhurst to confirm my commission in 1989. That was a significant moment. I was on college guard, polishing my boots, as I watched the Berlin wall fall. I did not really understand that the geopolitical glue that had helped keep the world safe for the last 40 years was coming unstuck, or what the implications might be for Officer Cadet Jopp, but the implications were certainly there. Those bonds, which had kept the cold war in stasis, did indeed start to melt, and that meant that I had a very busy military career.

I went to war when the Conservatives were in power, and when Labour was in power. I have had poor equipment. Both sides of the House have been responsible for part of what happened following 1989, as we started to manage decline. Do not get me wrong: I am so proud of the men and women of our armed forces, particularly those I led. I buried men from my regiment, and I try not to forget to always pay tribute to them and what they did; it enabled me to stand here and be their voice today. Essentially, from the end of the cold war, successive Governments started to take risks. This ticking time bomb has been passed on from Government to Government. Bad luck, Labour: it has gone off on this Government's watch; that is the fact of it. Essentially, a very big lie has been told to the British public; they have been told that we can have the defence we want at the price that we are prepared to pay for it.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he recall that at the end of the cold war a paper was written by Francis Fukuyama called "The End of History"? Does he agree that on the basis of that, everybody believed somehow that no longer would there be war, no longer would there be pressure and no longer would we need armed forces? That was such a mistake, as has been documented, which has affected everything since.

Lincoln Jopp: My right hon. Friend and fellow Scots Guardsman makes a good point. The zeitgeist throughout that period of time was to say, "Look, wars are a thing of the past. We can take risk against defence." That risk has rarely crystallised, so people have been tempted to take more and more risk.

We have also seen it in the hypothecation of defence spending. I get an Army pension, which contributes to the 2% of GDP being spent on defence. The last time I checked—despite the Minister for the Armed Forces having threatened to mobilise me more than once—my pension was not making a huge contribution to our ability to face down a resurgent Russia.

Everyone was taking risk and passing on that risk to one another. Now, I am afraid, that risk has crystallised in that we do face real enemies, and those enemies are very close. We do have to rearm—I should declare an interest as a founder of the all-party parliamentary group on rearmament—but unfortunately our record on that is not great. The numbers were run the other day and of the 32 NATO members recorded we came

31st for rearmament. The only trouble is, in 32nd is Iceland, which does not have any armed forces. That is not a great record for going over to Europe and trying to convince our European and NATO allies that we are pulling our weight.

One or two other things happened in that period of time. First, the MOD got pretty bloated, in particular in procurement. It is deeply unhelpful that we are now on our third Procurement Minister in less than 22 months, which makes it look like we are not taking it seriously. Equally, it shows no consistency in the building of approach. When the Government came in, they appointed the national armaments director, who will be the second-highest paid civil servant in the country. I hope that he is a massive success. I tried to set up the national armaments director up for success before his appointment by asking two Procurement Ministers whether the director would be given *carte blanche* to tear up the book when it comes to procurement. One of them said not only would he be given the ability to tear up the book but that they would hold him to account for doing so. I said, “The last thing anyone on the Defence Committee wants is for the national armaments director to come in front of us, after being in post a year, to say, ‘Well, we did want to change things, but I wasn’t really allowed to.’” The way is set fair: the national armaments director can rip up that book.

When the Defence Committee went to Ukraine last year, we were briefed on its procurement structure, which is extraordinary. Ukraine has put together an Amazon-like marketplace with 1,700 sovereign Ukrainian defence companies as suppliers and the customers being the fighting brigades, who simply write a requirement for a new bit of kit. For example, let us say that the Russians have got a new screen so the brigades cannot fly their fibre optically guided munition right into the Russians’ command post and have it blow up on the general’s desk. The brigade simply writes up that requirement, saying “I need a pre-charge of some sort to burst through that screen so I can fly my fibre optic guided missile in and get the baddies.” That gets put out to industry, which churns the problem; the record, from flash to bang—from requirement to kit delivery—is five days. That is what can be achieved.

Hon. Members must look at what is being bypassed to achieve that level of agility: the whole of the military chain of command above brigade level, bypassed; the Ministry of Defence, bypassed; the Treasury, bypassed; and equally, all the regulators, bypassed. That should give the national armaments director a sense of where we have to go to generate the relevance.

I think I heard the Armed Forces Minister—I cannot remember whether it was the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) or the current one—say the other day that it is rather tricky buying drones, because as soon as we have them they go out of date, so we will not buy any. That is pretty defeatist. We should redo the way in which we are thinking about things so that our land forces in Estonia have drones.

Al Carns (Birmingham Selly Oak) (Lab): On my comments on drones, there is a requirement to bring drones into the system so that training tactics, procedures, doctrine and concepts can be taught. The point was about drones going out of date within six weeks. The innovation the hon. Gentleman just talked about was

changing so fast that if we were to buy *en masse*, the drones would be out of date over time. The right context is that there is a requirement to teach and train our armed forces to interoperate with drones.

Lincoln Jopp: I thank the former Minister for his intervention. There is a huge challenge to us, in that we have to turn our ploughshares into swords rather than the other way round. We need industry that is sufficiently flexible to flick the switch and turn the lawn mower factory into the drone factory in double-quick time.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend is making a brilliant speech. For many people this would have been an obscure argument some years ago, but I genuinely think that how we procure drones is one of the most critical questions for the country. Does he agree that we need to think about SMEs as mission partners and that rather than thinking about the hardware, we effectively buy a service—a learning—from them? That way, the thing we buy is not the capability but the cultural change towards constant iteration, which is how we survive in a war such as the one we see in Ukraine.

Lincoln Jopp: The other group that has been bypassed, and which I did not mention, is the 18 prime contractors. This is direct to the SMEs. I am afraid that the model that we have developed since the end of the cold war has seen the 18 primes getting rich off defence pounds and SMEs getting legged over. The national armaments director should look seriously at the way in which that is done, in order to capture the innovative nature of SMEs that are doing some wonderful stuff. Ironically, they are not selling that to the MOD; it is all going overseas.

To the point made by the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar about showing honesty about the threat, I agree that we must be very clear about the threat and express it outside this place at every opportunity. The Prime Minister of Norway talks about defence about once a week in all his radio and television interviews. We met Norway’s joint forces commander, and even he goes on once a week and talks about the threat. Okay, Norway is nearer Russia, and it has a small land border and a very large sea border with Russia. The strategic defence review mentioned starting a national conversation; it seems to be a conversation of one line. If we are to get the investment that defence needs, we need to talk much more openly.

One other thing that happened during the cold war, I am afraid, is that the MOD became much more secretive. The Defence Committee always used to get things such as the major projects review and the equipment plan to see how the pounds were being spent. We do not get those any more. Similarly, James Heappey came to give evidence to the Committee on the Afghan data breach, but he got quite lyrical and started to say that he felt uneasy that, as Minister for the Armed Forces, he was getting lots of documents that said, “You can’t tell Parliament this” and “You can’t tell Parliament that”, because it was all highly classified. He claims that he wanted to be able to tell Parliament more but was constrained from so doing by the classification system. The Defence Committee used to do its own redaction. It used to get the full threat picture and was grown up enough to redact and not release secrets to the public. That would be a much healthier way of doing things as we go forward.

[Lincoln Jopp]

I turn finally to the moral component of fighting power. We have talked a lot about the physical component, and the moral is to the physical as three to one. We know that is true because Napoleon said it, and he was brilliant. I have had conversations with both former and current Ministers about the undermining of the moral component of fighting power with the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. That is why, when I came tenth in the ballot for a private Member's Bill, I took the opportunity to attempt to put in law that there should be no further investigations, inquests, inquiries or prosecutions of Northern Ireland veterans unless, in the view of a Supreme Court judge, there is new, compelling evidence.

The Bill comes to the House of Commons on 4 September and I very much hope that I can get cross-party support for it. I fear deeply for the stain on the moral component through the constant hounding of our veterans; indeed, I declare an interest as I spent three-and-a-half years of my life in uniform trying to bring peace to that place. I was not shot and blown up there but somewhere else. When the children of the schools in my constituency hear that I have been shot, they all look at me and say, "Where?" I always say, "On the roof of the Mammy Yoko hotel in Freetown." [Laughter.]

The moral component must be reinforced; it does not need resourcing. I hope that the new Secretary of State for Defence was only prepared to accept the job because he had some deal over Northern Ireland veterans. I look forward to finding out whether that is indeed the case, because our veterans need protecting from those prosecutions.

1.57 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): I give my thanks and gratitude, alongside those of hon. and right hon. Members, to those who serve and have served. In opening the debate, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge) talked about putting politics to one side, but everything is a political choice. Decisions are based on ideology, priorities and one's belief of what is the right course of action. I accept that my contribution to the debate will be an isolated one, but it is based on my personal ideology, priorities and beliefs.

The bare minimum in any debate should be honesty. It is therefore important that, straight away, we address with honesty that any movement from the self-imposed strait jacket of the fiscal rules through an increase in defence spending will have to mean a cut to other areas. The Opposition has framed this debate specifically with welfare as the target. With that in mind, I will talk a little about welfare.

Just under a fortnight ago, with my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne), I organised an evidence-gathering session in Grangemouth for the Right to Food UK Commission, which has toured the country investigating the state of food insecurity and poverty. In Grangemouth, we heard from fantastic local organisations that provide food to individuals and families who are living in such a dire, precarious position that they are reliant on the generosity of others. Those

organisations laid out the stark reality: the reason that people are in that situation is low wages that have not kept pace with inflation all the way through the Conservative Governments from 2010 onwards. And let us not forget the Liberal Democrats' part in the early days of the austerity coalition that created a new strata of society—that of the in-work poor. In 2010, 30,000 people used food banks. More than 3 million people use food banks today.

It was not as if the Conservative Government of the day were investing in defence—quite the opposite. During those austerity years, the state gradually withdrew itself every year, cut by cut, until we were left with a social security system that is no longer a genuine safety net. People are falling through it; they will never escape poverty. Does no one here in this Chamber question why we have a national minimum wage, a living wage and a real living wage? Is it not absolutely absurd that we have three different figures that are deemed acceptable but are all, in all honesty, so low that they are nowhere near enough for people to live on?

For heaven's sake, we are one of the biggest economies in the world, yet we have 14% of our children going hungry, workers needing food banks to survive, low wages, decimated public services, poverty, inequality, and communities that have been asset-stripped for decades. If we want to talk about national security, let us acknowledge that all those things are killing our people right now. What kind of country do we live in when we allow that kind of poverty? What are we actually supposed to be defending here? National security is about more than defence spending. It is about creating a healthy, well-educated nation and about people having good, well-paid, secure jobs and adequate housing. As I say, it is always about political choices and about priorities, and I make no apology for those being mine.

2.2 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is a tremendous privilege to take part in this debate. It has to be clear to us on both sides of the House that this is the most critical debate that we will be involved with. This is the most critical thing that we face but it often escapes our notice, and I credit my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) for centring on the very thing that is important. I say gently to those on the Government Benches that it is very easy to go around the whole time saying, "Well, of course, you did this and we didn't." The truth is, we can go right back and see how much previous Governments failed with regard to defence.

I was serving in the late 1970s when the Labour Government were in terrible difficulty. They were slashing the budgets, and military personnel from the captain and senior sergeant ranks were leaving the Army in droves. I remember having one depressed conversation after another—helped by a certain amount of Scottish water. [Laughter.]

Mr Francois: Highland Spring!

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I don't know what the hell you're talking about. [Laughter.]

In those conversations, we decided that there was clearly no future for us in the Army. Now, I did stay on a bit longer, but many left who I knew were very competent and very good people, and it is difficult to fill those

posts. That is the bit in the armed forces that is critical to everything else that happens. If we do not have a cadre of middle-ranking and senior non-commissioned officers, we do not have an Army. We just have a lot of orders from the top down but are unable to do them.

What we speak about today is critical, because we have to send a message to our armed forces that we believe in them fully and strongly and will support them in every way. That is why it is a pleasure to see the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) sitting in his place after his resignation. He has the respect of many of my colleagues on these Benches, without question, not only for his past but for his present. I know what it is like to resign when you disagree with the Government—I have done it a few times myself—but the reality is that he will never regret it. The thing that matters most of all when we come to this place is not us or the debates that we have here and away; it is the people out there who put us here. If we do not plan to speak up, even when our own side does not want us to, we are not worthy of being in this place. I therefore congratulate him, not because I am in a party political game but because I respect him for having called out a problem that the Government face. All the Ministers on the Front Bench know that, as does he. The question is: what will we do about it?

I want to start by talking about Northern Ireland, and I shall be here on 4 September, cheering my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne on with his private Member's Bill. We cannot for one moment forget that we have reduced the morale of British soldiers who have served—veterans who are now often in their late 70s and 80s—and who find themselves persecuted. I say to the Defence Ministers that this really started in the Northern Ireland Office, which was overly persuaded by Sinn Féin that they could somehow change what had happened and come out as victors. As the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak said in his resignation speech, they lost; they lost because of the efforts of the armed forces, and of all those who did not see another day and who died in the service of their country.

More importantly, we forget that walking down the streets in your own country armed and trying to protect civilians against aggression is quite different from anything else that the armed forces were trained to do. In doing it, they had to figure out all sorts of complications. The trouble with the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill is that it does not deal with the sense of what we asked our soldiers to do in risking their lives to protect the British public on the streets of the United Kingdom. We therefore have to understand that the legislation that the Government have brought forward is wrong. That does not mean to say that what the Conservative Government brought through was fantastic. It was not. There were many flaws and failings in it, but many of us felt that we would support it because it did one major thing: it stopped the constant attacks on those poor veterans whose lives are now coming to an end and who see themselves being dragged through the courts all over again.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): One of the strong arguments put forward for the legislation is that it will help families to find out the truth of what happened to their loved ones, yet by repealing the Conservative legislation, it makes that less likely rather than more likely—because who is going to come forward

and incriminate themselves by saying what happened to people who were unlawfully killed if they know that they will not then have immunity from prosecution?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: That is exactly the point. I hope that we will be able to drag this point out again on 4 September and make it very clear that if we in this House do not stand by those whom we order to go to war or to bear arms for the sake of the country, who is going to do that? We have the power to sweep things away or to make them. I have disagreed with my own Government many times, but I say gently to this Government: think again. Do not allow the Northern Ireland Office to drive this thing through when Ministers know full well that it is wrong; they need to defend those soldiers, despite the rows that might take place in Cabinet or among Ministers.

Mr Francois: Does my right hon. Friend recall he and I and others having multiple meetings in the Northern Ireland Office when we were Back Benchers, going through the detail of the Bill—almost line by line on occasions—and trying to defend the interests of veterans, and bit by bit overcoming the resistance of civil servants at the Northern Ireland Office? Does he recall how difficult that was, and does he still believe, like me, that it was worth it?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I do; it was difficult and we stuck to the task. We were not very popular at the time, but that has been a constant in my life. *[Laughter.]* I think you only know you are successful when you are not popular, and we were not popular on that. What we were trying to get was not perfect, but it was better than what we now have, and that is the key. At the heart of it was the aim of protecting those who have been sent, bearing arms, to defend the British people. We need to defend them and respect the sacrifice they made.

Sir Julian Lewis: Another spurious argument, which I am afraid we heard earlier in the debate, is that the legislation put our armed forces on the same level as terrorists. The truth is that everybody is on the same level before the law. In any case, the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 sold the pass on that anyway, because under it nobody—even if they were convicted of first-degree murder, as the Americans might say—goes to jail for more than two years. That put everybody on the same level before the law, as any such legislation has to do.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Yes, that is quite correct, and my right hon. Friend is exactly right to make the point now.

We really must understand that, if the first priority of Government is defence of the realm, then the second priority is defence of those they send to fight to protect the realm. If we cannot defend them, we are not worthy of being here. I say gently to Ministers that the House would support them if they went back to the Government and said about the Northern Ireland position, "This is quite wrong. It is unbalanced and deeply unfair." I hope that they will do just that.

The real reason that I decided to speak today is because I am really, really worried. As I have been saying for some considerable time, we are now in a more dangerous situation than we have been in not since the cold war—at least we arrived at the cold war knowing

[Sir Iain Duncan Smith]

what we had to do; Governments co-operated, NATO was fairly newly formed, we were full of the attitude that we would defend one another no matter what, and we were armed and ready—but since the 1930s. I am not in the business of saying that this Government are responsible; all Governments bear responsibility, as my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne said. We are seeing the rise of a threat very similar to what we saw in the 1930s, and our behaviour towards that threat is exactly the same as it was in the 1930s.

My father wrote a book many years ago about his time. He was a highly decorated fighter pilot, with five gallantry medals; he commanded in the war and fought all the way through. He said that he could never forgive politicians for having placed the country in the parlous situation of being close to losing the war because they did not see the danger and did not want to be involved in spending more on defence. That was the point he made, and it has resonated with me forever.

I happen to believe that we are seeing in front of us the growth of totalitarian states. China is at the centre, but North Korea, Iran and Russia are there, and others, like Myanmar, are developing. More totalitarian states are coming to fruition around the world, and they now outnumber democratic states in the United Nations. The axis has shifted. Over the last 15 or 20 years, not only have we not made ourselves ready—even today we are not—but we have simply failed to recognise that they have made themselves ready. One naval shipyard in China now builds more naval ships than the whole of the United States in one year. I am told that China now has 130 times the capacity of America to build naval vessels. It is no good looking at Europe, because we hardly build naval vessels any more either. The difference between now and what happened in 1937, 1938 and 1939 is that we then had major industry here—an industry that could build tanks and aircraft, had brilliant aircraft designers, and could build ships. We had probably the most powerful fleet in the world ready to go to war if we had to. We are not in that situation today.

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments, and I agree with him. My father said that the biggest mistake in the late '30s was that we had our head in the sand. The right hon. Gentleman has been here for a long time—[*Interruption.*] Sorry. When the Labour Government left office in 2010, they were spending 2.5% of GDP on defence. If we had kept spending that, £90 billion more would have been invested in defence by now. Does he accept that that is the case, and that what happened is a great shame?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: All these things are a great shame when we look back at the past, but no matter how much we fight the issues of the past, we always lose, because we cannot alter them. What we have to do is learn the lessons of the past. By the end, the previous Government had learned the lessons, were committed to spending more, and were spending more and doing more. The sad part is that the new Government have come in and there are differences, but I am not going to focus on that. We learn from our past and from our mistakes. If we do not do that, we are determined to repeat all those mistakes. This time, it may be too late for us to correct them.

This should not be a debate at each other, but a coming together of this House to require that this Government finance defence at the necessary level. I am one of a number of hon. Members who are old enough to remember that, when we finally faced the threat of the Soviet Union, which increased the number of medium-range missiles threatening targets in Europe, we stepped up. Spending went to 5%. That was tough, but we did it. All of NATO did it. No one was lagging. Germany stepped up, even though there were massive crowds on the street saying no. We saw off that threat, because the Soviet Union realised that we were ready.

The Government should appeal across the House for support for a higher level of spending. Three per cent in this Parliament should be *de minimis*. It is not enough: we should be at 3% before the end of this Parliament, with a commitment to rise at least to 4% or 5%. Other countries in Europe would in the past have looked to us for leadership in a crisis like this, but they are finding that they cannot do so, because we are behind them on spending and in the determination to defend NATO and our home countries. If we want to lead, we have to show the way through our financial commitments.

I therefore urge the Government, this evening and beyond, to hear what the Ministers who sadly resigned from the Government have said to them, and to hear what the House in general terms wants. We are ready to commit that spending, we will work to find the savings and we will give support to those who are dedicated to defence. What we must never do is forget the lessons of the past and be unready for the greatest threat since that faced by those brave men and women who died for us to have freedom back in the 1930s and 1940s. It would be a shame if we forgot why they died.

2.18 pm

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow the right hon. and gallant Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who gave an incredibly authoritative speech. I also commend the hon. and gallant Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp), who spoke powerfully. I have not served, but whenever I speak on this subject, I say that this House is richer because of the service of people on both sides, including the former Minister for the Armed Forces—my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns)—and our exceptional Minister for the Armed Forces.

It is Armed Forces Week, so I thank everybody in this country who has served and continues to serve. I particularly thank Stuart Mendelson, who set up an initiative in Hertfordshire called the Muster Point. It has a simple premise: to bring veterans together to meet, to socialise and to build networks and connections. He has had great success in doing that in Stevenage, working with my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia), and we are in the process of extending it to Welwyn Hatfield. I want to put on the record my thanks to Stuart.

This is also the first time that I have had the opportunity to address the Chamber since the Prime Minister announced his resignation. It is a moment of regret for me, and I want to put on the record my thanks to him for all his service to my party and the country, and also for the fact that when he leaves office, most likely in a few

weeks' time, defence spending will be higher than it was at any point during the terms of the five previous Prime Ministers.

The tone of the House has changed somewhat since the initial speech by the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), but I will re-inject a bit of politics, because I think it is important on Opposition day that we assess whether the rhetoric of one party matches its record in office.

I want to go back to 2014, to the moment when Crimea was annexed by Putin—the moment, as people on all sides of politics would agree, when we should have realised the depth of the threats that we faced in Europe. At that time, defence spending was 2.2%. I had a look at what defence spending was in 2022, the moment when the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began. Defence spending in that eight-year period fell to just under 2.1%. I am afraid that when the Conservative party was in office, it did not heed those warnings.

Paul Holmes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for outlining those defence figures, but when his party came into office in 1997, defence spending was 3% of GDP and when it left it was 2.5%. I absolutely take his point, but is it not absolutely applicable to his party and Government, too?

Andrew Lewin: I am pleased that the hon. Member takes my point, but I am saying that the circumstances had changed. [*Interruption.*] I will make the point: that is why I intentionally picked those two dates—2014, the annexation of Crimea, and 2022, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Those two points are indelibly linked, and our failure to act was a decisive moment in history.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I would point out that under the last Government we were the third highest spenders on defence in NATO. The rest of Europe was also not taking defence as seriously. We had all enjoyed the peace dividend and nobody was spending money on defence like they should have. We continued to maintain our presence in NATO though, yet now we are the 12th biggest spenders in NATO. To that extent, is it not the hon. Member's Government who are not matching their own rhetoric?

Andrew Lewin: Is the hon. Member therefore excusing the lack of investment between 2014 and 2022? That is what I am not sure of, because there are Opposition Members who have been clear and consistent—they did not serve in the Conservative Government and they thought it was wrong that defence spending fell. I appreciate that he was not here at that time—neither was I—but I do not know if that was his position.

Stuart Anderson *rose*—

Wendy Morton *rose*—

Andrew Lewin: I will make a bit of progress and then I will let other people in.

This might really upset some Opposition Members, so they should brace themselves: this is also the 10-year anniversary of Brexit. It is the case that most Opposition Members present supported Brexit, and I raise it in the context of public spending choices, because it has now been emphatically proven that the decision to leave the European Union has cost our economy tens of billions

of pounds. The estimate ranges between 4% and 6% of GDP, which equates to nearly £100 billion. In a scenario where we had remained members of the European Union and had a stronger economy, whoever was making the choices on defence would have been in a far better place to invest.

Wendy Morton *rose*—

Andrew Lewin: Does the right hon. Lady not agree?

Wendy Morton: Absolutely not. I stand here not as a Brexiteer, but as somebody who was a reluctant remainer. I voted to remain partly because of the security of our country, but let me tell the hon. Gentleman that there is no way that I regret that decision. I am a pragmatic Brexiteer—like most of our country—but it is no good him standing there and bemoaning this, that and the other; the decision about the defence investment plan falls on his Government. If it is such a good idea, what has stopped them—I notice the Government Benches are empty—just getting on and delivering it for the sake of our country?

Andrew Lewin: I am pleased that we were on the same side in 2016, and maybe we will be at some point again in the future. Let me fast-forward to 2024, because that was an important moment for the country.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: The hon. Member talks about 2014 and the invasion, and he is quite right. I was in Cabinet at the time, and one of the points that I and some others raised was what our position was over this. But the EU got this badly wrong because the President of France and Mrs Merkel headed over, on their own decision, to set up a negotiation that left Russia in control of Crimea, forgetting all the original support and our promises to Ukraine. They were reducing spending and did not want to go to war, and so they sacrificed Ukraine in the process.

Andrew Lewin: I am not sure that I would agree with the characterisation of sacrificing Ukraine, but I am also not saying that the European Union is blameless. I am saying that we had a period of history after Crimea where much of the west was not investing sufficiently in defence, and it is also the case that the Conservative party was in government at that point in time.

The point about 2024 is an important one—we had an important general election for the country. We hear now about the Conservatives prioritising defence, so I looked back at their record and their manifesto. What was their offer to the country on the eve of the general election? It was a big cut in national insurance—a cut that would have cost £10 billion a year. Again, when faced with the decision, two years into the Ukraine war, “Are you going to prioritise defence spending?”, that was not the choice they made, was it?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Member talks about the Ukraine war. It has to be remembered that only one European country stood by Ukraine at the outset of that invasion. Our Secretary of State for Defence and the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson took the decision to arm Ukraine against the advice of the Foreign Office. Does he seriously think that any other recent Prime Minister in this country would have defied the advice of

[James Cartlidge]

the Foreign Office? Can he tell us which other European country had the strength to stand by Ukraine and keep them in the war so that Russia did not get to Kyiv?

Andrew Lewin: But the Prime Minister at the time had the full support of the then Leader of the Opposition and now Prime Minister, so we were united as a House on that. I agree with the hon. Member that Boris Johnson at that moment made the right judgment, but he had the full support of our Prime Minister today.

Wendy Morton: Will the hon. Member give way?

Andrew Lewin: I will make some progress and talk about the record of this Government. *[Interruption.]* I know Opposition Members are enjoying it.

It is important that we reflect on the progress and the investment we have made. The aid-to-defence spending switch was not a policy that was universally welcomed on this side of the House, but I believe it was a necessary decision and the right decision to make. We have the Type 26 frigate deal, the Typhoon deal with Turkey, 13 new sites for munitions and factories, which are so important for our rearmament, and the armed forces pay rise—the most generous and urgently overdue pay rise for 20 years, which again was delivered by this Government.

We have had some authoritative interventions about the changing nature of warfare, and I have much to learn from other colleagues. It is to be applauded that this Government are investing in drone warfare. My hon. Friend the Member for Swindon North (Will Stone) has been a champion for investing in drone factories in his constituency. In just the last week, we have learned about the development of long-range missiles that the UK and Ukraine are working on together without the need for US components. That is a significant and welcome step forward.

While I admire many people on the Opposition side of the House, I regret to have to say that at every opportunity to increase investment in defence spending, the last Government did not take that option. I am afraid that the enduring image that has been left with the public is of the last Conservative Prime Minister leaving the beaches on D-Day early. It was a picture that told a thousand words.

In politics, parties need to be judged by their record, not just their rhetoric.

Mr Francois: On that point, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Lewin: I am going to come to a conclusion.

I recognise that this Government have lots more work to do, but under this Prime Minister's watch, defence spending is up—it is higher than at any point in the last 14 years or under the last five Conservative Prime Ministers—and whoever is the next leader of the Labour party will have my support in increasing it further.

2.29 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): We are facing dangerous and uncertain times, in a world that has dramatically changed in just a couple of years. To set

the record straight following the discussions across the House, it is worth pointing out that Europe is on a path of rearmament. In 2025 the European Union launched its rearmament plan, ReArm Europe, with the goal of upping spending across Europe by 2030. As many of my hon. and gallant Friends have pointed out, we are at the bottom of the pile now on rearmament. Even just a few years back, we were at the top of the pile for NATO spending and our defence capability. How have we fallen so dramatically in comparison with our European neighbours? Earlier this year Germany launched its modern-day comprehensive military concept—the first for a very long time—with the goal of building the strongest conventional army in Europe.

Things have radically changed in but a few years. How have we gone from being at the top of the pile in terms of our NATO contributions to being at the bottom? It is because of political choices, dithering and delay from this Government—a Government who think nothing of spending £330 billion a year on welfare benefits but cannot muster the courage to face down their Back Benchers to put our brave armed servicemen and women first; a Government who think our veterans are fair game for their Islington-dining-set lawyer friends and not deserving of our enduring thanks and protection from relentless lawfare.

To govern is to choose. This Government chose an extra £18 billion of welfare spending this year—an extra £18 billion on showing Britain that work does not pay. That is £18 billion that could have secured 250,000 extra soldiers, according to a recent report from the Centre for Social Justice. Instead, it went to “Benefits Street”. It could have been spent on 200 fighter jets, according to the CSJ report. Instead, it went to “Benefits Street”. It could have built 15 warships. Instead, it went to “Benefits Street”. When Labour Back Benchers want action on welfare, nothing stands in this Government's way, but when our country needs to show our enemies we are investing to protect our country and our future, we get weakness and delay.

We may have lost the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary and the Armed Forces Minister, but the same Government with no sense of putting our country first remains. I say to the Government: stop the lawfare on our veterans now. Make the tough decisions on welfare that we on the Opposition Benches will support. Put a defence investment plan forward now that will make our enemies think twice.

We are saying goodbye to a Prime Minister without a backbone. He has left our country weaker, poorer and less safe. But the country cannot wait for Labour's internal indulgence. It is time for the investment in our armed forces that the moment demands—investment that transcends party and puts our country first. It is about Britain and our role in an unsafe and dangerous world. It is time to act and give our armed forces the investment they need.

2.33 pm

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to make the case once again for a sustained uplift in defence spending, as I have done at every opportunity in this place. I feel quite humbled to follow the gallant Members who have spoken: the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green

(Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) made very thoughtful contributions to the debate.

As I did yesterday in our debate on the Armed Forces Bill, I pay tribute to the former Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), and the former Armed Forces Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns)—who I am disappointed has left the Chamber, so he cannot hear me saying nice things about him for the second time—for their steadfast commitment to equipping our country to deal with the emerging threats from hostile actors who wish to attack our democracy, our freedom and our way of life.

It is my firm belief, as I have said directly to the Prime Minister, that when a Defence Secretary tells us that the funding envelope on defence

“would reduce the readiness of our Forces and increase the risk to personnel on operations, and could make the country less safe”,

the Government have a duty to listen and act. I commend the new Defence Secretary; the new Minister for Veterans and People, my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey); the promoted Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Sandher-Jones); and the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), for stepping up to serve or continuing to serve our country in these challenging circumstances. The new Secretary of State and Veterans Minister are gallant colleagues who, before coming into politics, served our great country in the military, and I can think of no one more appropriate to be making the case within Government for increased prioritisation of defence.

We have heard some slightly confusing messages during the day—none of them definitive—about the timing of the publication of the DIP, and the shadow Defence Secretary, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), referenced this. I am aware that the Chancellor was still talking in Treasury questions about the DIP being published before the NATO summit in Ankara, and the Paymaster General gave an interview in which he indicated that it would be before Ankara. I think there is a very strong argument for sticking to that deadline, because we ought to be able to tell our partners at the NATO summit what we have committed. I also think there is an argument for publishing it under the current Prime Minister, because this needs to be seen as an issue of continuity: it does not matter if we have a change of party leader and national leadership, because we are still committed to this.

I urge the current Prime Minister, of whom I am a great supporter, to cement his legacy as someone who, despite what was said earlier, has consistently taken difficult political decisions because they are in the national interest, and he has paid a huge political price for some of those decisions. I would like him to secure the necessary uplift in defence spending before he leaves office, to keep this country safe. I am sure that history will be kinder to the outgoing Prime Minister than opinion polls and political commentary have been, especially if, decades from now, we can look back to the final days of his leadership as the moment that the UK faced up

to the real and dangerous threats it faces and appropriately responded with the money required to counter those threats.

I know that it behoves Members like me, who have consistently made the argument for increased defence spending, to also make the argument for where that money should come from. I understand the political point the Opposition are making about looking to welfare for this funding. I know that we cannot afford an ever-growing welfare bill and that that is not good for the people who are not in work but could be. I was proud to support the proposed welfare reforms last year, which would not have cut the total benefit package but reduced the increase by about £5 billion over the course of the Parliament. That would have been a useful contribution to the revenue side of any gap in defence funding. The issue with this argument, however, is that that only covers revenue spending and does not free up capital expenditure for new equipment. Reducing the welfare bill therefore cannot be the only answer to the funding requirements of the DIP.

It is not as if the Government are not already taking politically painful decisions to ensure that we fulfil our first duty, as set out in the manifesto I was elected on: ensuring the safety of the nation. On top of the difficult decision to halve overseas aid spending to fund an uplift in defence spending, which I know was felt deeply on the Government Benches, everything that one is led to believe about the DIP negotiations indicates that every Department has already been asked to accept a 1% cut—known as a “haircut”—to its capital budget. I am fully aware that this would slow projects down that Members across the House and our constituents in the country care about, from transport infrastructure programmes to new hospitals to rebuilding schools; I can think of projects I have argued for in the House that I would have to accept will arrive slower because of that 1% change. However, if we heed the former Secretary of State’s calls and go further, as is clearly required, we must look to the Departments with the greatest capital budgets for any additional uplift.

I would argue that additional capital funding, as has already been mentioned, could still come from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. Programmes that are being rolled out by that Department are important. Although we could be forgiven for forgetting during this week’s heatwave, my North Durham constituency has a cold microclimate and lots of badly insulated homes, so cutting capital programmes such as those that address home insulation would harm my constituents. Similarly, investment in carbon capture and storage means that new jobs in the North sea would come on tap later, although I am in favour of the proposed new oil and gas fields—that is as near to rebelliousness as anyone will ever see me in the House, but we are in “freedom hall” in between Administrations. However, when compared with the immediate need to keep our country safe, it is hard to see why those projects ought to be prioritised in the short term over ensuring that our armed forces have the kit that they need to defend the nation from threats that are here or coming in the near future.

Given the long lead times in defence procurement, any month that we go without spending the money needed on equipment could translate to a month in just a few years’ time when our brave men and women on

[*Luke Akehurst*]

the frontline do not have the weapons and ammunition they need to protect themselves and the country. In the final weeks of his premiership, I urge the Prime Minister to look again at whether additional funding could be found for the MOD's capital budget from the source that I have mentioned, or from other sources.

For the avoidance of doubt, let me set out just how pressing the threats that we face really are. Developments across the Atlantic have made it abundantly clear—

Alison Taylor: Does my hon. Friend agree that this debate has sadly lacked some praise for the Prime Minister and the Government for their investment in defence, including the new submarine reactors that have been made in my constituency of Paisley and Renfrewshire North?

Luke Akehurst: I will come to the achievements that this Government have already made in a minute—I thank my hon. Friend for urging me to get on with that—but let me talk about the threat first.

The era when taxpayers in Missouri or Virginia paid for the defence of Europe is long gone. Europe and the UK must fund our own defence. Although we can currently be optimistic about the progress of our gallant allies in Ukraine, it remains possible that the war will end in a harsh peace treaty for Ukraine that could leave it with borders that are not realistically defensible from a third Russian invasion and constrain the size of its military, removing the largest and most battle-hardened anti-Russian force from a future conflict.

From that point, the clock starts to tick on Russia's ability to launch a new war of aggression against another of its western neighbours, perhaps this time a NATO ally, like Finland or the Baltic states. Within two years of peace, Russia could rearm to exactly the same level of defensive capability it had when it invaded Ukraine in February 2022, this time having learned lessons from that experience. It could choose to engineer a scenario to test whether NATO will hold, perhaps taking Narva on the Estonian border, which is largely Russian speaking, in an attempt to break the alliance politically. The only way that we can stop this is by developing an effective deterrence, conventional as well as our existing nuclear deterrent.

While we possess a strategic nuclear deterrent, we lack almost every rung on the escalatory level below a global thermonuclear war, which would end humanity and civilisation as we know it. The F-35A programme, which I believe will be in the DIP, is an important additional nuclear rung, but we also need many more rungs of conventional capability. I have consistently argued, including in my 2024 Westminster Hall debate, that we need additional air and missile defence to counter the threat of Russian missile and drone attacks coming at us from the High North, as well as defences against grey zone conflict. That is especially urgent when the last Government reduced spending on ground-based air defence by 70% in their final years in office. And we need to deter by investing in long-range strike missiles, which I know is part of the SDR and will be in the DIP as well. The only way we can avoid a conflict is by ensuring our enemies—in this case, the proximate threat is Russia—know that we are prepared for one.

This is not just about hard power through military personnel and equipment. It also involves the political resolve of the British people and the politicians that they elect. Without a strong military, our way of life could be ripped away from us in an instant. Without a fair and good society worth defending, there will not be the public and political will to fight. Russia will know these weaknesses and will prey on them. Russia could aim to take advantage of perceived societal weaknesses and political divisions, knocking us out of a conflict early by making continuing to fight a political impossibility.

I appreciate that I have taken quite a lot of time, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I can see you indicating that I should wind up. Let us compare and contrast the Labour and Tory record. Under the Tories, armed forces personnel saw a real-terms pay cut in nine out of 14 years, but under Labour, they have received a third consecutive above-inflation pay rise, bringing the cumulative increase since 2024 above 10%. Under the Tories, armed forces housing was left in disarray, with a record 13,000 complaints a year, but Labour is setting up a defence housing service, and bringing homes into public ownership to address the unacceptable state that they are in. Under the Tories, the armed forces fell in size by 25,000 people to its smallest size since the Napoleonic era, but under Labour, recruitment is up, and over 100 outdated recruitment policies have been scrapped.

As a result of 14 years of underfunding, and the previous Government's dereliction of their duty to protect our nation and make the necessary tough political choices, our armed forces' presence in Estonia is down to fewer than 10 Challenger 2 tanks. We know about the shortage of ships, because we struggled to find even one Type 45 at a moment of extreme crisis. My message to the Opposition is: let us have more of the thoughtful contributions of their Back Benchers, rather than some of the rhetoric that we have heard from their Front Benchers. I recognise the progress that the Labour Government have already made, and I urge them to get to the 3% spending target. I can say that as a Back Bencher, but I know that Ministers cannot talk about percentages of GDP with such freedom. However, they should know that there is Back-Bench support for getting to 3% by the end of this Parliament.

2.46 pm

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst). He speaks with passion on defence, and he clearly wants to increase our defence presence.

I have listened to the debate and I am sounding an alarm. I grew up in a military family; both my parents were in the military. I left school and joined the military, and my brother served in the military. I spent my entire career in security and defence, and since coming to Parliament, everything I have done, outside traditional constituency engagements, is about backing security and defence. I am delighted to be graduating next month from the Royal College of Defence Studies. It has been brilliant to spend a year immersed in the best strategic command course in the world.

I reiterate the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith): we are in a very serious situation, but rhetoric, or party political lines, are overtaking that,

and we are missing the fact that we need to rearm to face the current situation. In 2024-25, there were 54 to 55 conflicts around the world—those figures might be adjusted, depending on the source. That is the largest number of conflicts in any one year since the second world war. If we believe that we can stop a major conflict, why can we not stop minor conflicts? There is complete instability, and the whole geopolitical situation has changed. Discussions that we are having now would have seemed impossible—beyond the realms of fantasy—five or even three years ago. We need to put that in perspective and really think about it.

When Government Members start to talk about “14 years of hollowed-out defence”, they make an illiterate defence argument. They are taking a moment in time and comparing peace with war. We need to look at the situation over the past 100 years and learn from history. At the end of the second world war, Clement Attlee demobilised the military, because that was the right thing to do, as we did not need 5 million soldiers. Similarly, at the fall of the Berlin wall, the majority of the world de-armed and reduced the scale of their defence spending. However, the situation has changed.

In 2022, defence spending was 2.22% of GDP, according to figures from the Office for National Statistics, not 2.1% as the hon. Member for North Durham said. There is no denying that the whole world has changed since 2014, or even since 2022, and we are in the most volatile situation. The debate is about whether we should measure from the end of the cold war or the end of the second world war. I firmly believe that we should measure from the end of the second world war. I believe that we will see a global conflict in the coming years, but we are not prepared to defend our nation. I believe that, at this stage, we cannot meet our article 3 NATO commitment to defend the nation for the period of time expected.

Everybody talks about article 5, but there are three things that every Defence Minister and politician must look at when we speak about defence: readiness, lethality and survivability. Everything we must do is there. We talk about numbers, but are we funding the readiness of our armed forces? Are they as lethal as they can be? Do they have the ability to survive any conflict? We are not looking at the expeditionary side of warfare that we have seen in the middle east in recent years; we are looking at how we fit on the world stage, and how we prepare for a global conflict, while hoping that it never happens. We have to look at those three areas, but there is always a debate. Are we ready enough? Should we spend more money on lethality, or should we look at survivability? The most important of those areas is readiness, but I am not saying that the other areas are not important. We have to be ready. If we are not, we cannot go to war.

In 1999, after I got married—I celebrated my 27th wedding anniversary on Friday—I said to my wife, “See you in six months,” and deployed straight to Kosovo. When we arrived in theatre, there were no Army barracks. We found derelict, flea-ridden accommodation—blokes were covered in flea bites—and we moved into houses that had been abandoned, as people were still being ethnically cleansed. We did not have the kit, but we were about the most lethal bunch of soldiers you could see. We adapted. The readiness came from what Field Marshal Slim described in the Burma conflict as spiritual morale. You can take equipment away from soldiers and break everything, but if they

have the spiritual morale to fight, they can get through everything. We are burning out that morale in the military over time, bit by bit.

Let me go back to when I was on the Defence Committee, from 2020 to the middle of 2022. My name is on many reports that absolutely destroyed the Government of the time. That gave me many difficult conversations with the Whips, but calling out the Government was the right thing to do, because we were not able to procure equipment. We were not ready and able to prepare for the world as it was at the time.

The Chief of the Defence Staff has recently said that we will have to cut operational services and training capability. Those are big issues, but he has also touched on something that most people do not mention: the resource spending. We have resource departmental expenditure limit spending and capital departmental expenditure limit spending. CDEL buys the ships, tanks, planes and big items, but they have to be run, and we have to pay our troops, so we have to look at the resources around that. Resource is about 62% of defence spending at the moment, but it is nowhere near enough—the balance is off. We are looking at big projects. It is great to be looking at issues such as how we fund new submarines and the Type 83, but will the global combat air programme be crewed or uncrewed? That is another debate; I have some good views on that that I would love to share another time.

At the moment, the debate is about what war we are preparing to fight. The hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) has mentioned that the DIP did not fund enough preparation for wars that we may be fighting in the future. It is always hard to predict the future of warfare. It is easy to take lessons from Ukraine, and just think that that is what warfare will be, and while we should take those lessons, we need adapt and prepare, moving forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) mentioned the 18 defence primes. On the scalability of technology, I believe a disruptive model is coming, or is needed, in the defence industry. Two weeks ago, I was delighted to be at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with NATO, discussing nanotechnology—even though I left school as a lad with no GCSEs, and joined the armed forces as a rifleman. Time has moved on.

Ben Obese-Jecty: Do you know what it is now?

Stuart Anderson: No.

Let us look at how technology and innovation are moving forward. In some ways, we need to think differently. We need an understanding of how we prepare for different warfares. It is not a matter of nanotechnology on the one side and aircraft carriers on the other; there is a bit in the middle. We should look at the scalability of new technology, as artificial intelligence develops and quantum computing comes online. The battle space will be completely different, and we have to move into that space. People often say that the nature of warfare is changing, but it is not. The nature of warfare is brutal, and will always be, but the character of warfare is changing, and we have to be prepared for that.

Let me go back to my point about readiness, lethality and survivability. All the things that happened on our watch, on Labour's watch before us, and on Labour's watch now, are chipping away at the spiritual morale of troops. I have a son who is a serving soldier, and I am

[Stuart Anderson]

watching that happen bit by bit. He is told, “That exercise is cancelled because we cannot afford it,” “You have to do extra time on deployment because we cannot rotate you through,” and “We are not going to order equipment, because the DIP is not ready.” All those things chip away at spiritual morale.

There is one issue that we are dealing with that cuts to the heart of every veteran. I sat with a load of veterans watching the football last week—I will be watching football tonight with serving personnel, and spending time with veterans and colleagues—and I have heard at first hand what they are saying. I served for 18 months on Op Banner during the troubles, and the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 is cutting through. Regardless of the political debate here, serving soldiers believe that they will not be protected by the Government when they go on operations. We can argue the issue, and go back and forth on it, but that is what is landing, and what they believe. A change to what we have in place would be a betrayal to our veterans. It would remove spiritual morale—that British fighting spirit that I have spoken about. It would make us not ready, not lethal and unable to survive. Unless the DIP comes forward with the correct funding for the correct defence products, we will be in a serious situation, and I do not believe that we are ready for what is coming over the horizon.

2.56 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Corona muralis—I wager that few people in this Chamber, if any, have heard that term. Perhaps the odd classicist will have heard it. It was one of ancient Rome’s most coveted military decorations. According to Aulus Gellius, it was a golden crown, shaped like a city wall, awarded for bravery, much like the Victoria Cross. It was awarded to Roman soldiers for being the first up the ladder and on to the enemy castle walls during a siege. Whoever received it found fame, and the accolade could be leveraged as a political stepping stone. Survival might be unlikely, but the prospect of personal and political glory could motivate men to embark on a suicide mission, convinced that they would fare better against impossible odds than those who had tried and failed before them. In “The History of Rome”, Livy wrote:

“The men dashed on in the face of wounds and missiles, and neither walls nor armed men standing on them can restrain them from vying with one another in the attempt to climb”.

With that, I welcome the Defence Ministers to their new roles, and wish them luck in the forthcoming reshuffle.

The new Defence Secretary tells us that he is working around the clock. That is another idiom to add to a lexicon that includes “flat out”, “at pace” and “laser-focused”—the perennial favourite. This Government’s failure to invest in defence, particularly given the high horse that they rode in on, while waxing lyrical about “hollowing out”, is farcical, given that we have already seen two experienced Defence Ministers quit. We now see two more take up the colours—both decorated former officers with an MBE, and each with an MBE for their service. Coronae murales all round.

The defence investment plan has entered the zeitgeist, but our duty in this House is to hold the Government to account. We can talk about top-level budgets and use

exciting buzzwords, but unless we are actually talking about what is in the plan, that capability is largely irrelevant. The defence investment plan is not funded properly; it is not even close to being funded properly. An additional £10 billion, plus £3.5 billion of loose change that the Government found down the back of the sofa, will not touch the sides. The new Defence Secretary will need to make damaging and difficult cuts. Much of that will not be truly realised until the publication of the ’26-27 Ministry of Defence accounts at the end of next year—by which point he may be long gone.

There are projects that sit under the major projects portfolio, specifically Dreadnoughts and GCAP. The defence nuclear enterprise takes up 18% of the entire defence budget. To put that in context, it means that we are last in NATO for our spending on conventional forces. We spend less, proportionally, than North Macedonia and Luxembourg. We need to be mindful of the spiralling cost of Dreadnought. If we couple that with the cost of upgrading the Astraea warhead, and of the AUKUS commitment, we see that we are locked into a huge proportion of the available budget being spent on submarines alone. Last week, the Royal United Services Institute wrote that it anticipates the DNE may hit 25% of the budget within the period covered by this defence investment plan. Meanwhile, its aerial contemporary, GCAP, continues to be a costly endeavour—so costly, in fact, that despite the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry informing me last week that a new funding deal for Edgewing had been agreed, my sources at the MOD tell me that the deal is not the multi-year settlement that is needed. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed the duration of the new funding deal.

With the demise of the future combat air system, GCAP and F-47 are the only NATO sixth-generation programmes left in town, yet the RAF is struggling to find the money for the platform, has apparently rowed back on committing to pillar 2, and is in danger of being superseded by events. The new uncrewed fighters currently in development are a fraction of the cost, and will be many iterations developed by the time we see the first Tempest. It will take something special to ensure GCAP is not a relic before it even leaves the drawing board.

Last year, the previous Chief of the Air Staff—now Chief of the Defence Staff—made clear that there were “no major equipment programmes planned for the next 15 years. We have what we have for the near and medium term”,

despite the combat air strategy being about to undergo a refresh. What the RAF has planned now is what we will have through to 2040. We have taken delivery of 48 F-35B jets thus far, and the programme of record states that we are committed to 138. Does anyone genuinely believe that the defence investment plan will lay out the pathway to buying another 90, if we have only bought half that number since 2012 in order to fulfil a purpose—being carrier deployable—that now makes little strategic sense? For reference, the US has budgeted for 85 this year alone, at a cost of \$21.4 billion.

Analysis by the US Government Accountability Office has shown that the full mission-capable rate of the F-35 is a lamentable 25%. Our own Public Accounts Committee reported in March that

“The UK F-35 fleet achieved approximately one third of the MoD’s target”

for the time it was able to fly all its required missions in 2024, and achieved only two fifths of the level of availability of the global F-35B fleet.

Lincoln Jopp: I do not know whether my hon. and gallant Friend has yet had the opportunity to go down to Speaker's Court and meet the armed forces representatives there. I met the very improbably titled Fungus 1, who is an F-35 pilot, and I was appalled to hear that he had spent nine years in training and has only just done three months on the frontline. As well as all the other things we are giving Defence Ministers to think about, surely pilot training has to be one of them, if we are going to be ready.

Ben Obese-Jecty: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. and gallant Friend. The UK military flying training system is on its uppers. I do not necessarily hold this Government responsible for that—there are longer-term issues with the flying training system. I believe the average length of time it takes pilots to qualify is somewhere in the region of six years; most of the pilots who are now hitting the frontline have spent as long in training as I spent in my entire military career, by which point I had done numerous operational tours. Significant work needs to be done in that area, and there are questions to be asked of the company that we have outsourced flying training to, as well as about the Hawk jets—which I will not cover in this debate. The Minister knows that that topic is a hobby horse of mine; I will not speak about it today, but he realises that there is a sense of urgency there.

Mr Francois: When I served on the Defence Committee, just before the election, we went to RAF Marham and spoke to two F-35 pilots. We asked them how long it had taken since they first walked through the door of a recruiting office for them to be allowed to fly the F-35. One said he had been lucky, and it had been six years; the other said he had been unlucky, and it had been 10 years. Does my hon. Friend agree that the MFTS programme requires fundamental reform?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I do—we need to get more pilots through the door, and I have asked numerous questions about our ratio of pilots to aircraft. I appreciate that the Minister does not want to divulge that information, but I would suggest that currently, it is not as good as it could be.

The joint programme office that should fix the F-35 is undergoing a global support solution reset that will cost an additional \$13.7 billion. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether any of that figure will be paid for by us in the UK. As a result, there is no timeline for completing technology refresh 3, which 72% of our F-35Bs still require, and no timeline for the completion of the block 4 upgrade. Talk of the 12 F-35As for the NATO nuclear mission—which the hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) mentioned—has gone suspiciously quiet, with rumours that they will be cut, and that is before we talk about the four-year lead times for low rate initial production material required to build them. Crucially, though, there is currently no more money allocated to the F-35 Lightning programme. The departmental budget laid out in the integrated review defence Command Paper back in 2021 only

included the procurement of the 48 we now have; all new funding for the F-35 will need to be outlined in the defence investment plan.

That brings us on to drones. We know that the RAF is committed to having the Tempest as a manned platform, but by the time it comes into service, the US will be a decade deep into its collaborative combat aircraft programme. It has just awarded General Atomics and Anduril sizeable contracts for the FQ-42A Dark Merlin and FQ-44A Fury uncrewed fighter jets. The Secretary of the Air Force has stated that the US plans to “procure over 150 combat capable CCA by the end of the decade.”

The US has budgeted \$1 billion for CCA procurement, \$822 million for modifications, and another \$1.4 billion for research and development. How much of the £10 billion of additional funds available for our entire defence budget do we think we are planning to spend? When the defence investment plan is published, we will need to look closely at investment in those projects that should deliver drones.

How does this all tie together? I have spoken briefly about Project ASGARD before—the Chief of the General Staff, speaking at the RUSI land warfare conference earlier, talked about the need to be able to strike Russia within 30 minutes—but whether or not this is properly resourced in the DIP will be instrumental to our fortunes. We need to move past our current squeamishness and invest properly in both Project ASGARD and its RAF cousin, Project BOYD. I was fortunate enough to visit a demonstration of ASGARD during Exercise Arrcade Strike last month, which gave a glimpse of how the next war might be fought. My takeaway, however, was how desperately it will need to be invested in. We risk being a day late and a dollar short when it comes to an integrated anti-access/area denial and integrated air and missile defence solution. The reluctance of our senior leaders to move from an in-the-loop and on-the-loop approach to the kill chain to an on-the-loop and out-of-the-loop posture concerns me—it is better to have the capability and not need it than need it and not have it. The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry confirmed to me last week that the MOD is looking at machine vision for lock-on in the terminal phase of one-way effectors, but we must move further and faster.

For all the talk of defence investment in exquisite capabilities, nobody is suggesting that we increase the mass of the Army significantly. That is before we consider that every single vehicle platform the Army operates, except for Foxhound, is due to go out of service by 2030. Our ability to field an armoured division is at best optimistic; in reality, it is laughable. My own background is in armoured infantry, as is that of my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp), and were we to try and field an armoured battlegroup—let alone a division—I would be interested to see what form it would take.

At the front of any armoured push is formation reconnaissance. That role should by now be delivered by Ajax. My views on Ajax are well documented, as I delivered a debate on the topic in Westminster Hall earlier this year, but what progress has been made since then? In the wake of Exercise Titan Storm, the Government commissioned an independent expert panel review. The results of that review have been submitted via a final report, but the Minister appears hesitant to publish the

[Ben Obese-Jecty]

outcome. I would be grateful if he published those findings for scrutiny in the House now that the review has concluded. In his summing up, could the Minister outline when the House will receive an update on that review's findings?

We know that the first phase of bringing Ajax up to speed will require the restarting of trials with the current version of Ajax, but the Minister has also informed me that the current platform requires a number of upgrades outside the scope of work in upgrading from capability drop 3 to capability drop 4, including improvements to the electrical power generation system, the crew compartment heating and the air filtration system. Although those sound like gremlins that need to be worked through on any new platform, can he tell me which of those modifications, if any, will mitigate the injuries sustained by service personnel on Exercise Titan Storm?

Ajax must be a success—we cannot afford to be stuck with a platform that no other country is willing to buy. The reputational damage to the platform is in danger of being baked in if the Government do not get the fix right first time. All 589 hulls have been built, and the factory will have no further work once those vehicles are assembled and rolled out. What work will the General Dynamics facility in Merthyr Tydfil then have to do? When I raised that question with the Government, they stated that it is an issue for General Dynamics. There is a reason the Government did not include that facility within the scope of the defence growth deal for Wales. Put simply, the Government cannot afford for Ajax to fail, neither from a defence exports perspective—and there are currently no pending orders—nor from a capability perspective. The Government know this, having made no assessment of any potential replacement platforms such as the Combat Vehicle 90, so when will we finally see Ajax realise its potential?

Sadly, though, that is not the only issue. Behind Ajax should be Challenger 3, but Challenger 3 remains in the demonstration phase and, based on reports in *The Telegraph* last week, is now beset by problems. The turret power traverse gearbox is potentially proving to be a problem that may push back delivery of the tank by years—to put that in layman's terms, that is the part that makes the turret rotate. The Government have now said that this is not the case, but it is concerning that they are yet to declare the planning assumption for service entry for the new tank, despite all 148 remaining Challenger 2 tanks being in scope for upgrade and conversion.

The Government have also previously told me that they are continuing to explore export opportunities for Challenger 3. What export opportunities? We have 148 main battle tanks; how many are we planning to sell, and who would buy them? We have no plans to replace them. I would be interested to understand the full scope of the Army's heavy armour automotive improvement programme. In January, the Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry told me:

“Manufacturing will begin once the tank's performance is proven, rather than being tied to a specific deadline.”

By when does he anticipate the tank's performance will be assessed to have made the grade? Meanwhile, our allies look elsewhere to rearm. With both the Franco-German main ground combat system to replace the Leclerc and Leopard 2 respectively and other fledgling

initiatives, what is the future of armour? “Behind the tanks” Warrior is due to go out of service next year, currently with no realistic replacement. Warrior is due to be replaced by a mixture of Boxer and the Ajax-derived Ares, but neither looks set to be ready in time. More concerning, the Government's position appears to have shifted once again, with the Minister telling me last week:

“Under current plans, Boxer is initially being fielded as a supporting capability to Armoured Units within 3rd (UK) Division, before being fielded to Mechanised Infantry Units between 2030-2035.”

Warrior goes out of service next year, so what is filling this capability gap? We have not yet seen an order for the Patria 6x6 as part of the common armoured vehicle system. The Government told me recently that they were continuing to monitor the market for potential future platforms, but the defence investment plan is supposedly to be published next week, so why have these decisions not already been made?

From a Royal Navy perspective, it is no secret that the hybrid Navy concept is the direction in which they are sailing. The commitment of the Royal Marines to the High North and potential investment in a joint commando craft or littoral strike craft would illustrate a longer-term commitment to that force posture, but the hybrid Navy concept means that the Type 83 is dead in the water. The decision to gift Type 26 build slots to the Royal Norwegian Navy kicks the can down the road when it comes to the sticky issue of when we need to pay for the new ships, with just eight to be built for us and a further five for the Norwegians. Given our significant commitment to global operations in comparison with the commitment of the Norwegians, do we really think that just three more ships will cover our global commitments?

This has been a whistlestop tour through just some of the myriad capabilities that will need to be detailed in the defence investment plan within the next week or so. [Laughter.] I left a lot out! Members are chuckling, but I could have gone on for another hour.

We need to spend more on defence. We need to resource our military to meet the threats that we face, not the ones that we would like to. If this Prime Minister, this Chancellor and this Defence Secretary will not find the funding required by cutting the welfare budget or changing the fiscal rules, they should make way for someone who will—but perhaps that will happen sooner rather than later.

3.11 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): This debate has been characterised by so many powerful speeches that I think it would be invidious to pick out any of them. I congratulate everyone who has contributed, particularly the Government Back Benchers who have evidently come to the debate espousing the principle that the best defence is attack. Some of their speeches have been so combative that it is hard to believe that only recently they lost their Secretary of State for Defence, their Minister for the Armed Forces, and even their Prime Minister. If morale is indeed the measure of a successful fighting force, those Government Back Benchers are doing extremely well.

By happy coincidence, I had a letter published in today's edition of *The Times*, which I had submitted before I knew that this debate was going to take place. I say that it is a happy coincidence because I know that

you, Madam Deputy Speaker, are worried about the ticking clock, and one requirement for a letter to be published in that esteemed newspaper is for practically all the argument to be compressed into no more than 150 words. These are the slightly fewer than 150 words that I chose:

“An erratic, isolationist White House, a ruthlessly imperialist Kremlin and a disturbing relationship between the two have put peace in Europe at greater risk than at any time since the height of the Cold War. The prime minister’s valedictory boast of securing ‘the biggest uplift in defence spending since the Cold War’ should therefore cut little ice. We are nowhere near investing even the 3 per cent of GDP—under current MoD calculation criteria—still being spent when the Conservatives were defeated in 1997, years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Under Margaret Thatcher throughout the 1980s—again applying today’s criteria—defence received between 4.1 per cent and 5.5 per cent of GDP. This shows the scale of effort required once again to boost deterrence and prevent the appalling costs, in blood as well as in treasure, of full-scale war between Russia and the West.”

That was the letter, and I will now briefly pick a couple of aspects of it on which to expand. The first is the use of the word “deterrence”. I am perturbed about the sense of inevitability that there is going to be a conflict with Russia, perhaps as soon as 2030. However, the question of whether or not there is such a conflict is not just down to Russia; it is also down to what we do—the preparations that we make, the investment that we think we can bear in the military in order to ensure that if Russia looks at the prospect of war with the NATO powers, it will see that the outcome is uncertain and the cost is likely to be unbearable. So we have to do our bit.

The other aspect of that letter on which I would briefly like to comment is the opening point—the point about the isolationist White House. No one knows how far the isolationist virus that is embodied by President Donald J. Trump has spread throughout the rest of the American political system, but if when he is eventually replaced that virus reappears in his successor, the future for peace in Europe will indeed be imperilled, because the key achievement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was to ensure that any potential aggressor against any of the member countries would know that if they attacked, from day one they would be at war with the United States of America.

What Donald Trump has done is cause that guarantee to be undermined. I do not know why he does it. I do not know what the nature is of what I described in that letter as his “disturbing relationship” with the killer in the Kremlin. All I know is that Europe will not be safe until again we can rely on the United States to guarantee our freedom. In the meanwhile, we must send a signal across the Atlantic, for our part, that we will do everything necessary to invest in our armed forces and to make the necessary preparations. If we do that, we will maximise the chance of restoring stability to the power balance between east and west, which saw us through the most deadly threats of the cold war—the times when it was thought that civilisation could perish—and we will get back to a situation in which people can then think about what it is nice to pay for in order to have a modern, civilised, compassionate society.

Let me end with a famous quote from another Healey who was a Defence Secretary, Denis Healey. He said, memorably, that if we do not have adequate defence, we do not have all the aspects of a society that we wish to

cherish; we do not have schools, we do not have hospitals, we do not have houses—what we have is “a heap of cinders”. So let us invest what we can while we can, let us get our priorities right, and let us restore the guarantee of the transatlantic relationship, which kept the peace and prevented a third world war.

3.18 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): As my colleagues on the Conservative Benches have already noted, today and previously, the defence of the realm is the first duty of any Government, and as a fundamental part of that duty, any Government must provide the people who volunteer to keep our country safe—at great personal risk—with the tools they need and the support they deserve. Our country is not kept safe by people in this place or by bureaucrats in Whitehall offices. It is kept safe by brave men and women who put their lives on the line because they believe in this country and want to protect it. They suspend their family lives, they risk their own lives, and they operate in incredibly difficult conditions, because they think that this country is worth suffering for—and even dying for. They do this of their own free will, and certainly not for any great sums of money.

We are incredibly fortunate that anybody puts themselves forward to serve, and even more fortunate that over the years this country has produced many thousands of courageous, professional and dutiful people who have preserved the freedom of this country and, at times, the world. The very least that the British Government can do is to treat these people—our armed forces personnel—fairly, to honour the implicit promise that their service will be repaid with respect and protection, and to make sure that when orders are issued from on high, the people charged with carrying out those orders are not punished for doing so.

Since the last election, we have seen this Government do exactly the opposite. Their Northern Ireland Troubles Bill is a direct betrayal of that promise, and it will see veterans dragged through the courts and hounded by endless inquiries, decades after their service. Those who served in Northern Ireland did so at incredible personal risk. They operated under intensely challenging conditions, the likes of which most of us in this place—save for some gallant Members—will never be forced to withstand. They did all this to keep our country safe from murderous psychopaths who wanted to undermine our democracy and tear our country apart through the use of terrorist violence, the assassination of police officers and the murder of innocent civilians.

Over the course of their service, the vast majority of those who served in our security forces did so with incredible professionalism. They behaved according to rules of engagement that did not constrain their terrorist enemies. They followed orders and procedures designed to protect innocent life. When those standards were not met, people were held responsible. Again, no such internal scrutiny took place within the terrorist organisations that they fought. Indeed, under the terms of the Belfast agreement and subsequent legislation, IRA terrorists were given immunity from prosecution, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) set out earlier. Many were released from prison before their sentences had been served, despite having carried out terrorist attacks that killed civilians.

[Katie Lam]

That charity and forgiveness stands in stark contrast to the treatment in the opposite direction. Many of those who served have been hounded for decades by vexatious legal claims. They include people who served in our armed forces and those who served in the police in Northern Ireland, which was then called the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Typically, these challenges have been politically motivated and brought by people linked to the Irish republican movement, often to furnish the republican narrative that our security forces behaved unlawfully throughout the troubles. Such challenges are usually launched not on the basis of new evidence, but because of the retrospective application of human rights laws that were never designed to govern counter-terrorist combat.

On the morning of 3 June 1991, three members of the IRA drove a stolen car into a small village in County Tyrone. It was their intention to murder a part-time member of the Ulster Defence Regiment, a regiment of the British Army made up of local recruits from Northern Ireland. On reaching the village, the car stopped. One of the men got out and pointed an assault rifle at the person he believed to be their target, but who was in fact a member of the Special Air Service in disguise. Believing that the decoy's life was in immediate danger, other SAS soldiers, hidden on the first floor of a nearby hotel, opened fire on the IRA men. All three were killed. Investigation at the scene showed that two of those men, Lawrence McNally and Michael Ryan, were armed with assault rifles. The third man, Tony Doris, was not armed, which the SAS soldiers who carried out the ambush could not have known. The three IRA men who were killed that day set out to murder a part-time soldier, and the actions of the SAS were designed to prevent that murder from happening. Fortunately, they succeeded.

That operation took place before I was even born, yet until earlier this year, the soldiers who took part in it were still being subjected to legal harassment for their actions that day. More than three decades later, lawyers with no specialist knowledge of military operations were asked to rule on whether those soldiers had behaved in accordance with human rights law, which was not designed for combat. Fortunately, the Court of Appeal determined that the SAS had acted lawfully, but other veterans have not been so lucky.

This Government's troubles Bill will mean more cases like that one, with more veterans dragged through the courts, hounded in the press, and forced to testify at countless inquests and inquiries. It will scrap the protections put in place by the previous Government and open the doors to a whole new wave of politically motivated prosecutions. The Government say that this is necessary because of our obligations under the European Court of Human Rights, but if protecting our veterans from vexatious prosecution is not compatible with ECHR membership, what better case can there be for leaving the ECHR altogether?

Earlier this week, we heard that we would be rid of this Prime Minister, who has repeatedly let down those currently serving in our armed forces by refusing to provide them with the material support they need, as well as those who have served previously, through the disastrous Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. I hope that his exit foreshadows the exit of the Attorney General

and the Northern Ireland Secretary, both of whom have been responsible for advancing and defending the Bill. They have been warned repeatedly about what an awful signal it sends to those who are currently serving. Why would anybody risk their lives if their own Government might throw them under the bus decades later? I only hope that the chaos in Government will provide the new Defence Ministers—whenever they arrive—with an excuse to drop the Bill for good, and that they will instead support the private Member's Bill brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp), which I am honoured to support.

Our Northern Ireland veterans made unimaginable sacrifices to keep us safe. It is not a lot to ask that we protect them from this nightmare in return.

3.25 pm

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): I declare an interest: I am a trustee of the armed forces parliamentary scheme. I encourage all Members of the House to undertake their placement on that scheme, if they can.

The Prime Minister has been generating some sympathy with the dignified way in which he is choosing to leave office, and I add my voice to those who have stated that we are fortunate to live in a country with a political system that values leaders who put their country and the dignity of their office before personal gain. The Prime Minister is many things, and I disagree with him profusely, but first and foremost he is a gentleman who won a mandate, and everybody across this House should respect that and wish him well going forward.

Others who have shown personal strength of character and commitment to public office include the former Secretary of State of Defence—the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey)—and the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns). I know that both of them took their decision to resign seriously and with the intense reflection that it deserves. I also understand that their resignations came as a great surprise to the Prime Minister and No. 10, as they were expected to stay loyal, keep calm and carry on. Well, for those of us on the Opposition Benches, it was no surprise whatsoever.

We do not know exactly what was said in Cabinet, let alone in the private discussions between the Defence Secretary and the Chancellor, and nor should we. But from what we have seen and what has been reported about the complete fiasco around the defence investment plan, and about the failure to plan and meet the expectations that the public and our allies around the world have of us, it is no wonder that the Defence Secretary felt that he was unable to work under those conditions any longer. For six months—a quarter of the time the Prime Minister has been in office—he could not make a decision.

Since January, it has been clear to the Government that there is a gargantuan shortfall in the Ministry of Defence budget. The paltry sum that the Treasury deemed suitable to shower on the MOD was barely enough to replace a few helmets, let alone build a next-generation fighting force that can deliver on the priorities outlined in the strategic defence review. Let us be clear: the indecision may be based on process—the Prime Minister's favourite wall to hide behind—and, yes, there must be a process to prioritise, delegate and decide, but his indecision will cost lives if and when this country faces a crisis that requires a military response. The question remains: why

did the Prime Minister and the Chancellor not see this coming? The answer, of course, is that they did. They saw the threat of being exposed as weak on defence, and they chose to do nothing.

I respect the Minister for the Armed Forces and thank her for her past service, but she has added to this. She has spent a lot of time criticising the last Government—quite rightly, because she is a Minister of the Crown—but she now sits in the Department, and she stands at the Dispatch Box saying that all is now well and that she is proud of the process she is putting forward, when one of the Ministers she served alongside in the Department has resigned, as has the Secretary of State, who said that things were not going in the right direction. I think she needs to look at their speeches again.

There are few things more damning for the leader of a country to be accused of than being incapable of protecting the people they were elected to govern. That is not a party political point, but a point that has been made by the former Defence Secretary and the former Minister for the Armed Forces and one increasingly made across the defence sector, including by the Labour man, Lord Robertson, who wrote the strategic defence review in the first place. I sometimes wonder if Labour Members are deaf, because all these Labour voices are telling the Government that their strategic defence review, the lack of a defence investment plan and the lack of funding going into our armed forces are damning, but the Ministers at the Dispatch Box do not seem to hear.

Mr Francois: I have great respect for Lord Robertson, an accomplished former Defence Secretary and a former Secretary-General of NATO, who joined the Labour party in 1961. He is a Labour lifer, and when even he accuses the Prime Minister of “corrosive complacency”, does that not prove how utterly out of touch this Government now are?

Paul Holmes: My right hon. Friend the shadow Minister for the Armed Forces is absolutely correct. I think we can add somebody else, and that is the former Defence Secretary. He is known not as a party political man, but as a deep statesman. He is known as a Minister on whom Prime Ministers from across the Labour party could rely. When we reach the stage of a former Labour statesman who wrote the SDR and the recently serving Secretary of State saying the Government are not listening to them, I think the country at large needs to listen, and so do Ministers standing at the Dispatch Box.

If I may, I will briefly mention specific points on the DIP and resilience. On the DIP, I know that the Ministers sitting on the Front Bench accept that the defence of the realm is the most important duty of any Government, and while I wish them success, I just think that this Government are falling short. There is no clearer sign of that than the lack of a defence investment plan, which they have promised. It has been much touted by this Government, but it is delayed by the latest drama. It is likely to be delayed again, which will spread uncertainty in our defence sector, including defence businesses in my constituency of Hamble Valley. Most importantly, it will spread uncertainty among our allies internationally.

The elephant in the room is that the Ministers sitting here today may not be in their jobs in three weeks' time. I do not wish that to happen—I believe they are good

Ministers—but that is the nature of the job we are in, or that they are in. Again, that will add to the uncertainty faced by businesses in the defence sector that are looking to the Government for the investment they were promised two and a half years ago.

In Hamble Valley, we have a thriving defence sector. The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry has been there: he kindly came down to a roundtable in the constituency. We have companies such as Domo Tactical Communications, Kraken, Safran, Saab and Windracers, but the constant feedback I get is that, without a defence investment plan, they do not know what they are supposed to do or where to invest. If the Minister and the new Secretary of State do not do this very quickly, those companies will suffer, and the United Kingdom as a whole will suffer. The figure of £13 billion is not the £18 billion identified by the National Security Adviser as needed just to maintain the status quo, which means that the United Kingdom will lose its credibility on the international stage.

My final point is about resilience. Last week, I was in Finland with the European Leadership Network. With Finnish MPs, we were looking at some of the defence co-operation in the NATO framework in which the United Kingdom, Israel and Finland play their part. I have to say that I was left shocked by the comparison between Finland's resilience and preparedness and the United Kingdom's. Hon. Members may challenge me—I know that some went to Norway last week—and point to the fact that Finland has a population of 5 million and a 1,500 mile border with Russia, whereas we have 70 million people on an island, but I think a lot of comparisons can be made. Very early on in the school system and when young people are growing up, defence resilience and preparedness are embedded in them, as it is in civil society and Government Departments.

As a former special adviser at the Cabinet Office, I know we have such documents, but what we urgently need to do—that is why this is in our motion—is not just look at international resilience and defence spending in order to attack, but make our population ready and willing to play their part in defending the homeland. The population in the Nordic countries have been polled about whether they would go to war if there was a threat. In Finland the figure is in the high 80s, but in the United Kingdom it is in the high teens, which worries me. Personally, I am a bit sceptical about how low it is here, because I believe our population would defend this country.

I am looking for answers from Ministers about how they plan—whether through the national curriculum or by reversing the cuts they have made to cadet forces in our schools—to very quickly embed in people from a very young age and entering civil society a sense that they are prepared to defend this country should that be needed.

Mr Francois: I thank my hon. Friend for his generosity in giving way. The Finns have what they call a total defence concept, which is that in the event of an attack from Russia—they have much experience of that, historically—it is not just the armed forces who resist, but the whole of society. They have planned that for decades. We had something a bit like that during the cold war, but the Finns take it to a greater degree. Having been there, does he agree that we could learn a great deal from Finland?

Paul Holmes: I absolutely do. The story was that if any Russian crossed the Finland border, the first thing they would hear from a Finn is “Hands up!”, and that if the Russians went into Finland, there would be a sniper’s rifle in every window. I am not saying that we need to do that—that was slightly tongue in cheek—but there is that resilience there. As a House, we have to accept that nobody under the age of 50 really remembers an adversarial cold war or the mentality of needing to be prepared to defend the country should there be an imminent and unprovoked attack. That is what we need to get back to, so I would be interested to hear from the Minister how the SDR will look at that.

We are living in unparalleled times. Public warnings have come from the Chief of the Defence Staff and from two Ministers who have resigned. A Prime Minister is now going and, I have to say, the ministerial team have not taken any notice of those warnings and are still carrying on without giving the money our armed forces need. We are paralysed: we are paralysed in this House and the Government are paralysed about putting in the much-needed money that the professionals are asking for. I hope that in three weeks’ time, when we get a new Prime Minister, that will be unlocked and it will change. Call me a cynic, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I am not sure it will.

3.36 pm

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): This debate comes at a very apt time. It is Armed Forces Week, when we show our support for our armed forces community, whether serving personnel and their families, veterans or cadets. I look forward to going to Brackley’s Armed Forces Day celebration this Saturday. I put on record my thanks to all the Royal British Legion branches that do so much across our constituencies, with a particular call-out to Tony McCawley, who organises veterans breakfasts in the Brackley branch on the first Saturday morning of the month: thank you for indulging me once a month.

Defence of the realm is the ultimate insurance policy: we invest now to protect our serving personnel and our people. If we fail to prepare, we prepare to fail. What the former Secretary of State says—that the Treasury is “unwilling” to commit the resources we need to defend the nation—is concerning. Given that the Prime Minister was unable to do that, what will the new Prime Minister—whoever that ends up being—do to move the dial and change that? That question lingers with us all, because it is really important.

Assuming that we do see the DIP published before the NATO summit, I hope that it will be honoured. It may be media speculation, but there are questions about whether the DIP should even be delayed by the forthcoming Prime Minister and whether they would want to meet the spending requirements. That is something we are all very concerned about. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) has just said, many businesses are being affected by the DIP not being published. One of my businesses, EKA, has been told that there will be no new orders until the DIP is published. That is really kiboshing businesses, no matter what the Government say. We talk about “corrosive complacency”, but we are now in enforced limbo and it could go on for months. We do not have the time for that.

Let me turn to the readiness part of this debate. One element of that is the preparedness of the NHS for any armed conflict. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) talked about us being in a situation that is more akin to the 1930s, and spoke about some of the risks. When we were fighting in the second world war, we did not have an NHS—it was formed afterwards. If we were to go into full-scale outright war now, there will be huge questions, because the NHS has never had to deal with that. The Chief of the Defence Staff, Sir Richard Knighton, has warned that the NHS is not ready for the casualties of full-scale war. We have approximately 14,000 medical regulars and reservists who work in the NHS. If we were to go into full-scale war, they would need to be deployed and we would therefore be faced with a gap.

The Government acknowledged in the SDR that there needs to be greater integration between defence and health to try to fix that, but the reality is that the Government still have no concrete plan for how the NHS would cope. As I said, we will have a gap in capability. If we see major returns of casualties, how will the NHS cope? When we had a recent incident, with only about eight soldiers returned, it overwhelmed the capacity of a particular hospital. That would have an impact on waiting lists and could potentially lead to the rationing of services, so what would it mean for civilians in the long term?

Those are all points we have to be prepared for. I call on the Government to turn their attention to them. Although the SDR acknowledges the issue, nothing has come from that, and we must be prepared. I ask the Government, in their own famous phrase, to work at pace. Please, work at pace and make sure we are ready for conflict.

3.39 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): In February 2025, the now outgoing Prime Minister told this House that Labour defence investment would deliver

“a new approach to defence, a revival of our industrial base, a deepening of our alliances; the instruments of our national power brought together; creating opportunity, assuring our allies and delivering security for our country.”—[*Official Report*, 25 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 634.]

In the many months that we have waited for the overdue defence investment plan, all that has been delivered is evidence of a Government lengthy on announcements and short on deliver for the security of our country. This has been at arguably the most globally turbulent time since the cold war and the second world war—a time when our defence industry needed certainty and support from the Government.

The 2025 strategic defence review set out that Labour’s defence investment plan would be completed in autumn 2025. Repeated pushbacks have real impacts on defence acquisition, expenditure and military capability. Labour has weakened our defence industry, leaving our armed forces in need of modernisation and transformation to ensure their readiness for modern warfare. However, as has been rightly highlighted by the Chief of the Defence Staff:

“recent circumstances...suggest the opposite. Further delay to the Defence Investment Plan, long promised ‘in the autumn’, risks sending damaging signals to adversaries.”

Our adversaries will not wait for a Government capable of bolstering our defence, and the Labour party should not be allowed to get away with this.

Even more concerning, when we finally receive the defence investment plan, it will confirm the intention to spend only 2.68% of GDP on defence and intelligence by 2027—an offer to uplift by only 0.08% of GDP to address a £28 billion blackhole in the MOD's defence budget. To quote the then Labour Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), that

“falls well short of what is required for defence and the country at this dangerous time.”

It will increase the risk to personnel on operations and could make the country less safe.

A plan pushed back five times that does not address the problem it was designed to address is not a plan at all. It shows a corrosive complacency, characteristic of this Government's failure to make the tough decisions they need to for our country. The Conservatives have always highlighted how serious this is, and we have taken the position that defence spending must increase to 3% by the end of this Parliament—a position recently backed by the former Defence Secretary.

Conservatives called for Labour to repurpose funding from the official development assistance budget for defence, and Labour followed our advice. We are now calling on Labour to go further and commit to spending 3% of GDP on defence by the end of this Parliament—doing this by reducing the welfare bill, not through more taxes and borrowing—growing the regular Army, and creating a sovereign defence fund that would mobilise billions in public and private funding to overhaul the defence industry.

This morning, the Chancellor told the House that the defence investment plan will meet the scale of the challenges facing our country, but we cannot defend against today's adversaries with inadequate policies from this Government. Like many others in the House, I urge the Government to get on with it. We can no longer defend our nation with soundbites.

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

3.43 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is a privilege to sum up this debate on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition in Armed Forces Week, when the nation pays particular attention and gives thanks to our armed forces, their families, veterans and cadets, for all that they do to ensure the security of this nation and its people.

This debate has a historical aspect, too. A week tomorrow is the 110th anniversary of the first day of the Somme, the fateful occasion on which the British Army suffered some 60,000 casualties, killed and wounded—the greatest loss our Army has ever suffered in a single day. Their sacrifice must never be forgotten. Indeed, we must not forget the sacrifice of those who died in subsequent conflicts, up to and including Iraq and Afghanistan.

In his emotive poem, “The Soldier”, the war poet Rupert Brooke famously said:

If I should die, think only this of me:

That there's some corner of a foreign field

That is for ever England.

Those fields are still there, as are the cemeteries, lovingly and respectfully tended by the staff of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. In Armed Forces Week, we pay tribute to their highly professional efforts, too.

We still live in an extremely dangerous world. Across the House we stand four-square with the noble people of Ukraine, who have been fighting against Russian aggression not just for four years, since the full-scale invasion in 2022, but for 12 years, since the original Russian invasion of Crimea and the Donbas—a period longer than the first and second world wars combined.

I say respectfully to the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin), who has just rejoined us, that it was a Conservative Government who, in 2014—after that first invasion, when the Ukrainians realised what was coming—began the programme known as Operation Orbital to train the Ukrainian armed forces to resist the full-scale invasion that they knew was coming. Had it not been for that programme—had it not been for the soldier's instinct of Ben Wallace and the determination of Boris Johnson to equip and train the Ukrainians to resist the Russian invasion—the Russians would be having supper in Kyiv this evening. Perhaps, despite his incredibly partisan speech, the hon. Gentleman could give us some credit for that.

Andrew Lewin: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: No. [*Laughter.*]

In February of this year, along with some 20 Members from this House—the largest ever parliamentary delegation to Ukraine as far as I am aware—I visited Odesa, Chernobyl and Kyiv. On 24 February, we were privileged to take part in the commemoration in Maidan Square to mark the fourth anniversary of the full-scale invasion. It is, in effect, Ukraine's equivalent of Remembrance Sunday, and it was extremely poignant to be part of it. They lay lanterns with a candle at their memorial in much the same way as we lay wreaths in Britain. The principle is exactly the same: it is to remember those who gave their lives in defence of freedom and democracy. The Ukrainians are fighting for our values and, ultimately, for our freedom too. We absolutely stand shoulder to shoulder with them in their brave struggle, which we all hope that they will one day win.

In order to help them, we need armed forces that can fight too. As the hon. and gallant Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) reminded us in his resignation letter, we need to plan for the next war and not the last. With that in mind, I would like to ask Ministers some questions on programmatics this afternoon. Having been in government for nearly two years now, Labour has to begin to take responsibility for something. I have three very specific questions for the Minister on military capability.

First, where are we on the much delayed E-7 Wedgetail programme? When, if ever, will this vitally needed eye in the sky enter Royal Air Force service? When, if ever, will Boeing actually make it work properly?

Secondly, turning to the Army, there are media reports that it will cost an additional £1 billion—above the £5.5 billion already allocated—to fix the Ajax programme and bring it fully into service. Is that true? If it is, can we be assured that General Dynamics will pick up the bill, per its current £5.5 billion firm-price contract, and that

[Mr Francois]

not a single extra penny will fall on the British taxpayer? Incidentally, where are we on the Morpheus tactical communication system?

Thirdly, how can it be that our entire fleet of Astute-class nuclear attack submarines are currently laid up for maintenance? The new Secretary of State chided me last week for discussing submarine movements on the floor of the House. I did no such thing. I was, in fact, discussing the total absence of submarine movements. Given the First Sea Lord's increasingly, and rightly, dire warnings about Russian naval activity in the English channel and the North sea, perhaps the Minister could tell us how we are supposed to credibly deter Russia when not a single one of our £1.5 billion attack submarines is currently at sea?

That brings me to the question of what has happened to the defence investment plan. The three well-respected authors of Labour's much-vaunted strategic defence review were adamant when it was published, over a year ago now, that the price of implementing the measures in the SDR would be to spend 3% of GDP on defence. The detail of how that would be afforded and the actual programmatic were to be provided subsequently in the defence investment plan.

We were faithfully promised the plan in the autumn. Then we were absolutely promised it by Christmas. Then we were definitely going to get it early in the new year. Now we are in the middle of June and still do not have the DIP. Ministers tell us that they have been working flat out. Well, they are now comatose.

The new Armed Forces Minister assured the House last night that it would be published by the time of the Ankara summit in July, yet *The Times* reported this morning that the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) is minded to delay the publication of the DIP because he wants to take these decisions himself. Presumably whoever his new Chancellor turns out to be—we all pray that there will be one—will have something to say about that too. Can the Armed Forces Minister commit absolutely that after crying wolf so many times, the Government are going to stick to the timetable and publish the DIP within the next fortnight, prior to Ankara? Or is it going to slip yet again? She laughs, but this is not funny. This is about the defence of the United Kingdom. Do Ministers not realise that what little credibility they have left is rapidly disappearing?

Indeed, after Cabinet this morning, and even during the course of this debate, the BBC has reported:

"No new major policies or spending decisions until new PM appointed, No 10 says".

Where does that leave the defence investment plan? Who is in charge of the clattering train? Who actually runs this country? Is it the current Prime Minister or the next one?

Paul Holmes: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. My hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) and I mentioned a number of businesses that are not growing—and I know that the shadow Secretary of State went to Kraken yesterday. Businesses are trying to get orders and grow, but are holding off because they do not have the defence investment plan. This lack of action is costing jobs, is it not?

Mr Francois: Absolutely; industry is exasperated, from BAE Systems down to the smallest defence suppliers in the land. When we were in government, we published—with one year's exception, I think—a detailed equipment plan every year so that industry could plan accordingly. That is what the DIP is meant to be, but still we do not have it.

Labour Ministers tell us and their own Back Benchers again and again that they are increasing defence spending to the greatest extent since the end of the cold war. That is literally untrue. The Defence Secretary told the world in his resignation letter that Labour's spending plans envisage going from 2.6% of GDP this year to 2.68% of GDP by 2030. That is a 0.08% increase over four years. How is that the largest increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war? Help me out, someone over there.

It gets worse. Labour is also seeking £3.5 billion of in-year, self-inflicted, Treasury-driven cuts to the operational and readiness spending of our armed forces. That means fewer ships at sea, fewer planes in the air and fewer exercises on Salisbury plain—and the Russian and Chinese embassies must be laughing themselves silly. If Members will not take it from me, take it from the Chief of the Defence Staff—the professional head of the armed forces—who warned just a few days ago that if Labour continues on its financial path and does not fund the DIP properly, he will have no option but to cut back on readiness and training, which is exactly the activity that is meant to deter a potential aggressor in the first place.

The blunt truth—as a Brit, I take no joy in saying it—is that this Government are the laughing stock of NATO. Indeed, in NATO's own readiness index, the United Kingdom ranks 31st out of 32 NATO countries, with the only one below us Iceland by virtue of having no armed forces to ready. As the Government disintegrate before our eyes, we can only hope that their successors are both competent and courageous and actually believe in defending this country, which clearly this collapsing Administration do not.

Another area that we want to press Ministers hard on is the fate of their benighted Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. The hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak, who famously described it as "not fit for purpose", spoke powerfully in his resignation letter to the Prime Minister in defence of Northern Ireland veterans. He mentioned his battle in government, where he

"set out the changes I believed were necessary, and the lines which I could not in good conscience go beyond. Those lines have not been accepted. I have run out of room to argue this case honourably from inside government. A serving minister cannot ask fellow veterans to trust a process he no longer trusts himself."

He went on:

"We ask soldiers to fight for this country. In return, we owe them the kit to do the job and the loyalty to stand by them when it's done. We are failing on both."

Nine former four-star officers have told the world that the troubles Bill represents a "direct threat to national security." A group of former SAS commanders who were at the sharp end of the battle against republican terrorism told us:

"Today every British soldier deployed must consider not only the enemy in front of them but the lawyer behind them... Make no mistake, our closest allies are watching uneasily, and our enemies will be rubbing their hands."

We absolutely cannot allow this situation to continue against those who defended the rule of law. Those who served in Operation Banner stood effectively as piggy-in-the-middle for decades between two warring communities. Over 700 of them were killed and thousands more suffered life-changing injuries. They and their comrades are now to be pursued through the courts via lawfare, actively aided and abetted by a Government who for months have promised multiple times to produce amendments to the Bill to protect veterans and, just as with the DIP, we have seen nothing of substance on which the House can rely, with no amendments and no letters of comfort for them, either.

It is a matter of record that a number of those regiments who served in Northern Ireland on Op Banner came from the north-west of England, including from in and around the Manchester area. I think of the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment and its antecedent regiments, including the King's Regiment, which traditionally recruited from Liverpool and Manchester—they did many tours of Northern Ireland. I therefore ask, in all seriousness, what is the attitude of the right hon. Member for Makerfield towards the benighted Northern Ireland Troubles Bill?

If the new Prime Minister seeks some kind of reset for the Labour party, a good place to start would be to drop this dreadful piece of legislation, which threatens to put our soldiers in the dock solely to the advantage of those who sought to kill them. In lieu of that, he could agree to back the Northern Ireland Troubles (Criminal Investigations etc) Bill, the excellent new private Member's Bill tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp), which will have its Second Reading on 4 September and which in essence seeks to curtail any further investigations, inquests or inquiries against our Op Banner veterans unless compelling new evidence as certified by a UK Supreme Court Justice is produced. Some of us on these Benches have literally spent years seeking to defend those who defended us; let us hope that the new Prime Minister will agree.

There has been consensus on one point this afternoon—I heard it again and again—which is that the first duty of Government above all others is the defence of the realm, yet the Armed Forces Minister resigned, the Secretary of State for Defence resigned and now the Prime Minister has resigned. This Administration has failed. It is broken. It is going. It made many mistakes, but worst of all, it failed to defend this country. For that, it deserves to come to an end.

3.59 pm

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): I thank our armed forces for their work to keep this nation safe every single day—the regulars, the reserves, the cadets, the civil servants who back our forces, and the men and women of our defence industry who keep our fighting forces on the frontline with the kit and equipment that they need to keep Britain secure at home and strong abroad. I have heard the pride in our armed forces from both sides of the House today, and though there was quite a lot of politics, in particular from the Opposition Front Bench, I think that all those who serve in uniform can take from this debate that, regardless of party, we back them and we will continue to support them.

I agree with the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) that it is a shame that Reform Members are still not here for a defence debate. None the less, in their absence, I will press on. There were a number of common themes raised today, but before I mention them, I will say this to the House. I am proud to be a Plymouth MP; I am proud to represent Devonport, the largest naval base in western Europe; I am proud to be the son of a Royal Navy submariner; and I am proud to be an RCDS graduate. I wish the hon. Member for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson) all the best for his graduation in due course.

On Saturday, I will be on Plymouth Hoe for Armed Forces Day, which is a brilliant annual event. I know that there is cross-party support for the men and women of our armed forces, but in particular, I thank one set of armed forces personnel who have done an amazing job in Plymouth over the last year, clearing all the second world war bombs that we keep finding in our city. The armed forces have a lot of roles, but the role that has been on the TV news is the one played by the brave men and women who have been moving second world war bombs around, putting their lives at risk to safeguard others from a conflict that took place many decades ago. I thank them for that.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): In Armed Forces Week, will my hon. Friend join me in thanking the brave men and women, the staff and the recruits of HMS Raleigh, the local community that keep them going and especially the reservists, who are such unsung heroes in this important week?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for her comments. HMS Raleigh is an important training establishment for the Royal Navy. Right across the country, whether in the Navy, Army, Air Force or the new direct entry scheme for cyber, we have some brilliant people training the next generation of talent in our armed forces. I join my hon. Friend in thanking all those who serve at HMS Raleigh.

This has been a good debate with some passionate speeches across the House. People are passionate because they care about defence; indeed, that is why I stand here as a Defence Minister. I care about defence, I care about our national security and I am proud that I am part of a Government that also do. A number of themes have been discussed and I will detail them here. Across the House, we have spoken about defence spending, readiness, armed forces personnel and veterans, and about how we deal with the inheritance left by the previous Government, how we value our people more and how we publish the defence investment plan. I will return to each one, but first I will turn to the DIP.

Those who were present at Treasury questions this morning will have heard the Chancellor say:

“The Ministry of Defence is producing a defence investment plan that will meet the scale of the challenges and meet the moment with increased readiness. I am confident that the new defence investment plan will be published before the NATO Ankara summit. It will involve more money spent more effectively and will meet the scale of the challenges facing our country.”

I think that answers the question.

James Cartlidge: Will the Minister give way?

Luke Pollard: I will make some progress. That was a clear answer to the questions that have been asked on the matter.

[Luke Pollard]

When it comes to defence spending, which was raised by a number of colleagues across the House, let me be clear: this Labour Government are spending more on defence. I welcome a debate that asks how we can spend even more and faster, but we should be clear that we are spending more on defence. Next year, we will spend 2.5% of GDP on defence. That figure was not met in a single year of the previous 14 under the Conservatives—[*Interruption.*] The shouty people on the Opposition Front Bench say the world has changed. The hon. Member for Exmouth and Exeter East (David Reed) must be terrible when he goes to the cinema in terms of being shouty. I agree that the world has changed; that is why we are spending more on defence. Would I like to spend more? Of course I would.

James Cartlidge: Will he give way?

Luke Pollard: No, I will make some progress.

We are spending more of this increasing defence budget with British companies. The hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) mentioned Kraken in his constituency, which I visited very recently. He will be pleased to hear, if he is not familiar with this, about the increased orders that we have given Kraken for its K3 Scout. I believe there is a K3 Scout on show in Speaker's Court at the moment. Kraken is a brilliant company investing in cutting-edge technology that we are backing not only for 47 Commando in the Royal Marines, which is in receipt of K3s for Project Beehive, but for the autonomous hybrid Navy options, especially in the strait of Hormuz. It is a brilliant company doing brilliant things.

When it comes to readiness, let me say clearly that we need to develop our warfighting capabilities, moving from an era of expeditionary warfare. The strategic defence review set out clearly the change that is required. Our forces have been postured and resourced for a period of expeditionary warfare for quite some time, leading up to where we are today, and the SDR set out that we need to move away from expeditionary warfare to warfighting readiness against a peer adversary. That means a number of things. First, it means retiring old kit and equipment that is not suitable for that task. Secondly, it means massively reforming our procurement system so that we can procure faster.

We inherited a broken procurement system that we are fixing, and I am pleased that the new national armaments director is leading much of that work. I know that we can achieve improvements in procurement because the brilliant men and women of our Ministry of Defence do so in the support that they provide to our friends in Ukraine. On one side of their desks, they can use increased permissions to procure kit and equipment for Ukraine faster. On the other side of their desks, we are trying to make it easier for them to procure what could be similar equipment for our own armed forces.

James Cartlidge: Will the Minister give way?

Luke Pollard: No, I am going to make some progress.

The third area that people have spoken about today is armed forces personnel and veterans, and I am grateful to a number of Members from across the House for mentioning people who are doing incredible things in

their own constituencies. I believe it was the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) who spoke about Tony McCawley, who runs the veterans breakfast. I thank him and the hundreds of people like him who run veterans breakfasts up and down the length of the country. I know it makes such a difference for veterans, especially those who might be having a tough time, to go somewhere where there are other people who have walked in their boots—maybe in a different unit and maybe at a different time of service, but having someone they can relate to makes such a big difference.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin), who spoke about Muster Point and Stuart Mendelson from Stevenage, who is doing such a good job in supporting veterans in his community as well. I know that if there were more time, every single Member who has spoken would have been able to single out brilliant people doing brilliant things in their own constituency, and I thank them.

James Cartlidge: Will the Minister give way?

Luke Pollard: I am still going to make some progress.

Let me now answer the questions about the inheritance that we face. I have already spoken about the SDR wanting us to move from expeditionary warfare to warfighting readiness, but we now need to deliver the changes that we have set out. We have made good progress, but we inherited a situation where 47 of 49 major defence programmes were over budget and delayed. I believe that the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) was responsible for those delayed programmes when he sat in my seat.

James Cartlidge: Will the Minister give way?

Luke Pollard: I am still going to make some progress.

Let me also be clear about the inheritance that we have in housing and in morale. We inherited a situation where many of our armed forces were living in housing that was frankly unacceptable. They had black mould in their children's bedrooms, leaky boilers and leaky roofs. We are sorting that out with a generational repair, and nine in 10 military homes will be either refitted or rebuilt in the next decade. We have already delivered the first 1,200, with the worst homes on our military estate being able to be refitted. That has been delivered by taking those houses back into public control.

James Cartlidge: Will the Minister give way?

Luke Pollard: I am still going to make some progress.

Let me also—

Paul Holmes: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder if I can seek your guidance. In this Opposition day debate, many of us have spent four and a half hours in this Chamber seeking answers from a Government Minister. When he refuses to give way, how do we ensure that he responds to our questions? Is it in order, Madam Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption.*] I will still have my say. Is it in order for a Minister not to give way through the whole of his speech?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): As the hon. Gentleman well knows, it is at the Minister's discretion whether he chooses to give way or not.

Luke Pollard: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) did say that I was a good Minister, which I am sure is a kiss of death for my career, but I welcome it none the less. He asked me how I am trying to answer the questions; I am answering the questions by not giving way, so that I can answer the questions that have been asked. I have taken copious notes.

James Cartlidge: Will the Minister give way?

Luke Pollard: I am going to make some progress; I am not going to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

The fifth area that we have spoken a lot about in the debate is how we value our people more. Valuing our people more means improving their conditions, and that means improving defence housing and improving childcare for deployed personnel, including deployed personnel in the United Kingdom, such as those deployed and based in Scotland. We have taken an important step in addressing that.

James Cartlidge: Will the Minister give way?

Luke Pollard: I am going to make some progress, as I have said a number of times. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will start listening.

I am exceptionally proud of the biggest pay rise for 22 years. I believe my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) spoke about the effective real-term pay cuts to our armed forces under the Conservatives. Well, they have had above-inflation pay rises from this Labour Government.

James Cartlidge: Will the Minister give way?

Luke Pollard: I am still going to be answering the questions raised and not giving way to the hon. Gentleman. Let me turn to the questions that have been asked. *[Interruption.]* They are very shouty, Madam Deputy Speaker—a little bit angry as well.

I have a lot of time for the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) and rate him highly. I appreciate his honesty in speaking about decisions that his party made when it was in coalition with the Conservatives. I have not seen that level of honesty in many of the speeches from Conservative Members, but I am grateful to him.

James Cartlidge: Will the Minister give way?

Luke Pollard: I am still not going to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) made a good point about numbers versus capabilities. I have responded to a number of urgent questions and debates around the defence investment plan, but I want more discussion about the new capabilities we need to bring on board. For instance, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham mentioned, how can we invest in more deep precision strike and integrated air and missile defence? How can we ensure that we are looking at F-35As? That is precisely what we need to invest more in.

I listened carefully to the excellent speech from the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp), and I am grateful to him for making it. In particular, his experience of having to bury men from his regiment shows what an

important, experienced figure he is; we in this House need to listen to him. He asked about the national armaments director ripping up the rules around procurement.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con) *claimed to move the closure* (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Question put accordingly (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 108, Noes 307.

Division No. 37]

[4.12

AYES

Anderson, Stuart	Lamont, John
Andrew, rh Stuart	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Argar, rh Edward	Lockhart, Carla
Atkins, rh Victoria	Lopez, Julia
Bacon, Gareth	Lowe, Rupert
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Lumsden, Douglas
Barclay, rh Steve	Mak, Alan
Bedford, Mr Peter	Malthouse, rh Kit
Blackman, Bob	McVey, rh Esther
Bool, Sarah	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Burghart, Alex	Moore, Robbie
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Morton, rh Wendy
Cartlidge, James	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Cleverly, rh Sir James	Mundell, rh David
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Cocking, Lewis	Norman, rh Jesse
Cooper, John	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Costa, Alberto	O'Brien, Neil
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Patel, rh Priti
Cross, Harriet	Paul, Rebecca
Davies, Gareth	Philp, rh Chris
Davies, Mims	Pritchard, rh Mark
Dewhurst, Charlie	Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Rankin, Jack
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	Reed, David
Duffield, Rosie	Robertson, Joe
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Robinson, rh Gavin
Easton, Alex	Shannon, Jim
Evans, Dr Luke	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Fortune, Peter	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Fox, Sir Ashley	Simmonds, David
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Smith, Greg
Freeman, George (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Fuller, Richard	Snowden, Mr Andrew
Gale, rh Sir Roger	Spencer, Dr Ben
Garnier, Mark	Spencer, Patrick (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)
Glen, rh John	Stafford, Gregory
Grant, Helen	Stephenson, Blake
Griffith, Andrew	Stride, rh Sir Mel
Griffiths, Alison	Stuart, rh Graham
Harris, Rebecca	Swann, Robin
Hayes, rh Sir John	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Hinds, rh Damian	Thomas, Bradley
Holden, rh Mr Richard	Timothy, Nick
Holmes, Paul	Trott, rh Laura
Huddleston, Nigel	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Hudson, Dr Neil	Vickers, Martin
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy	Vickers, Matt
Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Whately, Helen
Johnson, Dr Caroline	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Jopp, Lincoln	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Lam, Katie	

Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jerome Mayhew and
James Wild

NOES

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Adam, Shockat
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Baines, David
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Olivia
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Craft, Jen

Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Davies, Ann
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, rh Maria
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Patricia
Foody, Emma
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gittins, Becky
Glendon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Grady, John
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Paulette
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Tom
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim

Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kendall, rh Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lake, Ben
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote*
cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McEvoy, Lola
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast*
by Ben Lake)
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Iqbal
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naismith, Connor
Nandy, rh Lisa
Narayan, Kanishka
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex

Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast*
by Sir Nicholas Dakin)
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osborne, Tristan
Owen, Sarah
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Ramsay, Adrian
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reynolds, rh Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rimmer, Ms Marie (*Proxy vote*
cast by Rachael Maskell)
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Russell, Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sandher-Jones, Louise
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spencer, Hannah
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Taylor, Alison

Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie

Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Lilian Greenwood and
Jade Botterill

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)),
 That the proposed words be there added.

The House divided: Ayes 294, Noes 110.

Division No. 38]

[4.26 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Baines, David
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Brackenridge, Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan

Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris

Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Grady, John
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Tom
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote*
cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema

Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast*
by Sir Nicholas Dakin)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie (*Proxy vote*
cast by Rachael Maskell)
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim

Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Taylor, Alison
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam

Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Lilian Greenwood and
 Jade Botterill**

NOES

Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartlidge, James
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Cooper, John
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costa, Alberto
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Davies, Gareth

Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David (*Proxy vote
 cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Dewhirst, Charlie
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duffield, Rosie
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Easton, Alex
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freeman, George (*Proxy vote
 cast by Mike Wood*)
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Grant, Helen
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison

Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 Lumsden, Douglas
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, 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*)

Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 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, Patrick (*Proxy vote
 cast by Mike Wood*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:

**James Wild and
 Jerome Mayhew**

Question accordingly agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).

Resolved,

That this House looks forward to the publication of the Government's Defence Investment Plan; recognises the Government's commitment to providing the resources the UK's military needs; welcomes that the Government has provided the biggest uplift to defence spending since the Cold War; supports the Prime Minister's commitment to hitting 2.6% of GDP on defence spending in 2027, and 3.5% by 2035; further recognises that taking such decisions is never easy and will mean significant reallocations of funding from across Government departments because strong public finances are also part of what keeps the UK safe; endorses investment in the capabilities that the UK's armed forces need, after they were hollowed out by the previous Government; and further endorses the signing of more than 1,400 contracts since July 2024, with 94% of that total contract spend going to UK-based companies.

Puberty Blockers

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has not selected the amendment. I call the Opposition spokesperson.

4.37 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to take steps to prevent the PATHWAYS clinical trial into the effect of puberty suppressing hormones on children with gender incongruence.

Before I start, I declare an interest as an NHS consultant paediatrician, a member of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, and a member of the British Medical Association. It is also important for us to recognise at the beginning of this debate that we are talking about the protection of children—vulnerable children who are troubled, and who need our care and compassion and the very best quality of healthcare.

The healthcare of children distressed about their gender is an area in which attempts have been made to shut down debate with threats and accusations of transphobia; we saw the way that the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) was treated when she raised concerns. As adults and as elected Members of this House, we have a duty to safeguard children in our country. That means protecting them from adults who—with whatever motivation, good or bad—could do them harm.

As a children's doctor, I have recruited patients for trials, and I have cared for children and babies participating in clinical trials. I recognise the value of a well-designed clinical trial in improving clinical care, but today the House is not being asked to consider the principle of performing clinical trials in general, or on children in particular—I hope we can all agree that a well-designed trial can improve care. Rather, we are being asked to consider the Pathways trial: whether it meets ethical tests, what it does, the cohort, the protocol and the consent. I will go through each of those points in turn.

The Pathways trial is part of a group of studies run by King's College London and funded by the Government. So what does it do and why are we so concerned? The trial will take 226 children who are physically healthy—who are developing normally—and inject them with powerful drugs to delay that normal development in a way that may weaken their bones, affect their ability to think, damage their sexual function, and leave them unable to have children of their own.

We are told that the purpose of this is to treat a diagnosis of gender incongruence. So what is gender incongruence? The International Classification of Diseases states that it is

“characterised by a marked and persistent incongruence between an individual's experienced gender and the assigned sex, which often leads to a desire to ‘transition’”.

We know that gender incongruence is a condition that is subjective. It is based on how someone tells us they feel. There are no blood tests and no lab markers that can be used to diagnose it. As a paediatrician myself, I understand that how patients feel, particularly in relation to their mental health, is very important. We know from the Cass review that the vast majority of children with gender incongruence will get better on their own. Again,

as a paediatrician, I am used to providing supportive treatment for conditions such as respiratory viruses and gastroenteritis, which generally get better on their own, but I am not used to giving powerful drugs to children that can cause permanent long-term damage for subjective, self-resolving difficulties during adolescence.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): As a consultant paediatrician, my hon. Friend will be able to give a definitive view on this matter. Some who campaign for this treatment and therapy argue that the effects of gene therapy are reversible. To what extent are they reversible? Should we be treating this as a reversible treatment? My hon. Friend has referred to permanent damage. Can we try to agree across the House at least on this matter: that gene therapy applied to children is not reversible?

Dr Johnson: This is not a form of gene therapy. It is a medication that is a GnRH analogue, and what it essentially does is delay puberty. It was designed as a drug to treat children who go into puberty much earlier than they would be expected to, and to delay it until, as it were, the right time. The effects of the use of puberty blockers in older children and for a much longer period, at an age when they ought to have started puberty, are not fully understood.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): My hon. Friend says that we do not know the effects, but a number of children have been put through this process via the now discredited Tavistock process. Why does she think that the NHS will not refer to the data linkage study and use the data that would have been gained from the children who were put through that process, in order to find out what the effects are before deciding to put a whole new cohort of children through what is clearly a damaging procedure?

Dr Johnson: My hon. Friend raises a very good point, and I will come to the data linkage study shortly. What we do know from the Cass review is that the vast majority of children who went on to puberty blockers in adolescence went on to receive cross-sex hormones, which are known to have permanent effects.

One fact that is crucially important is that it is not possible for clinicians to confidently determine which children with gender incongruence will persist with the trans identity into adulthood, and which will not. How can the clinicians possibly know that they are not injecting potentially dangerous drugs into children whose incongruence will resolve itself? The answer is that they cannot. Will the Secretary of State tell us whether he is aware of new evidence allowing clinicians to work out confidently which children will persist with the trans identity at 11 and which will not? We need to think about the risk involved in the treatment, and whether it is worth the benefits that they will purportedly receive.

The trial researchers suggest that they will take a wide approach to looking at potential benefits, that they will look at quality of life and body satisfaction, and that there must be a reasonable prospect of benefit; but how can they know whether there is a reasonable prospect of benefit when they do not know whether or not the condition will persist? Some have suggested that giving puberty blockers will help the few adults who

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

retain their trans identity into adulthood to pass as the opposite sex. Does the Secretary of State think that the long-term damage to many is worth it for the cosmetic benefit of a few? The Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) Regulations 2004 specify that “anticipated benefits” must justify the risk. This is an ethical rather than a medical question. Does the Secretary of State think that the benefits justify the risk?

I regret that we have ended up discussing the details of a clinical trial in the Chamber—the reality is that things should be done impartially by scientists in most cases—but with this topic we have seen the quashing of open debate, which is why we have ended up where we are.

I will move on to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford). Even if the Secretary of State thinks the principle of the trial is right, he must surely agree that it is unnecessary and unethically broad. For example, if someone was designing a trial to treat children with a specific form of cancer, the children who would be entered into the trial would have that specific form of cancer. We would not include children with any disease, because that would make the results unreliable in terms of benefit to the target group and children would be unnecessarily put at risk of receiving experimental drugs that they did not need.

The same applies to this trial. The Cass report tells us that many of the children in the proposed trial will get better on their own. The Secretary of State said yesterday that

“we are talking about a very small subset of a very small group.” — [Official Report, 22 June 2026; Vol. 788, c. 56.]

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): The hon. Lady knows that she is one of my favourite Tories—I think I have said that before. She has quoted Baroness Cass many times. Of course, Baroness Cass thinks this trial should go ahead, because the benefits outweigh the costs. Why is Baroness Cass wrong and the hon. Lady right?

Dr Johnson: Well, one of the things with doctors is that if you ask two doctors, you might get two different opinions. I completely respect Baroness Cass. She has been president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, of which I am a member, and she has done great work on the report that we commissioned in the last Parliament. I know she is concerned that people may obtain these drugs illegally if they are not provided, but I do not share that concern. Personally, I think the important thing is whether the people obtaining such drugs legally are using them in a way that is safe, and I am not convinced that that is the case.

Dr Arthur: By giving way a second time, the hon. Lady shows why she is my favourite Tory. Does Baroness Cass not say that she has met young people who have been self-medicating with testosterone, which is irreversible? That is one of the problems that we are trying to address through this trial. It is about protecting young people so that they are not going down their own medical pathway, but are listening to medical advice and are well supported in a coherent framework.

Dr Johnson: I am sorry, but I just do not support that. We would not give children cocaine on the basis that they wanted it and would get it illegally otherwise. These are not sweets; they are powerful drugs and need to be treated with respect.

Even if we accept the premise that a very small number of people might benefit from treatment, how could clinicians decide which children to treat? On what ethical or moral code would we want to inject powerful drugs into children who are likely to have a self-limiting illness and therefore do not need it? That is what the Government have chosen to do, and it is not necessary.

Following on from the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon, they have this data already. The Tavistock was a travesty, but it means that the Government could analyse the data from the outcomes of those children. They could establish the outcomes as children went into adulthood, and Baroness Cass tried to do this using the data linkage study. Shockingly, six out of seven adult gender clinics refused to provide the Government with the data. Even when a specific piece of legislation was passed by the previous Government to clarify that it was legal to provide the information to this trial, the gender clinics still did not provide it.

I understand that NHS England is working on the data linkage study, but I ask the Secretary of State why it is taking so long. Is the abolition of NHS England causing delay? Why is he letting this trial, which he has expressed reservations about, go ahead in the knowledge that it is unnecessarily broad and in advance of the data linkage study?

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Does the hon. Lady agree that unblocking the reasons why the data is not being made available should be the top priority, and that analysis of that data should be done before any further experiments on children are done?

Dr Johnson: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right, and he expresses my point succinctly. Why is the Secretary of State going ahead with a trial—experimenting on more children unnecessarily—when he has the data to analyse already? Why has he chosen to fund this trial? Is he worried about the children who will be put on a medical pathway that may lead to cross-sex hormones and a lifetime of medicalisation when they would have got better by themselves anyway?

I want to talk about the age of these young people. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency warned in February that the youngest patients are at the greatest risk, and may end up on puberty blockers for a much longer period. They have a higher risk to fertility because sperm and eggs have not yet fully developed at Tanner stage 2, but this Government have chosen to include children of 11 or 12. Some will wonder why it is 11 for girls and 12 for boys—indeed, I was asked that question yesterday—but as a paediatrician I am aware that puberty starts earlier in girls than in boys. It is somewhat ironic that a trial based on the premise that girls could be boys recognises this biology, but I am glad that in this respect it does. However, that means some of the participants will be primary school-aged children with the merest form of puberty. How can they possibly meet the eligibility criteria, which includes “sufficient understanding of the treatment advantages and disadvantages, including discussion of fertility preservation”?

How can a child of 11 understand what it means to lose sexual function, to be unable to have children when they are older, to have difficulties in thinking and to have weak bones? Remember that this Government think that 14-year-olds are not old enough to watch social media, but they think 11-year-olds are capable of understanding this.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I just say this to the hon. Lady and, perhaps more importantly, to the Secretary of State, who is very genuine, personable and easy to speak to. In Northern Ireland, the Assembly and the Minister there have taken a decision not to pursue this. Would the hon. Lady agree that, when the Government pursue something here that may set a precedent for somewhere that has not agreed to it at the time, there could be an influence, with an adverse impact on the regional Administrations—the Northern Ireland Assembly where we are, and elsewhere—and it is important that the Government here do not take a decision that could influence areas they do not control?

Dr Johnson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention on devolution, and I am sure the Secretary of State was listening and considering what he has said.

To go back to the age of the young people, I am reminded of the judgment in *Bell v. Tavistock*, which says:

“We do not think that the answer to this case is simply to give the child more, and more detailed, information. The issue in our view is that in many cases, however much information the child is given as to long-term consequences, s/he will not be able to weigh up the implications of the treatment to a sufficient degree.”

I draw right hon. and hon. Members’ attention to the next part of the quote:

“There is no age appropriate way to explain to many of these children what losing their fertility or full sexual function may mean to them in later years.”

Yet, as Secretary of State confirmed yesterday, the children must consent or assent to being in this trial. Another question that he did not answer yesterday is why the Government did not heed the MHRA recommendation for a minimum of 14 years. Having established that the Government are going to put a group of physically healthy children with a self-resolving condition at a risk they may not fully understand, the remaining question is why they would they want to do this.

The trial itself has an interesting design. We are told that it is a randomised controlled trial—as a doctor, I am familiar with that term—but in this case it is a bit of a fudge. Yes, this Government-sponsored trial will randomise which children get the drugs now and which get them in a year’s time, but the comparison group that does not receive puberty blockers—300 children from the Horizon Intensive trial, with whom the trial will seek to compare—may not be considered a reliable comparison, because the group is a different group with different eligibility criteria. When the results of this trial are published, this fact is bound to be used by people who dispute or disagree with the findings. The Secretary of State said this trial will resolve the dispute over the issue, but that is one of the reasons why I think it will not.

I want to discuss sexual function, because yesterday the Secretary of State said that the trial would involve the completion of a number of questionnaires, and one

of my hon. Friends raised the question about what happens to children’s sexual function in the long term. What is sexual function? It is desire, arousal and orgasm. The trial organisers are clearly concerned about this, because they put into the trial the ALSPAC—Avon longitudinal study of parents and children—romantic relationships questionnaire. I read the questionnaire on the Health Research Authority website, and children from the age of 12 and over will be asked these questions, one of which is:

“In the last year have you had oral sex with another person? (This is when they put their mouth or tongue on your penis/vagina or you put your mouth or tongue on their penis/vagina)”.

Let us be clear: if that is happening to a 12-year-old, that is sexual abuse and the police should be called. Is the Secretary of State content for the Government to be asking these questions of such young children? Can he believe that they will be paid £20 for completing their questionnaires, alongside £30 for completing the assessment of cognitive ability and £15 for completing physical and height assessments, in addition to travel expenses?

There will be lots of talk this week about the Prime Minister’s legacy. Putting children as young as 11 on puberty blockers, with irreversible life-changing consequences, would be the most disturbing final chapter in what has been a troubled book of leadership. Today, right hon. and hon. Members will be asked to vote to consider their approval or disapproval of the trial. I urge them to look at their conscience, read the trial protocol—it is online—and remember that these are vulnerable children who deserve the best care. One day, the children caught in the middle of this debate will be adults. It is our responsibility to ensure that when they look back on their one childhood, their one adolescence and their one chance to enjoy growing up, they must know that every decision was made with the utmost care, caution and respect for their future. The power to make that happen is in our hands today. I urge hon. Members to protect children’s futures.

4.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (James Murray): I know what a sensitive, emotive and difficult issue this is. As I said in the House yesterday, I have myself struggled with the profound challenges this subject raises. We all, as adults, owe a duty of care to every child and young person in this country. That is a responsibility I bear, both as a citizen and as Health Secretary, with the utmost seriousness and sincerity. It is why, in all my deliberations on this matter, my consideration is to protect the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. Children’s healthcare must always be evidence-led, safe and effective. The way to ensure that is to follow expert clinical advice, which is what the Government are doing.

Dr Hilary Cass, the clinician who I think has more respect in this space than any other, has spoken about the importance of this trial in recent days. I remind the shadow Minister that it was her party that commissioned the Cass review and accepted its findings, which included the Pathways trial. I have been clear to the House that this is a challenging area. I accept and welcome the scrutiny of Members, but I encourage us to keep in mind Dr Cass’s request to consider the issues sensitively and cautiously. She says:

[James Murray]

“Polarisation and stifling of debate do nothing to help the young people caught in the middle of a stormy social discourse, and in the long run will also hamper the research that is essential to finding the best way of supporting them to thrive.”

I do not think that there is any question that a few years ago, children’s safety and wellbeing was not being protected when it came to gender incongruence. From around 2009, the number of children and young people being referred for NHS support around their gender identity increased rapidly. Stories subsequently emerged of young people struggling after undergoing radical and permanent transition surgery at an early age, of children rushed into taking medication without adequate therapy beforehand, and of clinicians disregarding conditions such as neurodiversity and mental health issues. As such, there was rightly deep concern about the vulnerability of these children and young people, the care and treatments they were receiving, and the surge in referrals. And so, in 2020, NHS England commissioned the leading paediatrician, Dr Hilary Cass, to carry out a review into NHS gender identity services for under-18s.

What Dr Cass uncovered was shocking and scandalous, and she made a series of recommendations for how children can be better protected and supported. It was, in my mind, unquestionably wrong for children and young people to be routinely prescribed puberty blockers for gender dysphoria without any clear evidence on their benefits or risks. The situation then was out of control and so I fully supported the indefinite ban introduced by my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), which followed the temporary ban brought in by the previous Government.

In considering what to do next, Dr Cass identified that treatment for gender incongruence was “an area of remarkably weak evidence”.

She found that even clinicians working in the field were divided on the best way to support, treat and care for young people suffering from gender dysphoria. Where there is strong divergence of medical opinion on treatment, the two possible responses are either to continue with uncertainty—and with that, conflicting opinions and advice—or to undertake a trial. It is only by doing that that we can ensure that children with gender-related distress get the same access to and standards of care as everyone in the NHS.

Gregory Stafford: There is a third option, which is to get NHS England to motor ahead with the data-linkage study, so that we can use the data that has already been collected to find out the answers to the questions that the Secretary of State is posing. Only then, if the information is not there, should the trial go ahead. Why is he not pushing that third way?

James Murray: The hon. Gentleman’s question allows me to address that matter directly. The data-linkage study will not provide clear evidence of the risks and benefits of puberty-suppressing hormones, which is needed to guide future clinical practice for this cohort. The type of information that would be available in a linkage study is much more limited than the detailed information that the research team will collect about the relative benefits and harms of puberty-suppressing hormones when accessed alongside a holistic model of care.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): For clarity, are Scottish children going to be included in the trial, either by being able to travel south of the border or via NHS Scotland directly?

James Murray: I have responsibility for NHS England as Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and I am setting out the protocol agreed in relation to this trial, as it is a subject that is arousing a lot of questions in the Chamber, which is fair. [Interruption.] I will come back to that point, if the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) allows me to make a little progress.

Iqbal Mohamed: Will the Secretary of State give way?

James Murray: I will make a little progress, and then I will be open to more interventions. We need to be clear about who we are talking about. As Dr Cass said, the vast majority of children and young people who question their gender will resolve it without needing any support other than their friends and family. For many young people, questioning their identity, on many different fronts, is a normal part of growing up, and we should simply let them be. A small number of those young people, however, need greater support because of the level and longevity of discomfort that they feel, and that can often involve counselling or therapy.

For a very small number of young people, it is possible—and I emphasise the word possible—that medical treatment would help improve their quality of life and mental health and reduce their gender-related distress. That is why Dr Cass recommended a trial to study the effects of puberty-suppressing hormones on young people’s physical, social and emotional wellbeing, and to establish how best to support children and young people suffering gender incongruence.

Iqbal Mohamed: On that point, in normal clinical trials, the active substance and a placebo would be used, and the impact, changes or benefits that each cohort experienced would be checked. If children have a psychological leaning and are emotionally feeling that they are in the wrong body, is there not value in having a cohort that takes a placebo and seeing if that improves their mental health?

James Murray: The hon. Gentleman raises an important question around how the clinical trial is designed. In this case, the young people involved in the trial, of whom there will be around 226, will be split into two groups; one half will have the puberty blockers from the start, the other half will receive them after a year.

My understanding of this matter, having interrogated the detail carefully, is that a placebo would not be appropriate for this trial because the subject will be able to know the impacts of having the puberty blockers; they will be aware of whether they are having the medication. What is important, however, and what I hope will set this Pathways trial in a wider context, is all the other work that is being done to study the incidence of gender incongruence and the responses to that among young people, which will go beyond the trial we are talking about to look at children and young people questioning their gender through talking to them, understanding their mental health and their approach to that. All that will happen alongside this trial, which is one part of a much wider study to understand how best to support young people who are facing these gender-related issues.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I acknowledge the serious way that the Secretary of State is approaching this. I think many people will be concerned that, as the shadow Minister has said, there is no objective blood marker for these individuals; I think they will be concerned that a group of people will be taken forward in this trial when a whole range of influences could have governed how they have got to that point, given that the implications of taking these drugs are quite profound for their life and further development. How does one reconcile the fact that there is no way of verifying the suitability and the way that these individuals have been selected for the trial? Perhaps he could help me to understand it better.

James Murray: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the tone he took in asking an important question, which I am pleased to be able to respond to. The bar for getting on to this trial is set extremely high, with strict eligibility criteria: parental consent, alongside the young person themselves consenting or assenting; a diagnosis of gender incongruence for at least two years; and consent from both the NHS care team and a national multidisciplinary team, including a wide range of disciplines, to understand all aspects of a young person's health, context and situation. The level of approvals and scrutiny that young people will have to go through to participate in the trial will, therefore, set the bar extremely high.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con)
rose—

James Murray: I will give way one more time, and then I will make some progress.

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. He mentioned parental consent—what would happen in a situation where the child was in the care of the state? Would they be included or excluded from this trial?

James Murray: If a child is looked after under a care order, the local authority has parental responsibility, so it would need to be part of the consent process as the corporate parent.

I turn to the points raised by the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) about young people becoming involved in the trial and the checks that are in place to enable that to happen. As I set out earlier, as the trial involves children, it comes with a responsibility to interrogate and understand its design. As Health Secretary, I have sought the most detailed assurances possible from my clinical advisers as to how children taking part in the trial will be protected.

There are a number of important safeguards. As I have said, children can participate only with the consent of a parent or guardian, and the child themselves must consent or assent. They can participate only if they have had a diagnosis of gender incongruence for at least two years, have received psychosocial support through the NHS and are of stable physical and mental health. They can participate only if they are not subject to any safeguarding concerns and if they and their parents demonstrate sufficient understanding of the nature of the treatment, including its possible advantages and disadvantages. They can participate only if the treatment has been deemed clinically appropriate by

both the NHS care team and the national multidisciplinary team and if they are already accessing NHS gender services. On eligibility, the bar is extremely high.

The number of young people who would expect to qualify for the trial will be low and the safeguards to ensure their safety and wellbeing will be rigorous. I have sought and had an assurance that, once they are involved in the trial, participants may be withdrawn at any point. We are not proceeding with the previous, now decommissioned, model of care overseen by the Conservatives when they were in government. We are proceeding cautiously, with rigorous safeguards in pursuit of the evidence, as Dr Cass recommended.

Last Thursday, the independent MHRA approved an updated protocol that significantly strengthened the objective criteria for withdrawing children from the trial, which is a change that I welcome. Signs of greater risk to participants will now trigger increased monitoring, clinical review or their automatic withdrawal from the trial. All participants will be monitored before, at the start of, every three months during, and after the trial. Before and during the trial, information will be collected about mental health, quality of life, self-harm and suicidality, body image, cognition, puberty stage, physical health and side effects.

I have been determined to ensure that the oversight of this trial is as rigorous and robust as it possibly can be, so I have requested monthly updates on its progress. That will include my being notified of any emerging risks.

This trial is rightly one of the most scrutinised UK clinical trials of recent times. We should expect nothing less when we are talking about the health and wellbeing of some of the most vulnerable children in our country. Yet, as Dr Cass has made clear, we have to build the evidence base to show whether the treatments are safe and whether they produce the positive outcomes that young people and clinicians want from them.

The Opposition's motion would prevent us from following expert clinical advice, when proceeding with the trial is the most appropriate way forward. I say that not because I am suggesting that we should feel instinctively comfortable in doing so but because I have arrived at that conclusion after considering the clinical evidence and receiving robust assurances on the safeguards that are in place.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I know that the Secretary of State has agonised over this matter—he made that clear in his statement to the House last night and again today—but what is not in doubt is the harm that these drugs do. It is an established medical fact. He is determined to be driven by the evidence. That is evidential. We know that the drugs have harmful effects, so in essence what he is saying is that we are prepared to wear those harmful effects on the off-chance that the drugs may have a beneficial set of effects, when there is no evidence to suggest up until now that they do.

James Murray: The MHRA has introduced additional safeguards. As a result of its dialogue with the trial sponsors, the amended protocol published last week increases the level of safeguards. That means that if the regular monitoring, which will happen at least every three months—it can be more regular during the trial—shows any sign of increased risk of harm, that will lead

[James Murray]

to increased monitoring, clinical review and, when considered against objective criteria, automatic withdrawal from the trial.

It is a question of monitoring this trial, possibly more closely than any trial before—the level of scrutiny is very great indeed—to ensure that at the first sign of any increased risk of harm, action will be taken. That is the assurance that I have sought in interrogating this matter carefully in recent days, and that is the basis on which I am talking to the right hon. Gentleman and others in the House today.

We must come to a fair and settled conclusion on this matter to move forward as a country, and I believe that we should follow clinical advice and establish the clinical evidence gathered in a highly scrutinised trial with all the safeguards in place that I have described. Only that approach will give us the confidence about where we settle on this matter in the future. On that basis, the Government oppose this motion.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

5.14 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): This debate is on a subject that, it goes without saying, is emotive and complex. We must therefore as always endeavour to have this conversation with compassion and empathy. The Liberal Democrats' position is clear and simple, as reflected in our amendment to the motion: any medical treatment and the approval of any clinical trial, including the one we are discussing, must be led by expert medical advice. It should not be led by personal belief, no matter how sincerely and passionately that belief is held. Politics has a place, but not in questions of medical trials and clinical consensus—those are better left to experts.

The Cass review, originally commissioned by the Conservatives, was clear that there was a need to gather more evidence. The safety of young people is paramount, and the experts involved in this space know that better than anybody; they work with these children day in, day out and understand the risks of both action and inaction. That is why we supported the previous decision to pause the trial after the MHRA raised concerns, and why we now support the decision to start it again.

We will listen to the experts and the clinicians, but to build trust in expert advice we need transparency and clarity, and throughout the process, we have pushed for exactly that. We want the expert opinions on the public record, as that allows us as politicians, as well as the wider public, to approach this issue with clarity and facts, not ideology or misunderstanding. That is why we called for the Government to publish how the MHRA arrived at its decision when concerns were first raised, and yesterday we called for the Secretary of State to confirm that the MHRA had confirmed that its concerns had been substantially addressed. Transparency is needed so that people can be confident that clinical advice is being followed.

Iqbal Mohamed: Will the hon. Member give way?

Alison Bennett: I am afraid that I will not.

Liberal Democrats have been arguing for many years that improved access to better specialist healthcare services for children and young people struggling with their gender identity is extremely important. Those young people have been badly let down by low care standards and extremely long waiting lists. The closure of the Gender Identity Development Service made it clear beyond doubt that change was needed. We have consistently campaigned for real action to tackle the shocking waiting times across the NHS, including for gender identity services.

Liberal Democrats welcome the move to create new regional centres to offer this care to the young people who need it. There is a need for multiple geographically dispersed clinics so that care is closer to those who need it, but roll-out has been slow, and more needs to be done to tackle the waiting lists—quite simply, a three-year average wait is not acceptable. For the centres to run effectively, we must support the specialists who provide children and young people with high-quality, compassionate and clinically appropriate care.

Treatment, first and foremost, should be based on talking therapies. Space and time to talk through feelings is vital for young people struggling with their gender identity. It is a deeply complex set of feelings, and questioning and understanding one's identity is never an easy thing, especially for a child, but for talking therapies to be an effective first step, children must be able to access them when they need them, not after years on a waiting list.

The debate is about access to a form of healthcare—one that is led by doctors and clinicians—and, as for any other form of healthcare, we must listen to the experts: the people who have spent years training and years delivering care.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Will the hon. Member give way?

Alison Bennett: I will not.

We must never lose sight of the fact that at the core of the debate is young people's wellbeing and health. It is not about ideology; it is about what is best for young people. The Government must always prioritise clinical evidence and put the interests of patients at the heart of care.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee.

5.18 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett). I wholeheartedly agree with her points about the importance of talking therapies. Those are incredibly important tools for children who are in gender distress. We need to see greater access to talking therapies for all children in a timely fashion.

May I first say that there is far too much debate about trans people without them? We would not tolerate this in any other debate. Yet somehow, whether in the media or in politics, in debate after debate—online, in the media and in this place—we talk about trans people and people in gender distress without acknowledging that we are lucky to be born into a body we identify

with. I will never know the pain of gender distress. There are times when I look in the mirror and I think, “God, I wish I could change this.” Usually, I wish I could not look so tired, but I do not know what it is like to not be in a body that I identify with; I am fortunate and therefore speak from a position of great privilege.

I will start with the words of one of my constituents, an 83-year-old trans woman called Teraina. She said, “I was born a male but I have never been a man. I tried but I failed. I always have felt female. Even at school as a boy, I was bullied for being”—in her words—“a ‘sissy’ so I left. I am 83. I have lived my life. This is about the future generations and the others who come next.”

Teraina discharged herself from hospital to have that conversation with me because she feels so strongly about future generations: that they should not be bullied for who they are; that they should be able to access treatment; and that they should be able to be who they are. We must get this right for the future generations of people like Teraina, because too many have lost their lives, or have suffered, living a life that was not fully theirs.

It is fair to say that there is a varied range of views in the Cass review. However, if future access to treatment for gender dysphoria is dependent on more research, it is vital that the Pathways trial goes ahead with the additional safeguards now put in place. Whatever one’s views on the trial, it is clear that every step has been taken to put the safety of patients at its heart. It has been designed by experienced clinical researchers and checked by independent scientists who advise the National Institute for Health and Care Research, and has included independent academic peer reviewers. As with all clinical trials, this one will be overseen by the data monitoring committee, as the safety and wellbeing of those taking part is vital.

All those safeguards should be welcome. After all, those people are the experts when it comes to the medical procedures and the science. The experts when it comes to individual children, however, are the parents. Both today and yesterday, some of the rhetoric around the statement has ignored the important role of parents in the trial.

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): I know the constituent my hon. Friend has spoken about. My hon. Friend also makes a valuable point about the need to speak with people who have lived a life, given that these things have been done in ignorance. Her point about parents is key. I have a constituent who is trans whose parents have engaged with me and explained the difficulties of learning to deal with and manage the situation. Their voices, alongside those of clinicians, are really important in understanding the issues. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Sarah Owen: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for his commitment to the LGBT+ community and for his work, including with his constituents. We have heard a lot today about throwing children into wild experiments, but that is not what we are talking about. We are talking about something done in collaboration with parents—parents who love their children and want the best for

them, and with medical professionals who want the same. The rhetoric around the trial really needs to change.

No child will be able to take part in the trial without parental consent. That has been confirmed again by the Secretary of State from the Dispatch Box. Of course, there will be some children who will never gain their parents’ consent: a heartbreaking situation for any family. However, there will be many parents who will truly support and know the wishes of their child; they will agree with the suitability of the treatment and want to support them on their journey.

Much has been discussed about the child, but parents have huge agency in the process. We are not just talking to the children; we are talking to adults who want the best for their child, and that point should be recognised.

Iqbal Mohamed: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I have huge respect for her and I completely agree that nobody here or outside should be looking to disrespect or harm any individual, whatever their age. Would she agree that parents should also be given all the information available around this condition, its treatments and the paths that children follow? Over 93% of children who experience gender dysphoria grow out of it and then are happy in their natural body. Does she agree that that and other information should be made available to the parents?

Sarah Owen: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention and his kind words at the beginning; that is the right tone, which we need to set, and information is key. People need to be able to make informed decisions—whether it is the child or a parent—and there needs to be independent information so that people can make fully informed decisions.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful and moving speech. Further to her point, does she not agree that the Opposition’s motion to prevent a clinical trial would not give people information, options and choices? It would cut down information, options and choices. She mentioned a constituent in her 80s who clearly did not grow out of her gender dysphoria, and this motion would close off lifesaving and life-changing treatment for the 7% of people who do not grow out of gender dysphoria.

Sarah Owen: I thank my hon. Friend for his powerful intervention; absolutely, information and scientific evidence are key, and this trial will be conducted by experts with patients’ best interests at heart. We have heard from the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), and I am sure that, as a doctor, she cares about her patients as much as all the doctors and clinical specialists that will be involved in these trials.

Last year, the Women and Equalities Committee held a one-off inquiry into the safety and effectiveness of puberty blockers. We stuck to the science. There were different views on our panel of witnesses, but I wanted to demonstrate something that has, sadly, not happened very often around this topic, which was that we could discuss it in a sensitive, respectful way, based on fact,

[Sarah Owen]

not opinion—not for social media clips or for likes on a particular outlet’s sidebar of shame, but for the good of the people we represent.

We also examined the use of puberty blockers for other medical purposes—something that has not been discussed today when talking about the risks, or perceived risks, of puberty blockers. It is commonplace to use puberty blockers for certain cancers, for endometriosis and for children experiencing premature sexual maturity, also known as precocious puberty. When it comes to cancers such as prostate cancer, the professors on the panel described the need to essentially “turn off” testosterone. This is now a commonplace treatment for prostate cancer.

Another use of puberty blockers is for endometriosis. We already know the disgraceful delays in diagnosis and treatment for endometriosis and adenomyosis, with women waiting at least 10 to 13 years just for a diagnosis. They are living in pain for far too long, but experts are using puberty blockers, again, to essentially “turn off” menstruation and oestrogen for women with severe endometriosis.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; I am listening to her very intently. Does she know what a measure of success would be in this puberty blocker trial? If 80% of the children on it were happy with the outcome, would that be a success? What are the ultimate measurements of success?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) is making an important speech, but before she gets back to her feet, I must tell her that I need to get 12 more Members in to speak.

Sarah Owen: I know that further details will be coming from the Secretary of State as to what a marker of success is, but I think we have to ask ourselves what a marker of success is for the individuals and families. For some, staying in their sex from birth may look like success. For others, that will not be the case. This is very much on the individual.

Dr Arthur: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Sarah Owen: I will not; I am going to make some progress, as I have been duly told to do.

The treatment of premature sexual maturity, or precocious puberty, in children—this is for children—uses puberty blockers now. The professors reported to our Committee that puberty blockers are

“recognised as a reversible treatment.”

Professor Butler added that we know

“from follow-up studies with children who have received it for precocious puberty that there are no ill health effects in the long term nor are there any negative effects on fertility recovery.”

Professor Grossman pointed to a “huge amount of evidence” from Harvard University highlighting successful treatment and outcomes for girls prescribed puberty blockers for premature sexual maturity

“in terms of fertility and their subsequent life.”

Joy Morrissey: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sarah Owen: I am not going to take any more interventions, as I have been told that I need to crack on.

These puberty blockers are the same drugs, prescribed in the same way, but instead of treating gender distress, they are treating prostate cancer, endometriosis and premature sexual maturity in children. Yet we have heard no call from scientists, campaigners or the medical community to stop the use of puberty blockers for those treatments.

Some have been critical of the trial going ahead, but what happens to young people experiencing gender distress if it does not? Dr Hilary Cass believes that without a trial, young people will continue to get drugs from “unregulated and dangerous routes”, and my Select Committee heard evidence to support that. Unfortunately, young people are now self-treating because they see no other option. They are getting hold of medication from abroad, with no assessment, support or medical advice. Dr Hilary Cass was right to say that she is

“absolutely convinced that more children will be harmed if we don’t do the trial than if we do.”

For me, safety is paramount, but this is an issue of access to healthcare, and there should never be a block to healthcare for anyone. While the trial goes forward, many young people, younger and older, will be scared and frightened about what the future holds. I hope that the Secretary of State can address the hostile environment for young trans people, as well as what support outside of legislation and the medical world needs to be more widely available for people in gender distress and the entire LGBTQ+ community.

5.32 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I frankly cannot believe that we are here again. When the Pathways clinical trial was paused earlier this year, I felt that there had finally been—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Forgive me—there is a five-minute time limit, which is the only way that I can incorporate all the Back Benchers who wish to contribute.

Rebecca Paul: Yesterday, even the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care conceded—the second one to do so—that he is “uneasy” and even “uncomfortable”. I suggest that his discomfort is nothing next to the lifelong damage that the trial will potentially do to an extremely vulnerable cohort of children, whom we should be protecting. That funny feeling in his stomach—[*Interruption.*] Oh, he has left. That feeling is his good judgment trying to be heard—he will not hear this if he has left—and it is not too late for him to listen to it. I agree with what one of my hon. Friends said yesterday: he is a good man who is being placed under intolerable pressure on this issue. But he needs to find his courage.

The number of children and young people presenting to the NHS with gender distress increased dramatically in the years after 2009, with an exponential rise from around 2014. What is behind the increase among Gen Z is unclear, but the reasons are likely to be multifaceted. It is speculated that the factors may include 24/7 internet access, the increased acceptance of trans identities, or

even peer social and cultural influences. Over the past 20 years, groups such as Stonewall and Mermaids have called for better access to treatment and more rights for trans people. Large corporates have gone big on diversity and inclusion to boost their brands.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I am slightly concerned by the idea that trans acceptance is part of the problem. Does the hon. Member agree that trans acceptance is completely reasonable and that trans people have always been here?

Rebecca Paul: I am not saying that it is a negative thing; I am trying to explain why we have seen an increase in the numbers of young people with gender dysphoria. I am stating facts; we were just talking about the importance of doing so.

In 2009, only 51 patients were referred to the NHS Gender Identity Development Service for children, of whom two thirds were male. In 2016, there were 1,766 referrals and two thirds of them were female. That is quite the change. There has been an overall surge in the number of children suffering gender distress, but the increase is especially notable among girls. We also see over-representation of neurodiversity, mental health issues and trauma in this group. To put it another way, these children are much more likely to have been in care, to suffer with anxiety and depression, to be autistic and to have been abused. It is a group of incredibly vulnerable children.

GIDS was established in 1989. Its main approach to treatment at that time was therapeutic, referred to as watchful waiting. Early studies from the 1980s showed that in around 85% of cases, the gender incongruence or distress ceased in the child after going through puberty. Later studies reached a similar conclusion, with between 67% and 90% desisting after puberty. Only a small cohort of children continue to experience gender dysphoria or incongruence after puberty, and it was that extremely small group who would likely adopt a permanent trans identity in adulthood.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Recently, the Government announced that they will legislate to prevent under-16s from viewing social media. We already ban under-16s from drinking alcohol and smoking, because we believe that they should be protected from doing things now that may have negative impacts on them later in life, particularly to their health. Does my hon. Friend think that this should sit in that category of protections for children?

Rebecca Paul: I completely agree with my hon. Friend; a child of this age cannot possibly consent to the life-changing, irreversible changes that come from puberty blockers. We need to remember that almost all children who start puberty blockers go on to cross-sex hormones, and there is no going back from that.

We need to remember that we have already had a trial in the UK. When we started using puberty blockers in the UK after 2011, the preliminary results came out in 2015-16 and did not demonstrate psychological benefits, with some of the females actually suffering a worsening of symptoms, including a higher incidence of wanting to hurt or kill themselves. The results of the study, which were not formally published until 2020, demonstrated

no statistically significant improvement in gender dysphoria or mental health outcomes. It is important to remember the early studies that told us that, in a majority of cases, going through puberty resolved gender distress. It follows, therefore, that stopping or delaying puberty using medication derails that natural desistance, essentially locking in.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): Speaking as a member of the political class and the medical class, may I ask the hon. Lady whether she would accept that it is better for politicians to accept advice from medical experts around medical issues?

Rebecca Paul: I thank the hon. Member for that excellent question. I obviously always respect and listen to different clinicians, but what is happening with this debate is that one set of clinicians with one view is being listened to. Let me remind everyone about lobotomies. Lots of very respected people came out for lobotomies; in fact, the person behind the idea won a Nobel prize. I think we would all agree that those clinicians got that wrong, so it is incumbent upon us in this House to always question. It is absolutely right that we listen to clinicians, but unfortunately we are seeing only one set of clinicians with one set of opinions being listened to here.

A Finnish study was published in April that looked at more than 2,000 adolescents and young adults who had been referred to gender services. It found that medical interventions did not reduce psychiatric problems and may even be associated with worsening mental health. How many times have we heard it said that puberty blockers offer a pathway towards improved mental health and reduced psychiatric distress for those struggling with gender identity? I have lost count. But there is hard evidence that not only says different; it says the opposite. I would be keen to understand from the Minister and the Secretary of State whether that study was taken into account before deciding to go ahead with the trial.

I want to point out that children and young people who grow up to be same-sex attracted are over-represented in this cohort, and that is something we need to think about. If we look at the case of Keira Bell, she was a lesbian struggling with her sexuality, and instead of people saying, "It's okay to find other women attractive—there's nothing wrong with that. You do not need to change your body," they said, "Ah! You've got gender dysphoria." They put her on puberty blockers, and then she went on to testosterone shots. She then had her breasts removed in a double mastectomy, and then she detransitioned. This is a deeply homophobic approach to healthcare. Those on the other side of the argument think they have the progressive position. I am sorry, but you are repeating mistakes that have been made historically—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Obviously, I have not said anything, so I am not repeating anything. No "yous" and "yours".

5.40 pm

Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): I must confess that Opposition days are beginning to feel a little bit like groundhog day. A party that largely sat on its hands during some of the most significant and difficult challenges is now returning to tell us where this

[Richard Quigley]

Government are going wrong, and doing so with all the fervour of a party that has never held power, let alone governed for 14 years. Just to warn everyone, I will not be taking interventions.

This is a deeply emotional issue, and I recognise that it provokes strong and differing views across the House. I am not here to shout down or dismiss any perspective. I have never had to face this decision myself, either as a parent or as a young person. It is a decision that invites intense scrutiny and judgment, often unfairly casting those involved as villains for doing what they believe is right for a child. We would all do well to remember that we can never truly know what it is like to walk in someone else's shoes.

Too often, this debate has been shaped by vilification and misinformation, much of it amplified by opposition voices and anonymous social media accounts, to the detriment of one of our most vulnerable communities. We hear the warped suggestion that people simply wake up one day and decide on a whim to embark on years of hormone treatment, to face discrimination and to fight for legal recognition, or, worse, that clinicians involved are reckless experimenters intent on subjecting vulnerable children to harm.

The Conservatives are, of course, entitled to their opposition, but what alternative are they actually proposing? As usual, they have found an apparent problem, but where is their suggested solution? Is it to return to a time when children experiencing gender incongruence were ignored or dismissed as an inconvenience? That approach belongs to the era of section 28, not to 2026. If their answer is an outright ban, they risk driving vulnerable young people into what Dr Hilary Cass has described as

“unregulated and dangerous routes.”

We are already seeing reports of children presenting at clinics having already accessed irreversible treatments at a very young age.

The outrage we hear today about so-called experimentation rings hollow when it is accompanied by no viable alternative, only a return to the same vacuum that previously existed. I do not suggest that this trial will provide all the answers, but it is undeniably better than turning our backs on a complex reality and leaving young people without safe, supported options.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Quigley: I will not, I am afraid—I did warn you, although I do like the hon. Gentleman very much.

Dr Arthur: Not too much.

Richard Quigley: Not enough to give way.

If we cannot trust Dr Hilary Cass, the author of a report that the Conservative party itself has endorsed, when she says she is

“absolutely convinced that more children will be harmed if we don't do the trial than if we do,”

who exactly are we prepared to trust? Do we follow the evidence, the clinicians and the science, or do we retreat into denial, burying our heads in the sand and pretending

that trans people do not exist and have never existed? The process the Government have chosen to follow is not reckless; it is rigorous. The MHRA and King's College London have undertaken detailed scientific scrutiny, and a revised protocol has been agreed that meets the highest regulatory and ethical standards. That is exactly what responsible, evidence-led policymaking looks like.

It is up to us to decide what kind of Parliament we want to be: one that confronts complex and sensitive issues with care, compassion and evidence, or one that turns away, leaving vulnerable young people to navigate these challenges alone and in the shadows. For me, the choice is clear: we owe it to those young people not to look away, not to inflame and not to exploit, but to act, guided by science, led by compassion and grounded in responsibility. I am once again proud to be part of a Government who are doing just that.

5.43 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Ind): Last autumn, on the announcement of the trial of puberty blockers on children, a cross-party coalition of Members and peers assembled who have serious concerns and are campaigning together for the Government to reverse this terrible decision. These are Members from across the political spectrum—as diverse as the independent group, the Lib Dems, the DUP, Tories, Reform, Labour and Restore, who are not usually in agreement on most political issues—working together on something that we believe is about the fundamental safeguarding and protection of children.

The previous Secretary of State held a meeting for Members and peers that allowed us to directly question those responsible for overseeing the trial. I had one main question: is there a lower age limit? I was told no—categorically no—so a child presenting with possible gender dysphoria pre puberty could actually have been as young as eight years old. Thankfully in this latest evolution, the trial seems to have now excluded those younger children, and we are told that it is for those aged 11 and over, but an 11-year-old child also has no possible way of envisaging life-changing pathways, future, possibly serious, health issues, regret, infertility or damaged sexual function.

The Health Secretary talked yesterday of “consent or assent” being given by those children. We are told that at least one parent must consent, but you do not have to be a genius to work out that is a future nuclear missile aimed directly at the family courts. Separated parents, many of whom will not agree with each other about whether to affirm their child's chosen gender identity, how to treat their gender distress or what, if any, social transition to accommodate at home or school, will be potentially battling each other over whether or not their child should be participating in this or future trials, all while their pre-pubescent son or daughter begs for the medical treatment that they believe with all their heart will save all of their discomfort and distress.

Many expert clinicians who worked at the Tavistock and who informed journalist Hannah Barnes' award-winning investigations for “Newsnight”, and subsequent book “Time to Think”, are totally opposed to this trial. We have had meetings with several of them, including Marcus Evans and Susan Evans. Marcus is a former Tavistock consultant, psychotherapist and psychoanalyst, employed by the Portman NHS trust for 35 years,

including as the head of nursing. Sue is also a psychoanalytic psychotherapist and mental health nurse, formerly of the Gender Identity Development Service. They both argue against the affirmative-only model of treatment, such as the use of puberty-blocking drugs, as it masks underlying issues, such as childhood trauma or autism. Along with psychologists Stella O'Malley and James Esses, both with years of experience of treating children and young people experiencing gender dysphoria, they are completely against the Pathways trial and the treatment pathway it puts very young people on.

Detransitioners often experience years of extreme distress and choose not to speak publicly about their own personal stories, but some would willingly engage with Ministers and Members. Keira Bell, Ritchie Herron, Philippa Roberts and Jonni Skinner, to name a few, have bravely shared their heartbreaking experiences of severe treatments, irreversible surgeries, mental health battles and years of painful regret. Although we have had nine Health Secretaries in just nine years, anyone in this post, however briefly, given the power to sign off such an enormously consequential trial, with huge potential for future investigations, must at the very least engage with those who have treated and been treated for this condition. I cannot think of any valid arguments against doing so and hearing from both sides of the argument.

There are many other reasons for stopping the plans for this trial—most important of all is proper analysis of the data that already exists, along with the Conservative Government's previous decision to ban the use of these drugs on children. The data linkage study completion is the strongest reason, along with the social, psychological and physical reasons already heard.

The cross-party coalition and I will not stop campaigning until this dangerous experiment on children is cancelled for good. Puberty is a natural, necessary life stage—a right. We should be able to help and support young people through it, until they are old enough to make life-changing decisions with certainty and the maturity they lack as young children.

5.48 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): This has been an interesting debate so far and I am grateful to follow the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), who has worked so much in this area. We should all acknowledge that this is not an easy issue.

The reason why I wanted to speak in the debate is that back when I was trying to get elected in 2024, I met the mother of a young trans woman. She told me about how her daughter really started to come to terms with who she was when she was entering puberty, but that led her to stop eating because she did not want to go into puberty. Her condition got so bad that she had to be taken to hospital, and she almost died. We should not view this as a lifestyle choice, and we should not think that doing nothing comes with no consequences. I know that not all cases are the same, but the reality is that doing nothing is not the answer. We do have to answer these questions.

I welcome the news this week that the Pathways trial is set to go ahead. Since the Government announced an indefinite pause on the prescription of puberty blockers last year, both young people and clinicians have been stuck in limbo. This uncertainty has helped no one—not

the young people who are desperate for medical support, nor the researchers who need to gather data to fully understand the effects of these drugs. However, it is right that this renewed permission for a trial is based on clinical judgment, not political discourse. We should be led by science, not politics, where the health of our young people is concerned.

King's College London and the MHRA have worked extensively to propose a safe and ethical trial, increasing safeguards since March and continuing dialogue with the Health Research Authority. I understand the concerns around the trial, and I think we all should. We all want to ensure the safety of the children involved, but it is time we find a way forward that balances the safety of the young people involved and the opportunity to enhance the care that we provide for children struggling with their gender identity. Far too often, that care is lacking.

Many Conservative Members have consistently called for the full implementation of the Cass review. Baroness Cass was quoted multiple times by the shadow Minister in her introduction to this debate, yet the Conservatives have called this debate to oppose the trial, despite it being one of Baroness Cass's recommendations. Why are the Conservatives not willing to listen to Baroness Cass on that single issue?

In her original review in 2024, Baroness Cass made it clear that research into puberty blockers was necessary. Just this week, she has said that the trial to examine the risks and benefits of puberty blockers will reduce harm, not cause it. In fact, she goes further and tells us that the debate around the risks of puberty blockers has been exaggerated—we have seen some of that today, if we are all honest. She is absolutely right on this point.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): The Conservative Government commissioned the Cass review. In their 2024 manifesto, the Conservatives committed to implement the review in full, which would include a trial. However, as my hon. Friend is saying, they now propose in this motion to stop the trial. Is that not proof that we actually need to have a trial? We need to take the party politics out of this matter, stop politicians from being the lead commentators and put it in the hands of the families and the clinicians.

Dr Arthur: Exactly. Baroness Cass is a respected expert in this field, and she made recommendations that were broadly accepted. We should be using science as a basis for decision making, not rejecting her findings purely on the basis of politics. Let me go back to what I said at the start: doing nothing will lead to our young people being harmed. That is an incredibly important point.

We cannot rely on debates in this place to decide how and when puberty blockers should be used. Rather, we should be relying on thorough scientific research, carried out in proper trial conditions and led by medical experts. We heard earlier the Health Secretary explaining some of the detail around protections for our young people. Baroness Cass is also clear that more children will be harmed by preventing the trial than by allowing one to go ahead. That is an incredibly important point.

Preventing a trial drives desperate children to look online or internationally for unregulated hormones or hormone suppressants. That leads young people to unsafe puberty blockers or to start taking hormones

[Dr Arthur]

such as testosterone at a much earlier stage, which are irreversible once they start to take hold. We can prevent that by providing the properly regulated use of puberty blockers in the UK via this trial. The trial will provide understanding and allow clinicians to effectively guide Government on our next step. It is the right and necessary thing to do for the Government, clinicians and young people. We need to take better care of our young people, and we need to do that via a clinical trial.

Let me say again that doing nothing might seem like the easy thing to do, but it will come with consequences. I really hope that we hear more from Opposition Members about what they think the consequences of doing nothing will be for the health and wellbeing of our young people, because we have not heard that.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Arthur: I will, because I know the hon. Gentleman is keen to speak.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) mentioned the recently published studies in Finland. Does the hon. Gentleman not think there is any merit in waiting to see what the Finnish tests and trials throw up? We could then see what we could learn from them, rather than replicating or duplicating them here. International science should surely be respected.

Dr Arthur: I welcome that fantastic point. Until I was unexpectedly elected, I was an academic, and what I learned was never to focus on a single study when doing research, because a single study is basically an anecdote. We have to look at the breadth of the research. If I may say so, we see exactly the same in the climate change debate—the broad spectrum of science supports the argument for climate change, but there are always one or two contrary views. Those views are welcome, but we do not base our view on just one study; we look at the breadth of the research.

5.55 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): The reason I am in the Chamber today is the protection of children—that is why I care about banning social media, and it is why I am here to speak about puberty blockers. We protect young people under the age of consent from alcohol, heroin and sexual abuse, because they are children under the age of 18. This puberty blockers trial for 11-year-olds makes me ask whether we are putting sufficient safeguards in place for those young people, and whether they have the cognitive ability to understand what they are doing. Do they have the cognitive development to understand that, when their brain is fully developed, they will have made an irreversible choice, one that will last for the rest of their lives?

We talk about these children giving consent. What about a class action lawsuit? Members have referred to 7% of people being happy to continue with the therapy. What will happen when these children are 18 or 25? Inevitably, a percentage will decide that they do not want to continue in the gender they chose as a child and want to go back to the gender they were before. What are they going to do? Are they going to sue the Government?

Are they going to sue the clinicians for conducting the trial, because they were forced and coerced into something that they did not fully understand?

Danny Beales: I thank the hon. Member, my constituency neighbour, for giving way on that point. There is a lot of “what about” in her remarks; will she reflect on Dr Hilary Cass’s comments that the trial will lead to less harm than would otherwise be the case? Why does she believe that Dr Cass is saying that? Does she doubt her expertise in this instance?

Joy Morrissey: My doubts come from why, for example, we are not allowing the data linkage study to be fully completed before proceeding with the new trial. That study would find out what has happened to all the children who have already taken puberty blockers. I wanted to ask the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett), that question, but I was not able to make that intervention; I do not know whether that had anything to do with the £1.5 million donation from Ferring Pharmaceuticals that the Lib Dems took before the 2019 election. I do not know whether that had anything to do with it, but there has to be some level of declaration if a political party has taken donations from a pharmaceutical company that is promoting this drug. That is relevant to how one represents oneself in the Chamber.

There is no justification for proceeding with the Pathways trial before the data linkage study is complete. Puberty is how a child transitions from childhood to adulthood, and anything that affects that process is going to have long-term effects. Those effects are going to be felt, not in one or two years, but in 10 years. The brains we have as adults, at the age of 24, are very different from the brains we have as 11-year-olds—our frontal cortexes are not fully developed. This is not just about the effect on these children’s psychology; what effects do these drugs have on humans over the long term? We do not know that, so why not look at the data linkage study? It does not have to be perfect, but it will allow us to protect the children going into this trial, so that the trial is as well-run as possible.

Iqbal Mohamed: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and for making such a passionate speech. I think we all agree, across the House, that we are here not to politicise or to demonise, but to try to make the right decisions for the safety of children. I think that all Members here share that intention. It was said earlier that these drugs are already used to treat different conditions, such as prostate cancer, endometriosis and precocious puberty. For the first two conditions they are taken by adults for a very short time, and for the third they are taken for a limited period until the child reaches the age of puberty. Such misinformation—or comparison—is not really valid, and should be avoided.

Joy Morrissey: That is an excellent point. When I heard about those other uses for the drug, I thought that I would be interested to see more clinical trials for conditions such as endometriosis and cancer to establish its long-term effects. However, that is for adults. When it comes to protecting children, I want to ensure that this trial involves as much safeguarding as possible.

We do not fully understand the long-term risk. We come to the House again and again to discuss what constitutes a child and what constitutes protecting a

child. We need to be clear about the fact that we must protect people under the age of 16, or 18—I do not care which age it is, but it should be an age on which we all agree—and that they must be subject to extra protection and safeguarding until they reach adulthood. That is why we are asking for so many safeguards—we need to ensure that the unintended consequence of trying to help a few young people does not lead to greater harm to many—and it is why we are here today.

I do not feel that asking the Government to include the data linkage study is too much to ask. This trial is a trade-off: long-term health is being exchanged for short-term happiness. This trial, in my opinion, is not safe, and this trial will not protect children from harm.

6.1 pm

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): Everyone should have the right of access to high-quality, evidence-based healthcare, whatever their age. At the heart of this debate are young people experiencing profound gender-related distress, and the families who support them. Too often they have found themselves caught in the middle of a political argument while facing long waits, uncertainty, and a lack of clear treatment options. Every young person deserves compassionate, evidence-based care, and that includes transgender young people and children with gender incongruence.

The irony of the Opposition motion is that it would stop the very research that many Members have argued is necessary before decisions about treatment can be made. If we are serious about evidence-based medicine, we must also be serious about gathering evidence. The Pathways trial follows a recommendation made by Baroness Cass in her independent review, a recommendation that had enjoyed cross-party support when it was published. Since then the trial has undergone extensive scrutiny by researchers, ethics committees, independent reviewers and regulators. Following further modifications and additional safeguards, it has been approved by both the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the Health Research Authority. If Members believe that more evidence is needed, surely they should support a process that is designed to produce that evidence.

Much has been said about risk, and of course risk must be taken seriously, but the answer to uncertainty cannot simply be to refuse to learn more. The answer is careful, closely monitored research with robust protections. Participants must have experienced gender incongruence for at least two years, must already be receiving NHS gender services, must have undergone psychosocial support, and must be assessed as being physically and mentally stable. Both the young people and their parents must consent, and every participant must be approved by clinicians and a national multidisciplinary team. This is not an uncontrolled experiment; it is a tightly regulated clinical trial operating under some of the highest standards of oversight that are available in modern medicine.

The hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) made a valid point about the need to ensure that children who realise that they are gay do not decide that they are transgender, and that we do not feel that we should push more gay people back into the closet, as they are feeling very much under threat at present. However, there is another risk that we must discuss, and that is inaction. For two years, puberty blockers have effectively been unavailable outside research settings. Young people

and their families have been told repeatedly that more evidence is needed, and now, when a trial designed to generate that evidence is ready to proceed, some seek to stop it. What message does that send?

Behind every statistic is a family. Parents of transgender children and children with gender incongruence often speak of the distress of watching their child struggle and feeling powerless to help. They see anxiety, fear and growing distress as their child experiences physical changes that can feel deeply uncomfortable and alienating. These families are not political talking points; they are looking for support, answers and hope. For many transgender young people, puberty itself can be a source of profound distress. We should not pretend that doing nothing is a neutral act, because delays, uncertainty and the absence of treatment options have consequences too. Puberty blockers have generally been understood as a reversible intervention intended to pause puberty and provide time for further assessment and support, and the purpose of this trial is to strengthen our understanding of both the benefits and the risks. If opponents argue that more evidence is needed, blocking the research that would provide that evidence is a contradiction that this House should reject.

I also want to address something that often sits beneath debates such as this. If you come to this debate from the position that transgender people do not exist or that it is a fad, you are mistaken. Transgender people have always existed, and they deserve the same dignity, compassion and evidence-based healthcare as anyone else. If, as I believe we all do, we come to the debate motivated by concern for children's safety and wellbeing, how can we say that we are protecting children while being comfortable with them living in fear of the changes that puberty may bring? How can we say that we are acting in their best interests when some young people are terrified of growing into an adult body that does not align with who they understand themselves to be, while parents watch helplessly from the sideline? If our goal is to truly safeguard children, we should support careful research, rigorous oversight and evidence-based medicine. We should seek answers, not prevent them. We should reduce uncertainty, not prolong it. That is why this trial should proceed.

6.6 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett), who made a very effective and powerful speech. All of us here today are concerned about the safety and wellbeing of children, and we want to ensure that young people facing a crisis of identity get the support that they need and that is appropriate for them. In many cases, that will be talking therapies. We need to give children and their families time to figure out exactly what the issue is and whether they will develop out of it in time, but that is not always the case.

My concern, and I believe the concern of many here today, is for those children who do not, as the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) put it, grow out of it as if it were some problem—children who have a genuine fear of what puberty will bring, and of what adulthood in a body that they do not recognise as theirs will mean. Those children currently feel that they have no option. If we take away the possibility of puberty blockers, where will they go? Where will they

[Christine Jardine]

turn? Too many young people are committing suicide, and we have to acknowledge that that is the very real danger of putting up a very different type of block—a block to understanding and to helping them develop.

Rebecca Paul: I thank the hon. Lady for giving an eloquent speech. It is really important that we are very responsible in the way we talk about suicide, and I would like to point out that Professor Louis Appleby did a study on exactly this issue following the ban of puberty blockers. His conclusion was that we were not seeing an increase in suicides as a consequence. He also made the point that it is important not to suggest that denying young people puberty blockers causes them to commit suicide. That is a negligent thing to do, and it is important that we put that on the record.

Christine Jardine: I thank the hon. Lady, but I point out that that is not what I said. I said that we were leaving children without an option. I also point out that if we are going to be responsible, we should not accuse people of being homophobic because they are trying to support the transgender community. Many of those people who support the transgender community are lesbians or gay. I know this because I am the honorary president of the LGBTQ+ community within the Liberal Democrats, and there is a great feeling of community between the two. I would caution people not to call anyone who wants to support the trans community homophobic.

These children need our support. In providing that, we should listen to clinicians and experts, such as Dr Hilary Cass, who has said, as so many Members have pointed out, that this trial will help protect children and will mean that they are less likely to be harmed. I think we should take that as our guiding principle.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) clearly laid out my party's policy. I am proud of the fact that, as a women and equalities spokesperson, I was responsible for the formation of most of our policy on the transgender community. I have to say that I spoke to a great many of them, and they would be appalled if they felt for one moment that we were not going to support them, not going to support this trial or not going to stand up for them at a time when they are under increasing pressure and we are seeing the demonisation of that community.

The young children facing a crisis of identity—wondering who they are, and wondering what support they will get—are looking to us to give them that support, and that is why I will oppose the Conservatives' motion.

6.10 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), and I agree wholeheartedly with her comments about homophobia.

I remind the House that I am a former biomedical scientist, and I have probably read lots more medical publications than many in this Chamber. I have also volunteered many times for medical research, either as a healthy patient in my younger years or as a patient now in my slightly older years, so I know the process from

both sides. I think it is really important that we recognise that the UK has some of the highest standards for medical research, especially when it involves patients. There is talk about why there is no placebo, but sometimes it is not ethical to do a placebo-based trial. If we are withholding a form of medical intervention from someone just to prove that the next best thing will be the next best thing, that is not ethically right, because we are withholding medical care when someone needs it. That is very different from a healthy patient model, in which we are treating healthy patients to see if there is a biological change that would be harmful to all patients.

All too often, healthcare for the trans community is marked by lengthy wait lists, inconsistent treatment and discrimination—we have heard some of that stigma today—and there needs to be a concerted effort to change that. We have heard a lot about safeguarding children, and I think everyone in the Chamber agrees that that must be paramount, but I fear we are dividing trans children from other children when it comes to their medical needs and what support should be in place.

I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care confirmed yesterday that the Pathways trial will go ahead. We have heard many Members mention that young people getting better is a way through this, but that is very stigmatising for those who do hold on to their trans identity into adulthood. In fact, very many—the majority—of young trans people will go on to be trans adults, and we also know that those who detransition do in some instances retransition, because they detransitioned for the social reasons of not having a supportive family and other social pressures. This is not as static as some may think, and in fact young people often raise that fluidity with me.

Young trans people need this trial to move forward. For many, this represents the only legal route to access puberty suppressants at the moment. A pathway can be profoundly impactful, and we have heard people describe it as lifesaving. This has not fallen from the sky. There are well-established scientific and clinical precedents for the use of puberty-suppressing hormones, supported by decades of research and medical practice, and for a variety of different conditions. Even fertility clinics use these drugs in some of their regimes with certain patients. As I have mentioned, placebos are not the solution to making this a safer trial.

Puberty-suppressing hormones are not new and they are not experimental. They have been used safely since the 1980s, and we have decades of clinical experience of supporting their use in controlled settings. But instead of engaging seriously with the potential benefits of such a trial, the Opposition have framed the issue as part of a broader culture war that is trying to erase trans children's identities. By removing healthcare, we are not going to remove trans children; they will look for alternative access to treatments, including, as we have heard, starving themselves to prevent puberty starting. That is horrific to hear—as someone who has been very active on eating disorders, that is really quite terrifying.

We should be focused on ensuring that the voices of those people who will be most impacted—the young people and their families—are part of the discussion. The way in which the trial has been put together is of course not perfect—no medical trial is perfect—but it is really, really important, and the risk of harm from not

going ahead with the trial has to outweigh the risk of harm from doing the trial. We need the data and the understanding, so we can make the right decisions when designing the clinical interventions and services that should be available to young people. Anyone who is denying that should think again about why they are making that argument. This issue is not about whether trans young people exist; it is about whether we choose to respond with the real—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I call Carla Lockhart.

6.15 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I am absolutely appalled by the Government's decision to press ahead with the Pathways puberty blockers trial. When I look at the decision, I genuinely find myself asking: what lessons have this Government learnt from the last number of years? Parents have raised concerns, families have raised concerns, clinicians have raised concerns, campaigners have raised concerns, and many in this House have raised concerns. This is not a concern that has appeared overnight. The petition on this issue, which was debated some time ago, attracted significant support, and I must note that my constituency of Upper Bann was one of the leading constituencies in raising concerns about puberty blockers and their impact.

Ministers have been warned time and again. We had the Cass review, the closure of the Tavistock clinic and the decision to stop the routine prescribing of puberty blockers to children. All those developments pointed in one direction: greater caution, greater scrutiny and greater protection for vulnerable children. Yet somehow this Labour Government have looked at all of that and reached the conclusion that will harm more children, not less. They have decided that the answer to this difficult issue is to recommence a trial using the very drugs that are considered unsuitable for routine use, the very drugs that children cannot routinely be prescribed, and the very drugs that Ministers themselves acknowledge raise serious unanswered questions. That is the contradiction at the heart of the announcement to recommence the puberty blockers trial. If these drugs are not considered sufficiently safe, sufficiently evidenced or sufficiently understood to be routinely prescribed to children, why are the Government prepared to recruit children into a trial involving the same drugs?

What troubles me in particular is the age of the children involved: children as young as 11. When I think of an 11-year-old, I think of a child at the very beginning of secondary school, maybe even in primary school; I think of a child still trying to work out who they are; I think of a child whose views, interests and outlooks on life can change dramatically in the space of a few months—indeed, even in the space of a few days; I think of a child who still needs adults to guide them, protect them and make decisions in their best interests. I do not think of somebody who should be carrying the burden of unresolved questions about fertility, bone development, neurological development and long-term health outcomes. The Government tell us that more evidence is needed, but on whose shoulders are they placing that burden? The shoulders of children: children are being asked to participate because adults still do not have the answers. That cannot be right.

I have had the honour of meeting Keira Bell—one of the bravest campaigners I have encountered in public life, because she has been willing to speak publicly about consequences that she will carry for the rest of her life. When people discuss the issue, they often hide behind clinical language and advice. Clinical advice can be wrong. I queried clinical negligence and malpractice in Northern Ireland through a recent freedom of information request; in one year, £9 million was paid out. That shows that clinicians can be wrong. Yes, we need them and we depend on them, and I have so much respect for them, but they are not always right.

Keira Bell has spoken openly about the loss of her healthy breasts, concerns about her future fertility and the permanent changes that she lives with because of the pathway she was placed on as a vulnerable young person. Perhaps the most heartbreaking thing she has said is, “I was a vulnerable teenager who needed help”—not drugs, but help. She has also said, “I believe I should have been challenged on my views.” Let us think about that: a young woman looking back and saying that the adults around her should have asked harder questions, exercised greater caution and protected her.

We are all called to this place to do the right thing. The right thing is to look at the data that is already there and the young people who have been on this pathway, and to stop the puberty blockers trial with immediate effect.

6.20 pm

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I support an individual's freedom to choose to live their life in whichever manner they want, subject only to the law. That includes someone's right to want to live a life in a different gender identity to that which they were born with. But this debate is not about that; it is about administering powerful drugs to children. Although I have no direct experience of what it is like to want to live a life as somebody with a different gender identity, I have represented parents in the family court disputing their child's gender identity—in one case, a child under that age of 10—in legal proceedings.

There is an absolutist argument that I want reject: the argument that this is only a clinical question, and that politicians, decision makers and the Government must follow clinical advice. The clinical advice itself is disputed, but I accept the weight that the Government have placed on the Cass review, which was commissioned under the previous Government. It is right that the current Government place weight on that. This is much more than a clinical question, though—it is an ethical question, a moral question and a legal question—and the issues that need to be grappled with fall on the shoulders of the elected Members in this place.

I want to explore one of the issues that I think is fundamental: the issue of consent. What can consent mean when we are talking about young children? What can it mean when we are talking about a parent giving consent for something to happen to their child? The issue of consent is not new. We have the legal age of consent for engaging in sexual activity. Society, through this place and the courts, has decided that children should not be engaging in sexual activity under the age of 16. That is not a fundamentally clinical issue; it is an issue around the emotional,

[Joe Robertson]

psychological, moral and ethical impact on a child who does not fully understand what they are getting themselves into.

When it comes to a child under 13, we have a law that says consent is impossible. Under 13, there is no such thing as consent to sexual activity; it amounts to what we might term statutory rape. However, in the trial we are talking about today, children under the age of 13—at the age of 12—are going to be asked if they have engaged in oral sex in the last year. That is something that is illegal—something that they cannot consent to by law. Why are they being asked a question like that in these clinical trials? I ask the Minister to address that point directly. Plainly, consent is meaningful only if a child understands all the ramifications. I challenge anyone to stand up and back the idea that a child under the age of 13, for example, understands what it is like to give up the possibility of fertility, to live a life in a different gender and to really understand, at that age, what gender means in its adult entirety.

I turn now to the role of the parent. What parent can possibly say whether their child has been able to grapple with those issues in any meaningful way? They may be better placed than anyone else, but that does not mean that they can really form a judgment or view. After all, it would be preposterous to suggest that an adult could consent to their own child engaging in sexual activity, so how can they possibly consent to a child grappling with those ideas such that they administer a powerful drug to suppress their development and puberty?

We have a Government who have taken the view, which I welcome, that an adult cannot possibly consent to their own child having a social media account because they are not in a position to assess all the harms. How, by extension, can they say that an adult is in a position to consent to their child taking powerful drugs that will suppress their puberty and sexual development? It lacks any sort of coherence. I urge the Government to think again.

6.26 pm

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): It is a great shame that this debate has been broken up along party lines. It should have been had as the debate on assisted dying was, where people from across the House could stand up and make their own case. Indeed, many Members from across the House have been supportive of what I am about to say.

Following the publication of the Cass review in 2024, the use of puberty blockers for gender dysphoria in children and young people was restricted by the then Secretary of State for Health due to an unacceptable safety risk, with their use limited to clinical trial settings. Polling by Whitestone Insight in '25 showed that the public do not support a trial, with 67% of respondents agreeing that puberty blockers should never be given to under-18s, even as part of a clinical trial. That figure was 70% among parents of children under 18.

Like his predecessor, the Secretary of State has declared that he is uneasy allowing this trial to proceed, and cites clinical advice and a need for scientific evidence as a cover to allow him to support it. I have worked with many scientists, and we should be wary of thinking that all scientists are working for the betterment of the world.

There were clinicians who said that the drug thalidomide was safe and clinicians who promoted lobotomies as a breakthrough mental health treatment. There were also clinicians who assured parents that puberty blockers were safe and reversible. It was in the name of science that clinicians prescribed puberty blockers to children at the Tavistock clinic for more than a decade, with an estimated 2,000 children receiving these powerful drugs. Where are these children now? How have they got on?

More importantly, I believe that as Members of Parliament, we have an overriding moral responsibility to protect the most vulnerable in our society, especially children. In our induction as MPs, we were told that we had a duty to speak out when things were wrong. It is clear to me that allowing possibly irreversible medical research to be carried out on 11-year-old girls and 12-year-old boys, when we know that some of these children at least will reconcile themselves to their biological sex at birth, is completely inhumane and uncivilised. Many of us feel uncomfortable about using beagles for medical research. How on earth can it be right to use children for irreversible and life-changing medical research?

6.29 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The journey from childhood to adulthood is challenging for many, difficult for some, and tortuous for a few. Through that journey, the support of older people, who are often parents, loved ones, people who care, is critically important. For those who suffer from gender dysphoria, that journey is all the more challenging. Many people—perhaps all of us in this Chamber—will have struggled with the emerging sexuality that is part of the journey to adulthood, but most people who suffer from dysphoria cope with it as they go through puberty. Indeed, the evidence—and there has been much talk of evidence in this debate—shows that medical intervention in those cases would not only be unnecessary but profoundly damaging.

Yet at the Tavistock clinic, the horrors of which I first highlighted in 2019, thousands of children were prescribed life-altering drugs. Indeed, it is more shocking still: more than 70 children aged three and four were sent to that clinic, and 382 children aged six and under were referred. The Government are fond, now, of speaking about the Cass review commissioned by the previous Government, but the review was not welcomed by the Minister and the trans lobby. When it was commissioned, it was regarded with horror by those who presumably now support this trial.

The Cass review found that doctors must be extremely cautious about giving trans drugs to under-18s—not 11, 12 or 13-year-olds, but people under 18. It found that doctors must be able to

“refer to the longer-term benefits and risks”

of treatment options; that young children should have therapy before they are allowed to socially transition; that many parents expressed concern about their child being socially transitioned and affirmed in their expressed gender without parental involvement; that too many decisions about changing gender have been rushed, with too little consideration given to whether children might regret their actions later in life; and that childhood trauma, neglect and abuse feature heavily in the cohort of patients seeking gender change.

As many as two thirds of those referred had suffered neglect or abuse, with high levels of parental mental illness, substance abuse and exposure to domestic violence. Those are the vulnerable children who went to the Tavistock clinic, which was closed after pressure from those who understood the horrors that took place there. When it was opened, of course—

Dr Arthur: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir John Hayes: I will in a moment, when I have made an attack on the liberal bourgeoisie, which the hon. Gentleman might want to hear. When the Tavistock clinic was opened, it was seen as an emblem of progress by the liberal bourgeoisie. Now, of course, we know that it was the embodiment of wickedness. On that note, I give way to him.

Dr Arthur: I am part of the liberal working class. This debate is not about the Tavistock clinic. The right hon. Gentleman has just quoted Baroness Cass, but one thing he has not said is that she recommended that the clinical trial go ahead. She said recently that she supports the trial because she thinks there will be real benefits to it. Rather than talking about Tavistock, will he address what Baroness Cass, who he quotes extensively, thinks about this trial that we are debating?

Sir John Hayes: Baroness Cass certainly wanted to gather more evidence. The evidence we have shows the damage that puberty blockers can do. We know that the substantial science suggests that they affect bone maturation, cerebral capacity and, of course, fertility. It is certain that there is no compelling evidence that puberty blockers have a beneficial effect. That is why she sought more evidence, as she concluded that there was no compelling evidence that they have a beneficial effect.

Christine Jardine: As another member of the liberal working class, I wonder whether the right hon. Member has the experience that many of us in this place have of talking to constituents, friends and family who have children who have struggled with their gender identity and have benefited from puberty blockers. While he says that there is no evidence, many of us have direct experience of seeing the benefits in action.

Sir John Hayes: That experience clearly contradicts the Cass review's findings, but it is for the hon. Lady to have that debate, no doubt, with Dr Cass.

What is certain is that we have no indication from the Government about what success in the trial will look like. When challenged on that subject, answer came there none. How will we gauge whether the trial is a success or a failure? Are these children really guinea pigs to be used to provide the evidence that the hon. Lady says is already freely available in her anecdotal experience of communicating with her constituents and others?

We know that there is certainly evidence from other countries. Have the Government looked to draw on that, rather than engaging in this dangerous trial? We know that there is evidence too from the 2,000 or more children who went through Tavistock. Some have suggested that we should look at the data already available rather than putting any more children at risk. Yet despite the Secretary of State's agonised decision—I do not intend that to be sarcastic or pejorative; I appreciate that the Secretary of State was completely straightforward about how difficult it was to make the decision—the trial

goes ahead. I accept that there are additional safeguards—this is not Tavistock; it is something different—but none the less it brings immense risk alongside the determination to try to gain facts. Instead, let us look at Finland and Denmark and at other countries that have already gathered evidence. Let us look at what we know of those who have already been through this process.

G. K. Chesterton said:

“children are innocent and love justice”.

I fear that this trial will steal their innocence and deny them justice. I hope that even at this late stage the Government, recognising that, will abandon this awful trial and save innocent children from that fate.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nurat Ghani): We come to the wind-ups; I invite the shadow Secretary of State.

6.37 pm

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): This has been an important debate. It has been a difficult debate, but a necessary one none the less. There are some subjects in public life where the easiest course is silence, where every word is weighed, where motives are questioned and where hon. Members may be tempted to step back rather than step forward, but when the subject is the safety of children, silence is not an option.

Children and young people are at the centre of the debate. They are not slogans or political symbols to be used by either side of any argument; they are children, and often vulnerable children experiencing distress that can be profound, complex and deeply painful. They need kindness, patience and support from adults who listen and act responsibly. They need services that are timely, professional and compassionate. Compassion is measured not by how quickly we medicalise a child's distress but by whether we protect the child's future and respond to their present pain. That is the heart of the debate.

Sadly, those of us who are concerned about this trial are often labelled as transphobic. Personally, I find that offensive. Child safety matters to me, and so does equality for trans people, but we have to think about children. The Government ask the House to accept that the Pathways trial is the responsible way to build evidence. Ministers say that it is a carefully controlled study, that safeguards have been strengthened and that only a small number of children will be involved. But the question before us is not whether research matters—of course it does—but whether this particular trial involving children as young as 11 and 12 is the right and ethical way to proceed. We on the Conservative Benches do not believe that it is. My position is rooted in a simple principle: when evidence is uncertain, risks may be lifelong. When the patient is a child, the burden of proof must be exceptionally high. That is not ideology; that is good medicine.

The Cass review changed the debate because it brought clarity to a field that had been allowed to drift for too long. It found weak evidence, poor data, inadequate follow-up and a service model that too often failed to look at the whole child. It was the previous Government who treated those findings with the seriousness that they deserved. The routine prescription of puberty blockers on the NHS was ended because the evidence did not justify the practice. That was not a rejection of vulnerable young people; it was an act of safeguarding.

[Stuart Andrew]

The Government now say that this trial is different. They say that it is not routine prescribing and that there will be monitoring, consent, assessment and withdrawal criteria. Yet process cannot answer the central moral question: can a child, at the start of puberty, truly understand the impact of interrupting that stage? Can an 11-year-old meaningfully consider questions of fertility, bone development, cognitive effects, sexual function and future regret? Can a parent, faced with a distressed child and a desperate sense of need for relief, rationally navigate the uncertainty without enormous pressure? Those are not abstract questions; they go to the integrity of consent itself.

In most areas of medicine, when the risks are serious and the benefits uncertain, we become more cautious, not less. We do not reassure ourselves merely because the cohort is small, or say that because only a limited number of children may be exposed, the ethical concern is reduced. For each child in the trial, the consequences are enormous and personal. For each family, the decision is life-altering. For each future adult, the question may one day be, “Did the people in authority protect me properly?”

The Secretary of State has said he feels “discomfort and unease”. I welcome that honesty, and I believe it to be heartfelt. Yet discomfort in this area should not be something that Ministers try to manage away; it should make them stop and think again. Unease is sometimes the proper response of conscience. The Government point to safeguards, but safeguards are not the same as certainty. Monitoring every three months may identify some problems, but it cannot guarantee that long-term harm will not emerge years later. Objective withdrawal criteria may be better than vague discretion, but they do not remove the risk of treating a child unnecessarily in the first place.

The Government have still not answered a fundamental question: why proceed now before the existing evidence has been fully examined? There are children and young people who were treated under previous services. There is data that may help us to understand outcomes. There is a Tavistock-related evidence base that should be completed and analysed before more children are exposed to puberty blockers in a new trial. Surely the first duty is to learn from what has already happened and therefore potentially identify wherever there may be gaps. That is not obstruction; it is responsibility.

The Government must not ignore the wider context. Many children who experience gender distress also have other needs: mental health difficulties, autism, trauma, family pressures, anxiety, depression, eating disorders or safeguarding concerns. Dr Cass was clear that services must look at the whole child and not just one aspect of identity. We should not accept a system that is slow to provide holistic support but prepared to move ahead with powerful medical intervention under the banner of research.

The House must be honest about the tone of this debate. There will be young people listening who will be feeling frightened by it. There will be parents listening who feel judged. There will be clinicians listening who are trying to do their best in a difficult and contested area. Let us be clear: our concern is not with the dignity

of any child—their dignity is beyond question. Our concern is with the decisions made by adults in positions of power. Children deserve adults who can hold two truths at once: that their distress must be taken seriously, and that serious distress does not automatically justify experimental medical treatment.

Vikki Slade: I am slightly confused because we know that the young people in this trial will already have all those other things in place. The Minister has been clear about the talking therapies, for example, and about the time period. It takes two years in the gender system before anyone can access this trial. I am worried that it is slightly disingenuous to suggest that these children are going to be popped straight on to a trial without everything else being in place. Could the right hon. Gentleman just clarify that he understands that?

Stuart Andrew: I can assure the hon. Lady that I have given this an enormous amount of consideration. I understand what she is saying, but my argument is that we already have a set of data on children who have gone through some of these experiences, and that needs to be looked at. Having spoken to some of them, I do not want to see others experience it.

Vikki Slade *rose—*

Stuart Andrew: I am going to continue because I want to give the Minister the opportunity to respond.

The Secretary of State says that this trial will help settle the evidence, but a trial that follows children for a limited period cannot by itself settle questions that may only become clear in adulthood. It cannot fully answer the questions of what a child will think at 25, 35 or 45 about decisions that were made at 11 or 12. When I was in my teens, struggling with my sexuality, it was complex enough. It was emotionally draining. It was scary. I cannot imagine how much harder that would have been if someone had added to the mix by telling me that maybe it was not my sexuality but my gender. This is why we must listen to people like Keira Bell.

We must not confuse the creation of some evidence with the resolution of all uncertainty. The Opposition's approach is careful, proportionate and child centred. We must pause this trial, complete the analysis of existing data, publish a full account of the known risks and unknowns and strengthen non-medical support. Then, and only then, should we consider what further research should be ethically justified. This is not abandonment; it is protection.

The first responsibility of any health system is not to validate every proposed treatment, but to ask whether that treatment is safe, necessary and in the long-term interests of the patient. When the patient is a child, that responsibility is heavier still. We owe these young people more than good intentions. We owe them caution. We owe them honesty. We owe them services that see them in the round, and we owe them the humility to admit that when the evidence is uncertain, the answer is not to press ahead and hope; the answer is to pause, learn and protect. For those reasons, I urge the House to support this motion.

6.47 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I would like to start by declaring an interest, because my son Milo, of whom I am extremely proud, is a trans man.

I have listened to colleagues very carefully over the course of our proceedings. There have been some truly heartfelt speeches, and this strength of feeling is certainly warranted wherever children are concerned. The Government welcome this scrutiny, and I want to thank Members from all sides of the House for the constructive tone and substance of this debate.

I am not the Minister who is responsible for leading on this policy in the Department for Health and Social Care. Nevertheless, I feel a great deal of responsibility for the health and wellbeing of children in our country. As the Minister of State for Care, I am, for example, responsible for making sure children at end of life are receiving the right palliative and end-of-life care. And tooth decay, for example, has an appalling effect on children's wellbeing. When it comes to gender incongruence, I cannot help but think of those children suffering in great distress, who may even be watching our proceedings this evening, and I want them to know that all of us in this Chamber want what is best for them. We might disagree about how we get there, but I do not doubt the sincerity of anyone who has spoken today.

Fundamentally, our approach on this side of the House is to be led by the evidence, and on this I pay tribute to Dr Hilary Cass, who has taken on one of the most sensitive and polarising issues of our times with such courage and professionalism.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson)—I hugely respect her expertise as a paediatrician—has said that our decisions could be motivated by “fear and hostility”, but that is not a charge that anyone could level at Dr Cass, who has shown the utmost courage and professionalism from the moment that she was appointed. It was on the strength of her independence and integrity that the previous Conservative Government, of which the hon. Lady was of course a member, accepted her recommendations. One of those recommendations was for a regulated, robustly safeguarded trial. Yesterday, Dr Cass said that she is

“absolutely convinced that more children will be harmed if we don't do the trial than if we do.”

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the Minister on an excellent and brave speech. When the Cass report came out, I was criticised for not accepting it in full, and now the very same people who said that to me are not accepting the Cass report in full. Does he agree that that is hypocrisy, and that those people should stick to their word?

Stephen Kinnock: I know that feelings on these matters are strong and heartfelt. If the Conservative party has changed its position and is putting forward its arguments with sincerity and honour, that is a perfectly acceptable position to take, but I simply remind the House of the journey that the party has been on.

Rebecca Paul: The Cass review also suggested a clinical trial for cross-sex hormones. On that basis, will the Government launch a clinical trial on cross-sex hormones as well?

Stephen Kinnock: This is a debate about hormones for suppressing puberty, and is related to the matter that the hon. Lady raises, but it is important that we get the sequencing right. Let us look at the trial and the evidence. That is part of the process of understanding the milestones and the forks in the road faced by children who are experiencing gender incongruence. Let us do this one step at a time.

We are proceeding carefully, cautiously and under the mantra that the safety and wellbeing of children are non-negotiable, and with clarity that a robustly scrutinised trial with rigorous safeguards is the only way of establishing a robust evidence base for puberty-suppressing hormones.

Many hon. Members have asked about safeguards, so let me remind the House what they are. A child can participate only with the consent of a parent or guardian and the child's own consent or assent, and only if they have had a diagnosis of gender incongruence for at least two years; if they are of stable physical and mental health; if they are not subject to any safeguarding concerns; if they and their parents demonstrate sufficient understanding of the nature of the treatment, including its potential advantages and disadvantages; if they have been deemed clinically appropriate by both their NHS care team and the national multidisciplinary team; and if they are already accessing NHS gender services, including participation in a tailored package of psychosocial care.

Sir John Hayes: Will the Minister at least commit to looking again at the experience of Finland and Denmark, whose evidence has led them to now emphasise counselling rather than medical intervention?

Stephen Kinnock: A little later, I will go through all the different work that is going on. This is absolutely not happening in isolation; we are taking into account a range of other studies.

Some colleagues have raised the work of the MHRA in strengthening the safeguards for young people involved in the trial. The MHRA has been engaged in a scientific dialogue with the trial sponsors, and it was the outcome of that process that led the MHRA, as an independent body, to publish the updated protocol last week. We welcome the changes, because they show that the MHRA is taking its job seriously and that the system is working as intended. We cannot cut corners when it comes to the safety and wellbeing of children, and the safeguards are now in place to guarantee greater monitoring and clinical reassessment, including objective criteria for withdrawing children and young people from the trial entirely. I remind colleagues that the bar to qualify for the trial is extremely high, with only a small number of young people expected to meet the strict criteria.

Some other colleagues—I turn now to the point made by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes)—have queried the need to have a clinical trial when a number of children have already taken puberty blockers and information is already available. However, Dr Cass concluded that there is not enough evidence about the risks and benefits of those medications. That is why she was so clear in recommending a trial to find that clinical evidence, because that is the basis on which we can take those decisions.

The information in the data linkage study is much more limited than the detailed information that the research team will be able to collect about the relative

[Stephen Kinnock]

benefits and risks of puberty-suppressing hormones. NHS England is, however, committed to delivering the data linkage study and has taken time to ensure that the data is shared by relevant organisations.

Esther McVey: I have been listening to the debate and have not yet heard what the Government will deem to be a measure of success of this puberty blocker trial before it goes ahead. What are the criteria, the measurements, the percentages and the numbers, and what are the timelines over which they will be measured? Can the Minister explain what those are? If someone is unhappy, can they sue the Government?

Stephen Kinnock: As the right hon. Lady will know, a lot of this is about the distress and the tremendous mental health pressure that young people going through gender incongruence feel. Clearly, one of the outcomes that we will look for from the trials is an alleviation and an amelioration of those significant mental health issues and distress. Those are the kind of outcomes we want to see to help some of those young people who often end up in awful situations, leading to self-harm and other terrible situations.

Some colleagues have asked about the wider support we are providing for children and young people with gender dysphoria and incongruence. I am pleased that the Pathways study is just one part of the wider work being done to ensure that the support is there. For example, Pathways Horizon is an observational study of all children and young people attending NHS children and young people's specialist gender services. Pathways Connect is a brain imaging study, Pathways Voices will interview young people, and Horizon Intensive is about ensuring that there is a comparison group of 300 participants who are expressing gender incongruence.

Furthermore, NHS England has opened three new children and young people's gender services in the north-west, London and Bristol, with a fourth planned for the east of England this year. I can confirm that the Government aim to have a service in every region of England in the coming years. These services use a different model with multidisciplinary teams, including mental health support and paediatrics, within specialist children's hospitals to provide holistic care. The new services will increase clinical capacity and reduce waiting times so patients can be seen sooner and closer to home.

I can update the House that waiting lists for children and young people's gender services have come down since this Government took office. As of April, nearly 3,000 fewer children and young people were on the waiting list compared with September 2024.

This Government stand by the principle that we will always be led by clinical advice and clinical evidence, but that does not mean we take these decisions lightly, and it does not mean that we are abdicationing our responsibilities either. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has requested monthly updates on the progress of the trial, including any emerging risks. Throughout this process, he has immersed himself in the detail, scrutinised the issue and sought the strongest assurances from his most senior clinical advisers. We have received those assurances and are proceeding on the basis of evidence, not ideology.

I end with regret that it appears that the cross-party consensus on Dr Cass's expert review has been lost, but also with hope that colleagues can get behind Dr Cass's work again. We will move forward on the basis of taking decisions based on the expertise of clinical and medical professionals, and acting within clearly defined safeguards and robust oversight, including in this House, to provide the best quality of healthcare and support for all children and young people to access what they need.

On one level, this is a specific debate about a specific issue, but when we zoom out, we see that it goes to the heart of what our NHS is about, which is how best to do the greatest possible good for the greatest possible number of people. When we look at this through that basic ethical prism, there can be no doubt that this Government's position is the right one. A small cohort of vulnerable children are struggling, and it is our job to help them—it really is as simple as that. I therefore urge colleagues to oppose the Opposition's motion.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 112, Noes 283.

Division No. 39]

[6.59 pm]

AYES

Anderson, Stuart	Griffith, Andrew
Andrew, rh Stuart	Griffiths, Alison
Argar, rh Edward	Harris, Rebecca
Atkins, rh Victoria	Hayes, rh Sir John
Bacon, Gareth	Hinder, Jonathan
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi	Hinds, rh Damian
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Hoare, Simon
Barclay, rh Steve	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Bedford, Mr Peter	Holmes, Paul
Bhatti, Saqib	Huddleston, Nigel
Blackman, Bob	Hudson, Dr Neil
Bool, Sarah	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Burghart, Alex	Jopp, Lincoln
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Lam, Katie
Cartlidge, James	Lamont, John
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Cocking, Lewis	Lockhart, Carla
Cooper, John	Lopez, Julia
Costa, Alberto	Lumsden, Douglas
Coutinho, rh Claire	MacDonald, Mr Angus
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Mak, Alan
Cross, Harriet	Malthouse, rh Kit
Davies, Gareth	Mayhew, Jerome
Davies, Mims	McVey, rh Esther
Davis, rh David (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Mohamed, Iqbal
Dewhurst, Charlie	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Moore, Robbie
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	Morrissey, Joy
Duffield, Rosie	Morton, rh Wendy
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Easton, Alex	Mundell, rh David
Evans, Dr Luke	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Fortune, Peter	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Fox, Sir Ashley	O'Brien, Neil
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Patel, rh Priti
Freeman, George (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)	Paul, Rebecca
Fuller, Richard	Philp, rh Chris
Gale, rh Sir Roger	Pritchard, rh Mark
Garnier, Mark	Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)
Glen, rh John	Rankin, Jack
Glendon, Mary	Reed, David
Grant, Helen	Robertson, Joe
	Robinson, rh Gavin

Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley

Timothy, Nick
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
David Simmonds and
Mr Andrew Snowden

NOES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Brackenridge, Sureena
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi

Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla (*Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry*)
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gittins, Becky
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia

Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Tom
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, rh Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 MacNae, Andy
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahan, Jim
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
 Midgley, Anneliese

Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Quigley, Richard
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie (*Proxy vote cast by Rachael Maskell*)
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scroggham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Slade, Vikki
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spencer, Hannah
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair

Strickland, Alan
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Taylor, Alison
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tufnell, Henry
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian

Ward, Chris
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Jade Botterill and
Lilian Greenwood

Question accordingly negated.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

REDRESS SCHEME

That the draft Private Landlord Redress Schemes (Approval and Designation) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 28 April, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—*(Gregor Poynton.)*

Question agreed to.

SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

Ordered,

That Leigh Ingham be appointed to the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority in place of Helena Dollimore, until the end of the present Parliament, in pursuance of paragraph 1(d) of Schedule 3 to the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009.—*(Sir Alan Campbell.)*

MODERNISATION COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Leigh Ingham be discharged from the Modernisation Committee and Amanda Hack be added.—*(Sir Alan Campbell.)*

Forest City: West Suffolk

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

7.13 pm

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I draw your attention, Madam Deputy Speaker, to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I also declare that my family and I are local residents affected by the development proposal we are about to discuss. I am grateful for this debate about the proposed Forest City, and I am especially grateful to Mr Speaker for allowing me to lead it, given my shadow Cabinet responsibilities.

I sought this debate because Forest City is such a danger to our way of life in West Suffolk. For those who are unfamiliar with this monstrous proposal, this is it: a city of 1 million people—the size of Birmingham—between Newmarket and Haverhill in Suffolk, and over the border into Cambridgeshire. It would be a city of 1 million people, supposedly to service the needs of Cambridge—a city that is seven times smaller, with only 145,000 residents. It would be a city of the same population density as London, where on average 58 people live in each hectare. That would all be where today stand ancient villages, communities built on trust and reciprocity, beautiful countryside, family businesses, new tech firms, the international headquarters of horseracing and breeding, and the best arable farmland in the country.

The most important thing to say about the plan is that its premise is absolute junk. The Forest City developers make specific claims regarding land assembly, compulsory purchase, affordability mechanisms, infrastructure funding, tax treatment and the scale of state involvement, none of which stands up to scrutiny. First, the resale model removes residential land value and caps resale at inflation-indexed build cost, excluding land.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member, my constituency neighbour, for allowing an intervention. I regard this as quite a bold idea, like the NHS; that was a bold idea just after the war. Let us try and use our imaginations: perhaps we will create a shining city—a city not on a hill but in the flatlands of Suffolk—and, just perhaps, a solution to the housing crisis we have in our land.

Nick Timothy: I think we have just had it—the people of West Suffolk will know that local Labour representatives are in favour of Forest City, which I think is shameful.

As I was saying, the resale model removes residential land value and caps resale at inflation-indexed build cost, excluding land. Where homes cost £350,000, as promised by the developers, this creates a permanent capital gap of £275,000 per unit. At the scale proposed—approximately 400,000 homes—that implies up to £110 billion of housing capital subsidy paid by the Government.

Secondly, the plan relies on a development corporation with powers of compulsory purchase, while denying itself increases in land value uplift. For a city of 1 million people, non-housing infrastructure will cost anywhere up to £60 billion in capital expenditure. The developers suggest selling a limited number of commercial plots to cross-subsidise investment, but this falls far too short. Without capturing the wider increase in land value, this is another massive black hole.

Thirdly, the plan implies water self-sufficiency at scale. The east of England is a water-stressed region, and a city of 1 million people would require around 170 megalitres per day of additional supply. That is equivalent to one south Lincolnshire reservoir or two fens reservoirs in deployable output terms, at a capital cost of up to £4 billion, excluding network reinforcements and financing. There is no plan and no funding for that work, and when I wrote to Anglian Water, it said that the developers had not even been in touch.

Fourthly, even assuming compulsory purchase at existing use value with hope value removed—which I believe is not what the developers have said to local landowners—land acquisition would require around £1 billion of up-front public expenditure. Removing hope value reduces up-front costs, but capping resale prices through a so-called permanent affordability model means that there is no mechanism to pay back the capital. In other words, this is yet another black hole.

Taken together, these funding gaps suggest up to £175 billion of Government funding, with no way for the state to recover the costs. When I put these problems and detailed questions to the developers in a letter sent in March, the reply I received one day later did not even seek to provide answers. When their report, “We Can Build A City”, was published and sent to Ministers in April, it failed to address a single one of these very serious challenges. That is no wonder, because building a city is far more complicated than these cowboys pretend.

Let us take the Government’s new towns programme as an example. Those are only towns, not cities, and only seven of the original 12 schemes are going ahead. Where whole cities have been built from scratch elsewhere in the world, many have failed. Those that have worked—to an extent—are often artificial new capital cities where the functions of government create jobs, such as Brasilia and Islamabad. Often they are in countries where there is still a great migration of people from rural areas to cities, such as in China. Even in China, though, people have simply chosen not to move to many of the new cities, and they stand partially empty. There are similar stories in Songdo in South Korea, Ciudad de la Paz in Equatorial Guinea, and Masdar City in the United Arab Emirates.

The reasons for that failure are all too familiar to those of us who have studied the Forest City proposal. These cities are built speculatively, without real demand; there are massive infrastructure costs without feasible revenue generation; and they are elite-driven projects, disconnected from the needs of real people.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): Although there are no proposals the size of a city in my constituency, there is a proposal to build thousands of new homes on the green belt in Hayes. Does my hon. Friend agree that this indiscriminate building on the green belt threatens communities and is swamping public services as well?

Nick Timothy: It is undoubtedly the case that we need to build more houses in this country, but schemes such as the one described by my hon. Friend must be proportionate for the areas in which they are proposed, and must come with infrastructure, services and amenities.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): On that point about speculative building, I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is probably not a fan of big, bold projects of

this kind, but does he agree that there is a very good example just down the road in Cambridge? The recent sale of Cambridge City airport to Homes England is an exciting initiative that will genuinely provide the homes and businesses we need.

Nick Timothy: I completely agree, and I will come to the needs of Cambridge and the surrounding area.

You will have noticed, Madam Deputy Speaker, that none of the examples that I have just given is in a western country. That is because advanced economies do not build artificial communities from scratch in the hope that economic growth will follow. That is the logic of the autocrat and the socialist planner, and there is enough evidence from history to inform us of its chances of success. In truth, the Government know that.

In the small print of the new towns programme, officials were dismissive of Forest City, saying that it had no local support, no landowner backing, no broader development interest, and no route to delivery. They said that Haverhill did not meet their economic tests, and that the area near Exning and Newmarket had too little water. Simon Dudley, the former chairman of Homes England, called Forest City

“a recipe for disaster, paid for by the taxpayer and dressed up as progress.”

Simon Lovegrove, an expert in new towns and cities around the world, has said that there is

“no need for such a city”,

that the proposal has “major flaws”, and that—for the reasons that I have already given—it is “unaffordable”. As Mr Lovegrove says, according to the employment-population ratio and the labour force participation rate, a city of 1 million people would have a working population of nearly 400,000, but the city of Cambridge has a working population of less than 70,000. The developers talk about the Oxford-Cambridge corridor, but I wonder whether they have even looked at a map, because we are on the wrong side of Cambridge for that.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): My constituency is in the path of the Oxford-Cambridge arc. I welcome the proposed development at Cambourne; there is also a proposal for a new town just south of the constituency, in Tempsford. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Forest City could just be a huge distraction from the new towns programme, which is a credible way of getting on with delivering the housing for which we certainly see the need in my constituency?

Nick Timothy: I do agree, but it is not just a distraction from the need to build in the way that that is needed in the broader region around Cambridge. Only today I received an email from one of my constituents who said, “I see that you have a debate. Please will you emphasise the damage that this is doing to people’s mental health, and the anxiety that it is causing local residents?”

Why, if this proposal is so flawed, has it not already been killed off? The developers behind Forest City have won fawning media coverage in *The Guardian*, the *Financial Times* and the BBC, and to date the Government have refused to say no. In March, the Housing Minister said in answer to a question from me:

“Officials will review this proposal in the usual way, including through a meeting with the promoters.”

[Nick Timothy]

In April, he confirmed that the meeting had in fact been held in February. When the developers claimed to be in talks with the Treasury, I asked Ministers there, in April, whether they, their advisers or their officials had met the Forest City team, but they refused to answer. When I asked whether the advisers from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government had met the Forest City team, I was directed to a publication about meetings held last year—not this year—with senior media figures, not developers. To date, everyone has been completely evasive about the whole thing.

During a debate in the other place two weeks ago, Baroness Taylor, a Housing Minister, told my noble Friend Lord Herbert:

“We are aware of the Forest City proposals and will be following how they progress through the appropriate local consultations and approvals”.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 10 June 2026; Vol. 856, c. 1423.]

But this is the point: Forest City will not go through local consultations and approvals. Its proposers are asking the Government to circumvent local democracy and create a development corporation with compulsory purchase powers. The Government could just say no, but so far they have refused.

In the meantime, it is local people who are suffering. I have had emails from people who have told me that they would like to sell their house, but cannot. I have had emails from people who have found their dream home in Suffolk, but cannot commit to buying it as long as this development remains on the table. People in the Bradleys have been told that their village will have to be flooded to make way for a reservoir. People in Great Wratting and the Thurlows have been told that village life will be gone forever. People in Exning, Newmarket and Haverhill have been told that their communities will become suburbs. People in Wickhambrook and Withersfield and Hundon and Kedington and Denston and Stradishall and Ousden and Dalham and Lidgate and Cowlinge—which, like Haverhill, the developers cannot even spell—have been told that they do not matter. Their lives will be ruined, and they have been told that they will have to live amid a building site for decades, often for the remainder of their lives. They have been not only disrespected, but insulted.

The Forest City developers, Shiv Malik and Joe Reeve, bussed in supporters from outside the area to a supposedly local meeting in Haverhill. They cancelled a public meeting in Thurlow because too many locals wanted to come—it was apparently a secret public meeting. Behind our backs, they and their supporters have disparaged local people as too old to have a stake in the future, too white to be interesting, and too rural to understand the obvious joys of city life. In the *Financial Times*, Mr Malik was photographed next to what was called a “deserted field”, seemingly unaware that the farmland in our corner of Suffolk is the best in the country.

The poor behaviour does not end there. Malik and Reeve present their plan as an act of altruism for the country and the next generation, but they want to keep 160 acres of the city for themselves. Based on Cambridge land values, that would be worth hundreds of millions of pounds. The chairman of their company, Dame Patricia Hewitt, is opening doors for them and promoting the proposition as being in the national interest. She is less open about

the fact that Mr Malik will soon be her son-in-law, and her family therefore have a direct financial stake in what she promotes.

On different occasions, Mr Malik has claimed the support of local landowners, when only one is believed to support Forest City and the rest oppose it. He has claimed the support of the British Horseracing Authority, which has had to write to him to tell him to stop. He has also claimed the support of the Jockey Club, which has also sent him a legal letter. He threatened to sue me for revealing these things, but when I held my ground, he backed down.

In truth, Forest City has attracted almost universal opposition among the people of West Suffolk—those living in villages and those in the towns; those who were born and bred in the area and those who chose to move there; those who are young and those who are old; the landowners, homeowners and renters; and the businesses and residents. There is value in the rural way of life, even if the Forest City developers disparage it. Local people do not want to see their homes and communities destroyed.

This is not about knee-jerk opposition to new homes, because we have had thousands of new homes built in the last five years. The new local plan proposes 5,000 new homes, on top of the 8,700 already marked for planning permission. Although Government housing targets have been cut for the cities, they have gone up by 57% for us. To put things into context, Haverhill has doubled in size in only 30 years. Given our proximity to Cambridge, this is understandable. As I said in my maiden speech, we should

“embrace the opportunities, not just fear the risks”,—[*Official Report*, 22 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 445.]

of housing demand connected to Cambridge. That is why I have never been an anti-housing campaigner, but the solution to the demand created by the innovation and enterprise of Cambridge is not Forest City.

The solution is the densification of Cambridge itself, the development of land adjacent to the city, and the construction of transport connections to the towns and villages within a commutable distance. Haverhill, for example, provides Cambridge with workers, including many at Addenbrooke’s hospital. It needs a rail link and not just the often single-lane A1307. The line between Newmarket and Cambridge should be dualled, and there need to be more services through Newmarket and Brandon.

My concern is that this Government, who have been setting and missing ambitious house building targets, will see Forest City not for the impracticability of the plan but as a big idea that they can seize to show that they still have radicalism. The developers are already talking about their pitch to the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), and some local Labour politicians—we have heard from one today—have already hinted at, or even given, their own support.

Peter Prinsley: I do not wish to declare my support for Forest City, but I wish to declare that there has to be some imagination here. It seems to me that the hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, has not grasped the imagination behind this project. We are not talking about simply expanding a number of existing towns; this is a completely new idea. What does he think about that?

Nick Timothy: To be honest, I am at a complete loss as to how that does not express support for the scheme, and if the hon. Gentleman is saying that he does not support it after his earlier intervention, that may be a record U-turn even for this Labour party.

This debate presents us with an opportunity to kill off this disastrous idea and all the anxiety and blight it is causing, so I want to ask the Minister the following questions. I gave him advance notice to ensure that we get clear answers, and on behalf of everybody in West Suffolk, I really do ask for clarity. First, do the Government recognise, despite prior ministerial statements, that the Forest City developers do not seek to go through

“the appropriate local consultations and approvals”,

and plan to rely instead on the legal, financial and political support of central Government?

Secondly, for all the reasons I have given, will the Government take this opportunity to rule out Forest City for good? Thirdly, in particular, will the Government rule out the establishment of a development corporation and the use of compulsory purchase powers for the construction of Forest City? Fourthly, do the Government share some or all of my concerns about the financial modelling and affordability gap in the Forest City proposal, as presented, and if so, where do they agree or disagree? Fifthly, will the Government publish details of all meetings and conversations held between all Ministers, officials and advisers in different Departments and the representatives of Forest City, including the chairman and members of its advisory board?

7.31 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Madam Deputy Speaker, please accept my sincere apologies for being slightly late to the Chamber.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Minister, if you were late, you would not be able to respond, so you got here just in time.

Matthew Pennycook: Excellent. I am very glad to hear it. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I congratulate the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) on securing this debate. I assure him that I have heard loud and clear his concerns about the high-level Forest City 1 proposals, and that I will reflect carefully on them. I also thank the other hon. Members who have made contributions to the debate.

Setting aside the detailed criticism made of the proposals in question, the core argument the hon. Gentleman has advanced is that the Government have to date refused to “say no” to it, which I think were his words. I want to respond to this charge head-on at the outset, because as he knows full well, it is not the role of the Government to opine on every development proposal that materialises across the country. For good or ill, depending on one’s viewpoint, we have a discretionary planning system in which schemes of various sizes are judged on their site-specific merits by individual local planning authorities.

The Secretary of State has powers to call in or recover planning applications where they involve matters of more than local importance, and they are exercised where necessary. The Department can also take forward specific initiatives and programmes involving the delivery

of large-scale new communities. The recent consultation and decision to establish a Greater Cambridge development corporation and the ongoing work taking place to progress a new towns programme are two good examples, but in each instance the Government clearly set out the parameters of their support and consult where appropriate. What we do not do—indeed, we are obliged not to do it, given the quasi-judicial role of Housing, Communities and Local Government Ministers in the planning system—is to publicly pass judgment on every unsolicited proposal that the Department receives. The hon. Gentleman looks somewhat confused by that notion, but that is how the planning system operates.

The hon. Gentleman kindly provided me with advance notice of the questions he asked, so in response to each of them, let me give him as much clarity as I can. He asked whether the Government recognised that the Forest City promoters do not seek to go through

“the appropriate local consultations and approvals”,

and plan to rely instead on the legal, financial and political support of central Government. In response, I say to the hon. Gentleman that, while the size and nature of the proposed development would suggest as much, it is not entirely clear from the high-level material published by the promoters. Their website states, for example, that subsidy is not sought. A clear preference is expressed, however, for a development corporation as the delivery model, but it is not made explicit whether they are seeking Government backing for a centrally-led urban development corporation or are interested in a future mayoral or locally-led approach. In short, we simply do not have enough detail about this proposal to be able to say with any certainty precisely how its promoters believe it should be delivered.

When it comes to the east of England, however, the Government’s focus is firmly on the establishment of the Greater Cambridge development corporation and using it to deliver nationally significant growth in Cambridge and its surrounding areas, in partnership with local leaders and communities.

The hon. Gentleman pressed me on whether the Government will take this opportunity to rule out Forest City for good. For the reasons I have just set out, it is not for the Government to rule in or out any proposed scheme in general terms. He is aware that when the promoters of Forest City 1 applied to be part of the new towns programme, officials reviewed the application and concluded that it did not meet the programme’s objectives, specifically the deliverability objective. However, as per the remarks made by Baroness Taylor in the other place on 10 June, which he cited, it is open to the promoters of the scheme to engage with the relevant local planning authorities and communities about their proposals.

Nick Timothy: I thank the Minister for his considered answers to my questions. The point is that the Forest City developers are not seeking a process where Ministers consider an application using their quasi-judicial role; it is that they are seeking a policy decision to support the creation of a development corporation with compulsory purchase powers. I think that is a different question, which I would like to press him on. Will he rule that out, or can he not?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, which pre-empts the next of his questions that I was going to come on to. He asked me specifically

[Matthew Pennycook]

to rule out the establishment of a development corporation and the use of compulsory purchase powers for the construction of Forest City. I believe I have already confirmed to him, in answer to a written answer on 9 February, that the Government have no current plans to consult on the establishment of a centrally-led urban development corporation to deliver the Forest City 1 proposals. I do not think we can be clearer than that. The Government are not exploring creating a development corporation to take forward this speculative proposal.

The hon. Gentleman invited me to provide an assessment of the financial modelling and subsidy gap in respect of the Forest City 1 proposal. It would not be appropriate for me to do so, even if the evidence base on which to make a rigorous assessment existed, which to the best of my knowledge it does not given that a business case has not yet even been put together by the promoters.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked me to publish details of all meetings and conversations held between Ministers, officials and advisers and the promoters of the scheme. I can confirm that neither I nor the Secretary of State have met the promoters. I have met some of the board members in the past, but not in relation to the Forest City 1 proposals. The promoters met my officials earlier this year and proposals were reviewed by officials when the promoters formally applied to be part of the new towns programme. As we have discussed, special advisers in our Department have had a single meeting

with the promoters with the aim of learning more about the proposals. As he will know, details of meetings that special advisers have with external organisations are published on gov.uk, in line with requirements set out in the relevant guidance.

To conclude, I appreciate fully the hon. Gentleman's desire to have the Government express an opinion on the high-level scheme proposed, but I am afraid there is not much more to add to what I have set out already. As I have made clear, when it comes to the east of England, the Government's focus is firmly on delivering high-quality, sustainable growth for Cambridge and its environs. We announced the establishment of the greater Cambridge development corporation on 2 June, and the required statutory instrument was laid two days later. Subject to forthcoming parliamentary scrutiny and approval, the development corporation will be established as an entity. A powers and functions statutory instrument will be laid later in the year, which will grant the development corporation both plan making and development management powers. The development corporation will be expected to work closely with neighbouring local planning authorities, including West Suffolk, engaging collaboratively to ensure that growth delivers positive outcomes across the wider area. On that note, I welcome the support he has expressed for the Government's focus on Cambridge.

Question put and agreed to.

7.38 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 23 June 2026

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

Fly-tipping: Residential Areas

9.30 am

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Any hon. Members who wish to take off their jackets have permission to do so. I call Melanie Onn to move the motion.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of fly-tipping in residential areas and associated impacts.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and to see so many colleagues here to participate in this important debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate and colleagues who supported my application.

Fly-tipping is often discussed as an environmental or waste management issue and a question of local authority enforcement. It is, of course, all those things, but in communities such as mine and across the country, it is more fundamental. It is about pride, belonging and whether people feel good about the place they call home. Residents often tell me they are tired of seeing mattresses dumped in alleyways, household waste abandoned on street corners and green spaces treated as rubbish tips.

Those are not isolated incidents; they become part of the everyday experience of a neighbourhood. The impact goes far beyond the physical waste itself. Surveys on environmental decay reveal that 86% of people living in heavily littered or fly-tipped neighbourhoods feel embarrassed by their area. It is terrible that people should feel that. That statistic ought to concern us all. Environmental degradation damages mental wellbeing, erodes civic pride and fuels a cycle of hopelessness that can leave residents feeling disconnected from the communities around them.

People deserve to feel proud when they walk down their street, and to feel that their neighbourhood matters. When fly-tipping becomes commonplace it sends exactly the opposite message. It tells residents that standards are slipping, that nobody cares and that decline is somehow acceptable. Once that perception takes hold it can be incredibly difficult to reverse.

We must also be honest about some of the pressures that have contributed to the problem. Across the country, councils have faced difficult decisions about waste services. Public waste disposal facilities have been reduced in some areas, opening hours have changed and restrictions have become more complicated. Residents frequently tell me that local tips can be difficult to use, with limitations on what can be taken, who can take it and how often visits can be made. None of that excuses criminal behaviour; those who dump waste illegally are responsible for their actions. But if we are serious about solving the problem, we need to understand all the factors that contribute to it.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Many of my residents are sick of persistent fly-tipping blighting our community. This Government have passed laws that allow us to prosecute fly-tippers, but residents are also frustrated by the cost of cleaning up this mess. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is imperative not only to clean up our communities but to make the fly-tippers pay for it?

Melanie Onn: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Why on earth should everybody else pay for the mess that others create, particularly hard-pressed communities that are already struggling? Adding to their council tax burden or imposing additional costs is not fair.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): In my constituency, fly-tipping remains a significant problem for local communities. Waste is dumped, and the council acts properly to remove the waste but it comes back again. As has been mentioned, the problem is even more challenging when waste is dumped on private land, and the landowners have to endure the cost burden of removing sometimes hazardous quantities of waste. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need stronger enforcement, which should include greater use of CCTV to catch perpetrators and tougher penalties for offenders, which seems to be the only way to deal with this serious antisocial behaviour?

Melanie Onn: My hon. Friend makes a number of excellent points. In every community there are hotspots that people go back to again and again. There is provision for local authorities to use CCTV, but it has to be monitored; there is no point in having CCTV if it is not. Local authorities also have powers to use drones to follow vehicles that are committing the crime of excessive tipping. My hon. Friend is also right about the cost to private landowners. Other hon. Members might talk about more rural communities, the impact of fly-tipping on rural land and the environmental waste their constituents are then required to clean up. It is incredibly challenging to deal with hazardous waste.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): On rural and private land, the Environment Agency in my constituency has said that there is a gap in regulation when it comes to privately owned sites that are used for one purpose initially but gradually accumulate waste and become fly-tipping destinations. The Environment Agency has no power to act against that because it is private land, and councils are also struggling to find the right approach. Does the hon. Lady consider that as a significant issue in rural constituencies such as mine?

Melanie Onn: It is interesting that the hon. Member says there might be a gap in regulations, and I suspect that that is the case for not just rural private land but all private land. I have the same thing in my constituency, where there are alleyways or unadopted areas that are frequently fly-tipped. I was going come on to local authorities later, but I will just repeat myself—why not; this place is all about repetition, isn't it? In those alleyways and on other private land, local authorities will say, "We don't have responsibility for that." I do think that the Environment Agency would be much more concerned

[Melanie Onn]

about the dumping and fly-tipping of hazardous waste, which has a broader environmental impact and falls into its area of responsibility.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): It speaks to the timeliness of this debate that so many people want to contribute. On that specific point, my local authority of Bromley does very well cleaning up fly-tipping, but it is sometimes a bit hamstrung because the waste is tipped on to housing association land. Residents perceive that to be the council's responsibility, but it cannot do anything about it. Does the hon. Member have any thoughts about that?

Melanie Onn: The responsibilities of housing associations on their land is a similar issue, as they are facing financial challenges of their own. That is why we end up relying so much on communities to come together and do the clean-up. There needs to be a much more holistic solution, but we cannot always rely on communities to step in to do something that has such a fundamental impact on them and the way people live their lives. I am sure that housing associations have an opportunity to work more closely with local authorities to try to come up with an improved solution.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): The hon. Member—my Member of Parliament—is being very generous in giving way. Her comment about the community is very relevant. To give one example, there was an action day in Immingham only two or three weeks ago, which involved not only local authority councillors but, in our case, Lincolnshire Housing Partnership. The important thing I want to stress is that the funding was made available by Phillips 66, so does she agree that the private sector can make a contribution by supporting community groups?

Melanie Onn: I am very grateful for my constituent's contribution. It is an excellent one, as always. He makes a very valid point; Phillips 66 is a great contributor to community activities across our areas, but I would not like us to rely on that all the time. It is a really welcome contribution and incredibly helpful. We are very grateful and community groups will be very grateful for any funding that they can get, but the fact that we have to rely on it so much speaks to our need to get a grip on this issue.

The hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) will know that recently we had a big fly-tipping issue in Weelsby woods. That is just around the corner from where he lives, so he will know it very well. We saw an unauthorised encampment there, with a huge amount of waste left behind. There was no concern for the fact that it is one of our valued green spaces that families regularly attend. The images of what was left behind shocked local residents. What should have been valued green space was turned into a disgusting dumping ground. That demonstrated something important about our local communities and how they pull together, because when the council sent teams to clear the site, volunteers also stepped up to help. It was an encampment for only three or four days, but there were several tonnes of waste from lots of tree work that had been undertaken; all the waste from that had been dumped in the park. Although that incident highlights the scale of the challenge,

it also highlighted the strength of community spirit across Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes, and Brigg and Immingham.

Before discussing policy solutions, I want to place on the record my thanks to the many local campaigners, volunteers, community interest companies like Empower and council staff who devote countless hours to improving our environment. I am referring to people like Zac from PickWalks, whose efforts have inspired countless residents, including lots of children, to take greater pride in their local area; and Frank Sparkes, who has become well known locally for his tireless work cleaning up the North Wall. He also taught me how to tie a fisherman's net at the weekend, so thank you very much, Frank. I am not sure I can remember that or repeat it, but he was excellent.

I am referring to people like Jim Elliott, who has become known as the canoe river cleaner for spending his time removing rubbish from our waterways by canoe. I joined Jim on the water and quickly discovered that clearing litter while in a canoe requires considerably more skill and balance than I possess. Jim made it look effortless, but I think he spent just as much time trying to keep the boat upright as he did collecting the rubbish. I am referring also to our local Wombles litter-picking group, which quietly and consistently makes a difference every week in our local area, and to members of our local Labour group, who have been working alongside these residents and volunteers, have cleared 11 rubbish-filled alleyways across the constituency and continue to organise clean-up operations throughout the area. That is tough work; it is not just turning up for a photo opportunity. They are grafting to clear the alleyways, and their efforts demonstrate something important—people care deeply about the area in which they live. The challenge for us as policymakers is ensuring that those residents are supported, rather than being forced to fight the same battles over and over again—the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Swards) made earlier.

That is why I welcome the action already taken by the Labour Government. For too long, fly-tipping has been treated as a low-level nuisance rather than the serious offence that it is. This Government's new approach rightly recognises that waste criminals should face meaningful consequences. I particularly welcome proposals for clean-up squads. Under those plans, local authorities will be able to issue conditional cautions requiring offenders to undertake community payback—unpaid work cleaning streets, parks and public spaces, including the areas where they have dumped. That sends an important message about accountability. I welcome the plans that will allow councils to recover money directly from offenders to fund clean-up operations and ensure that taxpayers are not left carrying the cost, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley also mentioned in his intervention.

Councils already have the power to seize vehicles involved in fly-tipping, but Ministers are encouraging local authorities to go further and use the power that they have to crush vehicles used in these offences, increase public awareness of enforcement action and make better use of technology such as CCTV, drones and automatic number plate recognition. Those are practical tools that can help to identify offenders and improve conviction rates. I welcome the fact that repeat fly-tippers now face

the prospect of penalty points on their driving licence, with the possibility of disqualification for those who repeatedly offend. For some offenders the threat of losing their licence may prove a far more effective deterrent than a fine alone.

Those important reforms deserve recognition, but we can still go further. First, we need much stronger public awareness about waste carrier licences. Many residents unknowingly and unwittingly hand over waste to individuals who are advertising cheap disposal services online or through cold calling. They assume that the waste will be disposed of legally; instead, it often ends up dumped in alleyways, fields and green spaces. Too many people simply do not know that they have a responsibility to check that waste carriers are properly licenced. Public education must become a central part of our strategy.

Secondly, we need to address the cost and availability of bulky waste collection. If we want people to dispose of waste responsibly, the legal route must be straightforward, affordable and accessible. I would like consideration to be given to a more universal approach across local authorities so that residents can dispose of bulky household items without facing excessive costs or barriers. There could be joint bulky waste disposals between residents as well.

Thirdly, there is a role for landlords. In areas with a high turnover of private rented accommodation, waste accumulation often becomes a recurring problem during tenancy changes. Landlords should work much more closely with local authorities to ensure that proper waste disposal arrangements are in place and to prevent alleyways and communal areas from becoming dumping grounds. It will work in their favour too; it is much easier to rent a property in an area that looks like it is being cared for.

Finally, we need to look carefully at the enforcement processes. Local authorities frequently tell us that gathering evidence, issuing penalties and pursuing court action can be lengthy, expensive and resource intensive. If we want councils to make greater use of enforcement powers, we must ensure that those powers can be exercised efficiently and effectively. Reducing the cost, complexity and evidential burden associated with prosecutions would help authorities to take action more quickly and consistently.

Earlier we touched on the “not on our land” approach from local authorities. If local authorities are not in a position to keep an area clean, what are they for? They are there for local people and to take care of our local areas. If local authorities support devolution and want power to be in the hands of those who know their areas better, then they should also be concerned about those areas and not be so quick to say, “There is nothing that we can do about that.”

I do not know if colleagues have found the same but in my local area, when fly-tipping is on private land, the local authority has often advised local councillors to utilise their ward funding to come up with a solution. In some cases, people are turning to private companies, as my constituency neighbour the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham said. That is not what ward funding is intended for. It could all get sucked into tidying that up when it should be used for much more productive, proactive and positive actions.

As for the cost benefit, we could have economies of scale. If local authorities, housing associations and other public bodies that have an interest in keeping our

areas clean, tidy and safe came together, it would prove a much more effective use of public money. It does not matter whether it is ward funding, local authority money or housing association money; it is all public money, so let us use it as effectively and efficiently as we can.

I will conclude to allow the many colleagues who are interested to contribute to this debate. Fly-tipping is often seen as a hyper-localised issue, but its consequences are national. It affects how people feel about their communities; it affects mental wellbeing, health and environmental health; it affects perceptions of safety and security; it affects tourism, investment and neighbourhood confidence; and most importantly, it affects whether people believe that their community is valued. The people of Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes have a right to expect to live in neighbourhoods that they can be proud of.

The volunteers, campaigners, CICs and council staff who I have mentioned are already doing extraordinary work. The Government have taken welcome and significant steps to strengthen enforcement and hold offenders to account, but by improving awareness, strengthening disposal options and supporting councils in tackling the wider causes of waste crime we can go further still. I look forward to working with the Government to ensure that communities across the country are cleaner, safer and places that people are proud to call home.

Several hon. Members rose—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that if they want to participate in the debate, they should bob at the end of every speech. I will call the Front-Bench spokespeople at 10.30 am. Doing the simple arithmetic, that means there will be a time limit of four minutes on speeches.

9.50 am

Hannah Spencer (Gorton and Denton) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) on securing the debate.

In Manchester alone last year, there were around 15,000 reports of fly-tipping. That is more than 40 incidents every single day. In my constituency the situation is particularly bad. In Levenshulme, there was one fly-tipping complaint for every four households. In Longsight, there were more than 1,000 incidents last year, the highest in Manchester, with Levenshulme close behind on 952. Behind every single one of these reports is a person who cares about where they live and who deserves so much better than having to live with illegally dumped waste in their backyards. The chances are that it is even worse than the numbers show. I regularly speak to constituents who, understandably, have lost all faith in reporting at all, because, too often, it does not lead to any action and the waste remains in our alleyways, in our kids' parks and on our street corners.

This is not about blaming communities. It is about ensuring that people have clean, safe streets wherever they live, regardless of their postcode. Tackling fly-tipping means proper enforcement against rogue waste operators and fraudulent businesses, but it also means giving local authorities the money that they need to actually deal with it, and that is where things just do not add up. In Greater Manchester, we have seen huge development in

[Hannah Spencer]

recent years, with property and construction firms making huge profits. Yet very little of that wealth is being returned to the communities that made it possible. I see clean streets around glossy new developments, while surrounding areas and neighbourhoods are left littered with waste.

A YouGov and Oxfam survey found that 78% of people support a 2% wealth tax on net assets over £10 million. If we are serious about fairness and cleaning up our communities, properly taxing extreme wealth is part of our solution. That is how we give councils the tools and the money they need to fix problems like fly-tipping. Today, I ask the Minister whether they will discuss with the Chancellor how to ensure that people who are getting super-rich from property development contribute fairly to the communities they profit from to fund the clean-up of issues like fly-tipping.

9.52 am

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) for bringing forward this important debate.

Fly-tipping is not only damaging to our environment—it makes our communities worse places to live. No one wants to walk past those huge piles of rubbish. I represent Morecambe and Lunesdale, which hosts some of the most beautiful spots in the country. I have a national landscape, a national park, the beautiful Lune valley and of course Heysham and Morecambe, which look out across the beautiful Morecambe bay. Morecambe's town motto is "Beauty surrounds, health abounds" and I would like to preserve that beauty for my constituents.

Rural constituents contact me about this issue, but as the debate is focused on residential areas, I will limit myself to talking about problems raised with me in towns like Morecambe, Heysham and Carnforth. I put on the record my thanks to the local Wombles groups and the litter-pickers, who go out every week in all conditions to help tidy up our community. Residents in Morecambe regularly tell me about their frustration at rubbish left in alleyways and ginnels. They worry about letting their kids go out to play because of broken glass. They are worried about rats—not to mention the expense. Millions of pounds are spent in England every year just to clean up waste.

I asked my constituents what more could be done to tackle fly-tipping and an overwhelming number of people cited the cost of properly disposing of rubbish as a driver for fly-tipping. Private waste companies and council removal services are expensive and people without a car just do not have any other option, so if money is tight, there is a strong temptation to do the wrong thing and avoid disposal fees. Although I might get very grumpy at the outcome, we have to take an approach of what works and what might prevent the problem. Suggestions from my constituents included regular neighbourhood skip days, where people could use council skips, three bulky item pick-ups per year, keeping the restrictions on van trips to the tip but removing the need to book so that people can go on spec, community waste points and incentive schemes. I am really interested in the Minister's comments on prevention.

Prevention will not fix the problem entirely; we need enforcement. I am really pleased to see the Government publish the waste crime action plan, which takes a zero-tolerance approach. The Environment Agency receiving an extra £45 million over the next three years is important to boost enforcement. I really like that fly-tippers will face being ordered to clean up their mess and will be required to repay the cost of their illegally dumped waste. That is really important. They could also face penalty points on their licences and, if they are a serious repeat offender, even lose their licences.

Constituents talk to me about cameras. I know that some councils have been using drones as well, and we have to look at all the ways that we can tackle this issue. Lancaster city council covers the Lancashire part of my constituency, and it found that across the whole of their district, fly-tipping is prevalent in five wards. Those are the five most deprived wards, so people who already face a lot of challenges also have to deal with their neighbourhood looking like crap. It is just not fair. What surprised me was that the city council said that some people told them that they did not know that fly-tipping was illegal—they did not know that it was a criminal offence. I am slightly suspicious of that.

To close, the waste crime action plan allows for tougher enforcement, which is very welcome, and for more resources for that. We also have to make sure it is easier for people to do the right thing in the first place, encourage a sense of pride in people's local communities and ensure that people take personal responsibility for their actions.

9.56 am

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) for not just securing this debate, but articulating each and every point that impacts the agenda of fly-tipping. It is prevalent not just in my constituency, but across the whole city of Birmingham, and, as has been said, across the whole country. The hon. Member said that repetition makes any argument more persuasive, but she has touched on all the key points that I was going to speak about.

Fly-tipping is an eyesore. It damages the appearance of streets, parks and green spaces. It attracts vermin, impacts on health and obstructs pavements. Children and vulnerable adults are all impacted. Within certain parts of my constituency of Birmingham Perry Barr specifically, there is an ageing community. While they take pride in their neighbourhood, unfortunately the fact that they are old and vulnerable means that they cannot deal with the issues like fit and able people can.

The ageing community owns properties that have private land at the rear, and unfortunately that has been abused. Not by them—they have been very proud of their back spaces—but by rogue waste collectors who have identified that particular location and regularly fly-tip there. Unfortunately, the local council cannot deal with it; they simply say that it is private land and that they are not able to touch the dumped rubbish. Local councillors have not been receiving any community chest award money to spend, so the rubbish is simply piling up, causing immense issues for vulnerable people. It really comes down to finances. It is not an issue in silo, but needs to be dealt with across all departments within the local council.

We often hear that CCTV or drones may assist, but all that comes with costs that cannot be met unless councils are resourced. Unfortunately, we had bankruptcy in Birmingham. We are out of that bankruptcy at present, but that does not mean that we have sufficient resources to be able to deal with the types of fly-tipping that we witness almost daily. Those regular hotspots are real eyesores.

I reflect back on when I was growing up in a little town called Aston. As a kid, I used to relish the thought of playing snowballs with my siblings in the morning during winter. By the time we got up, the whole street was clean because every neighbour had got out in the morning and cleaned their front patch. The only place we could play snowballs was in the local park. That is the level of pride that we want to re-instil within our communities. It can be achieved only if we have a council that is able to effectively resource and tackle the fly-tipping.

There needs to be a national campaign. I do not think this is a local issue for a local campaign. Education needs to be at the forefront: young children need to be taught at school and young people need to be taken out for regular sessions to clean streets and take pride in the local community. We also need methods to report people who offend. We need to embolden our communities. A lot of people out there take pride and want to report such problems, but fear that if they do so, they will be identified and there may be repercussions. It comes down to resources.

10 am

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. Fly-tipping in residential and rural areas is a blight across the communities that I represent, whether it is the most rural communities, such as Belsay and Kirkley Hall, or areas such as Throckley, Newburn and Walbottle on the more urban side of my seat. I pay particular tribute to community organisations, such as the Ponteland Anti-Litter Squad and the Hexham Wombles, that take action to clear up local litter and against fly-tipping, most of which do excellent jobs. There are other groups in the 200 towns and villages throughout my constituency, but I would detain everyone for quite a long time if I named them all.

I welcome the waste crime action plan. It sets an excellent foundation for taking action to tackle fly-tipping, which blights communities across the span of my constituency. However, I am slightly concerned that on the more rural side of my seat, there is a growing problem of individual areas becoming magnets for mega fly-tipping. While those areas are not hyper-residential, like the areas that many of my wise and well-informed colleagues have spoken about, mega fly-tipping is nevertheless a blight on the communities that live around them, use those green spaces, and enjoy the countryside and their surroundings.

I have been really heartened to see statistics coming out of Northumberland and Newcastle that show the hard work of council workers in addressing fly-tipping. Unfortunately, I think there is a structural issue within Northumberland in particular, where the Conservative administration neglects the west of the county. It directs resources away from the area I represent to areas that it prefers. There is a slight sense, certainly in my constituency,

that we are getting short-changed—that the Conservatives are putting up our council tax for very little in return in the west of the county.

I want to touch briefly on the Walbottle Road tip in Newburn, which is a major driver of fly-tipping and of unease and unrest over fly-tipping in my constituency, simply because it is impossible to turn into. It has been a running sore for residents over many years, including when my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) represented this part of Newcastle. I urge the Minister to think about how she can encourage councils to make their tips more accessible to address those concerns. One of the priorities for the new Reform councillors in Throckley, Walbottle and Newburn is to make sure that residents are able to access that tip and that the Mill Vale estate no longer has to deal with either the constant fumes and sheer noise from traffic idling just outside it or the fly-tipping we are seeing around it.

10.3 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) for setting the scene incredibly well. I welcome the Minister, who we are very fortunate to have. She is committed to the very things that we are asking for. I wish her well as she pursues these matters. We are not talking about a minor inconvenience or a bit of harmless litter; we are talking about deliberate, criminal environmental vandalism that directly devalues people's homes, attracts vermin to their doorsteps and robs law-abiding citizens of their hard-earned money.

I am going to give a Northern Ireland perspective, which will not be a big surprise to anybody, but it is important that we put on record where we are. The Northern Ireland environmental statistics report confirms that public anger has reached a boiling point. A staggering 73% of citizens are deeply concerned about our environment. For the first time, air and water pollution has been officially overtaken as the single greatest environmental anxiety for households in Northern Ireland by illegal dumping and littering, which was chosen by some 34% of respondents.

When I am at home, I live in Greyabbey. The main town is Newtownards, where my office is. I drive up and down that road two to three times a day—maybe more. People litter their KFCs, their McDonald's, their sandwiches and their tins. They go out the window and are usually hidden in the grass until the grass is cut. When the grass is cut, guess what? The litter that has been lying there for maybe six months suddenly becomes accessible. The National Trust in Mount Stewart is out, as is the council, trying to do something.

We have a beautiful nation. Recent figures show that almost 340 major illegal dumping sites were actively investigated in Northern Ireland in the past year alone. There is an epidemic. My constituency crosses two council areas: Ards and North Down, but I also partially represent Newry, Mourne and Down. They suffer some of the worst littering. They have some 31 major investigated illegal waste sites.

That is not counting the mattresses that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes referred to. People do not take their mattress down to the dump; they throw it into the laybys of the Ards peninsula.

[Jim Shannon]

They do not count the black bins full of rotting household waste, abandoned in the scenic coastal paths of Bangor or the rural lanes of the Ards peninsula. Every single week, local councils are forced to divert immense resources just to clean up after these waste cowboys. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency has spent some half a million pounds clearing up illegal sites just in the past period.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): I feel honoured to intervene on the hon. Gentleman; it is often the other way around. Fly-tipping is a big issue in my constituency, as it is in his. There is frequent fly-tipping around the cemetery in Carmunnock, for example. Does he agree that part of the problem with tackling this is a lack of proper funding for local government? In Glasgow, for example, the Scottish Government have not properly funded Glasgow city council. Does he agree that tackling this requires resourcing for local government?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do. It is an absolute disgrace that, across Northern Ireland, we see fewer than six successful illegal dumping prosecutions per year. Criminal fly-tippers are treating minor fixed penalties as nothing more than a business expense. That must change. We need to back our local authorities in Ards and North Down with the statutory teeth that they need. If a person is caught destroying a residential neighbourhood with illegal waste, the authorities should have the immediate power to crush their vehicle and publicly name and shame them.

Our communities deserve clean, safe and dignified places to raise their families. It is time to stop mollycoddling these criminals, clean up our streets, and restore pride to residential areas in the whole of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I support the comments from the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes, and look forward to the Minister's response and the other contributions.

10.7 am

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) for securing the debate and for her excellent speech outlining all the issues our residents face with fly-tipping. Nothing makes me more fed up and deflated than walking round the community where I raise my kids and seeing litter and piles of rubbish everywhere.

Fly-tipping is a blight on my city. Portsmouth is a beautiful place, yet a few lazy and selfish criminals can cause enormous damage and make my city look a mess. I have been contacted by countless residents about illegal waste dumping across my constituency. Commercial waste has been dumped behind businesses in North End, attracting rats and harming legitimate local shops and the work they do to serve the community.

This is not just a low-level or cosmetic issue; it is serious because fly-tipping puts my constituents at risk. These piles of rubbish create environmental hazards, increase fire risks and endanger public health. Unfortunately, the problem has been made worse by the failure of Liberal Democrat-run Portsmouth city council to act effectively and use all the levers available to it, be that

swifter collections, the use of CCTV or drones, number plate recognition or the crushing of vehicles. They must take some ownership and some accountability, instead of sloping their shoulders and saying it is "not on our land".

I will give some examples. Outside the charity bins near Cosham high street, piles of rubbish bags and mattresses regularly accumulate. The council puts up notices saying it is aware of the problem and will remove the waste as soon as possible, yet fines are rarely enforced and offenders rarely identified. It is little surprise that people continue to use this site as their own personal tip, because there are no consequences.

I have also dealt with cases where mattresses have been dumped beside the motorway, where responsibility is shared between National Highways and the council. Even when number plates have been captured on camera, enforcement action has not followed. This is not good enough. Near my office in Copnor, forecourts are regularly used as dumping grounds. The council often acts only after repeated reports, even when the waste presents a real fire hazard. One constituent, Tracey, outlined to me her frustrations:

"I often wonder why I pay my council tax when all I walk past is rubbish, fly tipping and dirty toiletries on my dog walks."

That is not what anyone wants to see when they leave their home. Every pile of rubbish sends a message that nobody cares and leaves residents feeling angry, frustrated and disheartened.

I join my hon. Friends in thanking those volunteers and groups who help to clear up our streets: the litter pickers, the shoreline cleaners and the generally brilliant, hard-working people across my city. I hope that Portsmouth city council listens to this debate and understands the impact that failing to tackle fly-tipping is having on ordinary residents. It is time to raise the game. The council must remove waste more quickly so that sites do not attract further dumping, and it must properly investigate and penalise offenders. It must also look to support initiatives that enable people to dump their larger items swiftly and cheaply.

I am proud to be part of a Labour Government who have launched the toughest ever crackdown on waste crime, and I am pleased to see that Labour's waste crime action plan will require fly-tippers to join clean-up squads on the streets they have trashed, because they should take responsibility. The Government will also look to put penalty points on driving licences, and repeat offenders could lose their vehicles. That sends a clear message to the people doing this: "You mess up our streets and you will clean up our streets. There are consequences for your time and your money." It is not just about individuals. We are targeting the organised criminal gangs behind illegal waste sites through £45 million of new investment for the Environment Agency.

This job of cleaning up and taking pride in our streets has started, but there is much more to be done. I am proud that this Government are taking it seriously and are leading by example and using every available power to crack down on waste crime. I hope that Portsmouth city council takes notes and gives this daily nuisance the attention it deserves, so that residents can once again value and have pride in their neighbourhoods.

10.10 am

Juliet Campbell (Broxtowe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) for securing this important debate on an issue that affects almost everybody in this room.

The waste crime action plan put forward by the Government contains several promising measures to tackle the persistent issue of fly-tipping in our communities. I welcome the additional £45 million allocated to the Environment Agency for waste crime enforcement, which will go a long way to strengthening investigations and addressing the problem at source. However, the measures proposed could go further, because residents like mine in Broxtowe have reported that rubbish is not only being left in the alleyway behind their property but being thrown over their fence and left in their garden. After reporting the incident, they discovered that as the landowner, they were responsible for clearing the waste themselves, as well as the associated costs. I am sure we would all agree that that just cannot be right. Victims of fly-tipping should not be left to bear the cost of the crime committed against them, yet this widespread injustice continues across the country.

The legal framework already allows for significant penalties, including unlimited fines, vehicle seizures and even custodial sentences. However, these powers are too rarely enforced. In fact, despite more than 1.26 million recorded incidents, enforcement action remains astoundingly low. According to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, less than 0.2% of perpetrators have enforcement action taken against them. My residents in Stapleford who live in an area with a communal garden space have repeatedly raised concerns about waste being dumped in that area, and the council continues to clear it. Time and again, the cycle persists, because those responsible are not being held to account.

The core issue is that without resources to properly investigate, enforcement action cannot be taken, and therefore we will never tackle the root cause of fly-tipping. I urge the Minister to consider further resources for local authorities that will allow them to form fly-tipping enforcement teams that could sufficiently investigate instances of fly-tipping so that strong enforcement action can be taken. That would not just be to clear the waste, but to pursue offenders and recover the costs. I hope that the Minister will also consider stronger measures to ensure that offenders are held to account in instances where they are identified, so that they not only face fines but are required to cover the full cost of clearance and disposal, therefore removing the burden from victims.

10.13 am

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. We have heard some meaningful contributions so far, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) for giving us the opportunity to praise our communities for the extremely hard work they are putting into our areas, but also to call out the situation that has got us here.

In my constituency of North West Leicestershire, I am proud to have some incredibly dedicated litter picking groups. Their commitment to keeping our towns and surrounding areas clean is amazing, but it should

not be necessary. I want to thank a number of them today, including the locally known Belton Sam, Coalville CAN for its recent litter pick of Coalville, and the regular litter pickers, including those in Hugglescote and Market Street in Ashby-de-la-Zouch. There are so many more who help from a much wider area and who travel to litter pick across Leicestershire, including my good friends Gibbo and Bob. They tell me that they are reporting an increasing number of fly-tips and have seen an increase in the amount of litter dropped in their local communities.

For this speech, I reached out to Carly Hosker, a constituent and member of Castle Donington Litter Wombles. Carly said:

“Fly-tipping affects everyone who lives nearby. It’s an eyesore, can attract even more rubbish, is a danger to wildlife and often leaves local people feeling ignored and very frustrated when nothing gets done about it. For me, it’s disheartening to see areas that should be enjoyed by residents, walkers, cyclists and families covered in waste.”

I have been a regular litter picker over the years and have to agree with Carly’s words. As our constituents’ representatives, it is now our job to back those words with action. Does the Minister agree that those responsible for these issues should be able to deal with those who commit acts of fly-tipping, rather than dealing with the communities forced to clean up after them?

I welcome the measures already announced in the waste crime action plan, because the scale of this issue is significant. Across the east midlands alone, there were around 96,000 fly-tipping incidents in a single year. My own council, North West Leicestershire, has dealt with about 700, or two every single day. Nationally, the picture is worsening, with over 1.2 million incidents recorded across England in 2024-25—a 9% increase in just one year.

Those figures do not even include the waste dumped on private land, with landowners often shouldering the costs themselves. I worked for a housing association for many years, and fly-tipping was a huge financial burden on it. There is also the frustration about the highway, where there is often confusion about who is responsible: is it the district, the county or National Highways? We have hotspots all over North West Leicestershire, including the A42 and the A453, to name just two. They are gateways into my constituency, but they are too dangerous for volunteers, and we have to question why it should be left to volunteers to clean them up.

There is often no clear approach led by authorities. Could the Minister please outline the cross-authority work that has been done so that the gateways to our communities—our highways—are not forgotten as “somebody else’s responsibility”. In this House, we owe it to Carly, Litter Wombles across the country and every community volunteer to match their commitment to action.

10.17 am

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) on securing this important debate.

Scotland is not immune to fly-tipping, which has a significant and often underestimated impact on our communities, affecting not only the physical environment but residents’ mental health and sense of wellbeing.

[Lillian Jones]

In truth, it is a serious criminal act that damages our streets and neighbourhoods and places a growing demand on already overstretched local authority cleansing department budgets.

There have been incidents where rogue traders have lured consumers with cheap cash-only rates to clear household waste, only to illegally dump it on our roadsides, countryside and lay-bys to avoid paying commercial fees. I have seen at first hand the impact of fly-tipping in my hometown and across my constituency: furniture, mattresses and even drug paraphernalia dumped on public footpaths and street corners and even at children's play parks. Residents complain of waste piling up in the streets, bringing their area down. They cannot understand why the local authority fails to keep on top of this scourge on our communities.

I know that local councils are trying, but they are dealing with the financial hand they have been dealt amid some of the severest cuts to local government since devolution. Budgets have been cut in real terms year after year, and as a result Scottish councils are merely managing decline across our communities, with enforcement staff being stretched ever thinner.

Put plainly, cuts to councils are cuts to our communities. Accumulated waste can make a neighbourhood feel neglected and unsafe, contributing to stress, anxiety and a decline in community pride. When public spaces are repeatedly polluted, it can foster feelings of frustration and helplessness among residents, particularly if the issue is persistent and slow to be addressed.

To take East Ayrshire council, the figures speak for themselves: between 2019-20 and 2021-22, the council recorded over 2,500 fly-tipping incidents, ranking 13th out of 32 Scottish councils. More recently, the 2024-25 data shows that over 4,500 incidents were reported in the authority, which demonstrates that there is a huge issue—and it is getting worse.

It does not help when access to the local tip is by appointment only. That is a cost-cutting measure, but when legal disposal becomes harder, the risk is that illegal disposal increases. Due to very low prosecution and penalty rates, 50% of Scottish local authorities believe that enforcement is not effective, and there is no consistency across agencies. In Scotland since 2019, over 280,000 incidents have been reported, with only 3,300 fines issued. That means that only a tiny proportion of offenders face any consequences, proving that the system lacks credible deterrence. That needs to change.

I want to put on record my thanks to all the volunteer litter pickers, who play a vital and uplifting role in strengthening our communities, bringing people together through a shared purpose and pride in their surroundings. Their efforts not only improve the physical appearance of local areas but send a powerful message that people care, inspiring others to take responsibility and to respect public spaces. Such efforts are commendable, but they should not be necessary. There is no excuse for fly-tipping.

10.20 am

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to see you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) for securing the debate, because fly-tipping affects every community in this country.

Stevenage was the country's first post-war new town, which is great, because our forefathers and mothers planned a great new town, but there are many green spaces and woods between residential developments. I also have four villages in my constituency—Knebworth, Codicote, Datchworth and Aston—and each has similar issues to the town of Stevenage.

Most of us are rightly proud of our communities, but a few people, who are not necessarily from our communities, wreck all that. Many of us go out week in, week out to clean up our streets. We have our Stevenage Wombles; just like Wombles across the country, they do sterling work, and I have joined them in the old town. Stevenage Labour party also has its own action team, which goes out once a month. We do our bit, and we go into the woods and clear them out, but do you know what? It is sometimes an impossible task. You try moving a fridge with just a few volunteers; it is just not possible. We have also found suitcases with things in them that I cannot possibly mention here. All of that is just not acceptable.

People are reporting fly-tipping incidents. Just yesterday, on one of our Stevenage Facebook groups, a diligent citizen spotted an address on a TV licence letter and reported it straightaway. I know that our council will take firm and effective action, but it is dealing with 3,000 reported fly-tipping incidents a year and spending more than £1.6 million.

Some Members have talked about funding. Yes, it is important, and we are fortunate in Stevenage that this Labour Government have increased our funding by 9% in the last year. That is great, but the extra funding needs to be matched with powers, so I am also grateful to the Government for their waste crime action plan. We have heard about some of the measures, which I fully support, including clean-up squads and taking away driving licences.

However, how will the Government monitor these things, because they will vary across the country? What potential measures does the Minister have in mind to go further? My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes set out some interesting ideas today, which we should follow up. It cannot just be for councils to tackle this; we need private landlords to take action, we need to crack down on the gangs and we need to get the police involved. There is a lot more that we need to do.

For now, however, it is right that all of us in this place should place on record our thanks to all those in our communities who will not let their streets and green spaces be blighted by this scourge. I am glad that action has been taken, and I can only call for more.

10.23 am

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) for securing this incredibly important debate.

I pay tribute to the South Park Users Group in Ilford South. Come rain or shine, they dedicate their time to keep our parks and streets clean through regular community litter picks. I also put on record my appreciation for the River Roding Trust, whose members collectively cleaned up 200 bags of rubbish from the River Roding, picking up the slack when Thames Water and the Environment

Agency should have acted. I commend them for their dedication to ensuring that the residents of Ilford South live in a cleaner and safer environment.

Fly-tipping is a scourge that repeatedly comes up in conversations with residents. Recently, I visited a local school where children as young as 10 interrogated me about the fly-tipping that blights our area. The fly-tippers may think that they are invisible and that they can dump their waste and get away with it, but fly-tipping is one of the most visible crimes in our communities. When people see it on their way to work, on the school run or while walking their dog, it drains local pride, chips away at social trust and sends a message that our streets, parks and rivers do not matter.

Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): As a fellow east Londoner, I know that fly-tipping blights our streets and neighbourhoods; it shows a real lack of respect for our communities. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should commend the Government for putting the onus on fly-tippers by making sure that they pay—if they do the waste crime, they do the waste time—and making sure that they are responsible for cleaning up their own mess?

Jas Athwal: I absolutely agree. I have been saying for the last 10 years that that should be done. The Government finally acting is a real positive; we are going in the right direction.

Fly-tipping blights our area, but when the council removes it quickly, people feel it is okay to dump rubbish on our streets because someone will pick it up. We cannot win either way; it becomes a vicious cycle. The more that people see the local area as a dumping ground, the more some feel enabled to fly-tip, meaning that the problem spirals unless it is fully tackled.

I know from working with my local council that decisive steps are being taken to tackle this blight on our communities. For instance, it maintains free bulky waste collection, removing a lame excuse for fly-tipping. It is cheaper to pick up from people's doorsteps in a controlled manner than from the streets once the waste has been dumped. Redbridge council has implemented not only that policy, but the wall of shame, which is an approach that has been adopted by other councils: naming and shaming to expose the waste cowboys who impose their mess on us. That sends a clear message that such behaviour is unacceptable in Ilford South and that those who fly-tip on our streets will be held accountable.

I welcome the decisive actions the Government have already taken to support local authorities battling fly-tipping, from expanding council powers to crushing the vehicles of serial fly-tippers and making offenders clean up the very streets and parks they have ruined. We need to go further to target the very worst offenders. The council needs to be able to set larger maximum fines to generally deter serial fly-tippers and to demonstrate that although fly-tipping may seem inconsequential to them, it is one of the worst forms of antisocial behaviour. With tough enforcement, councils could use extra revenue to fund detection—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. Your time is up. Before calling the Front-Bench spokespeople, I remind hon. Members that although there are often good reasons for being late to a debate, it is a courtesy to both the

Chair and other hon. Members participating in the debate to put in a note explaining those reasons. I call Sarah Dyke.

10.28 am

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) for securing this important debate.

The Government estimate that there were 1.26 million fly-tipping incidents across England last year and that waste crime costs the economy more than £1 billion a year. Such incidents represent an upward trend, with 3,000 incidents reported to Somerset council alone. However, those figures exclude incidents on private land and cases involving large-scale illegal dumping. Moreover, as is always the case, a substantial number of waste crimes are never recorded.

I want to recognise the work being done in Somerset to tackle the problem head-on. Somerset council's Recycle More initiative handles more than 170,000 tonnes of household waste every year. Major infrastructure investment in 2020 upgraded facilities and introduced more frequent collections. Somerset's flexible plastics trial—now concluded—demonstrated clearly how targeted local innovation can reduce fly-tipping in residential areas. That trial is proof of what is possible, yet without sustained national funding to back such local initiatives, progress stalls. The will is there, but the resources are not.

Waste crime has been dubbed the “new narcotics” by the former chair of the Environment Agency. That simply cannot go on. We must recognise it for what it is: a national emergency. We need to hold the perpetrators of these crimes to account. That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling on the Government to clean up illegal waste sites, catch those responsible and finally get a handle on the true extent of this environmental disaster. Organised crime gangs are making millions of pounds through illegal waste activity, without any regard for local communities, public health or the environment.

Earlier this year, a spotlight was thrown on to the issue when an estimated 21,000 tonnes of illegal waste was found at a site near Kidlington in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller). I thank him for his tireless campaigning on the issue, which led to more than 400 lorry-loads of waste being removed from that site alone. There are at least 11 other similar sites identified across England, demonstrating the scale of these organised crime networks.

We are not just talking about a nuisance; this is waste crime on an industrial level. Unfortunately, it is clear that the Environment Agency is not currently equipped to tackle it. Enforcement responsibilities are dispersed across multiple agencies, with no single body explicitly accountable for both prosecution and clearing up waste crime. Local authorities and the Environment Agency have powers, but no duties to enforce, which weakens their overall enforcement effectiveness.

The Minister for Nature made that point well in a debate on the Kidlington site earlier this year, highlighting the lack of a coherent body to which to report waste crime. If citizens are not clear about where to report, they are likely to do nothing. The Environment Agency is responsible for large-scale incidents or where waste contains hazardous materials. Smaller incidents are handled

[Sarah Dyke]

by local authorities, unless it is on private land, of course, where councils handle prosecution but are not responsible for clearing up the mess. The responsibility is on members of the public to be aware of complicated regulations and then report to the correct body. Given the clear under-reporting of crime, that is simply not happening effectively.

That is why the Liberal Democrats have called for a single national hotline for waste crime, to improve reporting, mapping and detection, because those responsible must be caught. Only 31% of incidents are currently investigated and more than half of those result in no further action, with only 13 custodial sentences handed down in England in 2024-25. As the National Rural Crime Network's report into waste crime makes clear, the legal framework is not the problem. Unlimited fines can be levied, vehicles can be seized and prison sentences of up to five years can be handed out, but those powers are rarely used. In addition, there is an enforcement postcode lottery depending on where the offence occurs.

A recent House of Lords Environment and Climate Change Committee inquiry concluded that serious organised waste crime is significantly under-prioritised, despite its environmental, economic and social impacts. It was therefore disappointing that the Government rejected the Committee's recommendation for an independent review into the entire system of waste crime. The Liberal Democrats call once again on the Minister to reverse that decision, come forward with a review and set out a Government strategy to tackle illegal dumping, including measurable metrics and targets. The Environment Agency and the Joint Unit for Waste Crime must also be adequately resourced to tackle this crime.

It is impossible to talk about enforcement without also addressing the conditions that allow this criminal market to thrive in the first place. We must review the current household waste recycling system that in part creates a market for criminal gangs to exploit. Further, decades of local authority budget cuts have eaten away at local services, with many now placing charges on the use of household waste recycling centres—an issue some residents in my constituency now face. Dorset council's recent decision to charge Somerset residents an £8.50 fee to use the Dorset council household recycling centre in Sherborne has forced residents in Milborne Port, Henstridge, Charlton Horethorne, Corton Denham, Templecombe and surrounding areas to make a round trip of up to 28-miles to access a free household waste recycling facility in Somerset.

In addition to increasing the environmental impact of residents' waste disposal, the new charge risks pushing people to consider illegal methods of waste disposal. Criminal gangs know that, and they are ready to exploit that temptation. I brought a petition to Parliament on this matter earlier this year that had garnered significant local support. The solution is clear: fix the recycling system, or accept that we are handing criminal gangs a business opportunity. The choice is really that simple.

The waste industry estimates that 35% of waste crime is committed by organised criminal groups, and there is reason to believe that that figure is increasing. The national rural crime unit took a report on waste crime and its links to wider rural crime to DEFRA, but it has

not been published, despite repeated requests. I ask once again: will the Minister publish the report and show that the Government are committed to tackling organised crime gangs operating in the countryside?

As with a lot of rural crime, local police forces can struggle to deal with waste crime effectively due to its organised nature and the cross-border tactics deployed by criminals; yet it falls short of the National Crime Agency's responsibility, giving criminal gangs free rein to exploit this gap. The Liberal Democrats are calling for the National Crime Agency to take over investigations into illegal dumps in the most serious cases and to improve co-ordination with local police forces. The new national police service, which was announced in the King's Speech, will assume responsibility for serious organised crime operations, but we wait to see how organised waste crime fits within that.

I have raised my concerns about the Government's lack of understanding about the specific needs of rural communities on many occasions, yet the policing White Paper from January made hardly any reference to rural crime. In fact, only 619 police officers and staff were assigned to dedicated rural crime teams across 37 police forces in England and Wales in 2024, representing a paltry 0.4% of the workforce.

In Somerset, there are only two—sometimes a couple more—dedicated rural crime officers covering more than 1,300 square miles; rural communities know all too well what that means in practice when crime strikes. A farmer in Long Sutton told me they were recently hit by their second break-in within 12 months; thousands of pounds of equipment was stolen but, unsurprisingly, they received little meaningful police action. That is not an isolated failure; it is what under-resourcing looks like on the ground. Proper reforms are urgently required to increase both capability and capacity. The Liberal Democrats are calling for a "countryside copper" guarantee for properly resourced dedicated rural crime teams or specialists to be embedded in every police force. I hope the Government will consider taking those proposals forward.

Criminal gangs are running sophisticated multi-cross-border operations, and the only response available is from fragmented agencies with under-resourced enforcement and powers that are almost never used. The problem is not the law, as there is already the option to levy unlimited fines and five-year sentences; they simply are not being applied. More penalties on the statute book will change nothing, if no one is resourced to enforce them. What we need is co-ordination, accountability and the political will to treat waste crime as what it is—organised crime. I urge the Minister to show that this Government are finally ready to do that.

10.38 am

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) for bringing us this important debate. We have heard many contributions about the impact on local pride, sense of belonging and importantly mental health, but it was uplifting that pretty much all Members spoke about the great work that volunteers do to tackle litter and fly-tipping in their area. It seems that everyone has some Wombles in their area—I am not 100% sure of the collective noun for Wombles, but

I think it might follow the wombat and be a wisdom of Wombles. I am very pleased to say that in Epping Forest we have the Loughton town council Wombles.

Jim Shannon: They are not Wombles, but the Strangford Lough and Newtownards Wildfowlers clear the foreshore at Strangford Lough every Sunday—they did it this Sunday past. Their work as volunteers is very much admired.

Dr Hudson: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. We have heard great contributions from across the House today.

Let me turn to some of the figures, which speak for themselves. Councils in England dealt with 1.26 million incidents of fly-tipping in 2024-25. That was a 9% increase on the previous year, and both the fifth successive annual increase and among the highest figure on record. The majority of those incidents, 62%, involved household waste. The most common sources were not lorry loads from organised criminals, although that is an issue I will come to, but car boots and small vans—everyday domestic dumps.

Across the country, our constituents have sadly become all too familiar with the sight of dumped bin bags, mattresses and white goods including fridges, freezers, washing machines and dishwashers. The effects are serious. As well as the obvious awful environmental consequences and the effects on nature and wildlife, fly-tipping is a public health problem, as dumped waste attracts vermin, creates fire risk and can contaminate soil and local watercourses. The harm is not only physical. Antisocial behaviour such as fly-tipping causes real anxiety and distress to residents who live with it.

Sadly, my constituents in Epping Forest are not immune to the blight of fly-tipping and its harmful impacts, with many serious cases across our area caused by shameless criminals who should face the full extent of the law. Fly-tipping threatens the precious wildlife and biodiversity that our forest of Epping Forest is so privileged to enjoy. As a positive counter to that situation, I have been privileged to meet unsung heroes, litter-picking groups right across Epping Forest, including Waltham Abbey community group and Theydon Bois parish council, who selflessly give up their time to clean up our communities, as I have seen at first hand on joining their litter picks.

However, the sight of copious numbers of discarded large nitrous oxide canisters, used illegally for drug misuse and then chucked on the side of roads for those who do the right thing to clear up, is incredibly concerning. As I have raised in the House many times—I raised it with the Minister just last week—any activity to clear up waste needs to address that issue as a priority for urban, rural and semi-rural communities alike. Will the Minister outline the steps that the Government are taking to tackle the illegal use of nitrous oxide and the subsequent discarding of dangerous canisters, damaging our environment?

The previous Conservative Government understood the fly-tipping problem and the need for further action. We increased the upper limit for fixed penalty notices for fly-tipping from £400 to £1,000 and established the Joint Unit for Waste Crime, a multi-agency taskforce bringing together key stakeholders, including the Environment Agency, the police, the National Crime

Agency, the British Transport Police, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the National Fire Chiefs Council and the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management. Through intelligence sharing and resource prioritisation, it has supported hundreds of operations contributing to arrests. I am pleased that the current Government are continuing with that measure.

We Conservatives also introduced several projects across England that sought to crack down on fly-tipping in residential areas, including portable CCTV cameras to patrol and capture footage across Northumberland, anti-climb fencing to protect neighbourhood areas in Hyndburn and larger recycling bins in better locations in Mansfield to ensure that the public have access to the correct disposal facilities. Those projects had demonstrable positive effects.

In Durham, which received funding from the last Government, the county council introduced educational bin stickers and permanent signage and installed CCTV on existing lighting columns. As a result, fly-tipping was cut by more than 60%. In Hyndburn, installing fencing and gates to prevent access to fly-tipping hotspots saw fly-tipping decrease by 100% in those areas in the following three months. The council saved approximately £4,000 in waste removal and clean-up costs over that period.

In addition, the Conservative Government passed the landmark Environment Act 2021, which laid the foundation for electronic waste tracking, a measure the current Government are now implementing. I had the opportunity to discuss that with the Minister just last week as we passed a necessary piece of secondary legislation on that subject.

The Minister will be aware that His Majesty's official Opposition tabled amendments during the passage of the Crime and Policing Act 2026 that would have added points to driving licences for fly-tipping. That was a Conservative manifesto commitment and it is most welcome that the Government have finally adopted that policy.

On the subject of manifestos, the Labour manifesto included this commitment:

"Fly-tippers and vandals will...be forced to clean up the mess they have created."

I am sure that the Minister will have had the same conversations as I have had with farmers and landowners about the issue of fly-tipping on private property: that is not the responsibility of the local authority, whereas on public land it tends to be. We have heard about that from across the House today.

When the fly-tipping is on private property, the landowner in many cases is left to pay sometimes thousands of pounds to clean up someone else's mess. To make the situation worse, the landowner may sometimes face landfill tax liabilities despite being the victim, not the perpetrator. Meanwhile, offenders frequently face little or no meaningful action. Once again, the figures speak for themselves: nine in 10 members of the Country Land and Business Association report being targeted within the past year, with over three quarters suffering a significant financial impact. Although stronger enforcement and prevention measures will help to reduce incidents happening, can the Minister outline what support is available to landowners and farmers who are being particularly targeted?

[Dr Hudson]

I would like to touch on the fact that although fly-tipping happens all over the country, some areas suffer more than others. The last Government provided targeted investment to the areas most affected by fly-tipping. Furthermore, just as the very act of fly-tipping varies geographically, so too does the rate of enforcement action. Only 31% of fly-tipping incidents are investigated, and over half the investigations result in no further action. Across England in 2024-25, there were just 13 custodial sentences for fly-tipping offences.

The Government have issued guidance to local councils, but guidance is one thing and action another. The Minister may be aware that the Countryside Alliance has called on the Government to incentivise local authorities to use the enforcement powers available to them. I would be interested to hear the Minister's thoughts on that suggestion.

We are united across the House in our shared desire to end fly-tipping and to ensure that those who commit this crime are punished appropriately. To do that, local authorities need the right resources and tools, but more importantly they need to use them. We can do more to tackle fly-tipping, and I hope that the Government come forward with ambitious proposals.

It has been great today to see so many people from across the House talking not only about this issue, but very much about what it means to their local community. A sense of optimism comes from highlighting the great work that local volunteers do. To conclude, I thank for their great contributions and interventions my hon. Friends the Members for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) and for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) and the hon. Members for Gorton and Denton (Hannah Spencer), for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge), for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan), for Hexham (Joe Morris), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin), for Broxtowe (Juliet Campbell), for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack), for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Lillian Jones), for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) and for Ilford South (Jas Athwal).

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I ask the Minister to leave a couple of minutes for the proposer of the debate to wind up.

10.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) for securing this very well attended debate. Let me also thank hon. Members from across the House who have made valuable points. It is great to hear from the Opposition Front-Bench spokespeople about everything that this Government need to do, but it was under the coalition Government and their cuts that the beginnings of this public squalor occurred. In the so-called big society of David Cameron, we did not realise we were all going to have to become litter-picking Womble troops, set up our own food banks to feed our communities and end up being lollipop crossing wardens as well, because of the severe cuts that happened to local government on the coalition Government's watch.

It is fitting that we are having this debate at the beginning of London Climate Action Week. Everybody's environment starts at their front door—it is not something out there in the oceans and forests; it is about stuff that is literally in the streets where we live. As my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge) said, this is a matter of social justice. It is about environmental justice, but also about the poorest people bearing the consequences of environmental crime. It is an epidemic that proliferated under the coalition and it became a pandemic from 2015. The failure to implement any new policy and the starvation of local government that saw local tips close led to this criminal activity and this waste crime epidemic.

Fly-tipping scars our streets and parks and takes pride away but it also robs us, as taxpayers. In the 2024-25 financial year alone, waste criminals—they are not cowboys; they are criminals—evaded at least £1 billion of landfill tax. Every fridge and bit of kitchen equipment dumped as a result of a refurb has not been disposed of correctly in either landfill or incineration; that is unacceptable. We are determined to take back control of our streets, parks and countryside from those criminals.

The hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) talked about setting up the Joint Unit for Waste Crime. Since coming into office, we have boosted the Environment Agency's enforcement budget for the current financial year by 50%, from £10 million to over £15 million. Over the next three years, we will give the Environment Agency an additional £45 million, so that budget is going up from £10 million to £15 million this year and then up to £30 million—we have trebled it. We are not producing action plans, but putting our money where our mouth is. That will mean more boots on the ground and more drones in the air.

We have pursued major regulatory reforms and boosted the Joint Unit for Waste Crime. Since the Government came to power, the EA has stopped illegal waste activity at over 1,500 sites and has achieved 125 prosecutions, with 10 people going to prison. Crimestoppers has launched a national campaign encouraging the public to play their part by calling 0800 555 111 to anonymously report suspicious activity. I encourage all hon. Members to amplify that campaign, which is running on social media at the moment. Our waste crime action plan is the next step and it is a scale-up. First, we are preventing illegal activity before it starts; secondly, we are strengthening enforcement so that offenders are caught and punished; and thirdly, we are cleaning up the most harmful sites. Let me take each of those points in turn.

First there is prevention. Stopping waste crime means putting legislation through Parliament that will replace the outdated paper systems, an issue neglected under the previous Government, with mandatory digital waste tracking: a single UK-wide platform that will monitor waste movements in real time. Regulators will be able to spot diversion away from legitimate pathways and spot fraud, such as misdescription of waste, at a much earlier stage in the chain.

We have laid secondary legislation that will overhaul the regulation of the waste carriers, brokers and dealers system so that there will be no more Beau Vines registered as waste dealers. We are moving from a light-touch system to full environmental permitting. We are removing widely abused waste permit exemptions on tyres, end-of-life vehicles and scrap metal, and tightening up seven other

waste permit exemptions. We are also going after the tax avoiders. HMRC is expanding tax check rules to the waste sector, so if someone's tax record is questionable, we will ask them questions before renewing their licence.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Mary Creagh: I will make some progress. We are matching prevention with tougher enforcement and pursuing the criminals with every tool in the box. We are increasing the Environment Agency's budget, as I mentioned, and giving it new police-style powers to intervene earlier, disrupt the criminals and bring them to justice before their illegal operations become established. We have to nip this in the bud when it happens; that is what we know works.

Ayoub Khan: Will the Minister give way?

Mary Creagh: No, I will finish my point. The Joint Unit for Waste Crime is strengthening its hand. It is bringing together environmental watchdogs, police forces and the National Crime Agency to dismantle the serious organised crime networks that blight our communities. The penalties for waste crime must match the harm it causes. The carriers, brokers and dealers reform will increase penalties for offenders to up to five years in prison. We know that sometimes those offenders will not be prosecuted for environmental crime but potentially for money laundering because they are not just criminals in one area; they have an entire criminal enterprise of which waste crime is just one branch.

On the clean-up, we are going after the criminals to make sure that they pay. We have worked with other Departments to publish criteria for cleaning up those sites where intervention is most needed. We are currently funding clean-up for Bolton House Road in Wigan, Alan Ramsbottom Way in Hyndburn and Worthing Road in Sheffield. We will go much further to prevent land owners picking up the bill in the future and work with the insurance industry to explore new models to shield farmers, business and land owners from bearing the cost of waste in their areas.

We recognise the role that councils have and the different challenges that they face. Thanks to this Labour Government, they have more powers at their disposal than ever before: issuing fixed penalty notices, prosecuting offenders and launching investigations. Ealing council, for example, has issued 1,993 fixed penalty notices for fly-tipping in 2024-25. When councils say that they do not have the money, it is often that they do not have the will or the skills. They can also seize the vehicles of suspected fly-tippers and crush them—or, for those interested in reuse, as I am, sell them. We have published best practice guidance and case studies on vehicle seizure to give councils the confidence to use those powers.

The National Fly-Tipping Prevention Group, chaired by DEFRA officials, has that guidance and Members may wish to bring it to the attention of their local councils. We have secured powers in the Crime and Policing Act 2026 for courts to impose up to nine penalty points on driving licences for fly-tipping offences. That is a strong deterrent and will make people think twice before they do such a job for their mates on the weekend.

We are also consulting on a proposal to give local authorities powers to issue conditional cautions to suspected fly-tippers. Those are a range of pre-court community-based sanctions. We all want to see these guys—it is mostly guys—going to prison, but this Government inherited a court backlog along with prisons full to bursting. However, these cautions could see offenders cleaning our streets or parks in an unpaid capacity, and being required to pay back the cost of cleaning up the waste that they have dumped. It gives local authorities another tool in the box.

I pay tribute to all the volunteers who have worked in this area, not least in my own city of Coventry, including at Destination Ball Hill and the Reverend Matthew Bull at St John the Divine, where I spent a very sweaty two hours cleaning up Willenhall last Friday.

Ayoub Khan: Will the Minister give way?

Mary Creagh: I will not.

I went back on Saturday and already someone had littered their Burger King wrapper out of a car. The issue is about people and it is very annoying. As a cyclist, I remember posting a cigarette box back through the window of a motorist who had just littered it right in front of my bike; that was one of my more fruity exchanges.

We need to follow Coventry city council's lead and have a wall of shame and CCTV, as there is in areas such as Clements Street in my constituency. Regarding the situation in Hexham, there is Waste and Resources Action Programme guidance on the accessibility of household waste and recycling centres. I urge my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) to bring that guidance to the attention of his council. It is also important that we have more tidy Fridays. Assistant Commissioner Louisa Rolfe has been seconded from the Metropolitan police to the National Police Chief's Council to co-ordinate this work between police forces across the country.

I am disappointed to hear about the Lib Dems in Portsmouth. It is really important for us to work with National Highways and crowd everybody into this space.

10.58 am

Melanie Onn: I thank the Minister for that response. I welcome the news about the tax checks and greater intervention of HMRC and the Organised Crime Task Force. Perhaps it would help to bring Louisa Rolfe into Parliament for a roundtable to discuss how police forces are co-ordinating on this matter across the country; there would be widespread interest, judging by the number of people who have contributed today. I am very grateful to colleagues for turning up and supporting this debate.

I am keen to explore what the point about councils having the funds but not the will or the skills means in practice. Fundamentally, the issue is about an agreement between the people and the state. We pay our taxes with an expectation that services will be provided. The social contract is quite fragile at the moment and easily undermined. It is disappointing that so many of our fellow citizens are undermining it for the majority in the country. It is worth remembering that the social contract remains and continues; perhaps we should focus on the positives, given that so many people believe in it, reinforce it and give their time.

[Melanie Onn]

I thank Members for their time and contributions. It was all incredibly thoughtful. I look forward to continuing discussions with the Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of fly-tipping in residential areas and associated impacts.

Border Security: UK-Ireland Co-operation

11 am

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered UK-Ireland co-operation on border security.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. Ten years ago today, the citizens of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. That historic decision should have ushered in a new era. People voted to strengthen our borders, reclaim our sovereignty and put the safety of our citizens first.

During the negotiations that followed, Northern Ireland was repeatedly assured that our place in the United Kingdom would be respected and protected, but what has followed has been nothing short of betrayal. Post-Brexit settlements were largely negotiated by politicians who voted to remain—people whose hearts were never in the democratic mandate with which they were entrusted. The result: a border system so broken that only one asylum seeker has been returned to the Republic of Ireland since 2020—I repeat, that is only one asylum seeker over a five-year period—even as illegal entrants exploit the border day after day. That is simply unacceptable.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend my hon. Friend for securing this debate. The party that she and I belong to has been highlighting this back-door approach for a number of years, but the Government have refused to act. The people recently took to the streets in their thousands to tell their Government peacefully that action was needed. Does she agree that the Government must listen and begin to act today? We look forward to what the Minister will say to reassure us.

Carla Lockhart: I will address just that as I go on with my speech. We are the only part of the UK with a soft land border with the EU. That reality has been downplayed by politicians in London and Dublin alike when it comes to illegal immigration. Northern Ireland has been left uniquely exposed—the weak link in the UK's border security chain—and our people have been put at risk. In the case of the Sudanese attacker, they were quite literally at risk of life and limb. The attempted beheading in Belfast has served as a brutal reminder to us all. That is what happens when Northern Ireland's security is treated as an afterthought.

The attacker came here illegally. He travelled from Sudan to Paris, flew to Dublin and took a bus to Belfast. That is all public knowledge. He was granted asylum with astonishing haste. He passed through two other safe countries first. He completed a 10-page application to gain access—really? It is simply not acceptable that our UK border with the Republic of Ireland has been left so porous.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for securing the debate. Given the clear and present danger posed by terrorism across the world, organised crime, and the trafficking of drugs, people and illegal weapons across the border, does she agree that it is incumbent on both Governments to deepen real-time intelligence and data sharing, and to tighten the legal and procedural frameworks to streamline

extradition? I also point out that our border is totally open; thousands of people could be entering the UK through Northern Ireland. We do not have any numbers, we do not know who is coming, and we do not know how good or bad those individuals could be.

Carla Lockhart: The hon. Member is absolutely right. The first duty of Government is to protect its citizens. When violent offenders can simply walk or drive across the border, that duty is not being met. The Government have taken strenuous efforts to check goods moving from GB to Northern Ireland, including plants, agricultural machinery and seeds, yet illegal migrants can simply hop on a bus from the Republic of Ireland and cross the border, no questions asked and no vetting required.

When functioning properly, the common travel area is a practical arrangement that works well for people living right across these islands. It ensures that UK and Irish citizens can travel relatively freely within the zone, at least in principle. That is a sensible system and we should keep it that way.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Is the hon. Lady surprised by the misrepresentation from the Secretary of State about what the common travel area means? It means simply that there is common travel for those who are legally in the country, not those who are illegally in the country. Is she also surprised that, for all the Government's talk, they have taken no steps to deal with the pull factors that bring these illegal immigrants to the United Kingdom? They get free accommodation immediately when they apply for asylum, a weekly amount of money and they are registered with a GP and a dentist, and we are then surprised that they pass through many safe countries to come to the United Kingdom.

Carla Lockhart: I think the hon. and learned Gentleman is reading my speech—I agree totally. For the CTA to work, it cannot be abused. It was built on trust between two sovereign nations. It is not a back door for illegal migration. In theory, the CTA is not intended for asylum seekers, but, in practice, the open land border is being shamelessly exploited by people who want to dodge UK immigration controls. The attack in Belfast is clear evidence that this loophole is wide open to abuse by dangerous individuals.

The problems do not stop there. Abuse of the CTA is happening right across the board, not only on our roads but at our airports and seaports. In the past year alone, more than 900 individuals have been detected abusing CTA routes. Northern Ireland is being used as a soft point of access into the United Kingdom. While London and Dublin trade warm words about co-operation, our ports, airports and communities are carrying the burden of a system that is simply not working.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On the issue of the porous border, no one expects a hard border constituting installations and so on, but I have been trying to get the Government to release the figures about how many electronic travel authorisations there have been, and I never get an answer. We do not even know the numbers for people who are coming in legally to tour, visit or holiday.

Carla Lockhart: My hon. Friend is correct. The fact that there is a lack of information that the Government are willing to provide on all manner of things regarding the border and movements back and forward is frustrating.

We need bus and rail checks like those in the Republic. The Republic of Ireland already carries out immigration checks without damaging the CTA. It has shown that it is perfectly possible to balance two things: maintaining the ease of movement while implementing targeted enforcement to protect public safety. We must remember that nothing in the Belfast agreement prevents proper immigration checks. The agreement requires the removal of military infrastructure. It did not, and never could, prevent the UK from protecting the integrity of its own borders.

When migrants began fleeing to Northern Ireland to avoid the Rwanda scheme, the Republic of Ireland responded by intensifying immigration checks on vehicles travelling south. Buses and other vehicles regularly get pulled over on roads south of the border in order to verify people's identity documents. If the Republic can use that kind of targeted enforcement to protect its citizens, why can we not do the same in Northern Ireland?

When people see weak border controls and a Government unwilling to grip the issue, frustrations grow. Upper Bann is home to people from many different backgrounds who make an enormous contribution to our community every day. They run businesses, work in our hospitals and care homes, contribute to our economy and enrich community life. I am particularly proud of the Indian community in Upper Bann. They are a wonderful people, whose entrepreneurial spirit and strong family values have enriched our constituency. That is why I draw a clear distinction between legal and illegal immigration. My concerns today are about illegal immigration and the border that is too often exploited by those trying to bypass proper processes.

As politicians, we must stop talking around this issue and start addressing it. The public deserve honesty about long-standing failures to tackle immigration and secure our borders. Tensions do not appear out of thin air, and if politicians simply offer warm words while dodging the root cause, those tensions will only deepen. Legitimate concerns must not be dismissed.

We must also be honest about another uncomfortable truth. It is not racist to be concerned about illegal immigration. It is not racist to expect secure borders. It is not racist to ask who is entering our country, how they have arrived here and whether the system is operating fairly or correctly. The overwhelming majority of people raising these concerns are decent, law-abiding citizens who care deeply about their communities and their country. They have every right to express their concerns through peaceful and lawful protests.

Too often, however, those asking legitimate questions have been dismissed, smeared or ignored. Some of the language used by sections of the media and weak politicians has been disgraceful. Rather than engaging with genuine public concerns, they have chosen to caricature, lecture or label people. That approach does not solve the problem; it only deepens public frustration and further erodes trust in our institutions. As politicians, our responsibility is not to silence concerns or pretend that they do not exist. Our responsibility is to listen, speak honestly and take action when action is needed.

[Carla Lockhart]

Let me be clear: I condemn violence. I have repeatedly called for calm, for respect for the law, and for the space to address the real issues that lie beneath the anger. There is no justification for attacking innocent people, destroying property or attacking the police. That being said, we must not be distracted from the legitimate concerns about illegal immigration. The root cause of the problem can no longer be ignored. We need people to see that the Government in Westminster are on their side. That starts with being honest about why so many people are coming to the United Kingdom and exploiting the soft border.

Britain is seen as an attractive destination. Those who arrive know they will receive taxpayer-funded accommodation, weekly financial support payments, free access to NHS healthcare, school places for their children, interpretation services, legal aid and other forms of support. They also know that enforcement is weak and removals are rare, which is a powerful pull factor.

The cost for asylum hotel accommodation in 2023, at the height of the crisis, was around £9 million per day, every day. Even now, it is estimated that the cost of housing asylum seekers will rocket to £15.3 billion, as opposed to the £4.5 billion that had been forecast. That is more than three times the original estimate. These are not abstract figures; this is taxpayers' money that could otherwise be spent on the NHS, our schools, our roads and our police.

The British people are generous and compassionate; they will always support those who are genuinely fleeing persecution. But every Government have a first duty to look after their own citizens. Let us be honest: the boats that people see coming in have single males on them, and if I or you were fleeing a war-torn country, what is the first thing you would seek to protect? It would be your wife and your family. While the extra emergency funding for the PSNI is welcome, the damage has already been done. We need action that prevents the violence in the first place.

In closing, I have three requests of the Minister. First, what steps will he take to ensure that there is an operational plan that includes the rapid removal of those with no right to be here and a joint approach that stops violent offenders exploiting the differences between the two jurisdictions? Secondly, what steps will he take to review CTA safeguards and press for action regarding better checks in Northern Ireland? Lastly, how does he intend to restore public trust in the UK's broken, exploited immigration system?

If we truly want to realise the promise of Brexit, Northern Ireland's place in the Union must mean something. Protecting citizens is a basic duty of any sovereign state, and that includes consistent border control across all four nations of the UK. If we take the tough decisions now, we can forge a future where security is guaranteed and sovereignty is upheld, and we have a UK that stands strong, tall and united once again.

11.14 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mike Tapp): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) on

securing this debate on a topic of great significance. We have had a number of contributions, and I am grateful for them all. I respect the valid concerns and absolutely agree that having those concerns is not racist.

Perhaps it would be helpful if I began my remarks by making the very simple, but important, point that the security of the UK border depends to a very large extent on co-operation. The nature of the threats we face demands that we work relentlessly across services, sectors and borders to ensure that we have the clearest possible picture of what and who is coming into our country.

In that effort, Ireland is without question one of our most crucial partners. It is a deep and long-standing partnership underpinned by a shared determination to uphold the first duty of any Government: ensuring the safety and security of our nations. It is also an active partnership. The CTA is at the centre of the active partnership. Having been in operation for over a century, it is an enduring arrangement between the United Kingdom, Ireland and the Crown dependencies. It is unique and invaluable, allowing British and Irish citizens to move freely, live and work across our jurisdictions and maintain the close links that underpin our shared history.

However, the success of the CTA depends above all on us preserving its security and integrity. That means working closely with our Irish counterparts to identify emerging risks and trends. Our co-operation is comprehensive, spanning operational activity, intelligence sharing and joint strategic planning. When patterns of abuse are detected, we co-ordinate action to disrupt them, ensuring a consistent and effective response on both sides. We are taking that co-operation further. At the UK-Ireland summit in March, the Prime Minister and Taoiseach agreed to expand our immigration data sharing arrangements. That work is aimed squarely at preventing those who are not entitled to CTA rights from exploiting the free movement provisions. That is an important step forward in further strengthening the security architecture that underpins the CTA.

It is also important to recognise that although the CTA enables close co-operation, it does not require fully harmonised immigration systems. Each country retains control of its own borders and decision making. While there are no routine immigration controls within the CTA and no controls on the Northern Ireland-Ireland land border, the UK operates intelligence-led enforcement activity on CTA routes to identify those attempting to abuse the CTA arrangement. Those targeted risk-based interventions also operate away from the land border in Northern Ireland. Let me be clear: everyone entering the United Kingdom must meet our immigration requirements, regardless of where they arrive from. Where individuals attempt to evade those requirements, they are liable to be detained and, if appropriate, removed and deported.

In Northern Ireland, the absence of a hard border remains fundamental, supporting peace, stability and the commitment of the Good Friday agreement. However, the openness must be matched by robust modern enforcement of our border security through our joint work with Ireland and the Crown dependencies, to further secure the external border of the CTA, and in-country through our intelligence-led operational activity on intra-CTA routes.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) on securing this debate. Does the Minister understand that when he speaks of co-operation between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach, it rings hollow when immigration officials in Dublin airport indicate where the bus to Belfast is? They proactively indicate to individuals how they can access the United Kingdom. Does the Minister understand that I could give him a litany of cases of individuals who have been removed from the United Kingdom and returned to Dublin—the country in which they arrived—only for them to return on the Ulsterbus? One individual flouted the system in that way on three separate occasions.

Does the Minister understand that any agreement around data sharing rings hollow when the Home Office will not tell us how many people enter the UK from the Republic of Ireland, how many apply in Drumkeen House in Belfast or how many are removed not just from Northern Ireland, but the United Kingdom as a whole, and even more so when the Home Secretary says that is because of the Belfast agreement? That is not right and there needs to be some openness.

Mike Tapp: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his well-made points. I disagree that those important diplomatic relations and agreements are hollow, but I will take away the point about the Irish border and feed it back to officials. That is disturbing, and of course I absolutely disagree with it.

I turn briefly to our work on immigration enforcement. We have removed nearly 70,000 individuals since the end of March, which is a 41% increase on the number of returns recorded in the previous 21-month period. The Government will step up and intensify immigration enforcement to track down, detain, arrest and remove illegal migrants in Northern Ireland. The Home Secretary is investing more than £3 billion in immigration enforcement activity over the next three years, including in Northern Ireland, where we will see a 20% increase in officers compared with 2023.

I cannot ignore the extremely important points made about the incident in Belfast, which disturbed us all. I agree that action needs to be taken to ensure that those in our country do not commit offences. Foreign national offender removals have increased significantly under this Government, but we do not hide behind that. We understand that there is more to do, and we will continue to pursue, deport and remove those who should not be here. I will not go into any more detail about that specific individual than we have already given. We have confirmed that he is Sudanese, and we know how he entered the country.

An important point was made about pull factors. We inherited a situation in which illegal and legal migration was too high. Illegal migration is still too high. We see that on small boat crossings and other clandestine entry points. We have reformed and are reforming the immigration system to remove the pull factors, making it less attractive to come to the country. We are aligning our asylum

system with the rest of Europe to reduce the asylum shopping that we have seen over the last four or five years. We are also making it easier to remove and deport people, which is why that number is up 41% to nearly 70,000, but we will go further, and there will be more announcements on that in due course.

Illegal migration is costly, which is another reason to bring it down. Asylum accommodation costs the taxpayer far too much, so we are moving individuals out of hotels and into larger sites. In Northern Ireland, asylum accommodation has reduced by about 10%.

I thank the hon. Member for Upper Bann for securing this debate. I am grateful to her and all Members who contributed. They raised important points, and I am pleased to have had this opportunity to reaffirm the UK Government's steadfast commitment.

Carla Lockhart: I thank the Minister for his response, but my constituents will be listening, and they will say that they have learned absolutely nothing and know nothing more about illegal immigration than is already in the public domain. They will have heard the word “disturbing” in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), who referenced the case of an individual returning three times.

We are living with this in Northern Ireland. We are living in communities that feel unsafe because of illegal immigration, yet they see a Government who are not even willing to take the full time to debate this issue, and are unwilling to give us evidence that they are taking it seriously. The Minister talks about data sharing—really? We need action. We need buses. We need real checks. We need action, not data sharing.

Mike Tapp: I thank the hon. Member for her contribution. I absolutely disagree with the framing that we are not taking this issue seriously. We are here today having a debate, and on top of that we are working day in, day out to fix the immigration system that we inherited. Deportations, removals and asylum processing are up, and hotel use is down. That is not by accident; it is through commitment and hard work from the Home Office.

I am the Member of Parliament for Dover and Deal, and I, too, am at the front of the illegal migration problem, so I understand the frustration and the passion. I agree that it is not racist to have those views against illegal migration. We are working so hard to fix it, but it does not happen overnight. Members have an absolute commitment from the Home Secretary and all Home Office Ministers that we are dealing with it, and we are looking at the CTA, too. As I have set out, a close and active partnership is already in place, and it will undoubtedly remain an integral part of our efforts to detect, disrupt and deter the threats we face to secure our border and ultimately to keep our country safe.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.

Environmental Sustainability: UK-Indonesia Collaboration

[SIR JEREMY WRIGHT *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered UK-Indonesia collaboration on environmental sustainability.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Jeremy. I am also pleased to see the Minister for the Indo-Pacific in her place; I did want this to be an Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office debate, even though the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was also answering questions this week, because, while my focus will be on environmental issues, this is also about our broader relationship with a country that is increasingly important to us.

Indonesia is the fourth-largest country in the world by population, behind India, China and the US. It is the largest south-east Asian economy, and the only one in the G20. It has seen steady—rather than spectacular—economic growth in recent years. While it does not currently account for a huge part of our trade, there is much potential. The UK-Indonesia economic partnership was launched earlier this year, and I gather that negotiations for a full trade deal are on the cards. So economically, it matters to us.

Indonesia is also one of the most environmentally important countries in the world. It has vast tropical rainforests, deep peatlands, iconic species such as the orangutan, the Sumatran tiger, elephants and the Komodo dragon, and amazing biodiversity in the waters and reefs around its 17,000 islands. It absorbs more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than the UK and USA emit combined. Healthy peat stores huge quantities of carbon but, if drained, it will start to release carbon, making it contribute negatively. Forest loss also leads to major CO₂ output annually.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for bringing forward this important debate. As she is setting out, peatlands store more carbon than all the world's forests combined, whether that be on the Somerset levels in my constituency or in the rainforests of Borneo, and their destruction accelerates the climate crisis. Does she agree that, rather than cutting climate funding, the Government should be investing in bilateral peatland partnerships, sharing our British expertise to protect these irreplaceable global carbon stores?

Kerry McCarthy: I certainly think that peatlands are incredibly important. It has been one of my frustrations that we put so much emphasis on forests, and on the UK on planting trees—like a race to how many millions of trees each party can pledge to plant—whereas, as the hon. Member says, the carbon sequestration impact of peatlands is greater. We need to do much more to protect them, including, I would say, banning horticultural peat, which I know she has campaigned long and hard for.

I will come on to the question of climate finance later, but I will say that we are in a world in which public money is under severe constraints. The USA, for example,

has pulled out of its commitments under COP. I want to see a lot more done to use public money, and philanthropic money, as a catalyst to leverage in far more private sector funding, including through things such as the voluntary carbon and nature markets, so that we can get that finance into protecting our forests, our peatlands and, indeed, our marine environment, which I will touch on a bit later as well.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is talking about peatlands; she will know that Indonesia had a huge, deep burn of its peatlands in 2019, with 31,000 sq km of land burned. In the UK, when we had a terrible peatland fire on Saddleworth moor in 2018, just the year before, an estimated 4.5 million people suffered from the particulate matter—the smoke that went into their lungs—and the health conditions caused by that. Keeping those peatlands moist, damp and wetted in Indonesia is so important. My hon. Friend rightly talked about the population of Indonesia being so large; it is so concentrated that it can be desperately affected by that health risk.

Kerry McCarthy: I very much agree. We both spent the Easter recess wading through peatlands. I was going to say that we were wading up to our knees; I was wading up to my knees, but for everyone else there the peat came up to about mid-calf on them. I had very short wellies on, too—I was given children's ones. There was an awful lot of squelching going on. Nevertheless, it was amazing to see the richness of the peatlands. We also took boats along the river. The water there is brown—apparently it is entirely drinkable—because of the peat in the water supply. I very much agree that stopping peatland fires and underground burning are as important as stopping the wildfires that destroy our forests.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for rightly securing this debate. She has given us some of the problems and, in her intervention, the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) suggested some of the things that could happen to solve them.

Back home in Northern Ireland, we have a number of small and medium-sized green tech businesses. They are innovative firms, who have new ideas about how to do things. Although I am not smarter than anybody else, I think that in Northern Ireland we are capable of giving some help to others.

Might there be access for companies in Strangford to bidding pipelines or other international investments, to ensure that we can help? Obviously, it would be at a price, because that is how businesses operate; they exist to make a profit. If that is possible, perhaps the hon. Lady would be kind enough to direct me on the right way to go.

Kerry McCarthy: I direct the hon. Gentleman to the Minister, because she is the one with the power to put him in touch with the embassy, for example.

However, I know exactly what the hon. Gentleman is saying. I was at the desertification COP in Riyadh in December 2024, which was all about land degradation and water scarcity. I went to the UK stand, which had a number of British investors. What really struck home with me there was a small company in my constituency

called LettUs Grow, which grows salad vegetables through aeroponics, so no water is required and the company has a very low carbon footprint.

It was brilliant to see out in Riyadh that countries such as Jordan and Iraq, which are managing extreme water scarcity, were aware that a company in Bristol might be of use to them in future. We need to use opportunities such as those showcases at COPs to illustrate what we do, so that our companies can find buyers in the markets that need their products the most.

Jim Shannon: If Members have not had the chance to go to it already, I will just let them know that the British Red Cross is holding an event in a dining room A or B today. Earlier, I was talking to a young lady who is doing some work in Nepal on water issues, including water shortage. There is flooding in Nepal, but it is projected that in about 20 years' time there will perhaps be a water shortage in the country. The British Red Cross might have some innovations or ideas for Nepal. The hon. Lady and I both know the British Red Cross; I know that she knows it very well. There is an organisation that perhaps could help, too.

Kerry McCarthy: The hon. Member makes a very important point. At Foreign Office questions last week, I had the first question on the Order Paper, which was very ably answered by my hon. Friend the Minister. My question was about the Tibetan plateau, the environmental degradation there and what China is doing to divert water sources. Obviously, Nepal is part of that situation, as it is in the Himalayas. I think that a fifth of the world's population depends on the Tibetan plateau for water sources.

If the hon. Gentleman seeks out the answer that the Minister gave me on that occasion, he will see that we have quite a few international initiatives that try to ensure that people get access to the water that they need.

If Indonesia is under threat environmentally, that affects us all, as I think some interventions today have already illustrated. Over recent decades, Indonesia has lost hundreds of thousands of hectares of forest each year. The main drivers of that loss are unsustainable agriculture, especially palm oil production, legal and illegal logging, mining, and rapid urbanisation.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend will recognise that where there is such degradation, huge amounts of biodiversity are lost. Indonesia is one of the most biodiverse countries in the world, and I am grateful to the Indonesian Government for the work that they have been focused on in this regard.

My hon. Friend will also know that forests in Indonesia are home not only to flora and fauna, but to people as well. The Indonesian Government agreed to a visit from the UN Human Rights Commissioner six years ago—that visit has not happened yet. I hope that the UK Government can keep pushing on that. Does she agree that protection for flora and fauna, which she is talking about so eloquently, has to go alongside protection for people as well?

Kerry McCarthy: I absolutely agree. I have just come from an event that Fairtrade is hosting in the Inter-Parliamentary Union room, at which people were talking, among other things, about the forest risk commodities

legislation—I will come on to that later, because the Government have announced regulations today—and about the cost to smallholders and indigenous communities of complying with it. Of course, we want to ensure sustainability and stamp out deforestation in the supply chain, but we have to remember that there are small farmers and indigenous communities whose livelihoods depend on that.

At Easter, a number of us went to Indonesia—Borneo, in particular—and met communities doing agroforestry projects. We were looking at how we could support them. It was mostly about orangutans, which I will talk about at some length in a moment, but the people matter very much too.

Barry Gardiner: This is an essential point. My hon. Friend will remember the words of Pak Ja Martin, who was in charge of the project that we went to see. He said, "You can't talk conservation to people who are hungry." Therefore, local indigenous people, who for centuries have protected and conserved their environment, must be involved. That was a key aspect of what we went to look at.

Kerry McCarthy: I could not agree more. I really appreciate all the interventions, which are a very good way of getting the debate flowing, but it is quite easy for me to lose my place. I was talking about the impact of mining, logging and urbanisation, and about the fact that forest and peatlands have been damaged by wild fires. I will come on to the marine environment later.

The UK has been at the forefront of efforts to help reverse these problems. In a joint statement in November 2024, our Prime Minister and the President of Indonesia agreed a new strategic partnership, underpinned by people, planet, prosperity and peace. It included a commitment to address illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing, conservation of ocean species, sustainable supply chains and food security.

At COP29 in Baku in 2024, we pledged £239 million to halt and reverse deforestation in forest-rich nations that act as critical carbon sinks, including Indonesia. The measures included £188 million for high-integrity forest carbon markets, £48 million for blended finance for forest programmes to attract private investment and £3 million for the United Nations framework convention on climate change to support communities to benefit from forest restoration.

We have also funded some specific Indonesia programmes, including UK Partnering for Accelerated Climate Transitions, which covers low-carbon transportation and energy efficiency. Phase 5 of a 20-year forestry programme looking at timber governance, legislation and regulation has had £12 million from us. The UK partnered with Jakarta and funded the Nature Transition Support programme for biodiversity protection in key national parks and pioneer carbon and biodiversity credit markets. The Climate and Ocean Adaptation and Sustainable Transition programme is funded by the UK's Blue Planet fund. I have several more things on my list, but I am slightly worried that I will steal the Minister's thunder. I suspect that she will tell us a bit about what the UK has done, so I will save them for her. As I say, good things have happened, but I will now focus on the challenges.

[Kerry McCarthy]

I have been fortunate enough to visit Indonesia twice in the last couple of years. In April 2025, as the then Climate Minister, I represented the UK at the Forest, Agriculture and Commodity Trade dialogue meeting in Malaysia. Indonesia had been co-chair of the dialogue with the UK, but was handing over to Malaysia, so my visit took in both countries. The discussion mostly focused on palm oil, as hon. Members would expect, and the theme of the dialogue was smallholders. I think I am right in saying that, in both countries, about 50% of palm oil production comes from smallholders. Although it is easy for the larger agricultural concerns to monitor regulations, comply with the certification and do all the bureaucracy that is involved in that, it is much more difficult for smallholders. As we have said, we need to bear their needs and livelihoods in mind.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) said that the first thing for people is always to feed their children and look after their families, and he is absolutely right: that is critical. If we cannot get that right, nothing can happen. Palm oil is in short supply at the moment, so how can we better ensure that those who produce it get the price they want, and the rest of the world gets the supply it needs? We need to find a balance, so perhaps we need a working partnership.

Kerry McCarthy: That is probably the subject for another long debate, because it gets into the inequities in global food supply chains and making sure that farmers—whether in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency or the heart of the Indonesian rainforest—get fairly rewarded for what they do. I would say that a lot of products with palm oil in them are probably not the best elements of a healthy diet, such as the ultra-processed foods we should be stamping out. However, palm oil can be sustainable, and I will come on to talk about how we ensure that it is. Even if some palm oil products someone ends up consuming are not particularly great, there are others where palm oil is an important part of our food systems.

Indonesia is the world’s largest producer of palm oil, supplying more than half of global exports. Palm oil accounts for around 4.5% of GDP and supports 16 million jobs, with many of those involved being smallholders, as I said. This is a dilemma that many emerging economies face: going for growth, exploiting abundant natural resources to the max and boosting the livelihoods of people who might otherwise be living in poverty, or protecting their environment. However, I do not think those two things need to be at odds with each other.

It is true that palm oil has historically been linked to deforestation, peatland drainage and biodiversity loss, but Indonesia has been taking steps to address that. A mandatory national certification scheme for Indonesian sustainable palm oil, known as ISPO, was introduced in 2011. A palm oil moratorium was introduced in 2018, halting new plantation permits and revoking some non-compliant concessions, and many private sector companies have adopted NDPE, or “No Deforestation, No Peat, No Exploitation” policies.

Indonesia has also acted more widely to protect its forests and peatlands. Forest and peatland moratoriums were introduced in 2011 and made permanent in 2019.

New permits to clear primary forests and peatlands were suspended, and that was complemented by peatland restoration programmes and stronger protection against wildfires. Secondary forests are still vulnerable, however, and many forests remain exposed within existing concessions.

Indonesia’s efforts are now focused on scaling up certification, strengthening enforcement and ensuring that future growth in palm oil production does not come at the expense of remaining forests, but this is a global issue, and we cannot expect Indonesia to act alone. We know that 90% of all global deforestation is driven by agricultural expansion to meet international demand for traded commodities. What we consume in this country is contributing to the destruction of forests and peatlands across the globe. The Government’s figures show that, in 2023, British consumption of everyday goods, such as palm oil, cocoa, rubber and soy, was linked to the clearing of around 29,000 hectares of forests worldwide. That is an area two and a half times the size of Manchester—we normally say the size of Wales, but perhaps Manchester is where it is at these days.

This was going to be the point at which I called out the Government for not making more progress with our legislation on forest risk commodities. I was going to say that we cannot have any credibility on the global stage in co-chairing initiatives such as the FACT—forest, agriculture and commodity trade—dialogue or the Forest and Climate Leaders’ Partnership, which we co-chair with Guyana, if we are not prepared to take steps to stamp out deforestation in our own supply chains.

During my time as Climate Minister, I spoke often to the Minister for Nature and the FCDO Minister responsible for international development, as well as to our two excellent envoys for climate and nature—Rachel Kyte and Ruth Davis—about this issue. I also pay tribute to the team in the international forest unit, which spans the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and the FCDO, who were great to work with.

Our conversations went back and forth on the pros and cons of going down the EU route on regulation, which was focused on the concept of sustainability, or the route proposed by the previous UK Government under the Environment Act 2021, which was based on legality. There was a valid discussion to be had about which approach was best, complicated by the fact that the EU approach would apply in Northern Ireland.

What should not have been up for debate was whether we would act at all, yet some parts of Government were arguing that this represented another burden on business, which we could not impose. Businesses such as Ferrero, which I met, were calling for regulation, as were supermarkets. The opposition within Government was a straw man to argue for delay or, in fact, for dropping the proposal altogether.

As I said, I came here prepared to vent my frustration at the delay, but I was pleased to get a heads-up from the Nature Minister last night that the Government are announcing today, at London Climate Action Week, that they are moving ahead with the regulations. UK businesses that trade in internationally sourced commodities such as palm oil will be legally required to check that their supply chains are free from products linked to illegal land clearances and the destruction of the world’s rainforests.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I was also delighted to see today that that announcement has been made. Is my hon. Friend aware that the five-year delay in passing the regulations has meant that imports totalling 54,000 hectares of tropical forests have happened? That is an area the size of Leeds.

Kerry McCarthy: I was going to wind my hon. Friend up by saying that I have no idea how big Leeds is—slightly bigger than Bristol, I think—but he is right that delay has consequences. I gather that the Government have announced a consultation now, but we do not want that to drag on. We must ensure that it is a genuine consultation, but that it is time-limited and that action follows as swiftly as possible.

Barry Gardiner: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Does she agree that, as part of that consultation, many of us would like the Government to consider that this should not just be a matter of legality, but of actual deforestation? She will know of cases where other countries have passed similar legislation; in Brazil, its then President changed the law to make sure that the companies that were deforesting were able to comply with our legislation, and therefore to continue the trade. There is a loophole here. Does my hon. Friend agree that the consultation would do well to close it?

Kerry McCarthy: My hon. Friend is right. One of my concerns was that Bolsonaro was making legal what should clearly have been illegal. The counter-argument was that there was something slightly colonialist about dictating how a country should decide on what was sustainable for its own purposes, and there were some voices on that side.

As I understand it, the UK will start on the basis of what is illegal in the country from which we are sourcing the products, but the intention will be eventually to align with the EU regulation on deforestation-free products over time, and the ultimate goal is a blanket deforestation-free standard that would legally require products to be produced without any forest loss or land conversion whatever. That is the end goal; the EUDR has run into some problems and its implementation was delayed—it should have been at the end of last year, and now it may be at the end of this year—so the idea is that we move ahead with what we have already drafted under the Environment Act, and then better will follow. The British Retail Consortium today welcomed the announcement, which is another indication that business does want this change.

While regulation will help to prevent further destruction, we also need to mobilise finance to protect standing forests and restore what we have lost. Public funding from donor countries and philanthropy both have an important role but, as I said to the hon. Member for Strangford, we must look to the private sector if we are to close the forest finance gap. Indonesia is already benefiting from REDD+, or reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, funding, which is a mixture of public and private finance, but we could do much more to scale that up.

Indonesia has a huge amount to offer investors, and I know they are looking to the UK to help them; in fact, just after I was in the country last year, the climate envoy arrived at the embassy to run some workshops on

voluntary carbon and nature markets and how Indonesia could work with the UK on those. We are rightly seen as leaders, not least because London is one of the global financial capitals of the world. At COP29, I was proud to launch our six principles for voluntary carbon and nature market integrity, and last year we used London Climate Action Week to launch the Coalition to Grow Carbon Markets, which we co-chair alongside Kenya and Singapore.

However, I am somewhat concerned by the lack of progress since then. There was a Department for Energy Security and Net Zero consultation that closed nearly a year ago on 10 July. I have been trying to chase that up, and I gather that around 200 responses have been published, but the recommendations have yet to come forward. Maybe that is being saved up for London Climate Action Week; I very much hope it is, because I think the eyes of the world are on us to make this blended finance happen.

There is one issue that I will touch on only briefly, as I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) will speak on it: the controversial plans for a food estate in West Papua. I have had some reassurances that that will not involve the destruction of healthy forests and that it is part of an important strategy to increase Indonesia's food security—I can tell by the look on my hon. Friend's face that that is not the account he has been given. However, as I said, I knew he was coming here to speak about that, and I know I can rely on him to speak about it with great expertise. The other assurance I have had recently is that Indonesia wants to move away from such a high dependence on the palm oil sector, diversify what it grows and increase its food security, but I will leave that to my hon. Friend to cover.

I want to talk instead about orangutans. My second visit to Indonesia was in April this year with the all-party parliamentary group on international conservation and Borneo Orangutan Survival UK. Three Members present today were on that visit, and I think it made a lasting impression on us. We took a very long and slow boat journey into East Kalimantan in the heart of Borneo and trekked through very rich, deep and, as I said, squelchy peatlands to see the work being done to restore primary rainforests. We also met people from the indigenous communities to see sustainable agroforestry in action.

The best part was that we spent a day at a forest school for orangutans, where they teach orphaned orangutans how to survive in the wild. Indonesia is home to three species of orangutans and they are all endangered. They are the most arboreal of all apes, spending around 80% of their lives in the rainforest canopy. Normally, their mothers teach them forest skills and how to survive in that way up to about the age of eight, but when they are orphaned, they go to forest school for about the same length of time. Then they go to university, where they practise semi-independent living. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent West and I each had the amazing privilege of releasing an orangutan—his was called Peanuts; mine was called Lanting—into their university island, where I hope they are thriving.

BOS is doing great work, but we need to do more to tackle the underlying reasons why so many orangutans need its help. I have already spoken at length about forest risk commodities and the destruction of habitats, but those are not the only factors. Many orangutans like

[Kerry McCarthy]

Peanuts and Lanting have been displaced by development as Indonesia's population and urbanisation grow. They are also very susceptible to human diseases such as tuberculosis, which they catch when humans start encroaching on their territory. I think all of us who went would agree that the saddest thing we saw at the forest school was the orangutans that could not be released from their cages because they carried diseases—particularly TB. They were clearly really unhappy animals and it was heartbreaking to see them. Under the law in Indonesia, they cannot be euthanised, because they are a protected species. However, there is some hope, because BOS is fundraising to create new habitats. There are going to be about 15 little islands where groups of infected orangutans—one male, a couple of females and the younger ones—will be able to experience freedom together without passing their diseases on to healthy animals. I look forward to seeing that come into play.

A sizeable number of the orangutans that BOS rescues have been trafficked—for example, stolen as babies to be pets or for private zoos. BOS has rescued around 50 from tourist attractions in Thailand. It has been three years since the UK passed the Animals (Low-Welfare Activities Abroad) Act 2023, which will ban the promotion by UK companies of tourist attractions abroad that involve animal cruelty and exploitation—for example, those where tigers are drugged and declawed, elephants are forced to perform or, as we saw on film in Borneo, orangutans are forced to take part in boxing matches. Yet we are still waiting for the Act to come into force, because the lawyers at DEFRA need to draft regulations. I am told that they are struggling to find the right words to put in the definitions to catch that type of cruelty and exploitation. My next note just says, “Get on with it.” They need to get on with it. There is no excuse for three years' delay. As a lawyer, I am pretty sure they can find the words to deal with these things, even if it is just where animals are forced to perform unnatural acts or where they are drugged or declawed. They do not have to catch every type of animal abuse and exploitation; it would be a start to bring in regulations that catch at least some of it.

Barry Gardiner: My hon. Friend has been very generous in taking interventions. On the animals that had diseases—she is right, it was an affecting sight that depressed us all; it is great that the islands are being built—is she aware that at a recent lecture, Nadine, who we met in Oxford, confirmed that when orangutans are captured for translocation, they will now be tested for TB? That will enable scientists to study the epidemiology of the disease in the wild population. Of course, if it transpires that TB is already in the wild population, it could be safe to release them back into the wild.

Kerry McCarthy: It was good to talk to Nadine on the visit; she was a real source of expertise. I am glad to hear that, and if it is a possible answer to the issue, that is excellent.

I will talk a little about the marine environment. We have quite a lot of debates in this place about oceans and marine issues, so I will not say too much, but they are important to Indonesia. The country covers an area of around 8 million km², only a quarter of which is land. With around 17,000 islands, Indonesia is an ocean state,

supporting coral reefs, mangroves and sea grass habitats that are vital for biodiversity and for human livelihoods such as fishing and tourism. It lies at the centre of the coral triangle, which is often called the “Amazon of the seas” because of its exceptional biodiversity, and has over 75% of the world's coral species and more than a third of global reef fish species.

Indonesia's marine environment is amazing—I have been diving there, so I can vouch for that—but it is also highly vulnerable. The reefs are under pressure from overfishing, destructive fishing practices such as blast fishing, pollution and overdevelopment. Rising sea temperatures cause coral bleaching, which weakens or kills reefs, while pollution and sedimentation reduce water quality. Indonesia has established hundreds of marine protected areas. Conservation zones reach tens of millions of hectares, and it has ambitious targets to expand them further to safeguard up to 30% of its marine territory by 2045, which would make it one of the largest marine conservation networks in the world.

Indonesia is also investing in marine conservation and restoration, including in coral reef rehabilitation programmes, stricter environmental regulations and innovative schemes such as the coral reef bond, which funds conservation projects based on measurable improvements in reef health. The UK has now passed the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Act 2026, and although I understand that a few more steps must be taken before the global ocean treaty is finally ratified, I hope that we will be able to play a full role in January at the ocean COP in New York. The Minister is leading on that, so perhaps she can tell us a bit about it in her reply.

Indonesia is vital to us, and will become ever more so. Its economic success is important to us, as is its environment. I look forward to hearing what the Minister and other colleagues have to say.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Lady for opening the debate. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called. So far, only one Member has done so, which means that he has about half an hour to speak, if he wants it. He is not obliged to take all that time, but I will call Front Benchers shortly before 3.30 pm, at the latest.

3.3 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): As you have made clear, Sir Jeremy, I have a little time, so I start, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on West Papua, by dedicating my speech to our former vice-chair, Lord Harries of Pentregarth, who passed away recently. He was a fervent supporter of West Papua and, as I am sure my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) will agree, of environmental issues. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said, I will use this debate to highlight the world's largest deforestation project in Merauke, West Papua, which is home to hundreds of indigenous communities, unique biodiversity and extremely rare species, and to briefly—although maybe not so briefly now, Sir Jeremy—address specific threats to the Tapanuli orangutan in Sumatra.

One of the greatest threats to Indonesia's progress on climate and environment is a three million-hectare, Government-backed food and energy estate project in

West Papua. The *Financial Times* has described it as the world's largest deforestation project. It threatens a total area that is five times the size of London—we are getting in all the major UK cities in this debate—and the livelihood of 50,000 indigenous people who call the forest home. West Papua's unique biodiversity and the irreplaceable habitat of endangered tree kangaroos, birds of paradise and many other species are at stake.

Deforestation on that scale would release a staggering 783 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, doubling Indonesia's emissions. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, who I have met to discuss this matter multiple times, is currently investigating indigenous rights violations in West Papua. In particular, he is investigating the Merauke Food Estate to document the evidence of displacements of Indonesian groups, land tenure violations and the use of military force. The project operates on the lands of more than 250 indigenous communities in West Papua. Customary land rights of indigenous communities are being ignored in the project areas and indigenous people are resisting.

Just this month, a 64-year-old woman from the community known as Mama Yasinta went missing. She features prominently in the film "Pesta Babi", which is all about the Merauke project and the violations there. Mama Yasinta has since reappeared in Jakarta and issued a public statement distancing herself from the film. Her family believe that her travel to Jakarta and subsequent statements were done under duress. I hope the Minister can make representations that she should be returned to her family in West Papua in the immediate future.

The BBC has done an in-depth investigation showing involvement of both military and intelligence forces in Merauke, so there is ample evidence. Several television and film documentaries, which we can all view, rebut the claims of the Indonesian embassy and Indonesian Government that this is not a deforestation project removing absolutely unique and vital habitats.

The UK Government need to raise serious concerns bilaterally with the Government of Indonesia and discuss sustainable and climate friendly alternatives to support the country's food and energy security plans, which I absolutely accept given the size of the population there.

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend is making another important speech after that of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). Does he agree that it is concerning to hear from reports of eyewitnesses that around 40 indigenous people have been killed over the last couple of months, and that drones and booby traps are increasingly being used against indigenous people?

Alex Sobel: Absolutely. Unfortunately, that follows a history of 60 years of extrajudicial killings and internal displacement in what are, and have traditionally been, very thickly forested areas. The island of New Guinea, which includes Papua New Guinea, is the world's third largest rainforest. Modern technologies, which we have seen put to very positive use in Ukraine by the Ukrainian forces and very destructive use by the Russian forces, are now being used by the Indonesian military against civilians who have no way of defending themselves. Again, that has been documented. I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East has raised that.

I am asking the Minister whether the UK can assist Indonesia in meeting its commitment to climate and nature protection through Indonesia's plan to restore 12.7 million hectares of forests, but not in Merauke and not in virgin rainforest, which has a unique ecosystem and biodiversity.

I will briefly talk about ecocide. That is a real threat to Indonesia and its international reputation and claim to be a democracy. Ecocide is where acts create a "substantial likelihood of severe and...widespread or long-term" environmental damage. Although it is not a separate crime in the International Criminal Court or the International Court of Justice, the 2025 advisory opinion on the climate brought by Vanuatu very much brings ecocide into scope. The last thing that we want is a major international country like Indonesia being hauled before the International Criminal Court for a project like Merauke or some of the other mining and deforestation projects that are occurring, particularly in West Papua, but in other parts of Indonesia as well.

That leads me nicely to the threats to the Tapanuli orangutan in Batang Toru, Sumatra. The Batang Toru ecosystem in north Sumatra is the only home of the Tapanuli orangutan. Identified as a separate species in 2017, at the time their estimated number was fewer than 800. More recent surveys have shown that they are the most endangered great ape in the world, so the Indonesian Government have a special responsibility for the Tapanuli orangutan. Research suggests that losing even eight adult orangutans a year could lead to the extinction of the species.

The Tapanuli orangutan faces several threats. The Batang Toru dam, owned by the PT North Sumatra Hydro Energy company, sliced through its habitat precisely at the intersection of three subpopulations. There is also PT Agincourt's Martabe gold mine expanding north into their habitat, as well as logging concessions, community incursions of subsistence farming and small-scale agriculture, and hunting and human-wildlife conflict. Those five threats could mean the end of the Tapanuli orangutan.

Barry Gardiner: My hon. Friend speaks knowledgeably about the threats to biodiversity in Sumatra in particular. It is not just the sixth largest island in the world; it also has 1,300 different tree species. Sumatra's forest cover has been staggeringly depleted, with about 20% of its lowland forest remaining. My hon. Friend is right to speak of the orangutan; the delegation that went to Indonesia looked at its conservation programmes. He will know that the Sumatran tiger and the Sumatran elephant are also desperately endangered, and that 132 bird species, including helmeted hornbills and crested firebacks, are threatened there. It is a biodiversity hotspot, and the threats that he has identified are very real and must be avoided.

Alex Sobel: Absolutely. If one looks at the geography of Indonesia and its different sized islands, such as Sumatra, New Guinea or Borneo, and the evolution of species on those islands over millions of years, that is what created these unique animal and plant species, which are found nowhere else in the world. The Indonesian Government have a unique responsibility among nations to preserve those species—once they are gone from the individual islands, they cannot be brought back, because they do not exist anywhere else. I have been to see the

[Alex Sobel]

West Papua tree kangaroos in Chester zoo, but they cannot survive in Chester zoo—they have to survive in the wild. There is the difficulty of seeing such things in the wild, but it is important that we preserve their ecosystems.

To give time for the Front Benchers, I will finish by saying that the UK also needs to think about its own role, particularly in the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which has called for a moratorium on projects that impact on the habitat of Tapanuli orangutans until a conservation management plan for the species can be adopted. There are some excellent organisations based here in the UK—I will not list them, but each time colleagues and I visit the biodiversity COP, we are amazed by the great British organisations and charities that are world-leading and helping to preserve animal and plant species globally. I know that they and the UK Government can help work on a conservation management plan to save the Tapanuli orangutans. We are uniquely placed to help Indonesia, but it needs to want that help. We should offer everything that we can; hopefully we can secure not just the Tapanuli orangutan but also, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) said, the Sumatran tiger, as well as pangolins, tapirs, sun bears and cassowaries—a whole range of species that live in the same ecosystem in Batang Toru.

We must use this opportunity to enshrine sustainable and ethical human rights practices into our working relationship with Indonesia for the sake of West Papuans and other indigenous peoples, biodiversity and nature. If we do not do it now, when will we do it? Soon, we will start to lose some of this unique biodiversity.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, not least for his remarkable display of self-control. We now come to the Front-Bench speeches, beginning with the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

3.14 pm

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for her passionate opening speech, and for the many hours we spent in each other's company on a long-tail boat when we were fortunate enough to visit Indonesia earlier this year. In honour of this debate, I am wearing my Indonesian jacket that I bought in Jakarta. On a day like this, in an increasingly tropical London, it is blissfully lightweight.

The UK-Indonesia relationship is at a crucial point. In January, our Government signed a strategic partnership, committing to stronger ties on climate and nature and recognising that, despite our differences, we share a particular vulnerability to climate change as island nations. The Liberal Democrats welcome that partnership warmly and would like to see it deepened. That requires the UK to show up as a serious partner, not just in words, but in the consistency of our commitments.

Indonesia's forests are among the most biodiverse on Earth and are home to between 10% and 15% of all known plants, mammals and birds. The hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) particularly appreciated that during our visit. The forests also store billions of tonnes of carbon. As I mentioned, I was fortunate enough to go to Kalimantan on the Indonesian side of Borneo

in March as part of a cross-party parliamentary delegation funded by ICCF-UK and the Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation. It is wonderful to see representatives from both those organisations in the Public Gallery.

I would like to report back on what I saw and what I believe it requires of us in this country. We visited Sabangau national park, one of the largest peatland ecosystems outside the northern hemisphere. I saw the Nyaru Menteng Orangutan Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre, where 228 orangutans that have been orphaned, many because of the palm oil trade, were being prepared for a return to the wild. The hon. Member for Bristol East mentioned the forest school for young orangutans, where we saw orphaned orangutans being taught to climb by their human surrogate mothers, and that memory will stay with me for the rest of my life. We met scientists, such as Nadine, who have spent decades studying the flora and fauna of Indonesia. We met Indonesian officials and conservationists who are doing extraordinary work to protect their vital, natural heritage. They expect the UK to be a reliable partner but right now we are falling short in two concrete ways.

Today, the Government announced plans to consult on new rules requiring businesses to check that products—such as palm oil, soy, cocoa and rubber—in their supply chains have not come from illegally deforested land. Liberal Democrats have pressed for that since the Environment Act 2021 was passed, so we welcome today's development—five years late is better than never.

The Government's own figures show that, in 2023 alone, UK consumption was linked to roughly 29,000 hectares of deforestation worldwide. In keeping with today's trend, I will point out that that is equivalent to 15 Cirencesters. The rules will be aligned with the EU's equivalent regulation, which has been weakened and delayed multiple times under industry pressure. They will cover only illegal deforestation in the host country, not all deforestation, meaning that products from forests legally cleared could still reach British supermarket shelves.

The Government say that a fully deforestation-free standard is their ambition for the future. Liberal Democrats believe it should be made the standard now. When these regulations arrive, they must be robust and not leave the door open to destruction that happens technically to be lawful. They must also cover indigenous people's land rights alongside deforestation, which are frequently the first casualty when forests fall.

On aid, the Liberal Democrats believe that the UK's commitment to spending 0.7% of gross national income on overseas development is both a moral obligation and a matter of national interest. We have set out concrete, alternative ways to meet our defence commitments without cutting international aid, including defence bonds and an increase to the digital services tax. The false choice between security and aid is one we reject.

That matters, because UK-funded conservation in Indonesia is working. Indonesia has reduced its primary forest loss more than any other country in recent years, and British investment has contributed to that, yet the Darwin grants, which have supported vital terrestrial conservation work, including in rainforests, have been cut. Projects and marine environments retain some funding, but projects in terrestrial spaces, including the rainforest, have been left without support. The ringfenced nature funding in the international climate fund renewal is also at risk. We are heading in the wrong direction. Institutions like Kew Gardens and the Natural History

Museum have deep, productive partnerships with their Indonesian counterparts—the kind of long-term scientific relationships that take decades to build but moments to break. We should be strengthening them, not withdrawing.

That brings me to the Government's national security assessment, which concludes that global biodiversity loss poses a direct threat to UK national security. I sit on the Environmental Audit Committee, which scrutinises exactly these questions. We know that a fuller version of the national security assessment exists, and we have asked to see it repeatedly, even under confidentiality arrangements, and that has been refused. Although elements have apparently been shared informally outside Government with the media, the EAC should not be the last to know about a document that the Government say concerns national security. The Minister must release it.

I will close with a story told to me by a young friend that really brought home to me what is at stake here. Bella is a passionate young conservationist. A few years ago, she visited Malaysian Borneo and went to see an animal called Iman. Iman was the last Malaysian Sumatran rhino on Earth—a species more than 20 million years old, reduced to one animal. Her keeper, Dr Zainal, had spent almost his entire career protecting Sumatran rhinos in Borneo. He had watched them go one by one. He was there in 2017 when Puntung was euthanised and there in May 2019 when Tam, the last male, died.

When Bella met Iman, the rhino was calling out—a distinctive kind of call, a searching call looking for others of her kind, but there were none. Bella described how she stood there, looking into the rhino's eyes—this ancient creature with leather-thick skin and a face that seems to have come straight out of prehistory—and understood viscerally in a way that no statistic can quite convey what extinction actually means. The name Iman means faith. She died in November 2019. The Malaysian Sumatran rhino is gone forever, but the Bornean orangutan is not yet gone. The peatlands of Sabangau are not yet destroyed; there is still time.

I ask the Minister to honour the commitment in schedule 17 to the Environment Act 2021 with robust, enforceable regulations; restore the overseas aid budget; protect the Darwin grants and the nature earmark; and release the national security assessment. The time to act is now.

3.24 pm

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): It is always a pleasure to serve with you in the chair, Sir Jeremy. I thank the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for securing this important debate and talking with what is clearly lifelong passion and lifelong experience. I thank her for the campaigning and work that she has done over a number of years. I also thank the hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) for his knowledge and passion around the largest deforestation project that is under way.

I have listened to everyone talk about the visit to the orangutan school. I am beginning to feel like the only kid in school who was not on the trip, but it sounds like it touched a lot of people. I noted the description of the forest school teaching young orangutans how to behave in the wild, and the skills that they need—it feels a bit like what CCHQ does to Conservative candidates before we are released into the wild at a later date.

Barry Gardiner: If the hon. Member wants to know the specifics of how to do that, they get a jar of liquid honey and squeeze it up the tree. You then have to follow it up with your tongue. I do not recommend that for anywhere near the Whips Office.

Mr Snowden: As a member of the Whips Office, I can assure the hon. Member that that is not something we will take up, although my team, if they are watching this debate, will probably now be panicking that I may be coming up with a YouTube video idea to try to go viral.

Anyway, as Conservatives we recognise the need to protect the natural world. To that end, we welcome this debate on UK-Indonesia collaboration on environmental sustainability. We see the profound importance of the bilateral relationship between our countries in both our mutual economic growth and our shared commitment to protecting the natural world.

The Opposition support robust engagement with Indonesia. We want the partnerships that our Government have announced to deliver real, measurable outcomes. Indonesia is the biggest economy in south-east Asia and is rich in biodiversity and natural beauty. However, it is precisely because the stakes are so high and the scale of investment is so considerable that this House is entitled to ask searching questions about whether the Government's approach is truly adequate to the challenge. It is in that constructive spirit that I wish to raise a number of points with the Minister.

Indonesia is home to the world's third largest tropical forest and holds 36% of the world's tropical peatland. As we heard from other Members, both have globally significant importance as carbon stores. Indonesia also hosts 3.5 million hectares of mangroves—about 23% of the world's total—storing approximately 3.1 gigatonnes of carbon. These are not abstract statistics; they represent irreplaceable natural systems on which the global climate depends. Despite significant progress having been made in recent years, deforestation in Indonesia surged by 66% during 2025, with 1.1 million acres of forest removed. What is our Government's position on that? Have they discussed it with their counterparts in Indonesia, and if so, what were the outcomes of those discussions?

Indonesia has the world's largest nickel reserves—estimated at 55 million tonnes—and accounted for 54% of global nickel production in 2023. The country's critical mineral wealth makes it central to the global energy transition, but the risks associated with nickel extraction are well documented. In November 2024, the UK and Indonesia agreed a strategic partnership on critical minerals. That was with the aim of sharing technical knowledge and mitigating risks linked to this kind of mining. Can the Minister tell us what mechanisms are in place to encourage those standards, and what assessment has she made of the application of the standards?

In January 2025, the two Governments agreed a new sustainable infrastructure partnership, which our Government say will open up new opportunities for British companies to design and construct projects in Indonesia. We support British commercial engagement; British companies obtaining projects abroad is something we should support, but what safeguards have the Government put in place to support commercial projects pursued under that partnership?

[Mr Snowden]

On the UK-Indonesia carbon market partnership to support Indonesia in implementing a carbon pricing framework and developing a voluntary carbon market, the Minister will be aware that voluntary carbon markets have attracted significant criticism internationally for the quality and permanence of the carbon credits they generate. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that any carbon market developed under that partnership meets rigorous standards and will not simply allow carbon offsetting that fails to deliver genuine emissions reductions?

Although Indonesia has the largest economy in south-east Asia, it ranks only 17th in the world by GDP according to the International Monetary Fund. Despite that, Indonesia is consistently among the top 10 carbon dioxide-emitting nations; indeed, the FCDO has estimated that it is the fifth-highest carbon-emitting country. The Indonesian Government aspire to reach net zero by 2060. By 2030, they aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 31.89% through national efforts and by 43.2% with international support. Those are significant ambitions, but the gap between aspiration and delivery is wide. Can the Minister set out what independent assessment the Government have made of whether Indonesia is currently on track to meet its 2030 targets, and what conditionality—if any—is attached to UK commitments?

Finally, the scale of the investment being discussed today is substantial. British International Investment has committed £308 million in climate finance across south-east Asia until 2031, including a rooftop solar programme that aims to produce 600 MW of energy by 2028. The World Bank, which the UK contributes to, is providing \$500 million to Indonesia's electricity network transformation programme. What assessment have the UK Government made of value for money across the totality of UK investments in this relationship, and how are outcomes being measured and reported back to Parliament?

We all share the objectives of supporting Indonesia's journey towards greater environmental sustainability while protecting its extraordinary natural heritage, and of building a partnership that delivers for our country and for the planet. The foundations that have been laid, including by the previous Government, are real, but good intentions and headline announcements are not enough. The House deserves clarity on conditionality, environmental standards and genuine value for money. Can the Minister please provide us with that assurance by answering the questions that have been asked today?

3.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Seema Malhotra): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy.

I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for securing this debate. I pay tribute to her long-standing work on climate and environmental issues, and to her generosity in sharing with us her experience of “squelching” in the Indonesian peatlands. Her account, alongside the contributions of other hon. Members who have also recently visited Indonesia, brought to life the richness of the environment in the country, and therefore the importance of our work together on climate and nature.

I am also grateful for the thoughtful contributions of hon. Members from across the House in speeches and interventions today, including by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Fylde (Mr Snowden); the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage); my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds); my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel); the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon); and my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner).

I recognise that this is a very timely and important debate. It comes just a few months after my first visit to Indonesia. I am very grateful to our climate and nature special envoys who were referred to in this debate, Rachel Kyte and Ruth Davis, for their extremely important work and their contributions to many discussions with Ministers across different Departments.

There is a very strong interest in this House in how we tackle climate change and protect nature, and in how we work with partners around the world to do so. With Indonesia, the core of our partnership is focused on climate, nature and energy co-operation. It is also important to say up front that Indonesia is pivotal to global outcomes on climate and nature for the reasons that we have heard today, including the scale of its rainforests and biodiversity. Indeed, its actions on energy, forests and oceans will help to tackle similar challenges across the world.

I also pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East as the UK's Climate Minister last year, during which time she visited Indonesia. I know that she saw at first hand how our partnership with Indonesia works in practice. In Jakarta, she met Energy Minister Bahlil. She worked to deepen our co-operation on the energy transition—from renewables to carbon capture, carbon markets and critical minerals, all of which were referred to in today's informed debate—recognising the real economic and political challenges that Indonesia faces as it moves away from coal. I am proud that she launched a UK-supported micro-hydro project in Lombok, demonstrating how we are working alongside Indonesia to support clean, reliable energy at a community level.

That combination of high-level policy engagement and practical delivery is central to our approach across climate, energy and nature, and we continue to build on that through our ongoing dialogue with Indonesian partners. Indonesia stands out as one of the most important countries in the world for climate and nature. It is home to the world's third largest tropical rainforest basin and has rich marine ecosystems that store carbon and support extraordinary biodiversity. It is a major emitter and a major part of the solution.

As a G20 economy and a leading voice in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Indonesia has influence well beyond its region. Its economy has long depended on sectors such as coal and palm oil, and like many countries it faces difficult choices as it seeks to balance growth with environmental protection. At the same time, Indonesia has committed to reducing emissions and is taking steps on forest protection, clean energy and climate finance. This Government are clear that global challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss can be tackled only through partnership, because no country can do this alone.

I will endeavour to respond to a number of comments raised today. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley will be aware of concerns about Mama Yasinta. We take seriously all reports of human rights violations across Papua. We are concerned about the recent increase in violence in Papua, including fatalities. I visited Indonesia in February and underlined the importance that the UK attaches to human rights. I raised the issue of Papua directly with the vice Foreign Minister.

I also want to refer to the UK's approach to supporting orangutans, which is twofold: to decrease the drivers of orangutan habitat loss and to support the mobilisation of finance for habitat conservation. An important example of sustainable commodity production is the multi-stakeholder forestry partnership phase 5, referred to earlier. That programme is helping Indonesia to strengthen the sustainability and legality of its timber production, ensuring that pressure from the forestry industry is managed sustainably. That is relevant for habitats across Indonesia, including the ecosystems of Kalimantan and Sumatra that are home to Indonesia's orangutans.

Threats to Indonesia's maritime environments include pollution; illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing practices; and warming waters linked to climate change. The UK and Indonesia continue to work closely with each other through the Blue Planet fund country plan. We are proud to partner with Indonesia through that fund and the maritime partnership programme. A number of hon. Members referred to the maritime challenges, and it is important to keep that focus in our debate.

In relation to the UK's action, we have worked closely with Indonesia for more than 20 years, combining diplomacy, technical support and targeted finance to tackle environmental and nature issues. Indeed, what started as co-operation on sustainable timber has grown into a wider partnership. Hon. Members also referred to the important engagement earlier this year when the Prime Minister and President Prabowo Subianto agreed a new strategic partnership. The ambition for climate, energy and nature was clear at the Lancaster House breakfast, which I attended, where President Prabowo and His Majesty the King came together with a vision for Indonesia as a global leader in sustainable nature finance.

We are now taking that important ambition forward in practical ways. For example, we are supporting efforts to protect forests and tackle deforestation, including in supply chains such as palm oil. We are backing Indonesia's energy transition, including through a just energy transition partnership. We are committed to providing a guarantee to unlock \$1 billion of additional climate finance from the World Bank to support the energy transition. That is important because we know that Indonesia has to fill a significant climate finance gap to meet its mitigations and adaptation goals.

Sarah Dyke: The Minister is clearly setting out how the Indonesian rainforests and peatlands deliver irreplaceable global climate benefits. We know that conservation efforts have been severely undermined because of the funding issue and she is setting out that new funding will be available. Will she also set out a clear timeframe for that funding?

Seema Malhotra: I am happy for the hon. Lady to write to me to ask about the specifics because there are different funds, some of which are already deployed

and some of which will continue in the future. If she would like to know more about specific funds, we can probably answer that.

It is also important to recognise that we are supporting efforts to strengthen governance and ensure that communities, including indigenous peoples, are part of that transition. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East for referencing the engagement and the rights of indigenous peoples.

Kerry McCarthy: On that specific point, Fairtrade was holding an event in the IPU room earlier and I was concerned to hear about the cost of complying with forest risk commodities regulation for indigenous farmers. They were citing figures in the tens—I think the low tens—for both African and Latin American smallholders. Can the Minister speak to her colleagues in DEFRA about how we can ensure that the burden of these regulations does not fall on people in indigenous communities? I think the answer is having co-operatives or regional government-led initiatives to make sure that they can comply with the certification, but can she make sure that that point is taken up?

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend raises an important point and I am happy to pick that up with colleagues. When we look at sustainability, we should also recognise the role that indigenous peoples play in supporting the environment and climate.

As I have referenced, it is important that we raise concerns about deforestation, supply chains and the pace of change. These are complex issues, particularly in countries like Indonesia, where commodities such as palm oil and timber are central to growth and livelihoods.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East referred to, the Government announced today that the UK is introducing a new approach to deforestation regulations to help to ensure that our consumption does not drive global forest loss. That will require businesses to strengthen due diligence and improve traceability in their supply chains. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East outlined, we are clear on that goal, but we also recognise that it must be done in a way that supports rather than undermines our partners. The UK has worked closely with Indonesia on sustainable forestry and supply chains for many years, and we will continue to engage and work in partnership with Indonesia and other partners as the policy develops to ensure that our approach reflects local contexts, is proportionate and supports sustainable growth, alongside forest protection.

Representatives from the Indonesian Government are in the UK this week for London Climate Action Week, to meet representatives from across the UK's Government, private sector and civil society. This is an important and landmark week, during which we can share the full extent of the UK's ambitions on climate and energy with partners across the world. I am pleased that on Thursday morning, the Indonesian Minister of Forestry, Raja Juli Antoni, and I will co-host a roundtable at the FCDO to showcase the Peusangan elephant conservation initiative: a flagship model under Indonesia's new presidential taskforce to develop innovative financing for national parks. That is another initiative that demonstrates how conservation, livelihoods and finance can be brought together in incredible, investable opportunities.

[Seema Malhotra]

To conclude, the UK-Indonesia partnership on environmental sustainability is wide, ambitious and rooted in practical co-operation. It spans forests, wildlife, cleaner energy, ocean protection and support for communities whose lives depend on the natural world. The partnership is backed by strong political commitment on both sides, and is supported by growing engagement between Governments, businesses and civil society.

We know that the scale of the challenge is significant, and that progress will take time. Like all countries, Indonesia will need international support to meet its commitments, and the strength of our partnership gives real grounds for confidence. Under Labour's leadership, the United Kingdom will continue to share investment and practical support with Indonesia, because the choices that we make together will help to shape a safer, more secure and more prosperous future for both of our countries.

3.48 pm

Kerry McCarthy: I thank everyone who came along to support the debate, and I thank the Front Benchers for their replies. I was particularly glad to hear the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Fylde (Mr Snowden), show such enthusiasm for the global energy transition and for countries meeting their climate ambitions, accelerating climate action and recognising the importance of carbon sequestration. I did not think those were Conservative party policies any more, but perhaps it is a different matter when it is about Indonesia rather than the UK. I resisted the urge to intervene on him on that point, as we will be having that debate in this place tomorrow morning.

I am not sure whether I should have referred hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests at the start of my speech, in relation to our trip to Borneo; I was just asking my colleague, and we are not quite sure whether all Members who went on the trip should have done so, but that is now on the record.

As hon. Members will have appreciated, that trip was absolutely wonderful. It brought home to us not only the potential of the rainforest, the peatlands and Indonesia's natural environment, but the threats that they face. I thank ICCF and Borneo Orangutan Survival, representatives of which are here to watch the debate. I hope that I have done justice to their efforts, and long may our relationship continue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered UK-Indonesia collaboration on environmental sustainability.

3.50 pm

Sitting suspended.

Prison Safety

4 pm

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I will call Michelle Welsh to move the motion; I will then call the Minister to respond. I remind all other Members present that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and from the Minister, although they can of course intervene without prior permission. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

It is highly likely that we will be interrupted during this debate for votes on the Floor of the House. I anticipate two votes, which means that I must suspend the sitting for up to 25 minutes. If the hon. Lady, the Minister and I are all back before 25 minutes, we can proceed more quickly, if that is any incentive.

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered safety in prisons.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. Since I was elected nearly two years ago, my office and I have been inundated with letters and calls from staff, prisoners and members of the public about the conditions at HMP Lowdham Grange in my constituency. I have heard repeated reports from prisoners of self-harm, deaths in the prison and instances of discrimination. I have also been contacted by staff sharing the impact of these incidents and the pressures on them, such as staffing and violence. These unsafe conditions are deeply concerning not only in their own right, but as a reflection of the wider challenges facing our justice system.

To truly improve safety in our justice system, we must tackle the drivers of this violence. I thank the Minister for visiting HMP Lowdham Grange recently after I raised concerns with him. As he will be aware, the inspectorate released its report just yesterday, following the most recent inspection. It is reassuring to see some progress in areas such as visible leadership, improving health services and security relating to drugs. However, I remain deeply concerned about ongoing problems relating to self-harm and suicide.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that prison safety cannot be separated from mental health? When inmates are in crisis, they can self-harm and there is a potential risk of dying through suicide. It can affect the safety of staff and other prisoners, too. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to tackle physical safety and mental health?

Michelle Welsh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As Members will hear in my speech, mental health and safety need to go hand in hand.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I agree with her analysis so far. The key point is that we must take some steps and have some initiatives to reduce prison violence. I am sure the Minister is aware that in the last Session I introduced a private Member's Bill, the Prisons (Violence) Bill, to place a duty on all prison management to minimise violence against prisoners and staff. One way we could do that is with key performance indicators, with specific targets for reducing assaults. Prison governors would then have an incentive to take action, to reduce the number of assaults and to halt the

loss of experienced prison staff. It is worthy of further consideration. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a potential solution?

Michelle Welsh: I absolutely agree. In fact, some of the accounts that I have been given by prison staff, particularly women prison officers, are deplorable.

The inspectorate notes:

“There had been two self-inflicted deaths in the previous two years and support for those at risk of self-harm was weak.”

The rate of self-harm had increased by 50%, and the number of serious incidents requiring hospital had doubled. The risks cannot be allowed to continue. More must be done to support prisoners and to support staff in addressing these issues.

I am also concerned that the processes for notifying the prison of a risk to life are wholly inadequate. The information that is publicly available directs individuals to the Safer Custody line, yet there appears to be insufficient training for operators handling potentially life-threatening situations. My team and I have frequently found ourselves guiding operators through the appropriate steps or being placed on hold while advice is sought from a supervisor. In some cases, we have been asked to leave a voicemail, with a response promised within 24 hours. That is for somebody who is threatening to take their life, I hasten to add.

If a prisoner is actively attempting to take their own life, I think we can all agree that 24 hours is far too long. When we are put through to the orderly officer's line, there have been numerous occasions on which no one answers and we are forced to leave a voicemail on a separate line. On the occasions when we do speak to the officer, we are reassured that a welfare check will take place, but we have found that those checks often do not take place or that, when they do, an officer simply looks through the door before moving on.

These concerns are reflected in the inspectorate's findings. Care plans under assessment, care in custody and team procedures were judged to be poor, with most prisoners not engaged in education, training or work, and with few meaningful activities identified to support them.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): On Friday, I visited HMP Wandsworth with the Chess in Schools and Communities scheme. I saw its work to teach chess in prisons, which is also great for teaching resilience, patience and team working. May I send the hon. Member some information about what Chess in Schools and Communities does? It may be useful in the institution that she is talking about.

Michelle Welsh: Absolutely. I thank the hon. Member for his intervention.

Access to appropriate healthcare is another shortcoming. Prisoners often do not have access to their prescription medication or mental health services, and their medical or religious dietary needs are not met. The inspectorate also raised concerns about

“prisoners with disabilities living in neglectful conditions”.

Discrimination has no place in our society, and no place in prisons either. I urge the Minister to treat this as a matter of urgency. I fear that if action is not taken quickly, an incident of self-harm will lead to another preventable death.

Let me move on to the subject of staff. I very much welcome the fact that the Government have taken steps to reduce the threat posed to our prison officers. Although numbers remain unacceptably high, the rate of assault and serious assault on staff has reduced. I also welcome the fact that the Government have now increased the number of staff stab-proof vests from 750 to 10,000, and that 500 officers will be trained on the use of tasers for the most serious incidents of violence. However, I support the Prison Officers Association in calling for protective equipment to be available to all officers, not only to those in high-security settings. Prison officers put their safety on the line every day to protect the public. The least we can do is ensure they have the protection they need. Can the Minister tell me whether there are any plans to make protective equipment available to all officers?

Grahame Morris: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. On the protection of prison officers, is it not correct that the last coalition Government got rid of almost 25% of prison officers? Every year I ask a question about how many prison officers have left the service, and each year the number increases. We have collectively lost 100,000 years of jailcraft through experienced prison officers leaving the service. This is a key issue that needs to be addressed if we are to tackle violence against prisoners and staff.

Michelle Welsh: One would think my hon. Friend could read my speech over my shoulder, because that is the next thing I will talk about. There remains a staffing crisis across our prisons, with officer numbers falling and many leaving the profession after only one or two years. I therefore ask the Minister, as my hon. Friend has done, what steps the Government are taking to improve staff retention, given its direct impact on prison safety. Our prisons are losing out on experienced members of staff, meaning that officers who often do not have the necessary experience or training have to handle situations for which they are dangerously unprepared.

Finally, I would like to raise the impact of the safety of prisons on the wider public. Time and again, when I speak to residents and the local police force, I am told about the endless cycle of incarceration and offending that is plaguing our streets. The local police and shop owners in Hucknall in my constituency know exactly who the offenders are who steal from businesses. The police do all they can—they collect evidence, they make arrests and they bring offenders to trial—but they know that in a year's time those individuals will be back on the street committing the very same offences in the very same community. This is not a sustainable system. Discussions about rehabilitation and treatment of prisoners are often overlooked or trivialised, but access to addiction support, healthcare and education is essential if offenders are to break the cycle of crime. As long as our prisons do not provide adequate rehabilitation, our streets will never be safe.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. I, too, went to HMP Wandsworth not very long ago. There was an incident on the wing: something happened and the prison officers had to shut all the doors and run. That was a horrible example of what they deal with every day. The violence is there: it is real, and I have seen it.

[Jayne Kirkham]

The prison had just set up a neurodivergent wing. I spoke to some of the prisoners, and the wing seemed to have made a real difference to them. We have been talking about rehabilitation; they had access to therapists and they were out of their cells doing things. That model seemed to work well. Does my hon. Friend agree that that could be looked at and rolled out on a wider scale, given how many prisoners—particularly male prisoners—have autistic traits?

Michelle Welsh: I absolutely agree. If the Minister has not been to Wandsworth, I ask him to go and see that model, which perhaps is something he can do going forward.

Offenders cannot focus on rebuilding their life if they are struggling simply to survive or are experiencing thoughts of ending their own life. I hope that the Minister shares my concerns about the safety and wellbeing of prisoners and staff at HMP Lowdham Grange and that he will take immediate steps to support the prison, the prisoners and the safety of prison officers.

4.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood Forest (Michelle Welsh) for securing this debate and for bringing attention to this very important subject, which she has raised on numerous occasions in the Chamber and elsewhere. She has spoken to Lord Timpson, the Minister for Prisons, and to me about the issue and has been a champion for inmates and staff at HMP Lowdham Grange, as well as for families.

I also want to thank my hon. Friend's staff, on the record, because it is not just Members of Parliament who deal with these very difficult, complex and draining issues. I know that staff in her constituency and parliamentary office have very difficult conversations and that they go above and beyond to help her constituents, and sometimes people who are not her constituents. It is right that I place on the record my thanks, not just for bringing the matter to my attention and that of the Government, but—[*Interruption.*]

4.13 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

4.33 pm

On resuming—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): The debate may now continue until 4.50 pm if necessary.

Jake Richards: As I was saying before we were interrupted by votes, I want to put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood Forest, her team, and her neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Michael Payne), who has raised this issue with me. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood Forest intimated in her opening speech, on the back of her representations I visited HMP Lowdham Grange in April. I had an important meeting with the governor and her leadership team where I raised many of the concerns raised by my hon. Friend and was reassured to a large degree. I felt that the leadership team there understood the issues and were working at pace to attempt to address them.

However, I also want to place on record that I challenged the team about the work that needs to be done. We have seen in the report published yesterday that although there have been improvements, there is absolutely no doubt that there is a long way to go. I hope that the governor and the leadership team at HMP Lowdham Grange would agree with that.

There is more work to do there and elsewhere. Poor safety in our prisons fundamentally reflects a system under strain. In the summer of 2024, this Government inherited a prison system that was in crisis—in utter collapse—and very soon to run out of places completely. Too many prisons are still struggling at or near capacity, with an increased risk of violence hampering their efforts to turn offenders' lives around, as we have heard.

I will go on to address some of the particular issues, but we have taken fundamental action to reduce the risk linked to capacity challenges. Ultimately, we can only do all the good work on reoffending, education and rehabilitation if we have a functioning prison system. That is why we are delivering 14,000 new prison places—the biggest expansion of the estate since the Victorian era. We are investing £4.7 billion in that prison-building programme over the next four years, and we introduced landmark sentencing reforms in the Sentencing Act 2026, which received Royal Assent earlier this year, to finally put the prison system on a sustainable footing for the future. That Act was not easy. Difficult decisions have been made, but that legislation means that we can reassure the British public, for the first time in essentially a generation, that there will always be prison spaces for offenders when we need them.

However, there is much more to be done on rehabilitation, education and mental health support. I accept that absolutely.

Lee Pitcher: I know that the Minister is a huge champion of mental health, and of men's and boys' mental health in particular. In my constituency, I have the Moorland, Lindholme and Hatfield prisons. Will he join me in celebrating the amazing work being done by the Samaritans in those prisons to support people, and Andy's Man Club as well?

Jake Richards: Absolutely, and I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am a massive champion of Andy's Man Club up and down the country, but especially in south Yorkshire. It does really important work with ex-offenders and indeed more generally. We have continued as a Government to fund the Samaritans' Listener scheme, which trains prisoners to support other prisoners who are in crisis. It is a brilliant initiative and I urge any parliamentarian to engage with it in their area.

I want to touch on what we are doing to try to protect our prison staff, because numerous Members raised that issue. We have invested £15 million in protective equipment, including up to 10,000 units of protective body armour. As I think my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood Forest set out in her opening speech, that is a transformative approach to protecting our prison officers compared with what the previous Government were able to do. Half those units are allocated to the long-term high-security estate, including at HMP Lowdham Grange. So, as we roll out body armour across the LTHSE, HMP Lowdham Grange will benefit.

That is why all staff in the adult male estate now have access to body-worn video cameras, batons, rigid-bar handcuffs and synthetic pepper spray as part of their standard equipment. It is why we have introduced PAVA spray in the Youth Custody Service. Very difficult decisions and considerations about the use of such equipment have to be made, but they are the right decisions to ensure that we protect prison officers, both in the youth estate and in the adult estate.

That is why we have trained and equipped up to 500 additional officers in the use of Tasers and why we are already installing up to 50 ligature-resistant cells, in order to prevent self-harm, and have confirmed funding for the installation of more. Because safety and security are innately intertwined, the Deputy Prime Minister has announced an extra £35 million this year to improve security at 17 of our most at-risk prisons, on top of the £40 million that we have already invested in this area. In addition, up to 13,000 new heavy-duty steel window grilles will be in place by next spring. The picture is getting better—we have stabilised the prison system and we are investing in security measures—but there is a lot more work to be done.

The rate of assaults on staff has decreased under this Government by 4.5%. I accept that that is a modest figure, but it is moving in the right direction. The rate of self-harm among prisoners has also decreased, by 8%, but I absolutely accept that it is far too high. As the Minister who shares responsibility for this area with my noble Friend in the other place, I get regular updates about serious incidents in prisons. They are far too frequent and far too serious, and much more has to be done.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for outlining the issues. One of the critical problems in prisons is the mental health crisis. People are coming in with complex needs, including complex emotional needs; sometimes they have addiction issues; and they may have experienced abuse in the past as well. Those things need to be addressed. We can provide all the body armour and other equipment that needs to be provided, as we should, but he and the Government need to address the mental health crisis as well.

Jake Richards: Absolutely. The NHS works in our prisons up and down the country every day, and it does incredible work. We have bolstered the approach to people identified as being at risk of suicide and self-harm. There is a comprehensive package of support for what is called “individualised case management process”. It sounds technical, but it is very important, because it means that for the first time we are treating prisoners, and looking at their needs and their history, in a much more tailored and individualised way. As I mentioned earlier in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher), we continue to fund the Samaritans’ Listener scheme, which is really important, but much more needs to be done, so I accept the hon. Member’s point.

I want to touch on security and drugs. Hon. Members will be aware that one of the biggest drivers of serious violence and instability in prisons is the influx of

contraband, particularly drugs. In prisons up and down the country, essentially of all categories, the No. 1 issue keeping the governor up at night is security and drugs.

We inherited a prison system that was awash with a shocking amount of drugs. They compromise not only the safety of hard-working staff and the prisoners themselves, but make it far harder for staff to do the important work that turns prisoners’ lives around. That is why we are tackling drugs on every front. We have invested in drug-detecting dogs; we have machines to detect drugs impregnated into paper and fabric; and we now have X-ray body scanners across the whole adult male estate.

Certainly, drones continue to be a significant challenge. We are investing in state-of-the-art technology; indeed, my colleague Lord Timpson was in Ukraine recently to look at the technology that it is using as part of the war effort, and what we can learn in terms of investing to secure our high-security estate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood Forest raised valid specific concerns about safety at HMP Lowdham Grange. She will know that the prison was brought under public management following serious issues with safety and security under the previous private provider. During my visit in April, I was encouraged by the progress being made. I have seen a much stronger approach to managing individuals at risk of self-harm or suicide, and we have supported HMP Lowdham Grange with additional investment in safety resources, better staff training and closer working with healthcare partners.

Through the long-term high-security estate taskforce, further action is being taken to tackle weapons and drugs in our prisons, and those measures are beginning to have an impact. His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons conducted an independent review of progress in May and published its findings yesterday, as I said. It confirmed that the prison has made progress and has a clear path to improve safety and security.

I reassure my hon. Friends the Members for Sherwood Forest and for Gedling, and others, that I remain fully committed, together with my colleague Lord Timpson, to improving safety at HMP Lowdham Grange and making sure that it receives sustained attention and action from the Government. The governor has also assured me personally that she and her team will continue to work with my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood Forest and other local MPs, and that my hon. Friend will shortly be invited back into the prison to see the progress and ask any questions that she has.

I again place on record my thanks to my hon. Friend for securing this important debate, for her continued advocacy on behalf of her constituents, and for the opportunity to respond. The challenges facing our prison system are significant and we do not underestimate or shy away from them. The Government are investing, modernising and taking action to make our prisons safer for staff and prisoners alike and, above all, better able to deliver rehabilitation, which cuts crime, reduces reoffending and protects the British public. That is the progress we are making, and the work we will continue to drive forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Role of Big Tech in Society

4.42 pm

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the role of Big Tech in society.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. It is good to see the Minister in his place, and indeed the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune). I am grateful to Mr Speaker for selecting the debate.

Today, I want to look at the relationship between Government and big tech, and its impact on wider society and the communities we all represent, as well as the national and even global consequences of this expanding, what I term “unreliable relationship of reliance”. Let me be clear: the Government do not have the resources necessary for research and development of new technologies compared with the wealthy and global tech companies’ resourcing—I get that. Private sector collaboration makes sense and is of benefit to our country. Improving the efficiency of Government, public sector productivity, and the outcomes and effects of Governments—whatever their political complexion—is something that I support.

However, I think the Government need to establish—this is something for the Minister; perhaps a legacy for him—their very own centre for tech research: a Porton Down for tech innovation and development, or an expansion of the R&D work of the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory. Not everything can or should be outsourced to the private sector—this is a Conservative MP saying that.

Today, I want to highlight some of the potential, if not inherent, democratic dangers for the UK Government—both today’s Government and future Governments—as the relationship with big tech becomes more embedded, we become more reliant, and by osmosis, we cede ever more power and influence to tech companies over all the people we represent in this Parliament, and the Governments they elect.

Perhaps UK Government data could be seen as the crown jewels of data—the ultimate state capture: data capture. Data is increasingly entrusted to companies with no democratic oversight or accountability. Some big tech companies regard democracy, governance and oversight, for all their faults, with disdain and even contempt—an irritant to their commercial progress, rather than as a challenging and helpful partner.

I believe that any Government being beholden to big tech—I do not mean collaboration, which is positive—is a strategic risk to our country, full of moral hazard. I submit that it is a potential and emerging medium-term strategic risk, where conflict between democracy and big tech will come into stark contrast. Today, we feel only the tremors of such a conflict, but it is for the future and for all Governments to address it before that tremor becomes an earthquake for our democracy and for politics more generally.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this very important debate. He is making an interesting speech. When we talk about big tech, we are primarily talking about companies based outside the UK—particularly in the

United States. Does he agree that this argument is really about sovereignty and about how more of this technology can be developed and owned in the UK or across Europe?

Mark Pritchard: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, and will touch on sovereignty later. The European Union—it is a positive in many ways—is looking at that. That is partly why I am making this speech today; it is about sovereignty too.

Who knows the most—who owns or hosts the most data—and how that data is used determines who has the hierarchical advantage. I would argue that that gives the democratic or control advantage, not just the commercial advantage. The people, through democratically elected government, should always have ultimate control.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this very important debate. Many big tech companies are a cause of concern, but a particular one is Palantir, which holds Government contracts worth more than £900 million, spanning 10 Departments. Does he agree that more concerning than its dominance is the fact that we do not know what data it holds and has access to? Numerous groups warn that patient data in the NHS federated data platform could be accessible by US authorities under the American CLOUD—Clarifying Lawful Overseas Use of Data—Act, so does he agree that the Government must exercise the February 2027 break clause until those questions are properly and publicly answered?

Mark Pritchard: The hon. Lady makes an important point. I will not name individual companies today—she has clearly put her views on the record—but no monopoly, be it a public or private sector monopoly, is good for our constituents, consumers and small and medium-sized businesses. She makes her case well.

Will this universal knowledge that tech companies have—this data capture—always be used for good? Will it always be benign? Will it seek the common good or the corporate good?

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mark Pritchard: Let me make a bit of progress, and then I will try to come back to the hon. Lady. I have applied for this debate a few times—I have been lucky today, but we have only an hour, rather than 90 minutes.

Is big tech politically neutral? Sometimes it does not seem like that. Is that of concern to the Government? Does the Minister agree that some Government data can never be white labelled? Are some big tech companies agnostic when it comes to the UK’s democratic values? Are they more interested in value than values? This is not speculation. Some—not all—of the most powerful figures in tech have openly questioned democracy and its relevance, authority and survivability. Some of those observers are not fringe voices shouting from the margins, but tech owners with capital, platforms and influence and with the ear of many of our constituents and, indeed, our Government.

Again, big tech is a force for good in the world. I believe that. It provides huge benefits with regard to human geography, economic empowerment and borderless prosperity. But in so many ways, tech’s story has only

just begun. That is one of the reasons why we need to have discussions like the one that we are having today. It is why Governments, wherever they might be, need to strike the right balance on how much power—how much of the people’s power—they cede to big tech and its shareholders. Many of its shareholders are known, but some are a bit more mysterious and, to the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Gordon McKee), do not necessarily always share our values, or are certainly not in the UK.

Caroline Voaden: Ten years ago today, the Brexit campaign became one of the first very successful disinformation campaigns. Ranging from Turkish immigrants to Spanish bullfighting, the targeted Facebook ads played on people’s fears and deceived millions. But today, disinformation is more pervasive, insidious and vindictive than ever before, so does the right hon. Member agree that we must learn the lessons of 10 years ago and introduce stricter regulations for social media companies to ensure that they challenge harmful disinformation and reduce its spread across their platforms?

Mark Pritchard: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that point. As I said, I am not going to reference particular tech companies or particular information or misinformation campaigns. I am trying to get Members across the House to raise their eyes a little and look at the big picture of the conflict, coming down the road, between big tech and sovereignty, democracy and all the people we represent. But the hon. Lady’s point is also on the record.

Again, the close relationship between big tech and Governments is necessary, but is none the less becoming increasingly problematic and conflicted. Tech needs smarter regulation, certainly more competition, and a recalibration and rebalancing of its relationship with Government. The collaboration between the two should not mean Governments turning a blind eye to the breaking of laws, or big tech enjoying public policy vetoes. With big tech come big responsibilities. Governments should not rush to absolve big tech of the wrongs of tech in return for future technology transfer and unfettered access, and better terms for collaborations with Government.

These questions arise, perhaps. If the relationship between Government and big tech is conflicted, is it also compromised? If so, does that compromise equate to a type of corporate kompromat? Who wins? Who loses? Who is in control? Has big tech gone beyond even the power of the global banking system in 2008? Has it become too big to fail, too big to challenge even if the challenge is by Ministers of the Crown, too big to be sufficiently stood up to and too big to be fairly taxed?

If the Government’s mantra is “In tech we trust”, I hope this debate will challenge Whitehall and the Government on the fact that that laudable aim does not come without significant, inherent and strategic risks for the whole of our country, our institutions and democracy itself—the people we represent. Therefore the challenge for Government is how they preserve the benefits of private sector collaboration while ensuring that no single point of failure or future political, trade union or operational dispute can jeopardise or threaten the UK’s national security, sovereign capabilities or

strategic interests. Who is ultimately in control? Is it the client—in this case, the Government—or is it big tech, or individual tech companies? Is there a master switch, and if so, whose hand is on it? If we are talking about a particular tech company, who within the tech company has the final say on disputed deployment of that tech, or on philosophical or political disagreements?

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): Does the right hon. Member share my concern that because of the speed at which big tech moves, we in this House as legislators always seem to be five steps behind where the technology is? How are we going to be able to regulate for a world that is faster paced than we are in this building?

Mark Pritchard: The hon. Lady raises a very interesting point. That is a challenge for all Governments and all Ministers, however able they are. We have a very good tech Minister here today, but it is a real challenge. The starting point is better co-operation, transparency and openness from big tech itself, as I set out in my introductory remarks.

It is the owner or owners—as in shareholders, the board, the advisory board or even other clients and customers—who may object to collaboration between a particular Government and a tech company. That is problematic. Or could tech companies themselves find a moral or political argument to turn off a particular Government service at a particular moment in time? That has been seen in recent months in the conflict in the middle east. We have seen it in China where certain tech companies have switched off their moral compass to placate the Chinese regime in exchange for commercial advantage. Meanwhile, freedom and democracy in China is set back. What can the Government do? There need to be more robust legislative safeguards. The Government need to collaborate with tech companies, of course, but not to capitulate.

In conclusion, tech companies should act as responsible corporate citizens, but they so often do not unless they are made to, and they are not made to enough for the reasons I have set out today. When Parliaments do regulate, tech companies fight it all the way. They weaponise the courts and demonise parents and legislators around the world who dare to even raise legitimate questions and scrutinise these companies. Big tech should not be asking what the minimum is it should do to keep Governments off its back, as it sees it, or to avoid negative publicity and public opinion. Big tech firms should be corporate leaders leading by example and setting high standards without Parliament or Ministers having to tell them what they should do. Big tech should do the right thing, because it is the right thing to do.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for introducing the debate. I remind other Back-Bench Members who want to contribute that they should continue to bob to show that they still want to be called. I am loath to impose a time limit if I can avoid it, but, given the level of interest, if everyone can stick to about four minutes each we will get everyone in.

4.57 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) on securing this debate. Given the number of people present, it will be a successful debate, and it is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Jeremy.

Technology plays a huge role in all our lives. I think all of us in this room carry a smartphone or some sort of tablet device that we use to check emails, do social media or read the news and all sorts of things, so the debate is timely and important. I do not want to repeat the points that the right hon. Gentleman made, but I think big tech has a lot to answer for in harvesting individuals' personal data, carrying out surveillance in marketing promotions and tracking us through various map applications. There is a lot to be said about big tech and about companies' market concentration and algorithmic control in social media.

I did a school visit recently and was told about pupils missing school because they are hooked on social media overnight. They barely get any sleep and cannot come to school or perform well at school. The right hon. Gentleman made a point about political neutrality. Without naming names, a prominent social media platform comes to mind in terms of a lack of political neutrality. As we use big tech in our day-to-day lives for work, leisure and for personal reasons, there is a lot to be said about data sovereignty for individuals and also for Governments, businesses and cyber-security.

I want to make a point about France and Germany, whose Governments have been moving a lot of their software systems to open-source software, which is not part of big tech. I would like to see the British Government seriously analyse open-source options.

Rosie Wrihting: On cyber-security, in recent weeks the US Government have decided to block Claude's new AI software, Fable 5. What are my hon. Friend's thoughts on new AI software and cyber-security?

Navendu Mishra: I have a lot to say about the Trump Administration, but I will not bore the House with those remarks. The threats we are seeing to modern society from artificial intelligence are quite serious and there is an unpredictable Government in Washington DC.

The Government should do a big piece of work, similar to that being done in France and Germany, on open-source software. I read an excellent book recently by American author Ben Tarnoff, called "Internet for the People", and I would highly recommend it to the Minister and all Members of the House. It is about how we are where we are in terms of big tech.

The point made by the right hon. Member for The Wrekin about better and stronger regulation is important. I also want to touch on the digital services tax introduced in 2020. The rate of digital services tax in the UK is fairly low. In Austria, it is 5%; in France, it is 3%; and in Germany, it is 10%. We need to revisit that as a society, and make sure that big tech companies pay their fair share of tax.

I have tabled two written questions, UIN477 and UIN57573, asking whether the Government have a strategy for using open-source software; I would like to

see them do a lot more on that. In Europe, our friends can see where the big tech platforms most of us use every day are leading us, and they are looking more and more at open-source software. Cyber-security and data sovereignty are really important issues.

I could go on and on, Sir Jeremy, but you are looking at me, so I will finish my remarks. I would love to hear the Minister address the points about open-source software and a digital services tax that could yield a lot more revenue for taxpayers.

5.1 pm

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) for securing the debate. It goes without saying that big tech companies, like everyone else, should pay their fair share. They should not be allowed to harvest a child's data or feature harmful content on their platforms. That is why the Government's ban on harmful social media could be an important step towards better protection for young people online.

However, I worry that enforcing a blanket ban will just see young people turn to virtual private networks and access totally unmodified content. VPN use went up more than 100% as soon as the ban in Australia was implemented. I also worry that taking away all social media platforms could be really damaging to some young people in Yeovil and beyond, who use social media to find their people, battle loneliness and express themselves. When done right, social media can be a space where young people can be so creative. I would welcome the Minister's comments on how we balance those concerns with the vital need to protect young people. We Liberal Democrats have suggested a film-style age rating system for these platforms to keep children safe online.

One area where we really do need to crack down is protecting the creative industries. Artists should not be finding their art being used by generative AI without their permission. We need the Government to clarify how they will go further on regulating the small print that big tech uses when it comes to what is used to teach AI models.

Beyond social media, the change and innovation coming out of big tech could be a real focus for good. For example, assistive technology for people with special educational needs and disabilities can be life-changing, whether that is AI note takers like Plaud or more specific tech for things like speech and language disorders. I know that the Department for Education is working away at this, but we need a cross-Government approach to fund and suggest the best assistive tech for schools and the workplace.

Related to that point, I ask the Minister to set out what discussions he has had with big tech companies about making their platforms—from social media to chatbots—more accessible for neurodiverse people, as there are lots of simple steps we can take. I would welcome a meeting with the Minister to set those out.

Finally, I want to talk about an issue where I am seeing impact: fraud and scams. One constituent with learning difficulties lost £70,000 to a romance fraud. There were no guardrails on social media, and nor were the protections on online banking apps good enough. Although we got Lloyds to refund my constituent, it was an uphill struggle. But it is not just that scam; scammers are everywhere and targeting everyone and

anyone in our community. Fraudsters are even using sponsored slots on Google to act as fake clean air zone charging websites.

Veterans are being targeted by scam wealth creation and property investment influencers, who use their background as veterans to sell worthless courses that trap those targeted in a spiral of spending more and more on such courses. A veteran from my constituency was worried at first, but after being reassured by a veteran recruiting for the course and the slick social media presence of the influencers, he invested. Ultimately, he faced bankruptcy and nearly took his own life. Regulation is not keeping up, and the Government and big tech need to be doing more to crack down on fraud.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): In my constituency, scammers have managed to impersonate the council to demand bogus penalty charges from vulnerable residents. Meanwhile, the world's leading deepfake expert, Hany Farid, says in *The New York Times* that he can no longer trust his own eyes. If he cannot, what chance do the rest of us have? Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to compel tech companies to crack down on deepfakes and establish an AI regulator to enforce a statutory code of ethics?

Adam Dance: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Will the Minister set out the steps that the Government are taking with big tech and the Financial Conduct Authority to crack down on fraudsters? It is important that the Minister clearly sets out what new protections and awareness campaigns the Government are putting together, because the approach so far has not been enough. We need action.

5.6 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) for bringing forward this important debate. It comes at a pertinent time, as we discuss the impact of social media on our children, the way we use AI, and the influence of big tech companies, including on our lives.

As I pointed out earlier, a growing number of voices—doctors, nurses, civil society organisations and Members across this House—are sounding the alarm about the unchecked expansion of one company: Palantir Technologies. The concern seems to centre around two issues. The first is the sheer scale of Palantir's involvement in our public infrastructure. It holds at least 34 current and past Government contracts across at least 10 Departments, totalling a minimum of £900 million. The true figure is likely higher, since several contracts remain unacknowledged or heavily redacted. Palantir's largest single contract is the NHS federated data platform, which is worth £330 million over seven years. My inbox has been rammed with constituents calling for the Government to trigger Palantir's February 2027 break clause. I support that call, and I hope the Minister will say whether the Government do, too.

Mark Pritchard: It is unusual for me to intervene, but I am glad the hon. Lady mentioned that number. I had no idea it was that many contracts for that particular company, and that underscores some of the points I was making. I can think of certain service companies, which I will not mention today, that have multiple contracts,

some of which they deliver well, and some of which have been a complete disaster under successive Governments. I can think of some global IT companies—not big tech, but the old, traditional hardware companies—where some of those programmes are delivered well, and some have been a complete disaster. To have so many contracts in the hands of so few is concerning.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: That is why I was so pleased the right hon. Member called the debate. I hope he agrees that once a contractor has failed for one Department, it should not be given a contract for another Department. I hope the Minister will speak to that.

I hugely support my constituents' call for the Government to use that February 2027 break clause with Palantir. I hope the Minister will tell us more about whether they intend to act on that. Some will say that Palantir's expanding portfolio simply proves that it is the best company for the job. That may be true for some places—I doubt it—but it is not a reason to dismiss concerns. We should be worried about one company having this much dominance across so many pillars of our society, and particularly a foreign corporation that may not have the UK's best interests at heart. I say that with confidence, because Palantir's founder, Peter Thiel, has accused us of having Stockholm syndrome over our affection for the NHS and said that we need to “rip the whole thing from the ground and start over”.

His broader political views are just as concerning, and I encourage Members to look into them.

The current CEO of Palantir UK is Oswald Mosley's grandson. I do not wish to judge a man solely by his grandfather's sins, but that gets harder when the views on display are not entirely dissimilar. Nor can we ignore Peter Mandelson's role in arranging the Prime Minister's undeclared 2025 visit to Palantir's headquarters—a meeting where no minutes were taken and that raised transparency questions that are still unanswered.

The second concern is data. Palantir built its reputation as a surveillance and intelligence tool for the US military; it is not a healthcare company, but a data aggregation company with software designed to link datasets across systems. This is no longer a hypothetical risk: NHS England has confirmed that Palantir staff can access identifiable patient data on the federated data platform through a new admin role on the national data integration tenant. The British Medical Association, Medacs, the Good Law Project, Privacy International and Amnesty International have all warned that that data could become accessible to other departments, or to US authorities under the American Clarifying Lawful Overseas Use of Data Act 2018, regardless of what any contract says.

Some 50,000 patients have written to their NHS trust boards to urge them not to adopt the platform. I am not suggesting that every Palantir contract should be cancelled tomorrow, but we are sleepwalking into a dependency on this company that we will come to deeply regret.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): We have not been universally successful at keeping to four minutes. I ask everyone to now get closer to three minutes, because I need to begin Front-Bench contributions at 5.28 pm.

5.10 pm

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. In my lifetime, technology has found its way into every corner of society.

[Ann Davies]

It has changed our workplaces, our classrooms and my farm, to be honest. It has brought real benefits, but also huge harms.

One positive, of course, is that we can stay connected to everybody in the world, but we are also always reachable, and with that comes the downside of being exposed to the online world. Our children can stumble across content so harmful that it alters how they see themselves and the world. I therefore welcome the Government's announcement on banning children from social media and blocking nude images on children's phones. But let us be honest: that should have happened years ago; the Government have dilly-dallied while we, and particularly our younger generation, have been left to pay the price. That is because they are scared of upsetting billionaire tech bosses, and that shows the real role that big tech plays: an undemocratic hand on the shoulder of our politics.

Big tech is pursuing AI superintelligence with almost no democratic oversight, and even world-class engineers admit they cannot fully control today's models. People never voted for AI systems that can generate abuse or distort elections, yet those are being rolled out anyway. Children and women have already been violated by explicit images created without their consent, and misinformation is now so widespread that it threatens the foundations of our democracy. Still, the Government tiptoe around tech billionaires, acting only when the damage is already done.

We have to be honest about the power that these companies hold. We were not elected to represent tech bosses; we were elected to represent our constituents. This Government have allowed themselves to be sucked in by the interests of the very richest people on the planet—individuals whose wealth exceeds the GDP of entire nations. I therefore want to ask the Minister three things. First, what will the actual consequences be if companies do not meet the deadline for blocking nude images? Will the Secretary of State report to Parliament at the end of that period with a clear timeline for legislation if progress falls short? Secondly, what proactive plans do the Government have to address the national security risk expected to be posed by superintelligent AI? Finally, when will this Government stop governing in fear of big tech and start governing in the interest of the people who sent us here?

5.13 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall.

Aptura has submitted a planning application to Falkirk council for a 300-MW AI data centre just 500 metres from Forth Valley Royal hospital, 20 metres from a care home and next to a densely populated residential area. From the outset, it is worth noting that the council has received nearly 1,800 objections from local people. It is no wonder that the strength of feeling against this big tech project is so strong: the proposed site, which covers about 55 acres of land, is being labelled as "sustainable", which is frankly insulting to my constituents. An environmental impact assessment

shows that the proposed data centre would emit pollution that would rank it among the worst 10 polluters in Scotland. The data centre requires its own electricity substation and 200 diesel generators as back-up. Even if they are never run for operational purposes, the generators will have to come online as part of a regular maintenance programme.

As we are here in Westminster Hall today in sweltering temperatures in the middle of a heatwave, let us also ponder the scale of the low-grade waste heat that the AI data centre would produce. The direct thermal exhaust creates hot air, which needs to be dispersed into the atmosphere. AI chips created by the big tech company Nvidia get so hot that they need liquid cooling, creating a warm liquid that must then be piped out. That intense thermal exhaust can raise temperatures by up to 9°. Surface warming can impact areas up to six miles away. As I said, the proposed site is just 20 metres from a care home, 500 metres from a hospital that serves approximately 300,000 people and is in a residential area full of families with children. The proposal is outrageous.

The noise being produced by the data centre will be constant. It will include infrasonic noise, the long wavelengths of which travel vast distances and can penetrate walls and glass, even defeating ear protectors. That pollution can cause serious physical and psychological harm and distress. Surely there will be consensus in this Chamber when I say that technology should not come with a health warning to people, families and communities. I would like to think that legislators at every level of government consider that to be the baseline for any of their decisions.

Of course, technology will play an increasing role in our society, but proposed developments like the one in Larbert rightly have people worried. Its proximity to the hospital, care home and many houses shows that people are right to be concerned. It is shameful that tech companies do not seem to be bothered about that. Technology cannot and must not be an industry that exploits people, communities and our environment for profit.

5.16 pm

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) for securing the debate and for his thoughtful contribution. He not only highlighted the dangers of content and addiction but made a power analysis when he talked about the threat to democracy of big tech companies. They have a supranational status now, and states are struggling to tax or regulate them—or to enforce the regulations that they have against them. That is a real challenge to democracy that we need to face up to across the House.

At the heart of this is the fact that tech companies have simply been allowed to get too big. We have had a laissez-faire attitude towards their growth over the years, which is based on confused economic principles. Yes, we want frictionless free trade, but is a market really free if it has been captured by a handful of firms? I thought that traditional economic theory already warned us about that, but we seem to have become more naive about it in the last decade or so. Looking at the power analysis in the global market, this is really about the hegemonic role of the US. If we look at pension funds, for example, more of UK pension savings now go into

Apple than into all UK firms combined. We can see how the problem accelerates over time. We wonder why our brilliant tech start-ups are not able to grow; it is because when they reach the point when they need more capital, all the capital is in the US. We get Google buying out DeepMind and the cycle continues. They get bigger and bigger, and we get weaker and weaker. For far too long, we have had an economic strategy that is naive about what happens in a free market if there is a hegemonic power in it. That power has to be challenged.

Members have touched on this today, but the answer lies in a greater focus on tech sovereignty. It is not about gaining tech independence; we are not suddenly going to invent our own Facebook, ChatGPT or Amazon tomorrow—it would be naive of us to try—but about establishing our own niches within the global markets so that we claw some of that power back. It is about pooling our sovereignty and working with like-minded states, perhaps those in the EU, and collectively using our power to enforce tax, regulations and other legal limits on the activities of tech companies.

Mark Pritchard: I did not have time to raise this issue in my speech. The National Security and Investment Act 2021 established the National Security Investment Unit, which was the right move. If a particularly sensitive company with strategic assets or a technology that affects UK interests is to be sold or receive outward investment, it has to be cleared by the Government. That is a welcome change, but it is rather perverse or even ironic that, when the situation is reversed, there is very little scrutiny.

Bobby Dean: The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. That is another item on the list of things that we have ignored for far too long. Ultimately, we need to shift the balance of power. As he said in his speech, the power has been shifted too far in favour of a handful of tech giants. This is not just about economic power; it is about our national security, the delivery of public services and, ultimately, our independence in the world and our ability to shape our destiny. I thank him for raising this important issue, and I hope we can have more discussions about power, as well as the impact of that power.

5.20 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy.

We live in an age in which a handful of technology companies shape how we communicate, shop, work and receive news, and increasingly how the Government deliver public services. There is no question but that technology has brought enormous benefits to us. It has enabled new businesses, accelerated scientific discovery and created opportunities that previous generations could not imagine, but Parliament has a responsibility to ask a fundamental question: who is shaping whom? Is technology serving society or is society being reshaped to serve the interests of technology companies?

Today, a small number of global technology corporations possess unprecedented economic power to influence markets. Their algorithms shape public debate and their infrastructure underpins our essential services. That concentration of power raises important questions about sovereignty. The Government are elected by the British

people and this Parliament makes laws, yet too often we find ourselves adapting public policy to the priorities of global firms, rather than expecting those firms to adapt to the rules of our society.

The rise of artificial intelligence makes those questions even more urgent. AI has extraordinary potential in healthcare, education, public administration and so forth, but it should raise concerns about issues such as transparency and accountability, which affect employment and the concentration of power. That means that there is a need for stronger competition policy when markets become overly concentrated. It means that public data is used in the public interest. It means protecting our citizens from harmful online environments. It also means supporting British innovation so that the next generation of technological advance creates prosperity across our country, rather than a dependence on overseas monopolies.

Britain should choose democracy, accountability and innovation in the service of society. That is the task before us. I thank the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) for securing this debate. It is a debate that this House must not shirk.

5.23 pm

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Jeremy. I congratulate the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) on securing this timely debate and on his interesting and balanced speech.

In today's digital age, a small group of technology giants wield extraordinary influence over the infrastructure, services and processes that shape our online lives. Although not all their market positions constitute illegal monopolies, their collective market power enables them to set the terms of digital engagement for billions of people worldwide. That concentration of power has profound implications for the rights to privacy, non-discrimination and access to information. It also has the power to undermine our democratic processes fundamentally, which is one of the points that the right hon. Member made in his opening remarks.

The platforms have become so embedded in daily life that meaningful participation in society often depends on using their services. That gives them enormous power to influence public discourse and to curate the information that we receive. We have in effect subcontracted our right to information to a handful of big tech gatekeepers. Nowhere is the danger posed to society greater than on the issue of AI.

Without doubt, AI is a transformational technology that will bring many benefits to our society, but in order to realise those benefits fully, it is important to put up safeguards to ensure that those technologies are developed and deployed appropriately and in the interests of society as a whole, rather than simply as a vehicle by which large tech companies can make even greater profits. Without robust regulation, we risk steering society towards an unpredictable and turbulent future that does not work for the public.

I have already raised with the Government the prospect of considering some form of employment levy, for example, on companies that replace large-scale workforces with AI. Tax is crucial to this debate, and I want to finish on it. Complicated corporate structures, offshore schemes and favourable tax systems allow companies

[Neil Duncan-Jordan]

such as Amazon and Apple to boost their bottom line. Given the lack of transparency about where companies make their money and pay their taxes, it is difficult to get an accurate picture of what is going on. Big tech is here to stay, but how we regulate it, tax it and control it are the big questions that our Government and society as a whole need to face.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): I thank all Members who have spoken so far for their co-operation. We now move on to the Front-Bench contributions, beginning with the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

5.26 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy. I thank the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) for securing this important debate and for raising the very real issues of the impact of big tech on democracy.

Big tech has in many cases become synonymous with US tech, but that is not something that we should accept. The UK's technology ecosystem is worth nearly £1 trillion. It is the third most valuable tech ecosystem in the world and the most valuable in Europe. The UK has a long history of technological innovation, from the industrial revolution to the creation of the world wide web. That legacy is still very much alive today, but we must continue to foster it.

The shortage of STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—skills in the UK has been a concern for the past two decades, along with scale-up funding. Start-ups in the UK repeatedly say that their main challenge is finding funding to scale up, and that that is hindering the UK's chance of having a thriving technological ecosystem with as large an impact as that of America. If we look at our pensions, for example, foreign pension funds invest 16 times more into UK start-ups than our own pension funds do. Overseas funds recognise the talent that we create, so why don't we? Why are we allowing our brilliant British start-ups to be sold abroad?

Backing British technology has never been so important, as we have heard in the debate, because big technology exists in every corner of our society. Even the Government run their computer systems on overseas cloud providers. As alluded to, the NHS data system is run by Palantir. The online systems used every day by workers across the UK's economy are run by big tech companies, neither owned nor run from the UK. That is a question of not only economic security but, increasingly, national security.

We cannot ignore the risks posed by overreliance on foreign technologies. That became apparent when the US Government switched off, across the globe, access to Anthropic's Fable 5 and Mythos 5. While Fable 5 may only have been a feature for a day, a worrying precedent has been set for the US's role in turning off international access to its big tech. What if that tech had been powering public services, such as our NHS records, when it was suddenly cut off? This must be a wake-up call.

Our reliance on the technology that fuels our economy and underpins our services shows how desperately we need a digital sovereignty strategy to support British tech. The Liberal Democrats are not willing to take the risk,

which is why we tabled and voted in favour of a digital sovereignty strategy during proceedings on the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill. We would have required the Government to establish a digital sovereignty strategy that placed British tech procurement at its centre. In an increasingly unstable world, the case for British digital resilience, technology and sovereign capability has never been stronger, but the Labour Government voted the proposed strategy down. I ask the Minister to explain what his alternative strategy is.

Unfortunately, we cannot talk about big tech's role in society without also thinking about the online harms. The world is increasingly moving towards the regulation of social media, and the Liberal Democrats welcome the action that the Government finally took on that issue, but the fine print really matters. The burden of safety must be on big tech, not on parents. The Liberal Democrats are clear that we must implement film-style age ratings based on harm, addictiveness and mental health impact. That is supported by the NSPCC, the Molly Rose Foundation and over 40 charities.

Social media companies must also play a stronger role in tackling misinformation. The UK Government must introduce stricter regulations for social media companies to ensure that they challenge harmful misinformation and reduce its spread across their platforms. Social media companies must issue fact-checked corrections to scientifically inaccurate posts and ensure that those are seen by everyone who shared or saw the original inaccurate posts. They must also change their algorithms to de-promote misinformation and fake news.

I recently witnessed the devastating and real-life impact of unregulated dis and misinformation in Epsom and Ewell when riots took place there in April. In analysing the social media around those riots, the Council for Countering Online Disinformation found that 62 right wing UK accounts produced 70% of the misinformation. It also found that 42 video posts containing misinformation reached 4.2 million views, accounting for nearly 25% of misinformation views, despite accounting for less than 1% of all Epsom misinformation posts. That false information reached at least 21.8 million views between 11 April and 23 April. It was also promoted by X's algorithm and, alarmingly, it continued to sit in X's trending tab for at least two consecutive days after it had been clarified by the police that the events in question never took place.

Social media is not the only cause of online harms. Despite their transformative potential, evidence shows that AI and bots are also a cause of harm online. NBC News reported that 57.4% of search requests online are now initiated by bots, compared with 42.6% coming from humans—a terrifying reality where bots are outpacing and outnumbering humans online. At the same time, 70% of people are unable to correctly identify real and fake AI-generated content online. Those online harms have been driven by big tech, and current legislation does not actively prevent them.

That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for the Government to create a new online crime agency to effectively tackle illegal content online. We would also introduce a digital Bill of Rights to protect everyone's rights online, including the right to privacy, free expression and participation. The Liberal Democrats believe that the UK must lead the world in building a future where

AI is developed and deployed ethically. That is why we would establish a cross-sector AI regulator that combines flexible, ethical oversight and technical expertise to ensure that the UK keeps pace with the rapid advances in technology.

The AI legislation promised in Labour's manifesto and the 2024 King's Speech has not yet materialised. Internal conflicts and leadership challenges cannot be allowed—

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady, but she has five minutes to sum up the debate, and she is on six and a bit. Can she swiftly get to her last sentence?

Helen Maguire: Absolutely. Internal conflicts and leadership challenges cannot be allowed to cost Britain its technological future or the safety of our children. The Liberal Democrats will continue to push the Government on the positive role that British big tech can have, while holding the Government to account. Getting that right is not politics; it is essential for Britain's future.

5.33 pm

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Jeremy, and a privilege to respond to this debate on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition. I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) on securing this important debate. I know that we share a common interest in this area. I also congratulate him on bringing a debate about the big picture stuff. It is important that we get there, and I compliment hon. Members for rising to meet that challenge.

The United Kingdom is home to Europe's largest, and one of the world's most dynamic, technology ecosystems. The digital and technology sector contributes an estimated £207 billion in gross value added to the UK economy and supports around 2.6 million jobs. It represents a vital pillar in our national prosperity that drives productivity, fosters high-skilled employment and enhances our global competitiveness. From artificial intelligence and cyber-security to fintech and advanced manufacturing, British innovation in technology continues to shape industries both at home and abroad.

We fully recognise the substantial benefits that large technology companies bring. These firms deliver cutting-edge innovation, significant investment, world-class infrastructure and services that millions of people and businesses rely on every day. Their scale enables rapid advancement in areas such as cloud computing, mobile technologies and data analytics, which in turn support broader economic growth across sectors.

At the same time, we must remain vigilant and ensure that market concentration does not inadvertently stifle competition or limit opportunities for emerging British firms. In key areas, a small number of global players hold dominant positions. Together, Apple and Google account for virtually the entire mobile operating system market in the UK, with iOS and Android combined making up nearly 100% of the share. Similarly, Amazon Web Services and Microsoft together command a very significant portion—often estimated at between 60% and 80%—of the UK's cloud computing infrastructure market.

That concentration brings clear efficiencies and capabilities, but it also highlights the need for effective oversight. We support a proportionate competition policy that promotes fairness, encourages new entrants and prevents any single player from abusing market power. Open and competitive digital markets are essential if we are to retain more economic value within the UK, nurture home-grown talent, and build a resilient and diversified digital economy.

As Conservatives, we have long championed the importance of robust yet balanced digital competition enforcement. Regulation should protect consumers and smaller innovators without creating unnecessary bureaucratic barriers that slow growth. The Competition and Markets Authority has an important role to play in this regard, alongside evolving frameworks such as the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024. Our approach prioritises evidence-based intervention that fosters innovation while maintaining the attractiveness of the UK as a place to invest and scale business.

This principle extends to other critical areas, including online safety. Timely and decisive action to protect children and other vulnerable users online is essential, and we have constantly advocated for stronger practical safeguards, working alongside parents, campaigners, experts and the industry, because protecting the most vulnerable must remain a priority. The Leader of the Opposition did not flinch from standing with parents and carers when the time came to be robust. Constructive collaboration between Government, technology companies and civil society will achieve better long-term outcomes than purely reactive measures.

More broadly, the influence of technology touches every aspect of modern life. From boosting productivity in traditional industries to enabling breakthroughs in healthcare and climate solutions, the sector's potential is immense. However, realising that potential requires the right conditions: access to talent, supportive infrastructure, access to finance for scale-ups, and a regulatory environment that rewards innovation rather than entrenching incumbents.

At its core, this debate asks us to consider what kind of digital economy we wish to build for the future. We believe that Britain should aim for an economy in which a diverse range of innovative companies—from start-ups in our world-class universities and tech clusters to established firms—can compete, grow and deliver benefits to consumers and society on merit. This vision rests on a strong competition policy that prevents the abuse of market power while actively encouraging the investment, dynamism and entrepreneurship that drive long-term growth.

We also recognise the global nature of technology. International co-operation on standards, data flows and emerging issues such as artificial intelligence will be increasingly important. The UK's position as a leading tech nation gives us influence on the world stage, and we should use that influence to promote open markets, ethical innovation and high standards.

The success of our technology sector is central to delivering the economic growth and opportunity that our country needs. By championing competition, supporting innovation and maintaining a balanced approach to regulation, we can ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of the global digital economy, creating jobs, driving prosperity and harnessing technology for the benefit of all. I look forward to hearing the Minister's remarks on the Government's current thinking regarding

[Peter Fortune]

the role of large technology companies, and on how together we can best support a thriving, competitive and innovative UK tech sector.

5.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Kanishka Narayan): It is always a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Jeremy, but it is a particular pleasure when we are discussing questions of digital markets and regulation, because I know that you bring expertise in and experience of these issues.

I thank the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) for securing this debate. He has held me to account in the main Chamber, we have spoken in the corridors of Parliament, and I am delighted that he has now convened a much broader debate on the role of big tech in society. I am grateful to him and to all other hon. Members for their contributions to this important discussion.

This debate gets to the heart of what I consider the central question in our politics, our economy and our national security: how we ensure that the extraordinary power of modern technology serves our society, strengthens our economy, protects our citizens, and is grounded in British values.

Given the time we have, I will do the courtesy of responding to individual Members first before talking more substantively on the common issues. The right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) raised the central question: are we on the side of British values or shareholder values for firms located abroad? It is pretty clear, whether on questions of online safety legislation, where we have the most robust regime anywhere in the world, or on questions of the most innovative set of sovereignty interventions anywhere in the world, that every single decision that this Government have made on technology has been on the side of British values, in the spirit of collaborating and never capitulating.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) raised the two magic words: open source. I made a speech a few months ago talking about my passion for open source, not least because aspects of its Welsh grounding—Raspberry Pi, developed by a Welsh founder, is now opening up opportunities for kids in living rooms across the world to develop bits of software.

There are three things we have therefore done on open source that make Britain the best place in the world for open-source talent: first, a particular focus on talent, not least a major hackathon we have partnered on to invite the world's best talent to come and build open source here; secondly, a series of offers of compute, direct involvement in Government strategy on open source and, to the extent it is helpful, personal mentoring from me for winners of public service development on open source; and thirdly, just this morning, significant funding of £30 million for a serious national lab, led by University College London, focused in particular on open-source models. Britain is at the frontier of open-source AI, and this is the right thing to have done for our sovereignty aspirations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport raised an important point about kids' experiences on social media and the impact on educational attainment. That is

exactly my personal motivation behind the significant action we are taking to ban social media for under-16s as well.

The hon. Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) raised a series of questions, and I will address two of them in particular. He asked about compliance with social media bans. There are three things we have done to ensure we learn the lessons from elsewhere: more robust age checks; ensuring that enforcement is out of the gate on day one rather than delayed, so that companies feel the heat of enforcement early on; and to acknowledge that this will not be a 100% overnight compliance issue, but a long-term societal shift in culture, as previous regulations have created. That is the right thing to do.

The hon. Member for Yeovil asked about wider opportunities that the Government will support to offset some opportunities that young people might lose as a result of the ban. There are exemptions for both education services and music streaming. Really importantly, on the day that we announced the social media ban for under-16s, we announced 180 youth hubs across the country. That means more than £500 million spent on arts, music and culture opportunities for young people, right across England. There was a series of contributions from Members with that point in mind.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) raised very important points about concentration. I will not speak overtly about an individual company, but I will flag that I understand from the relevant Department that a supplier contract for the NHS federated data platform will be reviewed in line with standard contract management processes this year, on the question of its extension. I am sure that her contributions will be regarded in that context.

I normally hold the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) fondly in my mind in our parliamentary debates, so I was sorry to hear her take a more political, point-scoring approach to questions of online safety. I was sad that she called putting the voices of Welsh kids and families at the heart of our decisions “dilly-dallying”. Thousands of young people and families in Wales contributed to the decision on a social media ban. This is a historic decision for the people of Wales, whose voices fundamentally shaped it. That is not tiptoeing; it is running fast but together towards the solutions that matter.

On the hon. Lady's particular questions, we are preparing legislative options alongside securing significant progress on blocking children from taking, receiving and sharing nude images. We have already secured more progress than any other country on this question. On her point on proactively dealing with national security concerns, the British Government are building capabilities, not least through the Security Institute and across our intelligence agencies, that are unparalleled in terms of ensuring that our national security is a priority on questions of technology.

On when this Government will face up to tech platforms, I gently suggest to the hon. Lady that again and again this Government have taken the side of people, not platforms—of British families, including Welsh families, not foreign tech billionaires. I would encourage her to join us in that mission.

My hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) raised concerns about a particular data centre. I am not fully abreast of the plans on that

particular site, but I am very conscious of the concerns he raised. I simply point out that, in theory, there are ways in which data centre investors ought to make sure that what they are doing supports our important clean energy and power goals. In particular, I reflect on the fact that in Lanarkshire there are significant sites that have pulled forward clean energy generation in solar and battery as a result of data centre investment, rather than instead of or in trade off with it. Again, we are focused on ensuring that both those aspirations are met, as they are in north Wales where our data centre investments are pulling forward the future of small modular reactor nuclear in this country.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean) and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), raised an important point about pension funds under allocation to British equities, in particular to British technology and AI equities. That has been a huge focus for the Government, not least through the Mansion House reforms and the increased deployment pace at the British Business Bank, which is now deploying more than £2 billion a year in this area, but also through the half-a-billion sovereign AI fund, which is focused on building deep British capability.

The point the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington raised about the balance of power is central. In response to the ask for a sovereignty strategy, we are not only talking about it—we are delivering it. We have defined the single most important question: where does Britain stand on the balance of power? Do we have strategic leverage to secure ongoing access to critical inputs? There are three tests we are focused on. The first is having enough critical inputs—NVIDIA graphic processing units, for example—to be able to play our way in the world. The second is having a diverse set of sources so that we have bargaining leverage in that context; one of the first things I did was meet SambaNova, Cerebras and Groq to diversify our engagement with chip companies. The third really important test is, where British strengths and economics allow, to build full-fat British capability. We have done that with our hardware plan—more than £1 billion supporting companies such as Fractile, OLIX, Saliency Labs and others. That is the crux of our sovereignty strategy: a clear definition, a clear plan across every part of the stack on AI, and delivery alongside that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) brought a deep degree of expertise on technology to this debate and asked the central question: do we shape technology in the artificial intelligence revolution, or is it the other way around? His point about stronger competition, which was also raised by the shadow Minister, is important. The CMA has been acting in an area of collaboration between the previous Government's aspirations on digital competition and this Government's. I look forward to the enforcement of remedies across both mobile and business software when it comes to AI.

My hon. Friend also raised questions about online safety. I hope he feels that the significant actions that the Government have taken—banning social media for under 16s, being one of the first countries to bring AI chatbots into regulatory scope to make sure that

they are not producing illegal content, and banning romantic chatbots—have been pioneering and show that we are always on the side of the British public.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) raised incredibly important points about how we ensure that the security of AI is central to the questions we ask in public policy. Across every aspect of Government, we are building a Labour vision for that. We are building state institutions that will last the test of time and ensure that we are kept safe from some of the risks of AI.

Mark Pritchard: I am conscious of time, so I want to give the Minister the opportunity to answer the questions I asked: who owns the data, who controls the data, and what does that mean for democracy and the balance of power?

Kanishka Narayan: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and I am personally interested in how we rest more agency and control in the hands of the British public and the British state when it comes to data. There are clear rules and regulations about both privacy and individual data consents that apply, but I want to go further still by building infrastructure that equips individuals to have greater control over their data.

In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Poole's points, through the AI Security Institute we have the best capability in the state to keep evaluating, understanding and mitigating risks. Through the AI Economics Institute, we have a deeper understanding of the impact of AI on jobs than pretty much any other country. We want to go further on that, including looking at a range of economic levers to mitigate some of the risks. Through sovereign AI we are investing in British capabilities, through the Alan Turing Institute we are investing in national security-relevant AI, and through labs that were funded just this morning we are making sure that British capability, rather than foreign capability alone, determines the future of AI.

Sir Jeremy Wright (in the Chair): The debate must finish at 5.50 pm, so the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) has a minute to wind up his debate.

5.49 pm

Mark Pritchard: Just a minute: no deviation, repetition or hesitation—never from the Minister, who was completely direct, cogent and excellent as ever. But the question remains for all of us: who owns and controls the data and what does that mean for democracy? That is not a party political point. Is that control and oversight of the governance sat in an office in San Francisco or elsewhere, or is it in a Minister of the Crown's office here in Whitehall? That will be an ongoing debate that goes to the fundamentals of why we are all here. The people must have the power, not large corporate entities. I think we all agree that we need to see more competition. Tech is a force for good, but we need to ensure that it has oversight.

5.50 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 23 June 2026

TREASURY

Covid Counter Fraud Commissioner Independent Review: Government Response

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): I am pleased to inform the House that the Government's response to the final report of the Covid Counter Fraud Commissioner, CP 1596, has been laid in Parliament today.

On 9 December 2025 the Covid Counter Fraud Commissioner revealed in his final report, "Pursuing Recoveries and Preventing Reoccurrence", CP 1462, the staggering amount of fraud and error across pandemic support schemes—£10.9 billion. This is money that should have funded our NHS and schools—money that belongs in our communities.

The commissioner's report set out crucial recommendations for recovering this money, ensuring those who defrauded the state during a national crisis face justice and preventing the misuse of public funds during future crises. Over the last two years Government have been working up an ambitious plan to recover funds and prevent fraud in future national emergencies based on the commissioner's findings. Today's paper sets out that plan and responds in detail to each of the commissioner's recommendations.

Righting these wrongs will not be easy. Significant time has elapsed and many of the entities involved have been dissolved, meaning some funds may still prove irrecoverable. But we are committed to putting this appalling scandal right—by recovering funds taken by fraudsters during the pandemic and putting them back into our public services, holding those responsible to account, and ensuring that taxpayer money is better protected in the future.

The report is published on gov.uk at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-of-the-covid-counter-fraud-commissioner>
 [HCWS140]

Tax Update 2026: Simplification, Modernisation and Fairness

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): Today the Government set out further reforms to simplify and modernise the tax and customs system, building on the commitment first made in His Majesty's Revenue and Customs transformation road map, published in July 2025 and confirmed at Budget 2025.

The measures announced today simplify rules, improve taxpayer guidance, and ensure more taxpayers can benefit from high-quality digital services. The changes, consultations and proposals announced today will help people and businesses to get their tax and customs right first time, while reducing burdens and improving certainty.

The Government are acting to collect more revenue from those who do not play by the rules. This will help ensure that taxpayers and legitimate high-street businesses can compete on a level playing field. The Government

are consulting on reforms to online marketplace VAT liability; further extending this liability to more effectively tackle non-compliance; bringing forward reforms to low-value imports, as first announced at Budget 2025; and taking targeted steps to tackle fraud from "sales suppression" systems, through consulting on new software standards.

Simplifying and modernising the tax system

The measures announced today support the Government's long-term ambition for a simpler tax system, in which rules are straightforward and easy to understand, and meeting tax obligations fits into how people run their lives and businesses. Together, these measures will improve how employer payroll and expenses operate, cut down on paper processes, and improve the overall experience for small businesses.

Key measures include:

VAT treatment of land intended for social housing: The Government are today launching a consultation on the introduction of a new zero rate of VAT for the sale of land intended for the construction of social housing. It is seeking views on how the current VAT rules work and how a new zero rate would support the delivery of social housing, helping reduce barriers to building new homes and supporting more households into safe and decent homes. The consultation will also help ensure any new tax relief remains fair and affordable.

Review and uprating of benchmark scale rates and overseas scale rates: BSR and OSR are optional flat rates that employers can use to reimburse employees for the cost of meals and other travel expenses when they travel for work in the UK (BSR), and for accommodation and meals when they travel overseas (OSR), without having to check every receipt. In response to stakeholder feedback, and following engagement with industry, the Government will review HMRC's BSR and OSR. BSR will be reviewed, with consideration given to the current costs of travel. In addition, the review will look to understand if there is scope to simplify OSR, with more alignment between BSR and OSR.

More Timely Payment for Income Tax Self-Assessment: As announced at Budget 2025, the Government are today launching a consultation on implementing more timely payments in ITSA, including reforms for ITSA customers with pay-as-you-earn income, who will be required to pay more of their forecasted self-assessment liabilities in-year through PAYE from April 2029. We are also consulting on the potential for more timely payments for other self-assessment taxpayers by reforming payments on account. Spreading tax payments through the year into smaller, regular payments will help reduce tax debt and avoid taxpayers having to pay larger, infrequent and sometimes unexpected bills.

Call for evidence on PAYE Settlement Agreements: The Government are taking proactive steps to simplify and modernise PSAs. As part of this review, HMRC is today publishing a call for evidence. The call for evidence seeks to improve understanding of how PSAs operate in practice, including how employers interpret the rules and where there may be complexity or uncertainty. The evidence gathered will allow an informed view of whether any changes are needed, with the aim of addressing unclear boundaries and inconsistent use, and helping to reduce administrative burdens for employers and advisers.

Consultation on modernising the distributions framework: The Government are today launching a consultation to explore modernising the rules that determine whether a payment to a company's non-corporate shareholders falls within the distributions regime. This is to ensure the rules operate as intended and minimise distortions, without undermining commercial practice. The Government are consulting because of the complexity of this area of the tax system, which in many cases has not been reformed since 1965, and the need to have a clear view of potential impacts before deciding whether to proceed.

Digitising the option to tax process: Option to tax allows businesses to reclaim and charge VAT on land and buildings, which are normally exempt from VAT. In response to feedback from the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of

Chartered Accountants of Scotland, and through work with the Land & Property Liaison Group—an HMRC-industry forum—the Government are improving the option to tax process by replacing paper-based routes with a new digital channel. This will incorporate industry requirements, including bulk uploads, for option to tax notifications, revocations and VAT registration cancellations.

Consultation on the tax treatment of members of US limited liability companies and other reverse hybrids: The Government launched a consultation on 10 June 2026 on new proposals to remove double taxation from investments in certain types of overseas entity—including US limited liability companies—where an unintended mismatch is resulting in high and unfair tax rates. This proposal is part of the wider work that the Government are doing to develop the UK's offer for globally mobile talent and ensure that the UK is a great place to live and work.

First-time buyer individual savings account consultation: The Government are committed to making the aspiration of home ownership a reality for as many households as possible. To support that ambition, the Government are today launching a consultation on the implementation of a new, simpler ISA product to support first-time buyers to buy a home. Once available, this new product will be offered in place of the lifetime ISA.

Help to Save: The Government confirm that the reformed help to save scheme will be delivered through a multi-provider model. Following consultation and engagement with stakeholders, this approach will enable financial institutions to offer help to save accounts directly to eligible customers, with the aim of improving visibility and access by embedding the scheme within the mainstream savings market. The Government will continue to work with industry to support implementation of the reformed scheme.

HMRC is continuing to deliver on existing simplification commitments, including by making its guidance clearer and easier to use. To support this aim, HMRC delivered over 4,000 updates and improvements to guidance last year to help more customers digitally self-serve and minimise complexity.

HMRC has also developed interactive guidance, which has won several awards for simplifying complex areas of the system by providing customers with tailored, step-by-step journeys. Over the last four years, HMRC has built 118 of these journeys and in 2025-26, customer feedback shows that interactive guidance supports effective self-service, with nearly 80% of respondents saying they were able to complete their task. This is supported by HMRC's data, which shows that over 96% of customers did not visit HMRC's "Contact us" pages within five days of using interactive guidance.

HMRC is also continuing work through the Better Letters Together initiative, launched in July 2025, working with the Administrative Burdens Advisory Board to improve the clarity and quality of letters and emails sent to customers.

Simplifying and modernising the customs system

The Government are committed to building a resilient, facilitative and modern customs system that promotes trade while protecting the UK and our economy. A customs system that gets the fundamentals right and adapts to modern international trade is key to trading with ease, now and into the future.

The measures announced today support ongoing administrative improvements to the customs regime, while laying the groundwork for future innovation and change. These measures collectively simplify customs processes and systems, support digitalised trade and improve trader experience, while protecting the UK border and domestic market.

The Government remain committed to working with industry to deliver reforms and identify further opportunities to enhance the customs system.

Key measures include:

Call for evidence on customs modernisation: The Government have published a call for evidence to capture industry views on trade digitalisation, and potential opportunities and challenges for the UK customs regime. This will explore key elements of the UK customs regime in the context of technological and regulatory change, to ensure we understand evolving trader practices and needs and continue to drive international trade.

Digitalisation and artificial intelligence customs pilots: Building on successful pilots with trade and US Customs and Border Protection, the Government will test and scale innovations in the customs system. This includes design and delivery of services allowing HMRC to process electronic trade documents for customs applications, and participating in the next phase of the Department for Business and Trade's Digital Trade Corridors programme. These initiatives will support businesses to adopt fully digitalised trade. HMRC will also test how AI can support customs caseworkers to complete real-time border documentary checks, improving border flow and strengthening compliance.

Improving the quality of our customs intermediaries: The Government are improving their support to good-quality intermediaries in the customs sector, through the launch of the previously announced standard for customs intermediaries, which was published on 3 June 2026, development of a voluntary certification scheme for the standard, and a new commitment to publish a consultation on mandating customs intermediary registration. This work will ensure the customs system is supported by a high standard of intermediary service.

Digital ATA Carnets: The Government have announced that the UK is one of the first countries to adopt digital ATA carnets, from 1 June 2026. Digitising this "passport for goods" makes it easier for businesses and touring artists to move goods between the UK and other countries temporarily without payment of import duties.

Changes to the duty reimbursement scheme for Northern Ireland goods: The Government have introduced legislative changes to make it easier for businesses to reclaim "at risk" duty paid on goods brought into Northern Ireland. The changes, which went live on 26 May 2026, are designed to enhance access to the scheme by directly addressing business concerns, and also ease the financial burden on businesses where evidence of the final destination of goods takes time to materialise.

Strengthening fairness in the tax system and helping customers get their tax and customs right.

Measures announced today also strengthen compliance and set out options to improve HMRC's ability to collect tax that is owed. This ensures fairness for the vast majority of taxpayers who meet their obligations and supports fair competition on the high street.

Key measures include:

Reforming the customs treatment of low value imports: The Government have listened carefully to representations made by industry and decided to accelerate delivery of the reforms by six months to October 2028 at the latest. In doing this, the Government have sought to ensure all goods are adequately controlled, while balancing the need to promote fair competition between high street and online retailers, and giving businesses involved in the sales and movement of low-value goods time to prepare for the changes and avoid border disruption. To give businesses as much certainty as possible about the new customs arrangements, the Government will publish a consultation response shortly and start legislating for the reforms in this year's Finance Bill.

Online marketplace liability: The Government want to tackle persistent VAT non-compliance among businesses selling on online marketplaces, both overseas and domestic. These businesses undermine honest businesses that pay what they owe, and it is estimated that they cost hundreds of millions in lost VAT each year. The Government are therefore consulting on how to clamp down on this non-compliance by making online marketplaces liable for VAT on both UK and overseas business sales of goods. This reform would make it harder for overseas businesses to masquerade as being UK-based to escape the current rules, and make sure UK

businesses also pay what they owe. This consultation seeks views from online marketplaces, hot food delivery platforms and restaurants and sellers operating through those platforms.

Electronic sales suppression software standards: The Government are determined to tackle till fraud on the UK's high streets, in which traders use payment systems to fraudulently under-report their income, which is unfair to legitimate high street businesses. The Government are launching a consultation on the introduction of software standards for electronic point of sale and mobile point of sale systems. This consultation seeks views from businesses, software developers and wider stakeholders on measures designed to prevent electronic sales suppression and support fair competition on the high street. The Government aim to ensure that any future approach minimises burdens on compliant businesses and delivers secure, reliable record-keeping that prevents till fraud.

Tackling lower value debts: The Government are today launching a consultation on proposals to extend existing powers to enable recovery of lower-value tax debts. This would apply to customers who can pay but have not responded to multiple contact attempts from HMRC. Each year, over 750,000 such debts, collectively worth more than £2 billion, remain uncollected after nine months, and more than 10 attempts to contact customers to pay what they owe. The proposals would enable HMRC to collect debts directly from customers' accounts in regular instalments, supported by a comprehensive suite of safeguards to ensure the power is used fairly and proportionately. This measure will help ensure those who can pay their tax debt do so, while maintaining trust and fairness in the tax system.

The full list of publications and announcements can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/taxupdate-2026-simplification-modernisation-and-fairness>

[HCWS141]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Media Green Paper

The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray): The Government have today published a Green Paper that sets out a new strategic direction for the Government's media policy.

At its best, our media provides the basis of a cohesive country and a healthy democracy. It has the power to advance shared understanding, shared facts, and shared experiences which help people trust and understand one another. It is this common ground on which a country is built.

However, like so many of our other civic spaces, it is facing fundamental challenges which are putting these benefits at risk. Television is undergoing a profound transformation, having moved from a system of limited broadcast channels to an environment of "content everywhere", where the largest players are global streaming services, video sharing platforms, and social media companies. Our domestic broadcasters, including our public service media (PSM) providers, are fighting to be seen in an increasingly competitive and fragmented market. People are increasingly accessing news online, rather than through more regulated spaces like their TV sets. This is weakening the ability of trustworthy news providers to reach audiences and shape an informed public debate.

We are consulting on a comprehensive set of proposals to ensure our media, and television in particular, can continue to play its vitally important role in our society and our democracy.

First, we are proposing three interventions to support an informed society. We will explore legislative options to require social media to make trustworthy news providers—which could include national and local news publishers and broadcasters—easily discoverable. This is crucial for countering misinformation, especially during times of crisis. We will also explore a new duty on PSM providers to develop and report on media literacy strategies, leveraging their high level of public trust and reach to help people critically assess the information they encounter. Further, we will consider mechanisms to support co-ordinated media literacy efforts across public service media, and the wider media sector.

Secondly, building on the extensive stakeholder engagement already undertaken, we will consult on measures to ensure audiences can continue to enjoy universal access to trusted and high-quality television content. The UK television market is shifting from traditional broadcast platforms such as digital terrestrial TV (DTT) to internet-delivered viewing (IPTV). The Government are committed to maintaining DTT until at least the end of 2034, but we are now consulting on what will come after this. To do this, we will work with industry and audience groups to design a package of support that helps audiences transition to IPTV services, ensuring that no one is left behind. This support will aim to address challenges around affordability and accessibility, enabling viewers to make the switch with confidence and benefit from the enhanced functionality and wider choice that IPTV services can offer. Alongside this, we will bring forward a plan for the managed withdrawal of DTT services. Final decisions will be taken in response to the consultation and set out in a White Paper.

We will also undertake a separate period of stakeholder engagement to ensure the regulatory framework for TV services continues to protect audiences from harmful content, supports media providers, and allows our creative industries to thrive into the future.

Finally, the Green Paper will explore how we can support our PSM providers—the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5, STV and S4C—who sit at the heart of our domestic TV ecosystem, driving growth and inward investment. PSM content needs to be easy to find on the platforms on which people watch TV. Therefore, the Green Paper examines the need for prominence on third party platforms, such as video sharing platforms. The Government's strong preference remains for industry-led, voluntary agreements to achieve increased prominence in a sustainable and robust way that satisfies all parties. However, should these partnerships not go far enough in delivering our objectives we would need to consider legislating.

We will also consult on illustrative options for strategic reform to the PSM system with the aim of better reflecting how people consume media and to address the regulatory and economic challenges this poses. We want a system that encourages the creation of more public service content, reversing the trend of recent years which has seen the output of our PSM providers decline.

Taken together, this work will ensure that our media continues to play its vitally important roles in entertaining, educating, serving democracy and supporting social cohesion in the UK, while putting audiences first.

The consultation attached to the Green Paper will be open for 10 weeks. Following this, the Government will bring forward a White Paper later this year.

This Green Paper complements the review we are undertaking of the BBC's royal charter. We will consider the findings and conclusions of this Green Paper alongside the BBC Green Paper published in December 2025 as part of the charter review.

In connection with the above, our Department has made the following documents available on gov.uk:

Watch this Space: A new strategic direction for UK media

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/watch-this-space-a-new-strategic-direction-for-uk-media-green-paper-and-public-consultation>

Papers from the Future of TV Distribution Stakeholder Forum

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-of-tv-distribution-stakeholder-forum-papers>

Minutes from the Future of TV Distribution Stakeholder Forum

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-of-tv-distribution-stakeholder-forum-minutes>

Future of TV distribution—Assessing the value and alternative uses of DTT spectrum for the future of UK TV distribution

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-of-tv-distribution-assessing-the-value-and-alternative-uses-of-dtt-spectrum-for-the-future-of-uk-tv-distribution>

I will also deposit a copy of “Watch this Space” in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS136]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Deforestation Regulations

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Reynolds): The UK has a leading role to play in supporting global efforts to tackle deforestation. Implementing an updated regime across the UK is critical to strengthen environmental protections, grow trade in sustainably produced commodities, and contribute to global efforts to halt deforestation—one of the most effective measures to address climate change and biodiversity loss.

This Government recognise that healthy forests are essential to climate stability, sustainable economic growth and the livelihoods of communities at home and abroad. Protecting and restoring these ecosystems strengthens our collective resilience, allowing us to secure supply chains, food and water resources, and long-term prosperity.

Around 90% of global deforestation is driven by agriculture, much of which is to produce internationally traded commodities. In 2023, UK consumption of agricultural commodities was associated with 29,000 hectares of deforestation worldwide and 9.4 million tonnes of associated carbon emissions.

UK companies have been global leaders in taking strong voluntary action to address deforestation in their supply chains, but they have also been clear that voluntary measures alone cannot deliver the consistency and certainty needed to tackle this global challenge.

A mandatory due diligence framework for timber has been in place across the UK since 2013. Building on this existing framework, we now intend to go further to decouple UK consumption from global deforestation.

We will therefore launch a consultation later this year to seek views on our Great Britain deforestation policy proposals from businesses, civil society and international partners.

We will consult on our aim to introduce regulations, including under the Environment Act 2021, alongside legislation that will strengthen the UK timber regulation. The aim of our proposals will be to require businesses in Great Britain with an annual turnover of over £1 million that use forest risk commodities and wood products, to carry out due diligence to ensure these are produced in compliance with relevant local laws.

In parallel, the Government are also confirming that the EU Regulation on Deforestation-free Products will apply in Northern Ireland as part of arrangements which ensure Northern Ireland's unique access to the EU single market is maintained. The regulation is due to apply in phases from 30 December 2026.

To ensure coherence across the UK internal market, and recognising the Government's manifesto commitment to protect the UK internal market and remove barriers to trade with the EU, we aim, subject to consultation, for due diligence requirements in Great Britain to apply to the same commodities and for businesses to be required to hold and pass down the supply chain broadly the same information as under the EUDR.

This approach is intended to avoid duplication of business burdens and disincentives to trade between Great Britain, Northern Ireland and the EU, so as to ensure that the measures announced today for Great Britain operate effectively alongside the EUDR.

In due course, the Government's ambition is to transition to a deforestation-free standard.

The Government's aim is to strengthen the approach to tackling deforestation, ensuring that any measures support the UK's objectives on promoting economic growth, securing sustainable supply chains and advancing our international climate and nature ambitions.

This action also helps us deliver on the UK's commitment under the Glasgow leaders' declaration on forests and land use, agreed at COP26, to halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030.

[HCWS137]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

UK-St Helena BIOT Migrants Memorandum of Understanding: Extension

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): On 21 October 2024, I spoke to the House confirming that on 15 October 2024, a new memorandum of understanding (MoU) had been reached with the Government of St Helena so that any new migrants arriving on the British Indian Ocean Territory would be transferred to St Helena, recalling that in practice no new migrants have arrived on Diego Garcia since 2022. The intention was for that MoU to last until a treaty between the UK and Mauritius came into force.

Given the need to ensure this arrangement continues to operate effectively moving forward, on 21 May 2026, we reached a further understanding with the Government of St Helena to extend the MoU until 30 April 2028.

Although we do not anticipate the arrangement with St Helena being required for its full term, we and the Government of St Helena agreed it would be prudent to settle on a maximal timeframe, negating the need for any further extensions.

We are hugely grateful to the Government of St Helena for their continued commitment to the border security of both the United Kingdom and BIOT.

As part of the arrangement and within existing FCDO budget allocations, the UK Government have committed to provide a one-off investment of £8 million in St Helena to improve health and education outcomes, and improve telecommunications and renewable energy infrastructure. This is consistent with our long-term support to the sustainable development of St Helena. Other technical support and costs remain, as I said to the House on 21 October 2024.

In further recognition of St Helena's valued place within the British family, the UK Government also commit to provide a one-off ex gratia payment of £250,000 to St Helena.

We thank the community of St Helena for its willingness once again to support fellow members of the British family. This extension underlines the strength of our modern partnership with every one of our overseas territories.

[HCWS138]

HOME DEPARTMENT

State Threat Prevention and Investigation Measures: 20 March 2026 to 19 June 2026

The Minister for Security (Dame Angela Eagle): Section 55(1) of the National Security Act 2023 requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of their STPIM powers under the Act during that period.

STPIMs were introduced through the 2023 Act and came into force on 20 December 2023. There have been no STPIM cases imposed to date.

[HCWS139]

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 23 June 2026

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
TREASURY	163	TREASURY—continued	
Business Rates	165	Support for Industry.....	172
Cost of Living: Falkirk.....	164	Temporary VAT Reduction for Hospitality:	
Cost of Living: Wythenshawe and Sale East	175	Northern Ireland	165
Defence Investment Plan	167	Topical Questions	177
Economic Strength	176	Transport Connectivity: Border Communities.....	171
Green Book Wellbeing Guidance	167	Transport Infrastructure: North-west England.....	172
Heathrow Airport Expansion: Economic Growth		UK-EU Economic Co-operation.....	173
outside London	175	Venture Capital Trust Income Tax Relief	170
Household Budgets.....	163	Youth Unemployment	169
Loan Charge.....	164		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 23 June 2026

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	15WS	HOME DEPARTMENT	20WS
Media Green Paper.....	15WS	State Threat Prevention and Investigation	
		Measures: 20 March 2026 to 19 June 2026.....	20WS
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS.	17WS		
Deforestation Regulations	17WS	TREASURY	11WS
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND		Covid Counter Fraud Commissioner Independent	
DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	18WS	Review: Government Response	11WS
UK-St Helena BIOT Migrants Memorandum of		Tax Update 2026: Simplification, Modernisation	
Understanding: Extension	18WS	and Fairness.....	11WS

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Tuesday 30 June 2026**

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 23 June 2026

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 163] [see index inside back page]
Chancellor of the Exchequer

Opposition Day [1st allotted day]

Defence Spending and Readiness [Col. 183]
Motion—(James Cartlidge)—on a Division, negatived
Amendment—(Louise Sandher-Jones)—on a Division, agreed to
Motion, as amended, agreed to

Puberty Blockers [Col. 255]
Motion—(Dr Johnson)—on a Division, negatived

Forest City: West Suffolk [Col. 298]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Fly-tipping: Residential Areas [Col. 49WH]
Border Security: UK-Ireland Co-operation [Col. 76WH]
Environmental Sustainability: UK-Indonesia Collaboration [Col. 83WH]
Prison Safety [Col. 104WH]
Role of Big Tech in Society [Col. 111WH]
General debates

Written Statements [Col. 11WS]
