

Tuesday
7 July 2026

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 7 July 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 7 July 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

The Secretary of State was asked—

Climate Change: Weather Events

1. **Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he plans to take following recent weather events to help tackle climate change. [900855]

7. **Adam Thompson** (Erewash) (Lab): What steps he plans to take following recent weather events to help tackle climate change. [900861]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): The heatwave last month saw the maximum all-time June temperature record in the UK set at 37.7°C, 2° higher than at any time since records began. Without human-induced climate change, the World Weather Attribution group of scientists has found that this 2026 European heatwave would have been virtually impossible. The climate emergency is real, and it is here. As we face these facts, this Government will continue to follow the science, to protect current and future generations.

Paul Waugh: Last week in Rochdale, I attended a community screening of Chris Packham's "National Emergency Briefing", and one of the most chilling lines in that entire documentary was that today's extreme weather is the coolest and most stable weather we will experience for the rest of this century. In other words, the recent extreme heatwaves, floods and wildfires are going to get much, much worse without real action. Does the Secretary of State agree that this Labour Government have a strong record in just two years of gripping this emergency, but there is much more we can do to prevent the damage caused by climate change to our health, our economy and our national security?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend articulates the position incredibly well. This is an emergency, as I said. We have seen in the last few weeks the way it affects our transport system, our education system and, indeed, health. The figures on deaths from heat-related episodes are really chilling. The UK Health Security Agency estimated that there were 1,504 heat-associated deaths in England last summer, 1,311 in 2024, 2,295 in 2023 and 2,985 in 2022. That is why it is so important that we act.

Adam Thompson: While many of our ongoing discussions in this House rightly focus on decarbonising heating, climate change means that cooling is becoming increasingly

important, too, particularly in the context of our recent extreme heatwaves. As these heatwaves become increasingly frequent, homes and businesses in Erewash and across the country increasingly need cooling as well as heating. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that the growing demand for air conditioning is met through energy-efficient technologies and clean electricity, so that adaptation to climate change does not come at the expense of our net zero goals?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We know that active cooling systems will be really important to manage overheating in buildings. That is why we announced that we will extend support under the boiler upgrade scheme to include air-to-air heat pumps, which offer both heating and cooling. These grants make £2,500 available for installation of those systems, and air-to-air heat pumps are also included in the VAT relief scheme for energy-saving materials, which are currently subject to 0% VAT. It is a very important issue for the future.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): The Climate Change Committee has condemned the Government for failing and falling short of adapting to climate change and accepting the reality as it is, which is that by the end of this century, global temperatures will have increased to between 3.5° and 4.5° above pre-industrial levels. What are the Government doing to adapt, rather than trying to prevent this from happening?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Gentleman and I have had this discussion before. This is a very, very important point: of course, we have to do more on adaptation, but the idea that we give up on tackling the climate crisis is grossly irresponsible. Why? Because the costs will become enormous and unmanageable. We have had this discussion at the Select Committee before. We have got to do both. He will see, as somebody who is concerned about our economy, that we simply cannot say, "We're going to just let climate change run away to 3.5° or 4°," as he was saying, which would have massive impacts on our population. We have to keep to the Paris agreement and adapt as well.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): The Secretary of State has referred to the number of people who are already losing their lives annually due to excess extreme heat, and that number will reach 10,000 by mid-century. The Climate Change Committee has been clear that the costs of putting in place the adaptations that are needed are less than the costs of not putting those adaptations in place. Will he be adopting the Climate Change Committee's "A Well-Adapted UK" recommendations and investment plans in full?

Ed Miliband: Well, that is obviously a matter for discussion across Government, but the hon. Gentleman makes a really important point, and I do agree with it. The May 2026 report of the Climate Change Committee is an incredibly important, landmark report. We know that adaptation has essentially been in the past a poor cousin when it comes to government, and it needs more priority; I absolutely agree with him about that. He is also right to talk about the emergency, because we often say, "This is hotter than it has ever been before," but as my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) said, this is a cooler summer than we will have in the future—that is the reality that we face. I endorse what the hon. Gentleman said on all these matters.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): We are in the third heat wave this year and, as we have heard, we are in the climate emergency now. The Climate Change Committee's report, "A Well-Adapted UK", has said that we are woefully unprepared across all sectors to face 2°C of warming, let alone more. Communities like mine in South Cambridgeshire deserve to hear to the facts and the evidence, and they are holding people's emergency briefings. I have written a joint letter with the leader of the Liberal Democrats to ask: does the Secretary of State support the televising of a national emergency briefing, so that all households know what we need to do to strengthen our food security, nature, health, energy and national security?

Ed Miliband: I support all efforts to make people aware of this emergency. Indeed, the state of climate and nature annual statement, which we pioneered last year, will be happening again in the next couple of weeks precisely to draw people's attention to this issue. I suspect that the hon. Lady would agree that we have got to make people aware of the dangers and show that there is something that we can do about them. If we say to people, "It's an emergency but there's nothing that can be done," people will be despairing, whereas if we say, "It is an emergency and we are acting, and we can act, and we can even act more than we are," then we can show that something can be done.

Energy Security

2. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase energy security. [900856]

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): Great Britain's energy system is robust and reliable, and delivers 24/7 for households and businesses across the country. However, in an era of geopolitical uncertainty, we need to do all that we can to strengthen our energy security here at home. The answer is for us to move away from fossil fuels, which we cannot control, to deliver renewables and nuclear here at home, which we do control.

Catherine Fookes: I agree wholeheartedly with the Minister. I recently visited the first UK deep geothermal site at the Eden Project in Cornwall, thanks to the excellent energy and environment parliamentary knowledge scheme—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I learned that geothermal direct heat has several advantages, including zero emissions and particulates, and it is half the price and one third of the deployment time of a small modular reactor, but it is currently excluded from permitted development legislation, which leads to long delays, when it should be a much bigger part of our energy security. Will the Minister please update me on the steps being taken to ensure we can make the most of cheap geothermal energy for Monmouthshire and beyond?

Michael Shanks: A shout-out to the energy and environment parliamentary knowledge scheme—there are some Members of this House who would really benefit from gaining some of that knowledge, I think. I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue—I heard a lot of cheers from the Labour Benches. Geothermal has an important part to play and we have to accelerate the

potential of all low-carbon energy sources, including geothermal. We will continue to look into the issues around planning, but we are also trying to build out heat network infrastructure that can be used to supply affordable low-carbon heat with a range of technologies, including geothermal, so that we can utilise that to deliver heat to consumers across the country. We will continue to look at what more we can do.

Douglas Lumsden (Aberdeen South) (Con): My constituents know that best way to improve energy security and job security is to drill more. The Government may not want to hear this, but my constituents know it, the trades unions know it, and even the Labour MPs on the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee know it. Will the Government approve Jackdaw and Rosebank as a matter of urgency to improve our energy security, to improve our job security and to improve our economy by billions of pounds?

Michael Shanks: The hon. Gentleman knows that I cannot comment on two specific projects that are under a process at the moment, but on his general point, let me say that oil and gas continues to come out of the North sea—24/7, right now. It is playing a part in our energy security, but we have also been a net importer for decades, so it can never be the only answer. This is about how we deliver oil and gas from the North sea for many decades to come, and build up what comes next. There is huge potential for his constituents in offshore wind in particular, which his Front Benchers refuse to back. He should tell his constituents why he supports a party that is against the new jobs of the future, which would help his constituents and those right across the north-east of Scotland.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): Last month, I asked the Secretary of State about the risk of blackouts from the increasing instability of our electricity grid, and he accused me of scaremongering. Since then, I can inform the House that I have been contacted by a whistleblower at the heart of our grid operator, the National Energy System Operator. They allege that senior managers have ordered control room operators to hide information that shows that the grid is not being run securely. They also allege that corporate affairs have interfered with the operational decisions needed to stabilise the grid in order to protect the NESO's reputation. If true, this is nothing short of a scandal. Will the Secretary of State take back his accusation of scaremongering and launch an immediate investigation into the security of our grid operations?

Michael Shanks: The shadow Secretary of State has made some very serious claims. If she has that information, she should share it with the Department. [Interruption.] Well, she has shared it in the House of Commons. She should also share the detail with us.

No, I do not take back—and I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State does not take back—the idea that the shadow Secretary of State has been scaremongering, because she has continued to do so; even though the National Energy System Operator has continued to meet the demand that is necessary for all consumers in the country, she continues to peddle nonsense

on social media. I think she should look at some of the facts before she does that. The heatwave saw no impacts on consumers, and demand was met at all times. We have a robust and resilient energy system; if she looks at the data, she will see that that is being delivered day after day.

Climate Change: International Discussions

3. **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): What discussions he has had with his international counterparts on tackling climate change. [900857]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Katie White): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend on his work before he came to this place; he was an international leader on this matter. This Government have put Britain back into leadership on international climate change. Last week, we welcomed 75,000 people to London, because our city is a leading mix of science, innovation, technology and investment. It was great to see Imperial College London, which is in his constituency, attending many of those events.

Joe Powell: I note the recent data showing that support for renewables in this country is now at 81% of the public. Certainly, in every visit that I make to meet young people, including students at Imperial College London, climate change is one of the first issues they raise; they are concerned about the future that they are going to inherit. Will the Minister comment on the impact of repealing the Climate Change Act 2008—unfortunately, this has become the position of some Opposition parties—on our standing in international negotiations, including our Paris agreement commitments?

Katie White: I agree with my hon. Friend's comments on public support. Ultimately, pretty much everybody in this House cares about the people and places that we love. This issue comes up time and again at every school I visit, and I know that is the same for people from all corners of this place, because I get letters from people from all corners of this place. The Climate Change Act was campaigned for by David Cameron, introduced by the last Labour Government and championed by every single Conservative Prime Minister, because it is a sensible way of doing grown-up politics and policy. It is a long-term framework with flexibility to meet the moment. Serious leaders support serious policy in politics, and that is what you get from a Labour Government.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Has the Minister discussed the Peak Cluster project with her international counterparts? What have they made of the lack of cost-benefit analysis by the British Government? Will carbon dioxide be imported from abroad into the UK if this ludicrous and unpopular proposal goes ahead?

Katie White: My understanding is that the Peak Cluster needs to develop the project itself; it is not a Government-backed project. This Government have made more progress on carbon capture and storage than has been made in the last 20 years. If the right hon. Lady's colleagues and constituents want to hear more about it, please feel free to write to us, as we will be happy to look at it further.

Large-scale Solar Farms

5. **Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the development of large-scale solar farms. [900859]

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): Solar power is one of the cheapest sources of energy available to us. I am proud that we have consented nearly 6 GW of solar power since this Government came into office—around six times the amount that the previous Government consented. This year has seen record solar power, generating around 20 TWh of electricity and providing around 7% of the total electricity generated. If we want lower energy bills, new solar is an essential part of making that happen.

Sarah Bool: My apologies, Mr Speaker; my voice is going—it has nothing to do with England on Monday.

These large solar schemes will need battery energy storage systems, but there are growing concerns about the safety of these systems. Other countries are looking at more prescriptions, whether through more regulation or technical parameters, such as size, but we in this country just rely on guidance. Will the Secretary of State consider pausing any approvals of further solar schemes until we have some proper regulation in place that meets safety requirements?

Ed Miliband: No, we are not going to pause our development of solar power—it is essential to get bills down for families and get us off the rollercoaster of fossil fuels. We take safety incredibly seriously; the Energy Minister has met the National Fire Chiefs Council and is working assiduously on these issues, and I am sure he would be happy to meet the hon. Lady.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): My right hon. Friend took office shortly after the fiasco of the contracts for difference auction under the previous Government, which did not get a single megawatt of new energy proposed. Since then, we have had tremendous success in boosting the amount of renewable energy, and this country is making tremendous progress. We are moving forward, but what does my right hon. Friend say to people like the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), who is constantly attempting to undermine the moves this Government are making to decarbonise the grid? Should we not all be celebrating the fact that the industry supports the steps that the Government are taking?

Ed Miliband: I agree with my hon. Friend. He puts it very well. Our renewables auctions have resulted in enough power to power the equivalent of 23 million homes. That is significantly cheaper than building new gas-fired power stations, which is what the shadow Secretary of State wants to do; I am old enough to remember when she was in favour of clean energy—but never mind. The Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Katie White), mentioned London Climate Action Week, and what is so striking is that

countries around the world are drawing the same lesson: that we need to electrify and get off the fossil fuel rollercoaster.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Ministers have consistently been trying to argue that solar needs 1% of agricultural land, yet in a spectacular display of disjointed Government, their own land use framework talks about 9% of our agricultural land being taken out of food production for environmental schemes. At the same time—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I cannot hear the shadow Minister—even I have to have a chance to hear him. Come on, Greg.

Greg Smith: At the same time, EDF chief executive Simone Rossi has said that the Energy Secretary's expansion of solar and wind is creating far more electricity generation capacity than is needed. EDF is even calling for a pause on the approval of new projects, so before he shuffles over or perhaps shuffles off, will the Secretary of State use his last days in post to see sense, drop the dogma, and save our countryside from yet more farm-destroying, inefficient solar?

Ed Miliband: What is he on, Mr Speaker? To be clear, even in the most ambitious scenarios, our plans for solar in 2030 would use 0.6% of agricultural land; I am happy to repeat that. I do not know what makey-uppy nonsense the shadow Minister is producing. The wider issue is that the Conservatives complain about energy bills, and energy bills are too high, but we have the cheapest form of power available—solar power—and they say no to it. They want to keep us hooked on fossil fuels, and we saw the impact of that with the Iran war and the Russia-Ukraine crisis. I think the Conservatives have got to go back to the drawing board.

Nuclear Energy Sites: Scotland

6. **Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): Whether he held discussions with the Scottish Government and local authorities prior to announcing potential nuclear energy sites in Scotland. [900860]

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): Ministers commissioned Great British Energy Nuclear's study of Scotland's potential for new nuclear last autumn. That study indicates that Scotland has land areas with high potential for future development. We remain open to discussions with the Scottish Government on opportunities for new nuclear in Scotland, and I welcome the conversations I have with the new Scottish Energy Minister on a range of topics.

Graham Leadbitter: Two years ago, Labour promised to cut bills for every household by £300. Not only are households now paying hundreds of pounds more instead of less, but Labour's nuclear tax on household energy bills will cost Scots a further £300 million over the next decade. The Minister knows that Scottish energy consumers pay among the highest electricity prices in the UK; he knows that there are serious alternatives that are quicker to implement and could actually reduce bills, such as geothermal energy; and he knows that the Government's

own figures for a nuclear waste disposal facility are up to £53 billion. With serious and far more cost-effective alternatives available, will the Minister listen to the Scottish people, stop the obsession with costly nuclear power that Scotland neither needs nor wants, and transfer energy power to—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Minister has got the message.

Michael Shanks: First, the hon. Gentleman knows that in every single opinion poll a majority of Scots show that they support nuclear energy. Secondly, the hon. Gentleman knows that every single day nuclear baseload is powering Scotland, and that the last nuclear power station, Torness, is about to close with no replacement in place. Thirdly, the hon. Gentleman knows that hundreds of people—skilled workers—power those nuclear power stations, and, indeed, thousands of Scots are working in nuclear power stations in England because of his party's opposition to nuclear. This is not a choice between nuclear and renewables; it is about both energy security and good jobs for everyone in Scotland.

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

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): As the Minister has just said, new nuclear is essential for energy security. It is also essential as an alternative career for workers in oil and gas. Does the Minister agree that by blocking new nuclear in Scotland—in contrast to what is happening in England and Wales—the Scottish Government are undermining not just the energy transition and our energy security, but alternative jobs for the very people whom they claim to represent?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is right. The industry estimates that more than 5,000 Scots are currently working in the nuclear industry, but not in Scotland. There is a huge potential for the expertise and experience of oil and gas workers to build the new nuclear power stations of the future, and to work in them as well. We need to capture those skills and keep them in Scotland, but because of the out-of-touch ideological approach of the SNP we will not have the opportunity to build those power stations in Scotland and those workers will have to go elsewhere, which is a great shame.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Thirty-eight years ago yesterday, 167 men lost their lives off the coast of Aberdeen on board the Piper Alpha rig. The friends and families of those men still mourn their loss, many of them in my constituency. That is a reminder of the danger in which so many still put themselves to ensure that energy flows to our homes and businesses around the UK.

This may be a first, but I welcome the Department's work in exploring the possibility of new nuclear in Scotland. The majority of Scots support it, but because of the Luddite SNP's ideological opposition to new jobs and investment, they will not benefit from it. What is the Department doing to ensure that no part of Great Britain is left behind as the rest of the UK leads the world into this new golden age of nuclear?

Michael Shanks: I echo the shadow Minister's words about those who lost their lives on Piper Alpha 38 years ago. That event was a wake-up call in respect of safety in the industry, but, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, it is also a reminder that there are men and women working in extremely dangerous circumstances right now in order to keep the country going.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support for the Government, which is actually not a first. Until he ended up on the Opposition Benches, he regularly agreed with what the Government are now doing. [HON. MEMBERS: "He still does."] He still does—I am convinced of it—and he is welcome any time.

We will do everything we can to move forward with possible sites for new nuclear in Scotland, but the fact is that we cannot make as much progress with those sites as we would like because of the Scottish Government's opposition through their planning regulations. I will continue to do what I can to persuade them to change their mind. There are hundreds of possible jobs, along with continued energy security in Scotland, and this is an opportunity that we should not miss.

Andrew Bowie: So for once we agree—and, by the way, my colleagues and I also welcome the Government's acceptance of the Fingleton review. However, it is sad that Labour's ambition pales in comparison to ours when we were in government and committed ourselves to building a new gigawatt-scale reactor at Wylfa and generating 25% of British electricity from nuclear. From Labour, we have a third large-scale plant cancelled and no ambition for a quarter of our electricity to come from nuclear power. Will the Minister update us on the progress of delivering on Fingleton, and will he now revive our commitment to an ambitious British nuclear future?

Michael Shanks: What I love about the shadow Minister is how every single time his face gives away the fact that he does not believe a word he is saying. However, I welcome the former Minister for consultation and his view of his nuclear ambition, which, of course, never came to fruition in the 14 years for which the Conservatives were in government. Meanwhile, the delivery to which he referred is exactly what we are getting on with in this Government. We are delivering on the Hinkley and Sizewell C nuclear reactors, delivering on a small modular reactor programme that already has an international reputation—countries around the world are interested in that technology—and building the nuclear that he only talked about.

Agrivoltaics

8. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential contribution of agrivoltaics to clean energy generation in England. [900862]

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): The Government closely follow developments in the agrivoltaics sector and support innovative technologies, for instance through initiatives funded by UK Research and Innovation. In the solar road map that we have published, the Government and industry have committed themselves to exploring future research and demonstration opportunities for agrivoltaic systems.

Daniel Zeichner: I commend the Secretary of State and his team for their determination and resolve in the transfer to renewables. In the extraordinary and unprecedented weather that we are having at the moment I can assure the House that some shade would be really welcome in parts of the east of England. Given the opportunities for agrivoltaics, including on reservoirs to tackle evaporation and in fields to tackle the stress that livestock and crops can face, is it not time to use this innovative and imaginative approach to greater effect?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and we are in favour of innovation wherever we can deploy solar. He talks about solar on reservoirs, which is absolutely an opportunity that we want to explore, but we also want to look at how agrivoltaic technologies can be deployed, and we are supporting the University of Lancaster to work out what that model would look like. I have visited a number of solar farms where farming and solar generation go hand in hand, and we want to see much more of that. Planning policy supports that, but we want to go further.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) referred to the use of solar panels on all sorts of buildings to provide shade, and we could include car parks in that. But what we should not be including is grade 1 agricultural land. Whether the Minister likes it or not, we have lost far too much agricultural land in east Kent already. It is not possible to farm under solar panels, and it is disingenuous to say that the land will be returned to agriculture in 30 years' time, because the panels are mounted on concrete and we all know that that will never be ripped up. When is the Minister going to face reality?

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not think the Minister is disingenuous—that is a little bit of a step too far.

Michael Shanks: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I have always enjoyed my conversations with the right hon. Gentleman, even if we disagree on many things. First of all, it is possible for farming practices to go hand in hand with solar generation. Secondly, even if we hit our most ambitious targets, less than 0.6% of farmland will be taken up with solar. Thirdly, he is right to say that we want to see solar on as many rooftops as possible—car parks, offices and schools—and on reservoirs, but the challenge that we face as a country is such that we need both ground-mounted solar and rooftop generation. I know that we can work together on the rooftop point, and I hope I will convince him of the other.

Small Modular Reactors: Jobs

9. **Baggy Shanker** (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of small modular reactors on job opportunities. [R] [900863]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Chris McDonald): Great British Energy Nuclear's SMR project could support around 3,000 peak construction jobs and many thousands more across the supply chain. As I saw for myself when

I visited Rolls-Royce recently, the company and Great British Energy Nuclear are working together on developing an industrialisation strategy to strengthen British nuclear supply chains.

Baggy Shanker: I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests relating to Rolls-Royce.

By backing SMRs, which the previous Government failed to do, this Government are backing Britain, delivering stronger energy security and good, skilled jobs in Derby and across the UK. Does the Minister agree that, in order to boost the benefits for our brilliant small and medium-sized businesses, at least 70% of the SMR supply chain must be built here in Britain?

Chris McDonald: I agree with my hon. Friend, as do Great British Energy Nuclear, which has set a 70% target, and Rolls-Royce. Although we understand that these great export products, when built abroad, will necessarily have some overseas content, we need to do more to strengthen supply chains in the UK. We have a gap at tier 1 and tier 2 of the supply chain, and I am determined to work with Rolls-Royce and engage in some meaningful industrial development activity to see how we can encourage British companies to compete successfully in that part of the supply chain.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): While I am very fond of the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter), the House will not be surprised to hear that I do not hang on his every word. My constituents are cock-a-hoop and absolutely delighted that Dounreay, in my constituency, has been identified as suitable for a new nuclear power station development, possibly an SMR. What can I do to help the Government make that become a reality?

Chris McDonald: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I know Dounreay, Reay and the north-east of Scotland very well for personal and family reasons, and I also know how the local community relied on very good jobs at the power station for so long. This Government would be very keen to undertake more nuclear projects in Scotland. If he wishes to be helpful and persuasive on that, he really needs to address his concerns to the Scottish Government and particularly the Scottish National party, which stands in the way of Scotland realising its nuclear potential.

Essential Energy Guarantee

10. **John Milne** (Horsham) (LD): Whether he has made an assessment of the potential merits of introducing an essential energy guarantee. [900865]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey): The hon. Gentleman will know that tackling the cost of living is this Government's priority. We have already taken action at the Budget, and we have also expanded the warm home discount to nearly 6 million households. We are working closely with other Departments on our kickstarter programme to test how public sector data could be better joined up to target support at those who need it most.

John Milne: The Liberal Democrat essential energy plan is an immediate way to address electricity affordability, but in the long term the solution must lie in more renewables, as I think the Secretary of State agrees. However, the Government's failure to make the case effectively is now becoming a serious problem in itself. Does the Minister accept that promising to cut energy bills by £300 was a mistake, when the price was bound to be affected by many other factors, and does he also accept that another manifesto pledge, Great British Energy, is currently just a logo in search of a purpose?

Martin McCluskey: I am disappointed at the hon. Gentleman's statement. We are making the case strongly and our pledge to reduce energy bills still stands. He will know that renewables are the quickest way to reduce our energy bills. He will also know that the warm home discount is providing significant support to people in his constituency right now. Just this year, the number of people in his constituency receiving the warm home discount has more than doubled to over 5,000.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): The warm home discount is a great initiative to help households cut their bills, but one thing we could expand to do more in this space is our heat network programme, and we may be getting a heat network in Derby. However, there is often a lack of awareness, particularly in some public sector organisations and businesses, of the opportunities that heat networks offer. It may be that winding down the public sector decarbonisation scheme is not enabling as many as we would like to sign up. Could I ask the Minister to look at our engagement with business, the public sector and housing providers to make sure that as many people as possible can benefit from heat networks?

Martin McCluskey: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. If we are to reach our clean power targets, we need heat networks on the system to be providing significant levels of clean heat. He will know that the green heat network fund is already providing significant support across the country, and we will of course look at what more we can do to support heat networks over the coming years.

Energy Prices: Household Support

11. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to support low-income households with increases in energy prices. [900866]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey): I know the recent rise in energy bills will be very concerning for families across the country. At the last Budget, we took an average of £150 off energy bills, which is now factored into our bills for years to come, and we have also expanded the warm home discount.

Rachael Maskell: I thank the Minister for his answer. Preparedness for the sharp increase in domestic energy costs is vital, with 13.5 million homes expected to be paying more than 10% of their household's spending on energy this winter and 5.5 million homes more than 20%, leaving families at breaking point. What further

steps is he intending to make to expand the warm home discount scheme, to take levies off electricity bills to cut costs, and to expand social tariffs?

Martin McCluskey: We are preparing for every contingency and looking at the support that may be required in the autumn and winter. The significant increase in the warm home discount has obviously benefited households right across the country, not least in my hon. Friend's constituency. The number receiving the warm home discount in York Central has increased from nearly 2,500 to over 8,000, to a value of £1.2 million in support offered to her constituents.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Last year, a Government-funded agency approved more than £50 million of taxpayers' money for solar geoengineering projects, one of which endeavours to dim the sun. At a time when families are struggling with energy costs and domestic production is being constrained, why are Ministers backing speculative climate manipulation, instead of fully using North sea oil and gas to deliver affordable, stronger and more secure energy, and lower bills?

Martin McCluskey: This is nonsense. That was set up by an arm's length organisation set up by the previous Government. It is not something that the Government are funding. In so far as that refers to more affordable energy, we are obviously working at pace to make sure energy is affordable right across the United Kingdom, including whatever support we can offer in Northern Ireland.

Community-owned Renewable Energy

12. **Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the potential impact of community-owned renewable energy on energy security. [900867]

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): We love community energy and we are determined to see much more of it all across the country. Through the local power plan, which we published recently, we are rolling out the biggest expansion of community energy in British history. By 2030, Great British Energy, which is delivering for the people of this country, will support over 1,000 local and community energy projects, with £1 billion of investment. Ownership matters to this Government, and we are determined to deliver it for communities across Britain.

Joe Morris: There are amazing developments in community energy, particularly across my constituency with the Northumberland solar-powered community buildings project, which is purchasing and installing both solar panels and battery storage for community buildings, including village halls, in our most remote communities. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the community energy specific need for a smart export guarantee, and greater support for community energy power-purchasing agreements?

Michael Shanks: That sounds like a great project, and I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend, as I would anyone across the House who has exciting community energy projects in their area. The local power plan partly deals with investment, but it also deals with those

questions of how we get regulation right so that communities can sell power locally and make a return that they can keep in their community.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Energy Security and Net Zero Committee report on community energy, which I am sure the Minister has read, has raised concerns that community energy projects are at risk of being left behind unless there is clear guidance from the Government on how and when the necessary reforms will be implemented. Will the energy independence Bill establish a workable model so that community energy will be delivered as soon as possible?

Michael Shanks: I love all the work that the hon. Member has been doing on community energy; I am tempted to say that we were going to do it anyway, but it was great to have the report on my bedside cabinet to read as well. Giving guidance and making reforms are exactly what we need to do; it is about making it much easier for communities to sell power to the market and hold on to the profits that they make from that. We will legislate to take that forward in the energy independence Bill. There are a number of other things that we are taking forward, but investment in those community energy projects is critical. I would encourage her to speak to the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) and make clear that £1 billion through GB Energy to make it happen does matter.

Climate Change: Resilience Planning

13. **Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD):** What assessment he has made of the adequacy of his Department's long-term resilience planning for climate change. [900870]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Katie White): The Secretary of State will publish an energy resilience strategy later this year. Last week, alongside the Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero, I launched a first-of-its-kind taskforce with external experts from security, the military and academia, to boost preparedness for climate change and nature loss.

Bobby Dean: The Office for Budget Responsibility fiscal report, out today, highlights some of the long-term risks of climate damage to the UK's finances. Unlike other OBR reports at formal fiscal events, there are no implications for the Government; they do not have to make any adjustments to their current financial planning. If he were to be moved to the Treasury, would the Secretary of State consider changing the fiscal rules to encourage more long-term planning for things like climate change?

Katie White: As I am the one answering the hon. Member's question, I cannot comment on those decisions. The OBR has put forward various reports to look at the impacts of climate change on our economy, and the value of investment versus the cost of inaction. The OBR has been incredibly helpful, as have various parts of our financial architecture across the City, which is looking at where the risks are. The taskforce that I mentioned will also look at the impact on finances and the economy.

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): During the heatwave a fortnight ago, I was contacted by the head of Oldswinford primary school in my constituency, who felt that the Government's advice on keeping the building cool for children did not adequately reflect the challenges. I know that this feeling was shared by other schools around the country and the National Education Union. I was also contacted by bus drivers and office workers. What is the Minister doing to ensure that schools and workplaces are resilient to increased and sustained temperatures in the future?

Katie White: I thank my hon. Friend for her contributions on climate change in the debate last week on carbon budget 7. The recent heatwave showed us for the first time the implications that we face across our country. For parents up and down the country, when many schools closed—not to mention other workplaces and hospitals—it had a catastrophic effect. We are looking at the issue across the board. We have an energy resilience strategy coming forward, as well as a wider taskforce, and I am working across Government with colleagues to ensure that any advice is updated, because this is sadly the new normal.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): One of the Department's key planks in tackling climate change is carbon capture. Given the Government's difficulties around the defence investment plan and the need to find allegedly an extra £5 billion, can the Minister confirm her Department's continuing support for the Acorn Project at St Fergus in my constituency?

Katie White: I can.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): What is not helping climate change is transporting fuel from the Stanlow refinery to Scottish airports. This negatively impacts the environment, increases pressure on road infrastructure and will reduce employment and negatively impact Scottish supply chains. Are the Government concerned about the future of fuel distribution in Scotland, and if not, may I respectfully and politely suggest that they should be?

Katie White: I thank my hon. Friend, who contributes to many of these debates. We want to ensure that we have a system that supports reductions in emissions, while also maintaining supply. I do not think that what my hon. Friend says is the case, but we do see a future for Grangemouth, and we look forward to continuing to work with him on that.

Climate Change

14. **Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): What steps he is taking to help tackle climate change. [900872]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Katie White): I would like to highlight three things that this Government have done to tackle climate change. First, we have brought forward carbon budget 7. I pay tribute to many Members of this House for the excellent discussion we had, with contributions from Members from Darlington to Devon, via Derby. Secondly, we have secured massive investment; since this Government came to power, we have secured

more than £100 billion of private investment. Thirdly, we have been looking at where there is friction in the system, and at how to remove that friction, whether through working with communities to energise Britain—I was out in Manchester and Bradford yesterday—or by reordering the queue for our energy projects, to ensure that we are at the forefront of tackling climate change, are managing the risks, and are taking advantage of the opportunities.

Dr Chambers: Will the Minister join me in congratulating Lib Dem-run Winchester city council on its fantastic initiative, Solar Together, which installs solar panels on council houses? So far, it has installed solar panels on 35 properties, reducing energy bills, lifting people out of fuel poverty and reducing carbon output. What support is the Minister giving to ensure that such initiatives can continue, in Winchester and throughout the whole country?

Katie White: I will absolutely congratulate Winchester city council on leading on this. Councils play a hugely important role, and I am looking forward to meeting many of them to discuss this issue when I visit the Local Government Association later this week. We have £1 billion of funding for community energy projects, and we are bringing forward more measures to accelerate progress, because this really is an opportunity to tackle the climate crisis, bring down energy bills and contribute to energy security.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I commend the Minister and the team on their approach. Tackling climate change needs to be a national and international effort. We should all be pulling together on this goal. Is it not time to call out some of the Opposition parties and their friends in the right-wing media for engaging in a propaganda wave of climate change denial? That poses a real risk to our future jobs, economy, fuel security and way of life.

Katie White: I thank my hon. Friend, who has raised this issue on many occasions in this House, and who is a friend of mine from across our great city. It is really important that we work at international, national and local level. Across our country, we all have a responsibility for the words and phrases that we use, and a responsibility to tackle misinformation and be honest about the challenges. That is not to say that we cannot disagree, but we could do so far more agreeably.

Topical Questions

T1. [900880] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): In the two years since July 2024, this Government have secured renewable power for the equivalent of 23 million homes, invested in the biggest nuclear building programme in half a century, started to deliver the biggest investment in warm homes in our country's history, taken £150 off energy bills and shown global climate leadership. I am proud that we are delivering on our mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower, so that we get lower bills and good jobs, and protect future generations.

John Lamont: The cost of heating oil remains a major concern for many residents in the Borders, particularly as families plan for the autumn and winter. The Government promised to cut energy bills by £300, yet since they took office, bills have risen by £300. What more will the Government do to support households in rural communities who rely on heating oil to keep warm?

Ed Miliband: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's question, because the situation facing families who use heating oil has been significant since the Iran war started. That is why we made money available, including to the Scottish Government, to help families in particular hardship. We have also increased the help available through the boiler upgrade scheme for those families using heating oil. I continue to discuss what more we can do with colleagues across Government.

T2. [900881] **Jenny Riddell-Carpenter** (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that there is no legal duty for energy developers to co-ordinate when they are developing in the same area or place, or at the same time. In Suffolk Coastal, Europe's largest energy project is being developed right now, alongside four other nationally significant energy infrastructure projects. Will the Government consider giving Ofgem more power to enforce co-ordination, so that people, communities and the environment do not suffer needlessly when developers are building projects that will drive forward this country's net zero ambitions?

Ed Miliband: We will look at all suggestions, including my hon. Friend's. We do look at cumulative impact in the planning process, and the strategic spatial energy plan will be very important. Members have raised this before. It is very important to understand the concerns of local people when planning where infrastructure is to be built.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): According to the press, the Secretary of State is applying for a new job, which means that he must be in need of references. Who will he ask first: the trade unions, who are calling for him to be sacked; the public, who have faced a £300 rise in their energy bills on his watch; or the oil and gas workers, who roundly rejected him at the recent by-election in Aberdeen?

Ed Miliband: I am incredibly proud of our record over the last two years. This Government have delivered the biggest investment in warm homes in our history, broken records on renewables, and secured over £100 billion of private sector investment. We have the biggest nuclear-building programme in a generation, and a plan for 400,000 new clean energy jobs. All the shadow Secretary of State had to show for her time in office was the trashing of our clean energy industries; there was no nuclear power delivered, and we had the worst cost of living crisis in generations.

Claire Coutinho: Let us look at the facts: bills went down £500 under me, but they have gone up £300 under him. The Secretary of State said that he has raked in investment, but that is because he has promised that consumers will pay sky-high prices to wind developers for decades to come. He is decimating British industry. Great British Energy is a complete flop. Is not the truth

that the only reason he wants an out from this job is so that someone else has to clean up the mess that he is leaving behind?

Ed Miliband: The truth is that we all face a choice on the future of our energy system. Do we learn the lessons of history—of two fossil-fuel crises in five years, as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Iran war—and say that we want energy sovereignty with clean, home-grown power that we control, or do we not? We have made our choice.

T3. [900882] **Frank McNally** (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): It was a pleasure to welcome the Minister for Energy to Bellshill for the opening of the new RES maintenance facility last week. RES' partnership with Scottish Power will support 15 windfarm sites, ensuring clean power for more than 400,000 homes. Does my hon. Friend agree that partnerships like that are important for our energy security, and help to ensure that communities such as Bellshill benefit from skilled industrial jobs?

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): I love Bellshill, and it was a pleasure to visit the other day to see this fantastic facility opening just across my constituency boundary. More than 300 wind turbines are being maintained and operated from the facility. That is a good example showing that the clean energy mission is about not just the renewables being deployed, but the jobs that go with it in communities like my hon. Friend's.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): When it comes to local and community energy, we welcome the investment by Great British Energy, and the local power plan. However, the Liberal Democrats pushed to get community energy in the Great British Energy Act 2025, because we knew that there were hurdles beyond investment, as pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), who is on the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee. We have been waiting for over a year to hear about this. The Minister has said that the Government are creating the much-awaited energy independence Bill, which will include changes to local energy trading, so that there is a right to sell supply locally. However, I would like to know about the community energy export guarantee, power purchase agreements for local authorities—

Mr Speaker: Order. Come on! I call the Minister.

Michael Shanks: The hon. Lady could go on all day reading out the things that this Government are already going to do. We want to see much more community ownership, because it matters to us that communities own their future energy, and that people keep the wealth in their communities to invest it in the things that they think are important, because they know their community best. There is a whole series of actions that previous Governments have not taken that would have made that possible. We are going to clear that away and make it possible for communities to own their energy, and we have put £1 billion into that. I always welcome the Lib Dems' support for what we are doing.

T4. [900884] **Mr Alex Barros-Curtis** (Cardiff West) (Lab): The £15 billion warm homes plan is brilliant, because it will lift 1 million people out of fuel poverty

and, as we are seeing in this heatwave, keep households cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter. While that is being set up, what are the Government doing in the short term to bring down energy bills?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey): I commend my hon. Friend and his constituents for their enthusiasm for the warm homes plan. They can already access grants through the warm homes plan, and they will soon be able to receive loans.

T5. [900885] **Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State consult the devolved regions on the roll-out of small modular reactors, so that all the consumer and job opportunity benefits can be shared right across the whole United Kingdom?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point. I am happy to give that undertaking. We want to see the opportunities around SMRs throughout the United Kingdom. I am happy to discuss that with him.

T8. [900888] **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): Year 7 students from Ranelagh school in Bracknell have written to me as part of the Creative for Climate Justice Project. As well as sharing some incredible artwork and poetry, they wrote that the impacts of climate change are already visible, and that we should act now to avoid irreversible damage. Does my hon. Friend agree? Will she assure those students that the Government heed their call for action?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Katie White): I thank my hon. Friend—another fantastic speaker in the carbon budget debate the week before last—and Ranelagh school students for presenting their ideas. They are not alone; this issue is raised at most schools that we visit, and we have to reassure students that the Government are taking action at international, national and local level. It is important that their voices are heard, which is why we are launching a youth scheme in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero.

T6. [900886] **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): During the election, the Government promised to cut bills by £300; in fact, they have gone up by £300. With that level of financial acumen, the Secretary of State will fit right in, in his new job at the Treasury, but my constituents and local businesses want their bills cut now, not at some nebulous point in the future. When he gets to the Treasury, will he remove the taxes on our energy industry, to ensure that bills actually come down?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. The way to get bills down is to drive for clean energy, which the Conservatives oppose. Why have bills gone up in the last few months? Because of the Iran war. *[Interruption.]* They know that they have gone up because of the Iran war—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think you played that one through earlier.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): Third-party brokers will rightly be regulated through the energy independence Bill, but the market is complex, and time-poor business owners still find it hard to find the right deal. Is the Secretary of State willing to explore measures to standardise business energy bills, and will he look at new data rights under smart data powers, so that small and medium-sized enterprise owners can take back control?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend raises an important issue about the treatment of businesses. I am sure that there is more to do on brokers. We will look at his suggestions.

T7. [900887] **Dr Roz Savage** (South Cotswolds) (LD): The Government recently shelved plans to require solar panels on new car parks, despite the significant potential to generate clean electricity, support electric vehicle charging and provide greater shade cover. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of abandoning those proposals on the Government's clean power and net zero ambitions?

Michael Shanks: First, just to be clear, we are not abandoning at all the idea that we should put solar on as many car parks as possible and encourage the creation of car ports, so that there can be solar panels on the roof. That is brilliant, and we should see much more of that. We consulted on whether there should be one mandatory solution for the whole country, and the consultation responses, which we take heed of, suggested that was not the right way to go. That does not mean at all that we are not hugely ambitious about solar on car parks.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): My local community energy company, which is run by volunteers, is incredibly keen to get solar panels on the roofs of local public buildings, but we are really struggling to get the permissions we need from the local authority to proceed with two schools. They missed the easter installation window, and have now missed the window for this summer. Does the Minister agree that we need this to hurry up?

Michael Shanks: Yes, I completely agree. I am sure that if my hon. Friend's local authority is listening, it will hurry up and make those decisions. We also want the process to be more standardised across the country, so that community projects like hers can learn from others who have done the same, and so that we can speed up the whole process.

T9. [900889] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): In this House, I have long championed rolling out small modular nuclear reactors, so the decision on Wylfa is welcome, despite the fact that we could have a full-scale nuclear power station and an SMR there. Will the Secretary of State announce the sites that will be used in further roll-out, so that is settled in the community and we can get that nuclear power on to the grid?

Ed Miliband: I think the hon. Member is talking not just about what will happen at Wylfa, but all the other routes to market that are happening, including advanced modular reactors and other technology. I can honestly say to him that we have massive enthusiasm from a whole range of private sector companies, and we are driving that forward at pace.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): I was elected on the back of three clear pledges, one of which was to work to create jobs and prosperity in some of our strongest growing industries. One of those is renewables, which is growing at 20% or so a year—much faster than the wider economy. In Cornwall, we are doing a great job at renewables. What steps is the Minister taking to help us to create those great jobs in Cornwall?

Ed Miliband: The framework provided by having a clear sense of mission, through the Clean Power 2030 action plan and the Climate Change Act 2008, is crucial. That is why we have the £100 billion of private investment. We are going to carry on doing it.

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): Regarding contracts for difference, will the Government now consider moving from a 100% revenue guarantee model to a partial coverage model, along the lines of what Australia now has?

Ed Miliband: We think the contracts for difference model is a good one. We want to get on with opening the auction, and we continue to look at all these issues.

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): Putin's war in Ukraine and Trump's war in Iran have shown us the need to make Britain more resilient against global energy shocks. Can my hon. Friend set out what the Government are doing to ensure that domestic electricity prices are decoupled from global gas prices, so that my constituents can get the best out of cheap, green, local renewables?

Martin McCluskey: I pay tribute to the work my hon. Friend is doing for her constituents on this issue. The most effective way to decouple our electricity prices from gas is to expand our renewable generation. Every wind turbine we turn on and every solar panel that we deploy helps to push gas off as the price-setter. We will continue to work in this way.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Just this year, Norway has opened up a licensing round for 70 new oil and gas blocks. It is reopening three old gas fields and has permitted development plans for three new fields. Meanwhile, this Government are still banning licences, taxing the industry out of business and not permitting Rosebank and Jackdaw. Why does the Secretary of State think he is right and our Norwegian friends are wrong?

Michael Shanks: I suspect that in the coming days England fans will learn a lot from Norway in something else. On the serious point that the hon. Member raises, we should first recognise that Norway took a different approach to extraction from the North sea 60 years ago, and it has continued to do that over its 60 years of extraction from the North sea. Secondly, we are not turning off the taps in the North sea. We have said that we will introduce transitional energy certificates to allow new production tied back to existing fields.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Business energy costs are a significant barrier, holding British business back from being competitive on the world stage. Has the Secretary of State done any analysis of the potential GDP growth from reducing business energy costs and getting British businesses moving?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Chris McDonald): British businesses were suffering from high energy costs as a direct result of the previous Government's policy to tie us to fossil fuels. The things that we have done—lifting the onshore wind ban, investing in offshore wind and rolling out solar and nuclear—will bring down energy costs in the long term, but we need to do something now. That is why we have increased the benefit on our supercharger scheme. We have rolled out the British industrial competitiveness scheme starting next year, but that is backdated through this year, too. We also have specific support for industries such as ceramics and chemicals.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): On heating oil, the Scottish National party Government boasted that they would add £5.4 million to the £4.6 million the UK Government gave to domestic consumers. However, there is scant evidence that that is reaching my constituents in the Western Isles, which have the highest fuel poverty figures in the country. Will the Minister join me in encouraging constituents to apply for support? Will he ask the Scottish Government to broaden the criteria and Advice Direct Scotland to get that money out the door, so that people are not left high and dry?

Martin McCluskey: My hon. Friend is right that more people need to claim the support that is on offer, and I encourage them to do that in his constituency and across Scotland. My understanding is that just over £1 million of the £10 million in the fund has been distributed.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): South Crofty in my Camborne, Redruth and Hayle constituency is approaching the historic restoration of Cornish tin mining, but high energy costs risk the UK losing control of the supply chain in domestic processing and refining. If the Government are serious about building up a sovereign critical minerals supply chain, will the Minister meet me to discuss extending BICS and the industrial supercharger scheme to critical minerals?

Chris McDonald: My hon. Friend knows how eagerly I am anticipating the return of tin production in Cornwall—I want it just as much as him and his colleagues. I would be happy to meet him to see how South Crofty and the rest of the Cornish industry can benefit from the Government's schemes.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): Will the Minister acknowledge that the highlands and islands produce a disproportionately large amount of our renewable energy? Will he also acknowledge that last week's Ofgem go-ahead for three pumped storage schemes will produce almost no jobs, no legacy housing and no community benefits, along with minimal, if any, advantage to the highlands of Scotland?

Michael Shanks: First, we are delighted to be building the first long-duration energy storage in Britain in 40 years, including pumped hydro storage projects that will help us store renewable energy for when we need it. Secondly, there will be local benefits from that and I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's point about jobs. These are big construction projects and there will be

jobs relating to running them afterwards. However, I will look further at his point on community benefits, because the community should benefit from such projects being built.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): The Government have worked with Ofgem to bring forward low or no standing charge schemes, which are supposedly open for trial. I cannot find them and neither can my residents. The access to those schemes is so small, so what are the Government doing to make them available to more people now?

Martin McCluskey: I will share details of that with the hon. Lady. We are also undertaking the cost allocation review, which deals with those issues.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): The UK's green economy is worth more than £100 billion a year, and nearly half a trillion pounds in investment is in the pipeline. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the contracts that his Department provides prioritise British firms and British jobs, so that we can prove our national capabilities and secure our energy?

Ed Miliband: That is something we take incredibly seriously. We are an energy policy and industrial policy Department. We have made progress on that and are determined to make further progress.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Government have stressed the importance of energy independence, sovereignty and security. How concerned are they that it is difficult to pin down, as we have tried to do, exactly how many, and what percentage, of the wind turbines in this country are produced in China, considering that a thousand of them were recently discovered to have been manufactured using asbestos?

Michael Shanks: We take those issues seriously across the energy resilience and security piece. It is for individual developers to look at their individual sites and ensure that they comply with the regulations that are in place.

We are also looking at what more needs to be done, because the security and resilience of all our energy infrastructure has never been more important.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): There is so much innovation going on in my constituency for floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea, including by companies such as Reflex Marine, but we need the test and demo models up in the Celtic sea to test the technology. The contracts for difference in the next auction will be crucial for offshore wind in the Celtic sea. Will the Minister commit to recognising that in future auction rounds?

Ed Miliband: Yes. We love Cornwall; we love the potential of what it can provide in terms of floating wind. My hon. Friend states her case incredibly well.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Private companies looking to deploy new nuclear at Oldbury will need to address skills shortages, particularly around roles such as welding. When assessing proposals for the site, how will Ministers ensure developers invest in skills so that local people can benefit from the jobs created?

Chris McDonald: That is exactly the reason we published our clean energy jobs plan, which identifies the demand for clean energy jobs in different parts of the country. We have also invested, through our clean energy technical excellence colleges in different parts of the country, to ensure that those skills will be available.

Mr Speaker: Final question.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Last night, Members of this House passed regulations to crack down on rogue landfill operators. Does the Minister agree that no public payments should be made to a landfill gas energy provider when that provider is linked to rogue landfill operations?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. We will write to her with a good answer.

Point of Order

12.38 pm

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In response to my question about the Peak Cluster project, the Minister for Climate implied that her Department was open to providing answers on that matter. I have sent numerous questions to the Department that have gone unanswered. They have been the most basic questions, such as “What is the cost? How much will fall on the taxpayer? What is the cost-benefit analysis? Will the UK be importing carbon dioxide from international sources?” I have also had to resort to freedom of information requests; again, they have all gone unanswered. What does a Member of Parliament have to do to get questions on this matter answered by this Government?

Mr Speaker: Does a Minister want to respond?

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): I am very happy to answer, because I responded to all the right hon. Lady’s written parliamentary questions, as I always do. In my answers, I set out very clearly that this is not a Government project so the Government do not have all the details. It is a private project, and as with any other private development going on around the country, we would not expect the Government to have an insight into all that data. The Government have not backed that project, so the answers to her questions were as I accurately gave them, and that is the case for all my written parliamentary questions.

Mr Speaker: It is good to hear that the questions have been answered. What more could one ask for?

Outdoor Education

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.40 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require that all children in primary and secondary education spend a minimum of thirty minutes a day outdoors during school hours; to require primary and secondary schools to provide a minimum of one lesson of teaching each week outdoors; to require that every child be offered at least one outdoor education experience during primary school years and at least one such experience during secondary school years; and for connected purposes.

Modern medicine is always looking for the next big discovery to change lives, yet we are missing out on the cheapest, easiest and quickest way to turn around the vicious mental health crisis we see in our children and young people—a crisis that affects their ability to learn, to achieve, to work and to live a healthy and happy life. The answer is outdoor learning. It is staggering to read that the amount of time children spend outside has fallen by 50% in a single generation, that children roam just 300 metres from home and that a fifth of children in the most deprived parts of the country never spend meaningful time outdoors.

Research shows that being out in nature makes children happy, that children who spend time outside care more about nature and that unstructured, risky, nature-based play outdoors improves confidence and cognitive development. Research funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs through Natural England found that 95% of children found outdoor learning made lessons more enjoyable, and that 90% reported an improvement in students’ engagement with learning and an increase in student health and wellbeing. These figures are staggering, and they deserve to be taken seriously.

This Bill is about improving the lives of our children and young people and, by using outdoor learning, raising a generation of people who will care more about nature, which is the one thing we know will protect us from the most devastating effects of climate change. Andy Jasper, the chief executive officer of the Eden Project, told us last week on a brilliant parliamentary visit that there simply will be no future without nature. Shockingly, a third of children never have school lessons outdoors, yet in many schools in South Devon outdoor learning is a regular weekly part of the curriculum, in playgrounds, school veg gardens, parks and little bits of woodland.

Children who live the furthest distance from green or open outdoor spaces spend more time on screens and have poorer mental health than children living in close proximity. A lack of time spent outdoors is linked to childhood health disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, obesity and depression. However, it is not just kids from the inner city who are missing out on the benefits of the great outdoors. In my beautiful constituency of South Devon there is a stark disparity that might surprise many in this House. I often hear of children who live just a couple of miles from our stunning beaches but have never been to them. There are few buses to the beach and the parking costs are a serious barrier for some. This mirrors research showing

[Caroline Voaden]

that young people in communities all around the UK coast view the beach as “not for them”, but for visitors and tourists.

This is why taking kids outdoors to do lessons at school is so vital to introducing them to the idea of being in nature and developing a familiarity with the great outdoors. There is not a subject on the curriculum that cannot be enhanced by outdoor learning. The Fibonacci sequence is seen in the petals of a flower, the scales of a pine cone and the seeds of a sunflower. English, science, music, poetry, drama and geography can all be enhanced by teaching outside. As one child said:

“When we were on the field trip, we did maths, English and science, but it was like we didn’t realise we were doing it”.

For teachers, that is pure magic.

Totnes St John’s Church of England primary school is located in a large housing estate and has a 44% special educational needs and disabilities cohort. Its brilliant example could be replicated by schools up and down the country. The headteacher told me that her pupils regularly use the school’s outdoor spaces to support emotional regulation, and that this is incredibly effective. She said:

“They thrive outdoors, so we take as much learning as possible into our grounds. Delivering learning in this experiential, immersive and hands-on way makes it more purposeful, as well as easier for children to understand and retain.”

The school has adapted its uniform to enable children to be outside as much as possible, regardless of the weather—all the children have wellies in school. At Blackawton and East Allington, children have a dedicated afternoon of forest school and an hour of outdoor PE every week. Headteacher Liam Fielding said:

“The opportunities to explore, problem solve, take risks, work collaboratively and simply spend time outdoors have a significant impact on children’s confidence, resilience and wellbeing.

For some children, particularly those who may struggle within a traditional classroom environment, outdoor learning provides a different opportunity to succeed, develop relationships and build self-esteem.

We regularly see children return to the classroom calmer, more focused and more ready to learn after spending time outdoors—phonics in the mud, maths with sticks”.

I was thrilled to be able to connect Harbertonford Church of England primary school with volunteers from Force 4 Nature, who turned up and built raised veg beds in the playground so the pupils can learn how to grow healthy food, which they can eat in school.

This kind of learning is straightforward and can engage those who struggle in a traditional classroom environment; the child who can be disruptive in the classroom is hard to spot once outside with the whole class. However, this takes confidence from school leaders and teachers, so it is crucial that outdoor learning features in continuing professional development and training. I want a curriculum and assessment review that includes outdoor learning, which Ofsted should include as a plus when assessing how schools are performing.

Any school in the country can open its doors and take learning outside. To take it one step further is the holy grail: the outdoor residential. I still remember the school trips I enjoyed at the Lagganlia centre, near Aviemore—the experiences have stayed with me for

many decades. However, we are still waiting to see Labour’s access to nature Green Paper, which the Government promised in this Parliament. That creates uncertainty for those who deliver programmes that provide such invaluable opportunities.

The Government have also decided not to renew the generation green programme, which provided access to nature, through structured outdoor learning, residential, farm visits and more, to over 125,000 children, including 26,000 from the most disadvantaged communities. The recent Milburn review is clear that mental health has become a primary driver of youth disengagement, not a secondary consideration. Rising anxiety, neurodiversity and long-term health conditions are reshaping who participates in post-16 education. If we want to help our young people achieve more, getting them outside is a good place to start.

Yes, residential costs money, but let us talk about the return on investment. DEFRA-funded research from the University of Cumbria demonstrates a social return on investment of £4.32 for every £1 spent on outdoor education as part of the curriculum. The Scottish Government have already acted on this, and we should too. Outdoor residential can literally change lives. They pull kids out of their comfort zone and teach them that they can do things they thought were impossible. Activities teach teamwork and problem solving, improve self-belief and build friendships. Those are the skills that will give children the resilience to help them cope with all the stuff that life throws at them as they grow up. They also offer space to connect with peers and teachers in a new way, offering valuable side-by-side moments.

“It’s like being in Minecraft” is a phrase often heard as the kids walk through the woods near Beesands in South Devon. For many children who come here to experience the great outdoors on a school residential, this will be the first time they have set foot in a wood. They might be nervous of sitting on the grass, or find it hard to walk down a steep grassy field towards the sea, but all these little moments are teaching them resilience.

Pete and Andrea Moore both gave up traditional teaching jobs to open the brilliant Forest and Beach outdoors centre, such was their passion for teaching children the value of experiencing the outdoors, not just seeing it on a screen. Kurt Mockridge, who runs Grenville House outdoor education centre in Brixham, told me of kids who come to his centre from a primary school just the top of the hill but who have never been down to the beach or in the water that is right on their doorstep. Parents who do not have the familiarity, confidence or time may struggle to take their kids out. That is why such trips are so crucial, especially for those from more deprived areas.

For many young people living in urban areas, their only realistic opportunity to experience nature comes through residential outdoor learning, where they are taken out of their local environment altogether. By building their confidence in the outdoors, we instil in them a respect for, and understanding of, nature, which will be crucial as we face the challenges of a changing climate. We simply cannot expect future generations to nurture our planet if they do not understand the wonder of nature.

For the mental health and wellbeing of our children and young people, for the enhanced learning outcomes

that they will gain, for the joy of learning and for the future of this planet that we call home, I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Caroline Voaden, Tim Farron, Dr Roz Savage, Dr Danny Chambers, Maya Ellis, Sir Julian Lewis and Chris Law present the Bill.

Caroline Voaden accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October, and to be printed (Bill 111).

Opposition Day

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

Summer Jobs

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister. I call the Opposition spokesperson to move the motion.

12.51 pm

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Bourne) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House regrets the combination of the rise in employers' National Insurance contributions, the impact of the Employment Rights Act 2025, and the regulations that make it more difficult for young people to get their first job; further regrets the destructive impact that the Government's policies have had on entry-level, flexible and seasonal work in particular; also regrets the Government's plans to give Mayors powers to introduce an overnight visitor levy, making staycations in England less attractive and less affordable, while risking jobs in the tourism and hospitality industries that depend on domestic visitors; calls on the Government to change course to support summer jobs, flexible working and seasonal work, on which the hospitality, leisure and retail sectors depend; and further calls on the Government to abolish business rates for high street businesses, to boost the economy and save summer jobs.

We know that a good start in life is critical, and that is certainly true in the world of work. Everyone remembers their first job—sometimes fondly, other times not. A first job, however, is not just a first wage; it is the first time a young person learns the world of work. It teaches them that it will pay them for what they can do, that they have a role to play, that they are needed and that they belong. It is where they learn to turn up on time, to look a customer in the eye, and to take pride in a shift well worked and a wage honestly earned. So this debate is not insignificant; it is about whether the next generation gets that same chance or whether the Government pull the ladder up behind them. I contend that, rung by rung, that is exactly what they are doing.

As a Conservative, I have always believed in the dignity of work, of the security and freedom that a regular wage brings, but today too many people are being held back. For their sake, it is important that we reflect on why. They are not being held back by a lack of their own ambition—that exists in abundance. Nor are many people being stopped by their parents, schools, colleges or universities—they all want them to succeed. Instead, more often than not, as the chief economist at the Institute of Directors has pointed out, it is Government policy that, in her words, is

“choking off work opportunities for young people”.

Over 1 million young people aged 16 to 24 are now not in education, employment or training.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the Opposition and the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward the debate. I can well remember my first job. It was not just about the pocket money, because it was not much in those days; it was about punctuality, turning up, social engagement and meeting people—all those things were important. Nowadays, my constituents in Strangford tell me that it is business rates, energy costs—all the things that prevent them from employing somebody,

[Jim Shannon]

not just for a Saturday job, but for a student job. They just cannot do it any more. Does that responsibility fall on the shoulders of the Labour party?

Gareth Davies: I am always grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He clearly learned in his first job the importance of showing up and he certainly does every single day in this place, which I commend him for. I agree with him, and I will set out in detail what I believe are the causes of the situation we find ourselves in today, with 1 million young people aged 16 to 24 not in education, employment or training.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Is my hon. Friend not incredulous that the Government's proposed amendment to the motion

"welcomes the Employment Rights Act 2025 and the...Plan to Make Work Pay"?

Does he think this is just another example of the Government burying their head in the sand, and that work may pay but there is nothing to work at?

Gareth Davies: That is exactly right. There is no point in pay being on an upwards trajectory, which we all support, if there are no jobs in the first place. Actually, under this Government, the record is clear that employment levels are in decline, not on a positive trajectory.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the biggest tragedy is for those kids who go to university, with all the costs that involves and three years of their life, only to find that they are no further forward? Does he agree that the Government would be well advised to focus on skills through further education, rather than obsessing about higher education, which I am afraid is a fraud on young people?

Gareth Davies: Of course, that is exactly why the previous Conservative Government had such a huge focus on skills, training and vocational courses. My own constituency of Grantham and Stamford benefited at the time from much-needed funding to boost skills and vocational training, so my right hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Member give way?

Gareth Davies: I give way to the hon. Member for Harlow.

Chris Vince: The hon. Member nearly forgot which constituency I represent, which would have been disappointing.

I do not agree with some of the conclusions the hon. Member is making and will make—for example, young people being out of work has been an issue for far longer than two years—but on skills, where I think we can find some cross-party consensus, there is a need to embed some skills earlier in young people's education. Does he agree on the need to broaden the curriculum to

include those vital employment-related skills at an earlier age? I am thinking of financial education and computer literacy, for example.

Gareth Davies: I will always agree on the need for financial literacy, but the point we are making today is that we believe in work—work as a route out of poverty, work as a way to increase the prosperity of this country—and we are highlighting the red tape that is now strangling businesses and preventing them from hiring young workers, which would otherwise give them a step on the ladder.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Gareth Davies: Let me make some progress for the moment.

It is clear that something is not working, as we have all been saying, so we have to try to understand and explain why that is the case. We should not need to point this out, but higher taxes and more regulation are simply not conducive to economic growth or higher employment. If we consider what a business must now weigh up before looking to hire somebody, first, of course, there is the jobs tax—a tax that targets not profit or success, but the very basic act of employing another human being.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that is perhaps the most corrosive consequence of all? Businesses have all the pressure that is bearing down on them, and so many are telling me that it is just not worth it. The correlation between effort and success is being depleted, their self-confidence is being eroded and, as a result, our economy is being sapped of any desire to contribute because the effort does not reap any reward.

Gareth Davies: Time and again, we in the Opposition try to make the point that it is not the result of any one particular policy; it is the overall environment. We do not, as a state or as a Government, create jobs; it is businesses that create jobs, and they need to know that the Government are behind them. They need to know that there is an environment in which they can invest in people. Right now, for a combination of reasons, that is not the case.

Tim Farron: The hon. Gentleman is making some important points. Obviously, in some parts of the world, including mine, many jobs are on offer but it is hard for young people to take them up. Some 60% of employers in the hospitality and tourism industry in the Lake District find it difficult to recruit staff. One reason is the lack of public transport to get young people to the places where they are needed. Another reason is the lack of affordable housing. Does he recognise that this is a structural problem affecting young people everywhere, but particularly in rural areas such as Cumbria?

Gareth Davies: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for making that point. As I was saying, it is not one particular policy that impacts this issue. As he points out, it is a combination of factors, particularly to do with geography in rural areas such as his but also in Lincolnshire, and I agree that transport connectivity is a critical part of that. The way in which we pay for more

public infrastructure, by the way, is to boost tax receipts through work, employment, enterprise and risk taking, but that point has been lost right now, because Labour's £25 billion jobs tax has forced businesses to cut back hiring at every level, especially young people. Thousands of people have now been let go because of the Chancellor's choices.

Secondly, there are the permits, restrictions and forms—all the red tape that is wrapped around those looking to employ young people who simply want to work during the summer. That is a fact that we are trying to highlight through our motion today, and I encourage everybody to look at the detail of it, because it is not often talked about in this place, but out there, among young people, it is.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): In areas like Fylde, which are very dependent on tourism—I would say it is the most beautiful part of Lancashire, but I do not want to incur your wrath, Mr Speaker, so I will say it is the joint most beautiful area—the local economy is based on seasonal trends. Summer jobs are important for not just the young people who get them, but the viability of the tourism and hospitality economy as a whole. Does the shadow Minister agree that this has a wider impact on the economy that sustains areas like Lytham St Annes and other coastal towns across Britain?

Gareth Davies: Completely. There is even now a tax on the great British holiday, which impacts my hon. Friend's constituency, Mr Speaker's and many others. The overnight visitor levy, known as the holiday tax, threatens my hon. Friend's area, just as it threatens Whitby, Scarborough, Blackpool, Bournemouth, the Norfolk coast and even my county in the Lincolnshire Wolds. The Government call it "modest", but the seaside landlady who is struggling to fill her rooms calls it the difference between a season that works and one that does not. UKHospitality has warned that this tax means that consumers visiting destinations in England are charged double the tax of visiting Paris and 70% more than in Barcelona or Rome. In effect, the Government's half a billion-pound holiday tax represents little more than a self-inflicted trade tariff on domestic breaks, driving holidaymakers overseas.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Is it not the truth that we have a Government who simply do not understand business? They think that they can squeeze and squeeze, tax and tax, legislate against and tangle up in red tape the very businesses that we need to drive our economy, get the growth that the Government say they want and provide jobs and opportunities for working people and young people. They simply do not get it.

Gareth Davies: The facts are there for all to see. As I was saying, it is vital that we support the business community, and that includes small businesses. So often the narrative is about large multinationals, but it is SMEs and small business owners who drive our country forward and employ people across the country, especially young people.

Another thing that businesses in this country are facing is the now infamous Employment Rights Act 2025, which has created so much red tape that the corner café has to focus on hiring a lawyer before it hires a waiter.

The Government have laid down so many requirements for employers who need to move underperforming employees on. Indeed, their own law says that after six months, employees are protected from unfair dismissal, but I have to ask, where were these protections for the poor old Prime Minister, with whom they dispatched over a single weekend on WhatsApp? He got less probation than a probationary barista. It is one rule for the shop floor and another rule for the Labour Front Bench.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): My hon. Friend will know that the right to guaranteed hours contained in the Employment Rights Act is of great concern to hospitality and leisure businesses. In Burnham-on-Sea in my constituency, they are worried that if they enjoy a period of good weather during which they engage more casual staff, followed by a period of poor weather when they have potentially very few customers, they will be compelled to offer guaranteed hours to those staff they have no need of. Does he share my concern that the right to guaranteed hours will prevent many young people from getting their first job this summer?

Gareth Davies: The whole point here is that businesses, the country and people need flexibility. The whole country runs on choice and flexibility, and if there are unnecessary restrictions that harm economic activity and prevent young people from entering the workforce when they want to, that is clearly not a good thing for our country. I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, because he makes a very good point about the Employment Rights Act, which we have made it very clear we disagree with.

This is not just about the dismissal elements of the Employment Rights Act. The Act also makes British businesses have a fair and open recruitment process. Businesses must find the right candidate, on merit, from a proper field of candidates, and yet here we are today with the Government filling the highest office of the land from a shortlist of one! They will regulate the Saturday job to within an inch of its life but run their own leadership contest with all the rigour of a one-ticket raffle. They will hold a whole by-election to find work for one man, while imposing a permit form on every under-16 in the country, a Sunday working ban and a levy on the town in which they live. It is the same old Labour time and again: "Rules for thee, but not for me."

It is two years since the last election, and Labour's policies are starting to bite. Job vacancies are down by almost 150,000. Thousands of job opportunities have gone, and the youth unemployment rate is up by 2.5%—that is 735,000 young people now out of work. Borrowing costs have hit record highs. Labour is spending more on welfare than defence, education and prisons combined. Our economy is shrinking.

It does not have to be this way. We have a plan that respects young people and the fact that they want to work hard and succeed. We have a plan to back young people already in work and support those who want to find work and gain experience, especially through a summer job. Where Labour's red tape harms employment, we will work with businesses to scrap it. That includes red tape on the employment of under-16s, such as the two-hour Sunday working limit.

[Gareth Davies]

In sectors where Labour's taxes threaten the largest impact, we will choose a different course: we will abolish business rates entirely for thousands of retail, hospitality and leisure businesses on our high streets, with a 100% relief benefiting one quarter of a million firms. We have ruled out the Government's disastrous holiday tax on working families and treasured domestic tourist destinations. Unlike the Government, we understand that to back businesses and employers is to back their customers and the people they employ too.

We cannot lose the aspiration of a generation because of the barrier raised by the failed choices of this Government. Young people want to work. They want to do their bit; they want to build their own futures. It is our job not to stand in their way but to support them. Our plan does just that. The Labour party has spent all summer worrying about one man's job. We say worry about all the others, back British businesses, back our high streets and back the young people of this country, who ask for nothing more than the chance to work.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister to move the amendment, or not.

1.9 pm

The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant): I will not be moving the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

I do not know how you felt when you got up this morning, Mr Speaker, and you saw the Order Paper. I saw that there was a debate on summer jobs and I thought, "That's going to be nice and summery and bright and optimistic—the sun is shinin' in the sky, there ain't a cloud in sight." But then along comes Mr Night with all his doom and gloom and rheum in his eye—

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): That is the reality!

Chris Bryant: A depressing version of reality.

I know that the Tories do not support proportional representation, but none the less we have had the single transferable speech delivered by the hon. Member for Grantham and Bourne (Gareth Davies) from the Conservative Front Bench. To quote Sam Fender and Olivia Dean, "All my memories of" the Tory Front Bench "ring like tinnitus"—only I do not mean that in a good way as it is in the song.

Let us look at the actual facts. On GDP, the hon. Member for Grantham and Bourne has been predicting doom for months, but the UK economy grew by a robust 0.6% in the first quarter of 2026, something the Conservatives would have died for during their 14 years in Government. On inflation, he has been making dire predictions for months, but the consumer prices index stayed steadily at 2.8% in May, defying expectations. On wages, average regular pay, excluding bonuses, increased by 3.4% year on year up to April 2026, ahead of inflation. On productivity, he kept on saying, "Oh woe is me", here, there and everywhere, on every broadcast outlet in the land, but UK productivity increased by 0.9% in the first quarter of 2026. On employment, he said we are doomed—

"We are doomed, Captain Mainwaring!"—

but in the three months to April 2026, UK unemployment fell slightly to 4.9%, meaning we are outperforming other major economies, including Canada and the European Union average, and we have a record number of people in employment at 34.4 million people.

We are absolutely not complacent about any of this. Some of the global headwinds remain challenging. The impacts of the war in Iran, which the Conservatives wanted us to go into at full scale, have yet to be fully felt, but we are making progress.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Nowhere is the summer job more important for young people finding work than on the Isle of Wight, but employers are telling me that it is increasingly hard to employ young people because of the tax and the red tape that this Government have put on them, so it is no wonder that youth unemployment is up. I have an idea for the Minister: why does he not reform welfare and reverse the decisions made by his Government so that young people can find a job?

Chris Bryant: I am not sure that there is "nowhere" in the country where that is more important than the Isle of Wight—every single constituency in the land faces challenges around getting young people into work. The former leader of the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), raised a completely different set of issues from those raised by the hon. Gentleman, but of course we have to reform welfare. I do not think a single Member of the House does not believe that we have to reform welfare. We have to ensure welfare works for people and enables people to get into jobs.

There is one phrase that the hon. Member for Grantham and Bourne used that I completely agree with, although I would just change one word. He said that as a Conservative, he believed that work is the route out of poverty and into prosperity, and as a socialist and a Labour party politician, I agree that work is the route out of poverty, to self-fulfilment, to better mental health and to increased social cohesion across the whole country, so of course it is an absolute priority for any Labour Government to want to get as many young people into profitable work as possible.

Let me deal with the three main issues that have been raised in the debate: first, young people and their summer jobs; secondly, support for businesses; and thirdly, tourism. I see the shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, hon. Member for Droitwich and Evesham (Nigel Huddleston), is in his place, so he may want to raise some of the issues around tourism later. I think he has been out in the sun a bit too much—I am a bit worried about him. Skin cancer is a major problem in the country—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Why is the Minister talking about people's skin?

Chris Bryant: What?

Mr Speaker: Order. The shadow Deputy Chief Whip should know better—I expect him to set examples, not break them.

Chris Bryant: I did not know the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) is the shadow Deputy Chief Whip, but there we are. If the hon.

Member for Droitwich and Evesham is upset I am terribly sorry, but I think he was taking my words in the way that I intended them.

I am sure that we can all remember our first summer job. Mine was in a newsagent/sweet shop. Others might have been behind a bar, which is very common, or working in a hotel. Wimbledon takes on 280 14 to 17-year-olds as ball boys and girls every year, plus many more young people in its bars and hospitality venues. The Commonwealth games in Glasgow, which should bring £150 million of extra investment into the city, will take on more than 3,000 volunteers and hundreds of temporary staff. The Edinburgh festivals will take on even more young people working across all the different events.

In tourism hotspots across the country, from Margate to Harrogate to Whip-Ma-Whop-Ma-Gate in York, in Bath, Stratford-upon-Avon, the Lake district, the Peak district and on the Jurassic coast, youngsters will be earning a wage for the very first time. That is a really important part of their social and personal development. We all know how important such jobs are to the whole economy. As several hon. Members have said already, getting their first experience of work teaches young people about the need to turn up on time, to look somebody in the face and engage with them, and to understand the rigours of work and stay until the end of the day.

The tourism industry meets domestic and international demand. We are still ambitious: we want to get to 50 million international visitors to the UK by 2030. Hospitality offers young people the chance to go from having no qualifications or experience to skilled staff member faster than any other sector in the UK, which is why it is so important.

Wendy Morton: If the situation is so rosy, will the Minister explain why youth unemployment among 16 to 17-year-olds is currently running at a staggering 30%—up from 24.7%?

Chris Bryant: I never said that the situation was all rosy; I said earlier that I am completely not complacent about the situation. I know the problems facing young people going into work that have been endemic in our economy for the last 15 to 20 years. A Conservative Member—I am sorry that I cannot remember who—asked earlier, “Isn’t university a fraud on young people?” Of course, it is really important to strike a balance between getting the experience to get into work rather than necessarily taking on an academic career. We have been keen to change that mix since we came into government.

I do not suppose that there is a single Labour Member who does not worry about the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training—NEETs, as people have referred to them already. Alan Milburn’s report is a real wake-up call for us all. We are fully backing the review and will of course act on its recommendations when they finally appear. We want to make sure they are based on evidence, which is precisely what Alan Milburn is pursuing.

Chris Vince: I apologise to the whole House that in my previous intervention, I did not mention my constituency of Harlow. I will put the record straight now and talk about the incredible work that Harlow college is doing

to support young people who are not in education, employment or training. As part of the ongoing Milburn review, will the Minister look at some of the good case studies, like Harlow college, to help benefit the Government’s thinking?

Chris Bryant: Mr Speaker, did you know that he is the Member for Harlow? That had completely passed us by completely, hadn’t it? My hon. Friend makes a good point and I am sure someone will send him a letter thanking him for it. I am sure lots of us have similar examples in our constituencies.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con) *rose*—

Chris Bryant: Maybe the Father of the House is about to give us another instance of an institution in his constituency.

Sir Edward Leigh: I am just wondering if the Minister is looking forward to a new summer job at the end of July. Can he give us any confidence that the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) has any new ideas to get young people into work? If he does, I am not aware of them yet.

Chris Bryant: Actually, quite a few mayors around the country, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), have advanced a lot of ideas in their areas that have precisely done that. It is important that we do not simply adopt a one-size-fits-all approach for the whole country. The kind of issues in my patch will be very different from those in the Father of the House’s patch, and we need to be able to match our ideas to the areas. As for the longest reshuffle in history, I think most of us are bored with it already.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The Minister is talking up the economic performance of the United Kingdom since his party took over in 2024. He is labouring the point about the first quarter of this year, but I detect that he is less confident about the second quarter—we will see what that brings. Youth unemployment stood at 626,000 last year, so with this fabulous economy, why has it gone up by 109,000? Why are there 109,000 more 16 to 24-year-olds out of work under this Government now than there were this time last year?

Chris Bryant: I want to be absolutely clear. I am not trying to suggest that everything is perfect in the nation and that we are in a version of nirvana; I am not saying that at all. I have friends and relatives who work in the hospitality industry, and I know that these last few years—not just the last two, but the last 15—have been really tough for hospitality. I think we lost something like 6,800 pubs from 2010 to 2024, and we have been losing more since then.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I am still trying to answer the hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan), if the right hon. Gentleman will allow me.

We have faced significant headwinds this year. We are keen to pursue the work that Alan Milburn has done, and, if I am allowed, I will come to some of the ways in which we are trying to address the specific problem we have.

John Glen: I recognise that the Minister wants to come to what the Government are going to do, but does he not accept that the decisions already made in the last two years—with respect to the price of employment and the national living wage, the cost of employment with regard to legislation, and business rates—have depressed the appetite of many small businesses to employ more people? Regardless of the strategic changes around the Milburn review, which I accept need to be evidence based, those decisions have had a chilling effect on the capacity of the economy to employ young people.

Chris Bryant: Let me say two things. On the national living wage, it must surely be wrong that somebody who works 40 hours a week cannot afford to pay their bills at the end of the week. If they have been a diligent worker, played by the rules and done everything properly, but they still cannot afford to put food on the table for themselves and their children, pay the electricity bill and all the rest of it, that must surely be wrong. That is why we introduced the whole idea of a minimum wage in the first place, and then the national living wage.

This issue applies only to young people older than school age—those aged 18 and above. I know that there are some people who have an impression that all those young people are living at home and do not need to earn in the same way as others, but that is simply not true for lots of 19, 20 and 21-year-olds in my constituency. They are earning their living, and they need to pay the bills, just like anybody else. There is a difficult balance to be struck there.

Similarly, I would argue, there is a balancing act around national insurance contributions. As the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) will know, we have tried to ensure that the sectors of the economy that are smaller and have less ability to absorb the additional costs do not have to meet them. I think something like 50% of businesses do not have to pay any more at all—I will correct the record if I have got that number wrong. In the end, I do not hear people frequently calling for us to slash expenditure on defence, education, the health service and so on. I sometimes want to say to hon. Members that it is all very well to denounce the national insurance contributions increase, but they would have to find the money from other budgets. It is all very well to say, “Let’s cut it from welfare,” but a lot of welfare projects are designed to make sure that people have an opportunity to put food on the table and pay the bills.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I am keen to move on, but I am an enormous fan of the right hon. Member, so I will give way to him.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: It is always great to have the Minister at the Dispatch Box; we always have a lot of fun. I have had to juggle this issue myself, so I want to ask him a very important question: does he honestly think that making the starting rate for national insurance payments almost half the previous rate has no effect on part-time employment? Does doing so not discourage those who would like to give people starter jobs? It makes that much more difficult; surely that is the reality.

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman makes a decent point. A balance has to be struck on all these things and, in the end, we have to make the sums add up when it comes to the Budget. Those are the difficult decisions that we had to make back in November 2024. The other issue we faced was that no provision had been made for support for business rates beyond April 2025 prior to the Budget in November 2024, so when we introduced measures in that regard, they had to be paid for too.

I heard what the shadow Minister has just said about abolishing business rates, but I am afraid that this is Trussonomics. It sounds great—“Let’s abolish all tax! Why not?”—but you actually have to pay for that and prove that you have the wherewithal to do so. I will crack on if I may, Mr Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption.*] Apologies, Mr Speaker; I did not mean to demote you there.

We are already taking action by putting an additional £1 billion into programmes such as the youth guarantee and the growth and skills levy, which are supporting almost 1 million young people and creating up to 500,000 opportunities for them to earn and learn. We have also been offering new incentives of £2,000 for those hiring foundation apprentices aged 16 to 21. That comes on top of a complete national insurance contributions exemption for employees under the age of 21 and apprentices under the age of 25, which I think meets some Members’ arguments.

Dave Doogan: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I am afraid that I am going to crack on, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind. He will have an opportunity to—

Dave Doogan: It is always nice to be the Minister’s first refusal. Have I put him off his stride?

Chris Bryant: No, no—but making a snide remark has not recommended the hon. Gentleman to me any further, I have to say.

A seasonal job may be the first route out of NEETdom. That is why we built flexibility into the Employment Rights Act 2025 to address issues of seasonal demand. Not all seasonal work is done on a zero hours or similar basis, but, where it is, there are provisions in the legislation to allow those guaranteed hours to be part of a fixed or limited-term contract where appropriate.

Let me be clear that the right to guaranteed hours does not force companies to make seasonal workers permanent; it gives workers the right to choose certainty and stability in their contracts where they want it, which will help them to budget and plan their lives. That is the right thing to do. It ensures that workers are fairly treated and affords employers the flexibilities that they need, while giving around 2.7 million workers a pay rise thanks to increases in the national living wage and the national minimum wage. I should add that the Department is running a consultation on some of the finer details of our zero-hours policies before they come into effect, and I encourage businesses to share their views with us so that these reforms work in practice, not just on paper.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Will the Minister give way before he finishes?

Chris Bryant: Oh, I have hours yet—and I still have to give way to the hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens—but of course I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Damian Hinds: The Minister said that he would not move the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister. I do not think that is unheard of, but I am curious to understand why, having put down such an amendment, the Government would not move it. There are three main things here, and the Minister has talked about two of them: the Employment Rights Act and apprenticeships. The third main thing seems to be about planned changes for business rates. In not moving the amendment, is the Minister saying that the Government do not stick by what they said previously about upcoming changes to business rates on pubs?

Mr Speaker: I call the PPS—sorry, I mean the Minister.

Chris Bryant: Touché, Mr Speaker! *[Interruption.]* Oh, Madam Deputy Speaker is taking the Chair. Well, I saw you off, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I think if you look at the history, that is not the case.

Chris Bryant: It has all got very unconventional.

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) is misinterpreting what is occurring. If he wants to reason with this matter, I am afraid he needs to talk to the Whips, who are in charge of decisions about whether we move things and vote.

I said that I would address the issue of support for businesses, and that is precisely what our “Backing your Business” plan is all about. We are rolling out one of the most significant pieces of legislation in more than 25 years to tackle late payments: the Commercial Payments Bill. We are expanding access to finance through the British Business Bank to give more small firms the confidence to grow and take on more staff, with guidance and support available from our business growth service every step of the way.

We are bringing in new hospitality zones with reduced red tape and licensing costs. These new zones will make it easier for businesses to move into disused spaces and employ more people. In addition to all that, we are cutting this year’s business rates bills for pubs and live music venues by 15% following a two-year freeze, and we are encouraging large concert venues to introduce a £1 levy on a voluntary basis to go towards supporting live music venues. It is great that Harry Styles, Olivia Dean and others are encouraging people to do that for their tickets, but it is not universal yet. It could be a significant advantage for live music venues, so I encourage all operators to do this.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: Yes, and I would be happy to give way to the hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan) again if he wants.

Sarah Bool: On the issue of support for businesses, Brackley Antique Cellar is a unique business that has 200 dealers, but business rates are really affecting it. Antique spaces often take on unique properties, and

business rates are really hurting them. Will the Minister reconsider the business rates for businesses such as Brackley Antique Cellar?

Chris Bryant: I have heard about that issue in relation to some other antiques businesses that are basically lots of stalls or small shops inside a much larger, older building. The hon. Lady makes a decent point, and it is one of the things we will be considering as we look at the future of business rates.

We have also introduced permanently low tax rates for retail, hospitality and leisure properties with rateable values below £500,000. This gives long-term certainty and support to the high street, and stands in marked contrast to the previous forms of relief, which created a yearly cliff edge that had been due to end entirely in April 2025. At the same time, we are increasing the hospitality support fund to £10 million, helping more businesses in this sector to grow and create more summer jobs. As hon. Members know, we have extended world cup opening hours and cut alcohol duty on draft pints. Despite being a Welshman, I very much hope that we have to do that rather more frequently over the next two weeks.

Wendy Morton: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I still have an intervention to take from the hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens from the SNP if he wants to have another go, but if not, I will give way to the right hon. Lady.

Wendy Morton: Does the Minister not accept that the schemes and programmes to do with the world cup—let us hope England stay in for as long as possible to help those businesses—are merely small sticking plasters? We need longer-term solutions for these industries that are much more sustainable.

Chris Bryant: Yes, I do not think England’s football prospects over the next few weeks are going to be the sole answer to the problem. That is why I have laid out a series of different areas in which we are already taking action, which I think will provide precisely the kind of long-term answers the sector needs. The Government have also protected the smallest businesses from the impact of the increase in employer national insurance contributions by more than doubling the employment allowance from £5,000 to £10,500. That is really important, and is very rarely mentioned in Conservative speeches.

I said that I would talk about tourism. I know that the Conservative party dislikes the idea of the tourism levy, and I have heard businesses complain about it as well—hotels in particular, but other parts of the sector too. I also worry that businesses are already facing a heavy tax burden, and I do not particularly want to increase it, but let us not exaggerate. First, all we are considering doing is allowing mayors to introduce a local levy. Some areas have already done so on a voluntary basis, and have done so very successfully. It seems extraordinary to forbid them from doing so, especially if they ensure that all the money raised goes into projects that support the tourism and hospitality sector. In certain instances where mayors want to introduce such a levy, it could be a real opportunity to drive forward economic opportunity in that sector.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): The King's Speech mentioned that mayors might have that power, but that foundation strategic authorities might also have it. Obviously, the approach has not been decided yet, but is that still the case?

Chris Bryant: Yes. I am very glad that my hon. Friend picked me up on that—that is a very good point.

I want to make another point about the levy, which is that some people seem to be suggesting that all of this is going to start in a couple of weeks' time. Far from it; this levy is far from imminent. We are consulting on it, and that process will take some time—I doubt we will have anything in place in the next 12 months. I very much encourage people to take part in the consultation so that we can decide how to move forward. Of course, any mayor or strategic authority will want to consider all the issues in the round and whether a net benefit can be gained from introducing such a levy, notwithstanding the additional pressures that there might be on costs in the tourism and hospitality sector.

Tim Farron: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, and for raising the issue of the tourism levy. We will have a mayor in Cumbria next May, and one of the considerations they will have is the fact that we have 20 million visitors every year to a county of 600,000 people. Those visitors use facilities in our communities—police, hospitals and many council facilities, not least the roads. They are very welcome to use those facilities, but not a penny is contributed towards them. I think people will instinctively be against a tourism tax, but the Government's choice to cut the local authority's funding by 31% is going to put the mayor—of whatever political colour—in a position where they feel they have no alternative but to introduce it. Would it not be better if mayors were able to make decisions and have our services funded properly by taking into account the visitors in the first place?

Chris Bryant: One thing on which I think the hon. Gentleman and I agree is that this is a very over-centralised state. We make far too many decisions on a national basis, rather than allowing local people to make more decisions that directly affect their businesses and their local economy. The economy in the hon. Gentleman's constituency might be very different from mine or that of any other Member.

In relation to tourism in particular, I am conscious that some of the country's biggest tourist attractions are in London—the British Museum and the Natural History Museum, for instance, get roughly 6 million visitors each—and a few other cities, including Bath, Stratford, Oxford, Cambridge and Edinburgh, do phenomenally well. Those cities might want to take a different attitude to that of other parts of the country, and I think that is the right way for us to move forward. There will be pressure from people who say, "Hang on, all our local museums are free to enter. Why are local taxpayers having to pay for that, rather than tourists when they arrive?" Those are the issues that mayors and strategic authorities will have to bear in mind, and it will sometimes be a borderline decision, but I think it is right that we give people the power and leave them to decide whether to exercise it.

There is one final policy area that I want to touch on, because it is mentioned in the Opposition's motion, and that is red tape. There is an irony about this—much of the red tape we are dealing with is in place because the previous Government introduced it. That is why we have set ourselves a very clear target of cutting the administrative burden on businesses by 25% by the end of this Parliament, and we are absolutely determined to do so. I fully accept the argument that there is far too much red tape; if we make it too difficult for businesses to employ people, that is an own goal for Britain. We are making progress—we have already announced a series of significant reforms that will mean no more mandatory strategic reports for medium-sized firms, and no more directors' reports for businesses of any size. That is going to save businesses some £230 million a year, but obviously we need to go further, and the Business Secretary is going to be making further announcements.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): My very first experience of employment was waiting at a van to try to get a day's work, cash in hand, at the berries, which was what people usually did when they were aged 13 or 14 and looked a wee bit older. I hope the Minister is not proposing a return to those days, because I kind of got the impression from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Grantham and Bourne (Gareth Davies), that that was the exact type of employment he was looking to return to.

Chris Bryant: To be fair to the shadow Minister, I do not think he intends to send children up the chimneys any more. That was his policy a few years ago, or maybe his predecessor's policy, but it is not his policy any more. It is not quite "Planet Earth that the Opposition are on, to quote Duran Duran, but they are close to it."

The Opposition motion talks a lot about regret. It regrets the Employment Rights Act 2025, the national insurance contributions, and so on. I am afraid that it tempts me to give my notorious Édith Piaf impersonation:

"Non, rien de rien...Je me fous du passé".

What is missing from these regrets of the Opposition? They have no regrets about helping draft the kami-Kwasi Budget that led to the fastest ever increase in mortgage rates, sending millions of families into unaffordable debt; no regrets about the biggest fall in living standards for two centuries; no regrets about slashing our public services, including the NHS, local government and our armed forces; no regrets about 14 years of anaemic economic growth. No regrets? No, I have regrets. I regret that the Conservatives ever got into power. I regret that they have become Mrs Thatcher's moaning Minnies. I regret that they left us with a nation divided against itself, but I do not regret the Employment Rights Act—I am proud of it.

To be clear, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have not moved the amendment, and I am not moving it.

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

1.39 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I am sure that Members on both sides of the House have heard from businesses on their local high streets and throughout

their constituencies about the challenges that they face from unaffordably high energy bills, the Government's increase in national insurance contributions, and recent business rates increases. This is a challenging economic landscape for businesses, especially those in the hospitality and retail sector, made worse by this Government's repeated mistakes. The increasing burden on small and medium-sized enterprises means that many do not have the resources to provide employment opportunities where many young people traditionally found their first jobs.

However, we cannot lose sight of the fact that many of these problems began under the last Conservative Government. It was they who undermined hospitality, retail, farming, agriculture and so many other sectors providing seasonal work over the summer through their terrible Brexit deal, the disastrous mini-Budget, and their failure to reform business rates as they had promised. Their record is a dispiriting picture of low growth, rising costs and falling living standards, all of which paved the way for where we are now. That is why it is so disappointing that this Government have added to those challenges through their short-sighted tax grabs, and are not acting with more urgency to support local economies and job opportunities around the UK. The state of our economy requires bold action.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): The hon. Lady called out the record of the previous Government, and she was right to do so. However, I remember that in 2012 youth unemployment stood at 22%, 4% higher than it is now. Of course, her party was in government at that time. I am keen to work collaboratively, but it is worth just noting that.

Sarah Olney: I am terribly sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I did not hear all the hon. Gentleman's intervention. He said something about unemployment in 2012. That was, of course, very soon after the global banking crash, which had a huge impact.

The state of our economy requires bold action: addressing the workforce skills crisis, reversing the national insurance jobs tax, speeding up delivery of the industrial strategy, and, most important, negotiating a new growth and defence partnership with the European Union, including joining the single market and forming a new customs union. More than 1 million young people in this country are currently not in education, employment or training, the highest level in over a decade. That is a very worrying statistic. The Milburn review has warned that the UK is at risk of experiencing a "lost generation" of young people owing to rising ill health, growing skills gaps, a dysfunctional housing market, and many other structural factors.

We are seeing not a lack of ambition among young people, but an institutional failure on the part of both the current Government and the last one. Ministers should be seeking urgently to ensure that young people have access to the skills, training and work experience that are necessary to begin their careers and participate in the workforce, but they cannot gain that experience if businesses simply cannot afford to offer new opportunities because they are struggling to stay afloat.

The cost of employment has risen significantly during Labour's time in office, and more than 110,000 jobs have been lost in the hospitality sector alone since the rise in national insurance contributions. If businesses

are not able to grow, it will not be just summer jobs that suffer; employment opportunities across the board will suffer, and of course that explains why the unemployment rate has climbed from 4.3% at the time of the 2024 Budget to 4.9% now. Our SMEs face huge challenges, and many are already struggling to absorb rising costs. Unless more is done to support them, vital entry-level jobs and essential contributions to the culture and character of our local communities will risk being lost.

As for issues affecting the workforce more broadly, the Liberal Democrats have welcomed the industrial strategy, alongside a funding boost for skills and training, but that progress stops well short of the fundamental reform that we need to see if we are to address the workforce shortages that many industries are facing. British businesses must be able to hire the people they need, with the skills that they need, but they must also have scope to employ less experienced workers who are just starting to climb the career ladder. Opportunities for young people are shrinking, and any business will tell us that the apprenticeship levy is not fit for purpose. Firms cannot obtain the funding that they need to train staff, and hundreds of millions of pounds of funding go unspent. The Liberal Democrats have long called for proper reform of the apprenticeship system to give businesses real flexibility over how they spend their money to train their staff.

The motion also calls for the abolition of business rates, and the Liberal Democrats agree that we need to see a complete overhaul of this unfair and damaging system. However, it was the last Conservative Government who failed to deliver the fundamental review of the business rates system that they promised in their 2019 manifesto. Perhaps things would have been different today if they had not simply kicked the can down the road. With the hospitality sector struggling to employ new workers, damage is being done to the prospects of our young people, who are now facing a soaring youth unemployment rate of 16.2%. It is self-evident that that trend is damaging to our economy as a whole. At the heart of this debate are people who are finding it incredibly difficult to obtain a job and support themselves, their partners, their children and their families—to pay rent, to pay their bills, to pay for groceries, to pay for essentials. That is what must not get lost in the debate.

The motion purports to examine the factors limiting opportunities for young people, but, perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a glaring omission of any reference to the damage caused by the last Government's failed Brexit deal. The appalling agreement negotiated by the Conservative party has been a complete disaster for our country, and particularly for small businesses, which are held back by reams of red tape and new barriers to trade. An astonishing 16,000 firms have stopped all exports to the EU as a result. While the Liberal Democrats welcome the steps—even if small and hesitant—that the Government are taking to improve our relationship with the EU, I urge the Minister to recognise that this should be only the start of moves towards a much deeper trading relationship, which should include joining the single market and forming a new customs union. That would be truly transformational for our economy, and for our young people's employment prospects.

At the very least, the Government should be making far more progress to secure a youth mobility scheme with the EU. If that were in place, there would have

[Sarah Olney]

been exponentially more work opportunities available to young British people this summer. Will the Minister set out a timeline for the introduction of a youth experience scheme? That would be beneficial to our whole economy, and could ease some of the burdens that our hospitality sector faces.

Tim Farron: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. She mentioned the youth mobility scheme. At present, the UK has youth mobility visa arrangements with a number of countries around the world, but with only one country in Europe, Andorra, which is a fat lot of good. As I mentioned, those in the hospital sector desperately need to recruit more staff. A youth mobility scheme arranged with our neighbours in the European Union would enable young people in this country to gain experience overseas, but would also enable the hospitality sector in the Lakes, in London and elsewhere to recruit the staff who they need to work over the summer.

Sarah Olney: My hon. Friend is, of course, entirely right. A youth mobility scheme would benefit not just young people who live in this country, but our businesses; it would allow them to recruit from across the EU, and obtain the short-term staff that the hospitality businesses in his constituency so badly need.

Businesses across the country, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, are struggling with unprecedentedly high costs, while battling a rising tax burden and an unfavourable economic climate. Struggling businesses mean fewer jobs, lost opportunities and lower living standards, so it is clear that we must look for ways in which to support local businesses and all who rely on them.

1.47 pm

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I am grateful to the official Opposition for giving us all an opportunity to reminisce about our own summer jobs. Probably many more years ago than I would care to admit, I was lucky enough to work both as a cleaner and at my local Co-op to help pay my way through the summer. Both those jobs were important to me; they not only stopped my mum murdering me for being around the house too much, but provided that crucial introduction to the world of work, and an opportunity to start to establish some of the disciplines and awarenesses of life that have served me, I should like to think, reasonably well over my 36 years on this planet—

Chris Bryant: Thirty-six?

Alistair Strathern: I am grateful for the protestations from the Front Bench.

Those jobs were also crucial in starting to form my politics. In both settings, I was incredibly lucky to work with some fantastic colleagues. Not only did my clumsiness—from spilled buckets to broken bottles in the aisles—mean that I often relied on their generosity and patience with my ineptitude, but they gave me a window into lives that were very different from mine to date. There were similarities between those two jobs. Both sets of people worked in industries in which the minimum wage had been crucial to driving up their

security and sense of prosperity. They were grateful for that, and as a result there was a great deal of support for the Labour Government at the time.

However, there was one crucial difference. At the Co-op, those with whom I worked had regular contracts, secure work and good terms. They were supported by a recognised trade union, and felt a comfort and security in their jobs that was denied to many of those with whom I worked cleaning local schools. There, the practical realities of limited terms and conditions, and insecure work with non-guaranteed hours, were not artefacts of a contract or remote bureaucracy; they were tangible insecurities that hung over people's day-to-day lives, and undermined their sense of security and ability to plan with confidence for the future that they wanted to provide for their family. That is why, many years down the line, I am proud to be part of a Labour Government who are delivering a record expansion of workplace rights through the Employment Rights Act 2025, and why the fundamental vision of protecting workers and ensuring a minimum social contract for those working hard for their families and doing right by their communities will always be foundational to my politics.

We come here not to embrace the contradictions and tensions that inhibit social change and progress, but to be creative enough and bold enough to lead the country, and to lead the way to a better economic settlement for the working families whom we are here to serve. That is why the minimum wage has been so transformational for our country, and why we have weekends now. I am very confident that in time, the Employment Rights Act will prove to be a big step forward for so many of the working people I am proud to represent. That does not mean that every aspect will always be perfect. Consultations with businesses and employers will be foundational in ensuring that we get the nuances right, when we look at how things play out in different employment settings, but the fundamental principle is this: my constituents and the cleaners I worked with deserve more confidence and security in their employment. That is exactly why I feel completely at home on the Government Benches, with my Labour colleagues.

The Conservatives' motion raises important issues. It is absolutely right to say that, over many years, we have not done enough collectively to bear down on some of the barriers to young people getting employment. We are doing a lot of work on that, but there is a lot more that we need to do. I am really glad that this Government are waking up to the need to do far more on vocational skills and apprenticeships. They are thinking about how we can reform qualifications to ensure greater alignment with our industrial strategy, and the growth opportunities that will come from industrial changes, but they are also breaking down practical barriers to accessing opportunities for young people in my communities and right across the country. The Government are introducing foundational apprenticeships, and are making sure that they are in reach of the hardest-to-reach young people—those who are desperately in need of the steps into work that apprenticeships can provide. They are reforming levies to make it cheaper for employers to take on apprentices and give them the training that they desperately deserve.

Hannah Spencer (Gorton and Denton) (Green): I very much agree with Members who have talked about the importance of summer jobs for young people, but as the

hon. Gentleman says, we also need to think about providing more long-term jobs. Does he agree that it is vital that the Government reinvest all the money from the growth and skills levy in skills, and do not let the Treasury take away a top slice? We also need to make sure that the apprenticeship budget reflects the ambition of the sector; it could drive transformational change, and get our young people into the good jobs that they all deserve—good, long-term jobs and summer jobs.

Alistair Strathern: I absolutely agree that we need to invest in apprenticeships to ensure that many more young people can access them, as well as work placement opportunities in their communities. That is why I welcome the spotlight that the Milburn review is already starting to shine, forensically, on barriers to young people accessing such opportunities. I am really keen to ensure that the Government lean into the practical implications of his diagnosis that we need to shift more money from supporting young people who are out of work into helping them into good paid work.

I am very proud to have supported the Government's jobs guarantee, and of the wider work that we are doing to ensure that employers in my community and right across the country are practically and financially incentivised to bring young people into the world of work and supported to train them up, so that those young people can benefit from opportunities that feel out of reach to far too many of them at the moment. That is an approach that we need to thread into all our work in this space.

I was very moved by the conversations that Gareth Southgate had in last month's documentary, in which young men who had been out of work for a very long time spoke of the impact it had on their self-esteem. It reflected issues with their confidence that had been long in the making. It reflected how they felt in their communities, and how they felt they were treated at school. Putting that right requires a continued focus on curriculum reform and place-based investment, but I would like the Government to go further in embracing the recommendations of the recent review on white working-class underachievement at school, to make sure that every young person, no matter what community they live in or where they come from, has no barriers to succeeding, and can feel confident in their ability to succeed at school.

In a moment of agreement, let me agree with the Conservative party's diagnosis that we need to go slightly further on business rates to support fantastic local employers in doing more for young people. I think the Conservatives are being slightly cheeky in skirting the fact that the plans we inherited from them would have seen a huge cliff-edge increase in business rates. The many financial pressures that we have had to juggle since coming into government have meant that it has been challenging to balance things. I approve of the work that we have done to try to ease some of the multipliers, and I would like us to go further still. I also approve of the work that we have done to give further discounts to pubs, given that they have been in decline for decades, and I would like us to go further still there.

Fundamentally, however, the plans we inherited from the last Government would have been completely disastrous for the very businesses whose virtues the Conservatives are espousing today. If the Conservatives are so passionate

about the errors of the Government's choices on the minimum wage and national insurance, I encourage them to be bolder, and to do more than just offer regret, because regret will not change a single aspect of those policies' implications. If they are genuinely confident that there are better ways to plug the gaps in our public finances and improve our public services, why are they not committing to reversing the national insurance hikes? If they genuinely believe that the minimum wage has gone up too far, why are they not embracing the practical end point of that argument by suggesting that they would cut it? Maybe it is because, much as they like to complain about the implications of our policies, they begrudgingly recognise that in the incredibly difficult circumstances that we inherited, both those choices may well have been right. I look forward to a Conservative Member proving me wrong.

I thank the many Members who have shared their fantastic experiences of summer work, and the many colleagues with whom it has been inspiring to work on some of these issues, including staff from Amazing Apprenticeships, a charity in my constituency that does genuinely amazing work to boost apprenticeship opportunities for young people across the country. I look forward to continuing to work with them as the Government bring forward the Milburn review.

1.55 pm

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): As I am an accountant, it will come as no surprise to Members from across the House that I take a keen interest in numbers. Unfortunately for this Government, the numbers do not make for pleasant reading.

Labour Members have been busy crowning their messiah from the north—a coronation conducted with little scrutiny and even less debate—but I wonder whether they are aware that youth unemployment now stands at 16.2%, which is close to its highest level since 2015, and already above the pandemic peak. I wonder whether they know that 735,000 young people are out of work—up by 109,000 on the year. I wonder too whether they know that, for the first time since 2013, the number of young people not in education, employment or training has passed 1 million. Whatever is happening in the labour market is landing hardest, and first, on our young people. It is the plain, measurable consequence of decisions taken by this Government, including the introduction of higher national insurance contributions.

As we have heard today, the Employment Rights Act has added costs and burdens to employers large and small. I ask Labour Members to think like an employer for a moment—not a large firm with a human resources department, but the owner of a farm, a hotel or a shop on the high street, who has to decide whether to take someone on for the first time, perhaps over the summer. Under the Act, that decision now carries real legal risk within six months, rather than two years, so the rational choice is perhaps not to take the risk at all. The farm does not hire an extra hand for the harvest, the guesthouse does not take on extra staff for the holiday season, and the high-street shop does not offer the Saturday job that may lead to a summer job and permanent employment. Let us be honest about the cost: by the Government's top-end estimate, the Act lands over £1 billion on employers. Small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of our economy and a key gateway into work

[Mr Peter Bedford]

for young people, yet the uncertainty has left too many high-street businesses reluctant to invest, expand or hire.

These are not merely statistics to be traded across the House. Behind every percentage point and every headline figure is a young person searching for a first job, eager to build skills, gain experience and achieve independence. Too many are growing up believing that hard work is no longer rewarded, and that aspiration is no longer valued.

John Glen: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. In responding to me, the Minister pointed out that it was necessary to increase the national living wage so that everyone had enough money, which is obviously a reasonable point to make. Does my hon. Friend feel that the pace at which that was done—it increased faster than the rate of inflation—has caused a situation in which some young people will no longer have the jobs that they could have otherwise expected?

Mr Bedford: I totally agree with my right hon. Friend. I think the pace at which this was brought in has had a massive impact on businesses, particularly smaller businesses, and their ability to adapt to a changing labour market.

Chris Bryant: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to continue my conversation with the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen). My other concern is how it can possibly be right that somebody is employed for and works 40 hours a week, but their pay is not enough to cover the bills or to avoid being subsidised by the state afterwards. That is one key question we have to answer.

Mr Bedford: Too many people are growing up believing that hard work is no longer rewarded and aspiration is no longer valued. That is not the message we should be sending to the next generation. We owe our young people better than that.

For many of us in this House, a summer job was how we first learned what work is. In my case, it was stacking shelves in a corner shop, then working behind a counter at a local café and then in a greengrocer. Each one of those jobs taught me the same lesson—the value of money and the pride that comes from earning it oneself. That is why I support the action the Opposition are taking to save the summer job.

We would cut business rates for the businesses that create those first-rung jobs, not have another round of tinkering with multipliers and reliefs. We would scrap the archaic restrictions that stop young people choosing when they work, such as the outdated limits on Sunday working and the rules that bar them from working after 9 pm. A young person helping in a restaurant or a hotel is not being exploited; they are gaining experience, earning money and developing skills that employers value. We would end the culture of excessive bureaucracy that greets any employer offering a teenager their first opportunity, because every unnecessary form is yet another reason to say no. We would repeal the most damaging aspects of the Employment Rights Act and give employers the confidence to hire again. We would give SMEs proper, simple access to a growth and skills levy, so that a seasonal job can become an apprenticeship instead of simply ending in September.

I have heard what the Minister and hon. Members have said, but it is important that we give young people the dignity of a job, and a Government who are serious about work do not legislate away the very jobs our young people need. A summer job is about not just a payslip, but confidence, responsibility and resilience. This Government's actions have limited those opportunities, so I urge the House to support our motion, and I urge Ministers to give our young people back their first chance of building a successful career.

2.2 pm

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I was in two minds about joining this debate on summer jobs, to be frank, because my first job was stacking shelves in Marks & Spencer over Christmas, but I hope the House will forgive me for joining in anyway.

I thank the Opposition for bringing forward this debate, because it is really important. Labour Members should embrace, not shy away from, the opportunity to debate the hopes and aspirations of young people. Listening to Opposition Members, one would think the challenges facing young people in the labour market materialised out of thin air or started on 4 July 2024, but the number of young people not in education, employment or training rose starkly in the years up to the general election and, yes, it has continued to go up.

It is right for the Opposition to look at what this Government have done in this sphere, and they should absolutely provide such scrutiny, but they have missed a few things that this Government are doing. Our youth hubs will give young people the localised support they need to get into their local labour market. This Government have offered new incentives of £2,000 for those hiring aged 16 to 21 for foundation NICs apprenticeships. That comes on top of a complete NICs exemption for employees under 21 and apprentices under 25.

Ultimately, where we are now, with the under-employment and stagnant wages that young workers face today, is directly linked to the 14 years of the Conservative party, because for over a decade it oversaw an economy built on precarious and insecure work. A strong package of workers' rights and protections goes hand in hand with a strong economy. The Employment Rights Act has been vital to modernising protections and making work pay, because when we give people certainty over their hours and their wages, we give them the confidence to spend on our high streets, to go into their local pubs and to support their local corner shop, which benefits all of us through growth in the economy.

Throughout the passage of that Bill, the Government listened carefully to stakeholders to ensure that these reforms are balanced and fair, pro-worker and pro-business. I note that the amendments to people's rights on the first day of employment were made because the Government showed that they were willing to listen. Despite what the Opposition may claim, this Government appreciate that work fluctuates seasonally, which is why the Act explicitly provides powers for zero-hours measures to cater for seasonal work, and the Government are continuing to consult employers and trade unions to inform future changes. The legislation maintains flexibility, allowing businesses to use contracts offering variable hours at different times of the year, with offers of guaranteed hours taking the form of limited-term contracts where reasonable.

Some of the key changes in the Employment Rights Act were those made to statutory sick pay, which ensured that a safety net is available for those who need it most. The Opposition have tried to paint that as a devastating blow to business, but to be clear, the regulatory impact assessment published last October concluded that the additional cost of these reforms would be £15 per employee.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Employers right across my constituency of Mid Bedfordshire—particularly SMEs and retail, hospitality and leisure businesses—are telling me that the Employment Rights Bill is reducing flexibility and having a chilling effect on their ability to employ people, particularly young people. If employers are telling me that, why are they not telling the hon. Member the same in his constituency?

Sean Woodcock: I meet businesses in my constituency all the time. As I stated at the beginning of my speech, they raise a number of the issues that the Opposition have raised, and I do not pretend that none of those come up in my conversations. Yes, the Opposition talk about how they want to get rid of the worst aspects of the Employment Rights Act, but I have yet to hear them name what they are and which bits they would get rid of. They just mention it without any clear proposals of what they plan to do, as with their continuing false promises on business rates, NICs and various other things.

To return to my speech, removing the three-day waiting period for SSP means employees can recover from short-term illness without spreading infectious diseases in the workplace, which reduces the risk of more employees needing time off. It is about protecting the firm, the other employees and the productivity of the business as much as it is about protecting the employee.

This debate exposes a fundamental difference in vision. The Opposition believe in and want an unstable, low-growth economy built on a race to the bottom. Labour Members believe working people need an economy that values their contribution, secures their rights and delivers genuine economic growth and good job creation. I am proud that that is what this Government are seeking to do.

I want to conclude by mentioning that last month I had the opportunity to sit down with young people, in the heart of Banbury in my constituency, to discuss these issues face to face. They were very clear that a multitude of different things are blocking them in the labour market. They talked about AI, and how it is coming up in interviews and being used to filter out job applicants. They talked about failings in the school system and in careers advice. They talked about fears about their mental health, and whether they would have appropriate support if they enter the labour market. They brought up those issues when I spoke to them, and unlike this motion, they want us to tackle this. They did mention the costs that employers say come with employing people, but they did so alongside raising those issues. Like my hon. Friends, I do not pretend that has no impact whatsoever, but in those conversations they asked me to take away and bring to this place the point that we should look at all these issues in the round—

Mr Bedford: Will he hon. Gentleman give way?

Sean Woodcock: I am nearing the end of my speech, so I will not give way.

Those young people want us to tackle these issues in the round and in a systemic way, rather than through party political point scoring and throwing statistics across the Chamber, as we heard from the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford), because this is too important, and it is important for us to get this right.

2.9 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): We have 109,000 more young people out of work, the youth unemployment rate is at 16%, and our ratio between youth unemployment and overall unemployment is now at European levels. Why do we care about youth unemployment? There are two reasons: first, it is a matter of what is right and of justice for young people; and secondly, if someone is unemployed when they are a young adult, the scarring effect on their career and earnings can stay with them for five, 10 or 20 years into the future.

It is definitely true that the labour market has softened a lot. I hear in East Hampshire that this has not been about mass layoffs; it has been overwhelmingly about not taking people on in the first place, or not increasing the amount of work hours for people already employed. That is especially true for those marginal employment decisions—Saturday jobs, seasonal work, and, the title of today's debate, summer jobs.

The number of apprenticeships is about to rise dramatically, but that is because the Government have reduced the minimum specification and length of time for an apprenticeship, and every time that is done, the number goes up hugely. But I worry that, like for like, apprenticeships in key sectors employing lots of school leavers—I hear this about hairdressing, for example, in East Hampshire, as I am sure other Members also do—are already falling. Business owners in my constituency are reluctant to expand because of the risk, and are not maxing out on business opportunities where they are fluctuating or seasonal. The phrase “pub-closing time” has become meaningless, because pubs are closing earlier and earlier, all at different times, and in some cases not opening for days.

I spoke about the scarring effect of being unemployed as a young adult. There is also a big downside and cost to not being able to get early paid work experience opportunities before becoming a full-time employee. To be fair, the Saturday job, and part-time employment for under 18s in particular, has been in long-term decline. That is partly to do with the decline of paper rounds and milk rounds. There has also been a decline in Saturday work in retail, some of which is about an increasing nervousness—often an ill-placed, unnecessary nervousness—on the part of employers around their responsibilities when hiring young people. Whatever the different mix of reasons, the numbers have come down over time.

That decline has now accelerated for two reasons. First, I am afraid that whenever the economy takes a hit, it is always young people who feel it first, which is because of the “last in, first out” approach to employment and people not being taken on in the first place. Secondly, it has become relatively costlier and riskier to take on those young people, because of direct employment costs and the Employment Rights Act 2025.

[*Damian Hinds*]

All of us in the Chamber are Members of Parliament; we have done reasonably well in our lives. Most of us, before we came here, had successful careers of one type or another. How many colleagues in this place had their first paid employment for 37.5 hours a week, full-time, reliably throughout the whole year? I certainly did not. My first job was a zero-hours contract—we just did not call it that then. In fact, it was not quite a zero-hours contract because there was no actual contract. There was no guaranteed work; it fluctuated week to week, and night to night, washing dishes in a local restaurant, but that is where I learnt some of those crucial skills. They now call them soft skills, but there is nothing soft about them; they are hard.

That job is where I learnt about taking criticism; about turning up again the next day; about turning up when I was tired or feeling not that great; about looking the customer in the eye; and about how, if I kept coming back day after day, week after week, at the end of the week they gave me money. That is an important life lesson.

A high proportion of people with zero-hours contracts are young, and a high proportion are students or people with another job. But one of the biggest employers of people on zero-hours contracts is the national health service, because NHS bank staff work in that way. The contracts can work for young people. In my constituency, I know plenty of young people who have two zero-hours contract jobs: one at home, where they are during the holidays; and one where they are studying during term time. I do not see why that does not work perfectly well for both employer and employee.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I have always thought that a zero-hours contract was a terrible name for what is actually flexible hours. There was always an ideological opposition to it, but in practice over two thirds of those who were on the contracts—adults as well, often with caring responsibilities—loved the idea of being able to work when they could but not having to do so when they could not manage it. That is the kind of flexibility that is necessary in an economy. It was loved by people in Europe, who wanted to do the same but never got around to it.

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend is right. I have spent an inordinate amount of time studying zero-hours contracts, partly because the previous leader of the Labour party, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), used to bring them up at Prime Minister's questions every week, and gave the impression that half the country was on a zero-hours contract and was getting no work whatsoever. In fact, it turned out that less than 3% had their main job as a zero-hours contract, so far from them working zero hours—*[Interruption.]* Yes, look it up.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Damian Hinds: I am spoiled for choice. Who wants to contradict me?

Sean Woodcock: The right hon. Gentleman is right. I had a zero-hours contract as a student and it worked for me because, crucially, I was able to say, “No, I can’t come in today.” Surely he understands that there is a

difference between that situation and when often huge companies—but not only huge companies—say, “You have a zero-hours contract and that is it, there is no alternative, but you are expected to come in for these hours.” Does he not understand that zero-hours contracts can be exploited? It is not about getting rid of zero-hours contracts that work for individual students.

Damian Hinds: Of course the hon. Member is right. Nobody wants exploitative zero-hours contracts. Quite often when the Opposition talk about zero-hours contracts, the Government think that the work exploitative automatically gets inserted into the phrase. That is why we stopped exclusivity clauses in zero-hours contracts way back when we were in government. Nobody should be exploited, but that does not mean that there cannot be a job that works for the employer and employee and gives flexibility in the economy.

Jayne Kirkham: The right hon. Gentleman is being generous. Of course there are zero-hours contracts that work for some people and not for others. For example, if it is the choice of the employee, then it is fair enough, but if someone’s work is cancelled when they are on their way in, that is not fair. The 2025 Act still allows people who are employed to say, “No, I do not want those average hours. I am happy to work on a zero-hours contract.” That optionality is still there.

Damian Hinds: Good employers, who want to keep their employees, do not do stupid things that upset their employees. Good employers will always want to keep good people in order to build their business.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Will the right hon. Member give way on that point?

Damian Hinds: I had better not. Although, it always brightens my life to hear from the hon. Gentleman, so I will give way.

Dr Arthur: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, who has been taking a lot of interventions. Does he acknowledge that we are here to think about those not-so-good employers, not just the good ones? That is what the Employment Rights Act is about. At the weekend I met an employer who had minor concerns about what it was going to mean for him, but he said that, by and large, he was already doing a lot of this stuff. It is not about the good employers; it is about the not-so-good ones.

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman is right, of course. I do not think anybody in the House of Commons would argue that there should be no employment or workplace regulation at all. *[Interruption.]* Well—actually, I do not think anybody does, genuinely. I certainly do not. I welcome very many of the rights that have come over the years. However, it would be totally ignorant to suggest that new inflexibilities and rigidities can be brought into the labour market without their having an effect on unemployment. Whenever there is an effect on unemployment, there is always a magnified effect on youth unemployment, and we want to ensure that young people can get into and stay in jobs.

I want to speak briefly about the costs of employment. This is much harder to talk about, because whenever anybody talks about the realities of equalising pay

between younger people and slightly older adults—not that people do so very often—they can be vilified easily for being heartless, uncaring, discriminatory—you name it. However, sometimes being in this place as a politician and a representative and having the best interests of our constituents at heart means having to say difficult things. This difficult thing is something that I think most people here know—including, actually, most Labour MPs—but it is difficult to say.

Let me take a little bit of the heat and politics out of it by talking about a hypothetical situation. This is not the situation that we actually have today, because we have differential national insurance contributions by age. Imagine a situation where an employer has a job vacancy and they have two applicants who in all other respects are the same, but one is 30 years old and one is 18. Who is the employer going to employ at exactly the same wage, with all other things being equal? They are, of course, going to employ the person with experience—the person with both work experience and life experience, who has just been doing it a little longer, working with teams, dealing with colleagues and dealing with customers.

I use that hypothetical situation just to establish the principle that wages do have an effect, and that is why the Low Pay Commission—[*Interruption.*] The Minister can screw up his face again if he wishes.

Chris Bryant: I am just trying to understand.

Damian Hinds: Well, I will help him with that. That principle is why, back in 1999—under a Labour Government, as he will recall—when the original minimum wage came in, the Low Pay Commission specified that there should be a different rate for young people. That was for two reasons. The first reason was because of the work experience effect: there is a difference in how employers view people with a few years' work experience and others without that experience, and if those rates were exactly the same, youth unemployment would inevitably rise. The second reason was to recognise that very many of those younger workers are in some form of education or training at the same time. We all want people to be properly rewarded for the work they do. The best thing is to be well rewarded in a job, but the worst thing of all is not to have a hope of getting into a job that is well rewarded.

We have talked a bit about the national living wage. Of course, we all want the national living wage to keep going up. That is why we brought it in, by the way, in 2015, with the explicit intention that it would keep rising until it was further up the income distribution. However, we do have to acknowledge the reality. As I say, I think that most people present know that there is a difference by age and that it is there for a reason.

Jayne Kirkham: It is still the case that there is that differential, is it not? There is still about a £2 difference between under-21s and over-21s, so it is not actually having the impact that the right hon. Gentleman suggests it should. If there is still that differential, why is there that problem at the moment, when employers are not paying national insurance contributions for under-21s either? Considering that the differential still exists, why does the problem exist?

Damian Hinds: I genuinely do not know quite how to respond to that. The differential has come down. It is due to come down further—it is due to be eliminated.

There will still be the difference in national insurance contributions. Nobody is at this time envisaging there being no difference in employment costs at all. The reason that I used a hypothetical case and established that principle was to demonstrate why there is a wage effect on youth unemployment.

I was going to talk about the overnight visitor levy, on which I have strong views—I think it will be bad for our local economies, bad for international inbound tourism and bad for places that rely on domestic tourism and seaside towns in particular—but in the interests of time, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will not.

I will just end by saying that I would have thought that the Labour party would like to break away from that cliché—the fact that every Labour Government ever to exist have left office with unemployment higher than when they came in. If I was a Labour Member, I would want to say, “With our enormous majority, and perhaps with the new Prime Minister we are about to have, this could be our chance to break away from that, so that nobody can ever say that to us again. We are, after all, Labour—we are supposed to be the party of work. Let us devote all our energies to maximising employment, and particularly to maximising the opportunities for young people coming into the labour market.” It is not too late for them to take that approach.

I just want to add something that we have not really talked about today—in fact, something we hardly ever talk about—in the context of these changes. We need to consider the number of people who will be forced into self-employment as a result of the changes in the Employment Rights Act. I strongly encourage the Government to change course.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Members might like to know that I aim to call the first Front-Bench spokesperson at about 3.35 pm.

2.26 pm

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I am grateful to His Majesty's Opposition for calling this debate today, as it gives me an opportunity to talk about a survey of young people that I did last year. It was a broad survey and statistically significant, with more than 500 young people in Mid Derbyshire engaging on their work and education opportunities and sharing their views on their futures.

Before I come to that, I will offer some reflections of my own experience of summer jobs, as that is the title of today's debate. One such job was pulling out weeds for very low pay, which really taught me the value of hard work. I would go home from that job every day absolutely exhausted. I also spent some time during the university holidays pulling pints, which taught me how to deal with difficult people—a skill that I find myself using quite regularly in my current role. When I receive applications from people who want to work with me, I always think it is welcome if they spent their early career in hospitality, because workers can learn a great many skills in that industry that will serve them well in a great many jobs across the labour market. I also spent some time as a grave-digger, during the holidays when I was in the sixth form and at university—it perhaps serves as a metaphor for one or two things I have done subsequently.

[Jonathan Davies]

I understand that this summer there may be some jobs going with the new occupant of Downing Street. If the Minister could have a word on my behalf, I shall be waiting by the phone.

Hannah Spencer: Does the hon. Member agree that there is a problem in Clacton, in particular, with certain people applying for jobs and then not actually doing them, or doing lots of other jobs instead of the one they should be doing? Perhaps we could think about a scheme where people like that do work experience with some of the incredible, hard-working young people who do vital jobs so that those people could learn a thing or two about how to behave in work and how to work hard.

Jonathan Davies: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. My focus is on the people of Mid Derbyshire, but I am sure that the people of Clacton will hold their representative to account in the appropriate way.

Of the young people who responded to my survey, 44% said that the cost of living was the biggest issue they faced, followed by housing and renting costs at 34% and employment and jobs at 33%. I want to read just one contribution from a constituent, which I found to be particularly profound. They said:

“Life for young people especially isn’t just unaffordable—it feels completely unattainable. I’ve had a job for nearly 5 years and am on the minimum wage. There is no way, with the state of the housing market and general cost to live that I’d be able to sustain moving out, renting or even learning to drive/buying a car. My independence seems—and I imagine it does for a lot of young people—like it will never fully arrive.”

That was mirrored in the fact that a great many of the young people who engaged with my survey were not optimistic about their futures. That is a moral and political tragedy.

Dave Doogan: Looking to the future, a job vacancy has just come up in Clacton. It would be good to know whether the Labour party will be putting forward somebody of a youthful nature as its candidate. To get back to the core issue of the debate, the Minister, in his meandering rebuttal to the motion from His Majesty’s Opposition, talked about a £1 million fund to help people aged 16 to 24 get back into work. That would be £1.50 per unemployed person aged 16 to 24. If the Government applied that money just to the 109,000 extra unemployed young people over the past 12 months, it would not even be a tenner. Does the hon. Gentleman think that would make much of a difference?

Jonathan Davies: I spent most of the hon. Gentleman’s intervention trying to find out what is going on in Clacton, but perhaps the Minister heard what he said and will furnish him with a response in his summing up.

The Government are doing a great many good things to support young people. There is more to do, but I will touch on some of the things we are doing. We have an unemployment rate of 4.9%. That is far too high, but we are outperforming many other major economies, including Canada and the EU. I particularly welcome the youth guarantee, the growth and skills levy and the other levers that we are introducing to reduce business costs, including on energy. We are expanding access to finance through the British Business Bank, and we are reducing red tape and licensing costs.

On summer jobs, it is particularly important to highlight our support for hospitality, including cutting business rates for pubs and live music venues by 15%, which will be followed by a two-year freeze. We are also increasing the hospitality support fund to £10 million, which will really help those sectors.

We have heard a little bit from the Opposition Benches today about wage increases and national insurance. On wage increases, when I go to food banks I often meet young people who are in work but tell me that they are still not making ends meet, and that point comes through from the survey that I did. That really is a tragedy. While I acknowledge the concerns that businesses have raised with me and that the Opposition have raised today, I do welcome the wage increases. We have to deal with this cost of living crisis. Young people should not be working as many hours as they can yet still not able to get by.

The point about national insurance is quite interesting. The decision to increase employer national insurance was a difficult one. I would rather we had not had to do make that decision, but we did. Public services were failing so badly that that in itself was a brake on the economy. I note that the previous Government also effectively tried to increase national insurance by 1.25% in 2021. That was called the health and social care levy, but they did row back on it.

The reality is that we have a long-term problem with public services, and it is holding back people’s lives and the economy. We have grasped the nettle on that, but I hope that sometime later in this Parliament we can revisit the issue. We stood by businesses in covid, and we are asking them to stand with us now as we rebuild public services. As the economy continues to grow, I hope that that option is on the table for the Government.

There are a few things that I would like the Minister to bear in mind going forward. I very much welcome the Great British summer savings scheme, which offers VAT cuts to the visitor economy sector, which is a very important employer of young people, including in Derbyshire. Once that scheme ends, I would be grateful if a review could be undertaken to see how much economic growth and how many jobs it generated. My long-term aspiration is for us to be in a place where we can offer a VAT cut, particularly for the hospitality sector.

After the financial crisis in 2008, the previous Labour Government cut VAT to 15%—it was subsequently put up to 20% when the Conservatives came in—and that was a real shot in the arm for the economy. If the Great British summer savings scheme shows evidence of being a real driver for economic growth, particularly in the important visitor economy sector that employs a lot of young people, we should see whether we can harness that and offer a different rate of VAT for the visitor economy and hospitality sectors. I believe that that would be good for the economy. It would also be good for our high streets and people’s sense of place and wellbeing.

Jayne Kirkham: That is the important thing. The summer savings scheme could be really useful. I think the onus is on all of us as Members of Parliament to get out and spread the message to businesses across our high streets that they should make the most of it so that we can see how well it works.

Jonathan Davies: I really hope that it is a success. I know that in Cornwall—my hon. Friend's part of the world—there will be a great many businesses and visitors benefiting from the scheme.

Alan Milburn's report, which highlighted that a million young people are out of work, is something that I am struggling to comprehend. It is a moral scandal that has been brewing for a very long time, and the Government are taking steps to address it. It is worth noting that while youth unemployment is appallingly high—now at 16.2%—it is lower than it was under the previous Government in 2012. We have a great deal of work to do to give young people a sense of hope and opportunity for the future—[*Interruption.*] Well, 2012 was four years after the financial crisis. We also effectively had a financial crash of our own to deal with after the mini-Budget.

We do have a great deal of work to do, but I think the foundations are there to do something for young people and work, particularly the summer savings scheme. I would be grateful if the Minister were to take that forward and see if we can expand it into the future.

2.35 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is always good to speak with the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall) on the Front Bench. Were we discussing the threats that we face or the problems we have with China and the desperate way that they have undercut the market using slave labour, we would be on the same side of the House completely. My respect for him is enormous. However—[*Laughter.*] I do want to talk about today's subject.

I was not planning to say anything about summer jobs, but my first experience of one was in Italy, where I had been studying. I had gone to the coast to find a job. All I could find was a job working as a plongeur, as it were, in the dishwashing section of a restaurant. I was a useless waiter and got told to stop sitting down and talking to those who were eating, so I was sent back to the kitchen. During the evenings I had nowhere to stay, but I had managed to borrow a Fiat 600—an old one that I could start with the end of a teaspoon—and I drove it round to the car park and used to sleep in the back. It was wonderfully cheap but not exactly very comfortable. I am not quite sure what I learned from that—I did learn a few lessons, but I am not prepared to divulge them all here. Washing in the sea was one of them, though I have to say I am not sure how that has stood me in any good stead for the last few years. We will move on from that.

We can overstate the lessons to be learned from a job, but being in work does teach young people about working to get a salary, turning up on time, as colleagues have said, and recognising that if they do not do so, the employer has every right to get rid of them. That is the key bit that we constantly talk to our families about.

I want to come back to the problems that we face. When I was Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when we came to power in 2010, we had just had a huge, difficult recession. We had high unemployment, and we had to get that unemployment down. I say to the Government is that the cost of all their problems is not one issue alone—it is when they fail to realise the impact of one change after another on what is ultimately

the most at-risk group. I agree completely with my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) that the most at-risk group is young people. When the Government make changes to employment regulation, add on costs and change people's rights, it is always younger people who are the most affected. They are the easiest to move out of employment, and they are almost invariably the last ones in. They are also the most expensive to look after while they are in work—for a good reason.

When I used to tour the jobcentres I spoke to young people who were there looking for a job. I used to ask, "What is the biggest hurdle that you face?" They would say that every time they go in front of an employer, the employer would ask them what experience they have in work. They would say, "I have no experience." Then the employer says, "Well we cannot take that risk. I am looking for someone else, so you will not get the job". As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire said, not only is it a marginal cost but it is also about the complete lack of experience and the risk that an employer takes on when they hire the younger person.

The triple whammy of the national insurance charge, particularly on part-time work, the Employment Rights Act and the rise in the minimum wage are the vice that is squeezing this situation. Any one of those we probably could have got through, but to have all three of them hitting employment is the real problem that we face, and unemployment is the result.

Youth unemployment at 16.2% is staggering. We used to pride ourselves on having a lower youth unemployment than the rest of Europe, but that is not necessarily the case now. The latest figures show us categorically that now have three times the NEET rate as the Netherlands has. The Netherlands is probably the closest type of economy to us in Europe; it is often quite flexible, and it often looks to the UK to import some of its flexibilities. The reality, therefore, is that the group who will suffer—they were always going to—is young people. Without that work experience, they will not go on to get that job they want—in fact, it is the job that they need—as a starter job.

Turning to apprenticeships, an individual apprentice is now much more likely to get a full-time job and go on to earn more money than somebody who has studied at university. The collapse of the relationship between university and a brilliant career will fundamentally change the nature of who we are as a country if people who go to university with the promise that they would earn much more money than they would ever have to pay in debt then find that is a broken concept. That is a matter for both sides of the House. We must deal with it.

I have family who are paying off debts. The astonishing interest rate on those debts has become staggering, and it is trapping them—they are unable to look at buying houses or anything else. That is the pressure on those people, and sometimes what they earn at work is not enough for them to be able to get by and do well.

The Opposition's motion, which I will come to, is really important. The point is that we have to make a change. The Government may want to have young people in work and want there to be those so-called Saturday jobs, but Alan Milburn says in his report that the

[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

“first rung has thinned. The clearest examples are the decline of the Saturday job...For earlier generations, these were...the routes through which young people first entered working life. They provided income, but they also helped young people build confidence, learn the habits of work and show employers what they could do. For too many young people now, those opportunities are weaker or have disappeared altogether.”

We did not really need the Milburn report to know that—we knew what was going on—but his saying that must be telling for the Government. The Government have overstepped the reality.

For example, zero-hours contracts were flexible and were liked by the vast majority of those who had them. Older adults—mostly those with caring responsibilities—liked the flexibility of being able to go to hospital appointments or take those with disabilities to hospital appointments one week, while on other weeks they could work, doing more hours to make up the money. That flexibility helped them. It also helped students coming out to do all the big jobs in entertainment, hotels and short-term affairs such as Wimbledon. It is travesty that the Government have tightened that up. They need to learn from this.

I stress again that most people liked the idea of zero-hours contracts as they gave them flexibility in work that allowed them to get work experience, which they could sell when going to get a full-time job, as well as the chance to earn some money to subsidise themselves while doing other work, studying or whatever. It is astonishing that the Government have got rid of that.

My party's motion rightly mentions the astonishing high street business rates. We rightly talk about wanting to protect our high streets against competition from online retail and so on, and the majority of those part-time, small jobs are on the high streets. Those small businesses and shops need people to help them make their business grow, but business rates for some of the shops on the high street in my area have risen by 60%. It is unbelievable to think that a small business will be able to survive a 60% increase. That business has to make choices, which mean that not only can it no longer hire someone, but it has to lay people off—it can no longer keep them in employment. We have seen dramatic layings off and closures on the high street for the simple reason that people cannot afford to run their business.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend recognise that the group of people who often get forgotten in these debates—certainly by Government Members—are business owners? They are trying to hang on to these young people, or even to their normal employees, and they want to do the right thing so they pay them before themselves, but often, because the minimum wages have gone up, by the time those businesses close the owners are not benefiting from that income. We tend to forget the small business owners, but they are vital, as we are trying to highlight.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: It is all about throwing out the baby with the bathwater. I fully understand that the Government want to regulate some of that employment to ensure that people are protected, but the Employment Rights Act is so all-consuming and far-reaching that there is not just the cost—estimated at about £5 billion—for

companies and businesses but the knock-on effect for those who need a job but can no longer be employed, as well as for those who would employ them but will have to close their businesses.

Flexibility is critical in employment—it always has been. It has always been a case of, “What is the risk in hiring you? Do you have the experience? Can you do the job? Can I afford to pay you the wages? Do I have to do half that job for you as a result?” For small businesses, that is a real problem. The Employment Rights Act has been a real nightmare.

The issue is not just that £5 billion cost but the way in which that impacts on economic growth. Regulating employment is not an isolated issue that does not affect anything else; it affects growth in the economy. I talked earlier about the triple whammy. With business rates alongside that, businesses face even higher costs and problems. They are being regulated a great deal, they do not have flexibility in employment, and they have to pay more.

The third critical issue in our motion is the cost of energy in the United Kingdom, which is astonishing. We have the highest energy costs in the developed world—it could be said that we have the highest energy costs in the world as it is—and a huge amount of that is to do with the ridiculous helter-skelter drive to get to clean energy no matter what. We are now threatening businesses with fines—the car industry gets fines if the right cars are not produced—and energy costs are so high that businesses can no longer manage to manufacture goods here. We will need to manufacture goods when we need to spend the money that we do not have at the moment but will have to have for the defence industry. That is a manufacturing case, yet none of those industries says that it can afford to expand its manufacturing base because the cost of energy is so high. Those three things are critical. I therefore support the Opposition's motion.

I finish with one single fact. We have all been talking rather blithely about what we did in those summers and how we got our first jobs, but it is worth reminding ourselves that for the generation going through now, the flexibility, opportunities and ability to earn are far less than they have ever been. When we talk to our children, we discover how difficult employment is for them. We can talk to them about being able to earn the right money, about being able to pay for a house or about sky-high rents. This is a serious problem. If we want to face it and take it on, we should think of the old health dictum, “do no harm”. I say to the Government that when they pile those three massive burdens on to industry and the individual, they are doing great harm to those we need to protect. My advice to the Government is simply this: think again about the triple whammy and reduce the burden they have put on industries.

2.48 pm

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): Most hon. Members would agree that I have a beautiful constituency. That fact is no secret. Many people visit our corner of Devon, and catering for that tourism means that seasonal work is vital to our local economy.

Last year, I visited Devon Cliffs and Ladram Bay, which are two of the largest and most popular holiday parks in the area. Such sites support hundreds of jobs, and their impact reaches beyond the parks themselves,

sustaining local suppliers, tradespeople, retailers and service businesses across the constituency. They give young people their first opportunity to step into the world of work. It is an opportunity to contribute, to earn their own keep, to learn customer service, to work in a team and to lead one, and to develop confidence grounded in real experience. We can all agree that those are skills and experiences that form the foundations of a good society, but the accumulation of taxes levied on those businesses has forced them into an impossible position: they must either absorb those costs by cutting jobs or pass them on to the consumer.

Tourism is a price-sensitive market. Families choosing a holiday will simply go elsewhere if prices rise. Either way, the result is the same—fewer jobs—and it is the young seasonal workers who are first out the door. That is how this Government's tax policies have deepened the youth unemployment crisis. Tackling the growing number of young people not in education, employment or training must therefore be a priority for the Government.

Youth unemployment has reached the highest level in a decade outside of the pandemic, and too many young people are leaving education without a pathway into work. Alan Milburn's report found that 84% of young people genuinely want a job. They want to be in education or training, yet this Government's policies are making that harder to achieve. We all know that the longer someone remains out of work, the harder it becomes to find lasting employment. That point has been raised by multiple Members today. Prolonged unemployment damages confidence, limits prospects and increases the risk of long-term reliance on state support.

At the very moment we need the sector to be creating opportunities for young people, businesses within it face mounting pressures: rising wage bills, higher national insurance contributions and business rates, and the burden of excessive red tape. Those are all compounded by unsustainably high energy costs, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) mentioned. On top of that, accommodation businesses already face a 20% VAT rate on stays. That is double the rate charged in France, Italy, Spain and Portugal, and the 2024 autumn Budget imposed a £3.4 billion tax on the hospitality sector.

The consequences have been serious, and we have all seen them in our constituencies. More than 100,000 jobs have been lost in the hospitality sector since that Budget. Against that backdrop, the proposed holiday tax would add yet another burden. I recently met representatives from the Professional Association of Self-Caterers, who warned that businesses would have no good options. They can absorb that levy and cut back further or pass the cost on in the price that hard-working families pay for an affordable holiday.

Rather than giving this vital sector the confidence and breathing space it needs to invest and create jobs, the Government are proposing yet another charge, and it will be left to the discretion of mayors to decide whether to implement it in their area. That will create stark disparities, with areas that choose not to impose the tax gaining an advantage over those that do. Tourism contributes £147 billion to the United Kingdom economy and supports jobs and growth in every corner of our country. It should be encouraged to grow, not be weighed down by ever-increasing costs.

It is not just holiday parks and hospitality businesses feeling the strain. The newly passed Employment Rights Act 2025, combined with the sharp rise in the national living wage for 18 to 20-year-olds—the very people who rely on Saturday jobs, summer jobs and Christmas jobs—are compounding the problem. The new zero-hours contract rules actively deter employers from taking on 16 to 24-year-olds for fear of being locked into offering permanent hours. We have heard similar stories from Members in the House today. Businesses need the flexibility to take on extra staff over the summer or at Christmas, and the 2025 Act takes that flexibility away. The legislation creates not job security, but job insecurity.

The young people of Exmouth and Exeter East do not want handouts; they want a first job, a first wage and a first step. Businesses in my constituency stand ready to give them that chance, but they cannot do so while this Government tax, regulate and burden them at every turn. I urge the Minister to scrap the proposed holiday tax, ease the pressure on hospitality and restore the flexibility that seasonal employers need. We should give our young people back the ladder of opportunity before this Government kick it away entirely.

2.53 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I refer the House to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Every summer, thousands of students, school leavers and young people across our country begin searching for seasonal work. For many, these jobs are much more than a payslip; they are the first step into employment and a chance to earn their own money, gain independence, develop confidence and learn the responsibilities that come with work. I know just how valuable such opportunities can be. Today's debate is important not simply because it is about businesses, but because it is about protecting opportunity. It is about ensuring that the next generation has the chance to develop the skills, confidence and experience that will shape the rest of their lives.

Seasonal jobs matter because they support people at every stage of life. From the responsibility and skills I learned in my childhood paper round to the office temping I did throughout university, my seasonal jobs helped shape my career. Those first experiences of employment have been just as valuable to my career as the more permanent roles that followed. For students across the country, such jobs help them earn money towards university or everyday living costs. They give young people confidence and experience before entering the full-time workforce, and they enable businesses to meet the increased demand that often comes with the busy summer months.

However, those opportunities exist only if businesses have the confidence to recruit, and that confidence is being steadily eroded by the policies of this Labour Government. As a result, such opportunities are becoming harder and harder to find and youth unemployment is rising. Businesses across the country are facing rising costs from every direction. Employer national insurance contributions have increased, wage costs have risen significantly, employment regulations have become more complex and burdensome, and energy bills and overheads

[Mr Gagan Mohindra]

have continued to soar. Any one of those pressures would be challenging, but together they are forcing businesses to make difficult decisions.

The businesses I speak to are not telling me they no longer need staff; they are telling me they simply cannot afford to employ as many people as they once could, and that has consequences far beyond their balance sheets. Across South West Hertfordshire, I have heard that message repeatedly. In Sarratt, I visited Micklefield Hall, a wonderful local events venue. It explained that the biggest barrier to employing young people today is cost. It used to happily recruit students straight from local schools, investing time in training those people with little or no experience. It even offered apprenticeships. Today, that has become much harder. As wage costs have increased, more experienced workers are being prioritised for roles that would previously have been filled by young seasonal workers, simply to keep costs down. Apprenticeships are no longer financially viable and have stopped. The manager, Tom, left me with a simple, powerful question: how can the Government expect businesses such as that to continue supporting their local community when they are spending most of their time simply trying to survive?

I also spoke to the manager at Waitrose in Rickmansworth. Weekend shifts there have traditionally been filled by students, giving hundreds of young people meaningful employment and helping them to build confidence, responsibility and valuable workplace skills. The manager explained that the increases in national insurance contributions and wage costs have added millions of pounds to the company's costs, forcing it to make significant efficiency savings across the business. For now, Waitrose has, as a large employer, managed to absorb those costs, but it raises an important question: if even businesses of that size are having to reduce costs elsewhere, what does that mean for smaller employers who simply do not have the same financial resilience? How long can the reduced amount of summer jobs that remain continue to exist?

One of the biggest tourist attractions in my constituency is the Harry Potter studio tour in Leavesden, which is a major employer of young people. The business was hit with huge costs after the last-minute change to VAT resulted in refunds for a significant amount of pre-sale tickets. When such businesses are forced to absorb unexpected costs caused by the uncertainty that this Government create for them, it is our young, inexperienced people whose opportunities are at risk.

At the Grove Hotel in my constituency, I was told that, disappointingly, due to the cost of hiring staff since this Government have been in office, the business has had to tighten its approach to seasonal work and has taken on longer fixed contracts over more flexible opportunities that suit students. That is again taking away even more vital first employment opportunities for young people.

Another hospitality business, Anna's Kitchen, caters events across my area and employs many young people around term time. In fact, one of my own members of staff worked there before joining my office. At just 18 years old, the skills, confidence and responsibility he developed through that job played an important role in helping him to secure employment here in Parliament.

These stories are exactly why these opportunities matter. They are not simply summer jobs; they are stepping stones to successful careers. Behind every one of these examples lies the same concern. Businesses still want to employ young people—they recognise the value that young people bring, and the value that the businesses offer them—yet increasing costs are making those opportunities more difficult to provide. The consequences stretch far beyond individual businesses. When seasonal jobs disappear, young people lose valuable first experiences of work; businesses reduce their opening hours or scale back services; hospitality, tourism and retail suffer; local economies lose spending power; and, ultimately, economic growth slows.

Growth happens when businesses have the confidence to invest, expand and create jobs. That is why this Government must work with businesses, not against them, and why the Conservatives would reduce the cost of employing seasonal workers by repealing large parts of the Employment Rights Act. We would abolish business rates for thousands of retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, cut the red tape that stops employers recruiting young people, and introduce our cheap power plan, which would cut electricity bills by 20% for businesses.

I will go back to what I said at the start: this debate is ultimately about opportunity. Our young people should not be priced out of those vital first steps into employment by the harmful policies that this Labour Government used to fund the welfare bill. Every seasonal job created is another young person gaining confidence, building skills and taking that first important step into the world of work. Those opportunities are worth protecting, and I urge the Government to recognise the damage that they are doing to the opportunity for our young people to fulfil their potential.

3 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra). In so many debates, we learn a little about colleagues on both sides of the House, and this one gives us the opportunity to reflect on the summer jobs that many of us had. I think back to my first job—this will probably show how old I am now.

Mr Mohindra: Twenty-one!

Wendy Morton: I will take 21 any day. My first job paid the grand sum of 50p an hour. At the end of the week, when I got my pay packet—it was a pay packet in those days; there was no bank transfer—I felt quite wealthy. For the first time, I had a bit of money of my own; I could spend it on what I wanted, instead of having to ask the bank of mum and dad for money.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): That was liberating.

Wendy Morton: It really was, but it was more than that. It got me used to the whole mindset of going to work: getting up, being there for a certain time, and asking, "Is there anything else I can do?" My job was waitressing, and the usual pot-washing. Alongside that, when I was old enough, I learned how to pull a pint. My sister did the same, as did other youngsters from our village and the local towns. The employer was fantastic;

he would pick up those who did not have transport and whose parents could not take them, and he made sure they got home as well. To me, that was a responsible employer.

That job gave me confidence. I was forced to speak to people in a restaurant environment, and had to handle cash and bookings—really important skills. The biggest skill of all was feeling confident that I could go out and work. We talk about working people; I very much think that the Conservative party is the party of working people. We have outnumbered Labour Members in this debate.

When I was growing up, there was always an expectation that we would go through education and then go out to work. If we wanted something, we worked for it. That was the way that we were brought up. Today's debate has highlighted something quite sad: young people today do not have the same number of opportunities to get a summer job. This is about gaining not just money, but experience. I speak to so many employers, and have done for some time, about the importance of employability. Too often, I hear that employers small and large want to take on young people, but those young people do not have all the skills. That is not their fault; it is because they have not had the summer job, or a newspaper round or whatever, which helps that little bit when starting a job.

We need to take a long hard look at the employment market, and we need to look at what has happened in the last couple of years. We have heard today that youth unemployment is running at 14.5% for 18-to-24 year olds, up from 12% in 2024. Youth employment for those aged between 16 and 17 is at a staggering 30%, up from 24.7%. I read that 700,000 graduates are out of work and claiming benefits. There is something wrong there.

We encourage young people to go through education and to go to university, and then they struggle to find employment. That is partly because unemployment is high, but it is also because of the burdens being placed on our businesses. We talk a lot about large businesses, but often, the SMEs and the micro-businesses—the lifeblood of local communities and high streets that I have the pleasure of representing across Aldridge Brownhills—are being buried in red tape. They have seen employers' national insurance hiked, they are being blocked from employing under-16s, and they are suffering as a result of high energy costs.

Any business that we go to will talk about the hike in energy costs, and for an energy-intensive industry, that hike is particularly difficult. In my constituency, we have a lot of brick makers; in the west midlands, brick making and the ceramics industry are really important. Although Denby is not in my constituency, who does not like picking up a piece of Denby pottery and seeing "Made in England" proudly stamped underneath? We are losing those businesses, which means that we are losing opportunities for young people, the opportunity to grow our economy and develop more skills, and our manufacturing capability, which is important.

We saw during covid how important it was to have sovereign, UK-based manufacturing capacity and capability when we needed to manufacture the critical covid vaccines. That surely should have taught us something. We have to build up more home-made skills. I also urge the Government to look at skills and opportunities for young people and, more broadly, at what skillset we

need for today and for the future. We talk about the opportunities that artificial intelligence will bring, but it will also bring challenges to some sectors. The big question is: are we ready for that? I do not think that we have done nearly enough thinking to get us to that point. We have to do that now, to make sure that we are developing the right skills. For years, people who did an apprenticeship in engineering or plumbing were seen as not earning as much as the graduates who had been to university and got the high-tech jobs. There were also the toolmakers—[*Laughter.*] We can laugh about toolmakers, but in the west midlands there is a history of toolmaking. My point is that AI will not be able to replace all those skills. We need to look at what we need in future, and our education system—our schools, universities and colleges—need to make sure that we are all working together.

Critical to that conversation is business, and not just big business. I come back to my point about small business. We started our business many years ago with something called enterprise allowance. My husband had an idea, and the enterprise allowance paid us £40 a week. It did not seem like much at the time but, my goodness, we felt that the Government were backing us to create an income, a living and a business.

We need much more backing and confidence for our business community. It is time that we created a culture that supports businesses—one where "business" is not the bad word. Business is not bad. It is not bad to make a profit, because that profit is so often put back into the business, into employment and into the young people who, we all agree, we want to nurture and encourage, so that they can get into employment, get a job and a skill, and have a bright future.

3.9 pm

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I start with a point that I think is abundantly obvious to most people, and certainly to Opposition Members, which is that economic growth is possible only with a culture in which we support businesses in taking risks. I mean "risk" in all its forms, including the taking on of staff. Also, we need abundant clean energy. That was proven in the industrial revolution, and in the 1980s.

Douglas Lumsden (Aberdeen South) (Con): Would my hon. Friend agree that if we want abundant energy, we should produce much more of it in this country? It would be much better for our economy, for jobs, and even for the environment if we produced oil and gas in this country, as opposed to relying on imports.

Blake Stephenson: My hon. Friend makes a compelling case for drilling in the North sea—a case that he made very successfully in the by-election in Aberdeen South. I congratulate him on that, and welcome him to the House of Commons.

In the 15 years that I was working full time in the City before coming here, I saw a ratcheting-up of costs and the de-risking of our economy. Energy costs have increased as we have sought to decarbonise; employment flexibility has gone down; taxes have gone up; and regulatory burdens are uncontrollably high. I will give two examples from my time in financial services. They are not necessarily related to summer jobs, but I will come to that. Anti-money-laundering regulations are now costing the economy

[Blake Stephenson]

£33.6 billion a year, and bank ringfencing is costing banks £1.5 billion a year. The regulatory burdens throughout our economy are absolutely incredible.

We have failed to properly recognise that it is businesses that grow the economy, not Governments. Over the past two years, the Government have missed an opportunity. They came in claiming that they would be the “change Government”, but they have doubled down on all the mistakes of the past. Tax has gone up over the past two Budgets by £66 billion, and red tape has gone up. The Minister said that he had aspirations to reduce red tape, but in fact the Government have demonstrated that they are capable of increasing red tape. With the Employment Rights Act 2025—the unemployment rights Act—labour flexibility is down.

Britain has spent two decades trying to build an economy on less risk, and it is just not possible to do that. The impact, unfortunately, is felt most acutely by our young constituents. In particular, as a result of the Government’s interventions over the past two years, the Saturday job is disappearing. That is absolutely tragic. Hon. and right hon. Members from across the House have spoken passionately about their first job. If you can believe this, my first job in north-west Hampshire was sweeping a weighbridge at a scrapyards. That was not under contract, and I was not promised any particular hours. As a 16-year-old, or thereabouts, I would sweep the weighbridge in the morning and wash the owner’s car—and I would get 20 quid, not 50p, so there was quite some inflation since my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) earned that wage.

Mr Mohindra: You were overpaid!

Blake Stephenson: Or, indeed, I was overpaid.

I moved on and washed pots in my local pub. Then I progressed and became a waiter and ran wedding receptions. By the time I got to university, I was working in a Zizzi pizza restaurant—other pizza restaurants are available—and I enjoyed it thoroughly. I made connections, I blossomed, and I became more confident. I know that people describe these as soft skills, but my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), who is not in his place, correctly said that they are the hard skills—the difficult skills that we need in our economy. We will only have them in our economy if we grow them in young people when they first start working.

Rebecca Smith: My hon. Friend reminds me that one of the other soft skills that we learn that way is resilience. I am wondering how he got those jobs, because I earned £10 a day in my first job. I was sweeping the floor in a florist and, if I was lucky, bundling up some flowers before I sold them. Part of that £10 was my bus fare to get to and from work, because the place where I was fortunate enough to live was a long way from the city centre. Does he agree that resilience is a skill that is missing in a lot of today’s young people, and that if we are taking away the jobs where they can learn that skill, it is yet another way that we are de-skilling the workers of the future?

Blake Stephenson: I am pleased that my hon. Friend and I started our lives sweeping floors; that is something that we have in common. Of course, resilience is a really important skill in life and it is learned best when we are young. I remember those early days on my bike, cycling in the cold with my knuckles freezing. I do not want to sound like my father, but it is true. I had to get to that workplace on time, and there was no public transport. It was a few miles away, so I jumped on my bike and I did it. This is how we learn resilience and how we grow as people and succeed in the economy.

Youth unemployment is now at an all-time high, with 14.5% of 18 to 24-year-olds unemployed. My right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills also mentioned the fact that 30.7% of 16 to 17-year-olds are now unemployed and are not learning the skills we have just agreed are important for enabling young people to grow into strong, resilient adults. That feeds through the whole of the economy, and 700,000 recent graduates are now out of work and claiming benefits. A generation of young people are at risk of unemployment and being left behind, unable to find the dignity of work and unable to save, buy their homes and invest for their future. This is a serious problem that we are facing in our economy, and it is all a result of the decisions by this Government, who are putting the summer job at risk. It all starts with the summer job.

What needs to be done? We need a fundamental reset in how we think about risk, investment and enterprise. We in this House should be creating the conditions for economic growth and allowing businesses to get on with what they do best, and then we should get out of the way. Of course, this Government are doing the absolute opposite. They are meddling, getting in the way and wrapping businesses up in red tape. They are increasing costs by increasing levies, which is the polite word for taxes, and they are also increasing taxes on jobs. That really is not fair on our young people, and it does a disservice to the opportunities throughout our economy.

As I know hon. Friends want to contribute, I will make just one final point on repealing red tape. The Milburn review says that the decline of the Saturday job has made it more difficult for young people to enter the workforce, and that is absolutely right. In previous generations, we had far more routes to start our working lives, of which we have heard many examples. Those routes not only provided us with an income but taught us skills, confidence and habits of work. Without those, none of us would be where we are. Those first steps into a lifetime of work are crucial for enabling us to understand what we want to do for the rest of our life, what we want to achieve and how we can learn the skills to get there. Young people need the Government to get out of their way to help them back into work, and that is what a Conservative Government would do.

3.18 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) for his excellent speech. I agree with everything he just said. This is a really important debate, and the motion put forward by His Majesty’s Opposition is so significant for young people. I am the most worried I have ever been for young people and their prospects. Although I do not doubt the intentions of many Labour Members who have spoken, I sense a massive disconnect

in Government policy. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) spoke about the triple whammy, and I will come on to some of those points, although I am conscious of time.

There is a massive disconnect between what the Government say that they are doing and the reality on the ground. Businesses in my constituency increasingly tell me that they cannot take on young people because the costs are so high. On the recent polling day, a business owner came up to me while I was knocking on doors and said, “I just don’t know if it’s worth it any more.” It struck me what a sad state of affairs that is: someone is grafting away and running a small business; he wants to do the right thing and hire people, and he is unable to do so. That is significant.

Three things have had a huge impact on the labour market. If there had been just one intervention, there would have been some impact. It is basic economics that interference in the labour market will have a consequence: naturally, business owners must make logical decisions and will decide to adjust their employment numbers accordingly; they will do what they can afford, and they must make a profit. But there has been a triple whammy with the impact of business rates, national insurance—the jobs tax—and the Employment Rights Act, possibly the single most damaging piece of legislation to business from any Government. We will see the impact of that.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Sean Woodcock) asked which bits of the ERA the Opposition would repeal. Well, I would repeal everything that has to do with the liberation of trade unions. That legislation is not about employment rights; it is a love letter to trade unions. It is there to ensure that trade unions and the hand of the state can interfere with private enterprise. We are starting to see the consequences, which will only increase. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) made this argument logically and eloquently, but when a business owner must make a decision—he used the hypothetical example of the 18-year-old and the 30-year-old—they will of course take the individual with more experience. That individual requires less training, has proven that they are resilient, and has proven that the opportunity cost of hiring them is much lower than with the 18-year-old.

When I ran a business, I loved hiring apprentices and young people—they had a hunger—but small businesses can only do that within the parameters of what is affordable and within the profit they can project. The consequence of the Government’s policies is that youth unemployment is high, at 14.5%—much higher than when they took office in 2024—and among 16 to 17-year-olds it is 30.7%. Those are huge numbers, and I worry about them.

I recently held a debate in Westminster Hall on the impact of the Government’s policies on rural pubs. As has been alluded to, hospitality, leisure and retail are great employers—not just for Saturday jobs, but of young people generally. The impact of those policies has meant that, if those pubs are staying open, they are not able to hire more young people. It is going the opposite way. We are seeing the impact.

As a number of hon. Members have said, there is dignity in having work. It gives young people the soft skills—or the soft-hard skills, as my right hon. Friend

the Member for East Hampshire said—and gives them an opportunity to get ready for life. There might be other, structural issues, such as getting on the work ladder, but that first job has such a positive impact on young people. We have heard about sweeping floors, but whatever the job, it ensures they are able to work.

I still remember a 16-year-old I hired once. He did not have his tie done up or his shirt tucked in, but I took a risk on him—and it was a risk, because I had to train him up. I said to him, “Young man, you’re going to have to tuck your shirt in and do your tie up.” Only two years later, when a grad came in for interview, he told them, “Tuck your shirt in, and do your tie up.” That just made me laugh—I thought, “Look how far that young individual has come on.” He went on to do other forms of employment, go up the job ladder and get higher wages. I take great pride in all the young people I employed and trained.

Flexibility in the labour market is important, as is ensuring that the Government do not increase the burden on businesses. I come back to the disconnect. The Minister who opened the debate, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), who I have a great deal of time for, made a valiant effort—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall): Not me?

Saqib Bhatti: I have lots of time for the Minister who will be closing the debate as well, but I have not heard him speak yet, so I will reserve judgment.

The hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore made a valiant effort at defending the Government’s record, but he did not acknowledge that the unemployment rate has gone up—as a natural consequence of the Government’s interventions—and there is no indication of how they are going to get it down. With the best will in the world—however much money they spend training people up and doing interventions—if businesses are not hiring, the unemployment rate will stay where it is. I invite the Minister to address that point in his closing speech. What reassurances will he give to 16-year-olds, 18-year-olds and other young people who want hope and want to build their lives?

I will end in a moment, because my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Douglas Lumsden) wants to speak. Recently, I was at the opening of the Bluebell Wood café in north Solihull. It was an idea that I came up with, and I worked with Andy Street, the former Mayor of the West Midlands. Hospitality is a big employer in my constituency—we have the National Exhibition Centre, the largest regional hotel, the Hilton Metropole, and many other businesses—and they all talk about the need for skills. We talked to University College Birmingham about bringing to north Solihull a training restaurant that would train top-level chefs and “*maître d’s*”. When I cut the ribbon, the main chef said that they were training level 1 apprentices to do level 3 work. I invite you to come and visit, Madam Deputy Speaker, if you would like—top football clubs and top restaurateurs go there to recruit. But there have to be jobs at the end of the line.

This is so important. I urge the Government to reflect on their policies and consider the impact they have had on the future prospects of young people.

3.26 pm

Douglas Lumsden (Aberdeen South) (Con): We have heard lots of people describe their summer jobs, and I will do so too. When I was a student, I enjoyed a summer job. I was working as a postman in my constituency, delivering letters and leaflets to homes up and down Aberdeen—and what do you know, Madam Deputy Speaker? Thirty-five years later, I am still delivering leaflets and letters across the city of Aberdeen. That job was vital to me, because it gave me the resource that I needed—the money that I could spend through the rest of the year—as it is for so many people.

What has changed in the intervening years is that our city now finds itself under attack from not one, but two Governments—the enterprise-crippling national insurance increase from the Labour party and the double whammy of business rate increases and banditry from the First Minister in Holyrood. The First Minister is clearly content in hoarding business rates in Edinburgh to fund his independence obsession and his other failed projects.

That is before we even talk about the barons of Aberdeen city council, which is run by an SNP-Lib Dem coalition of malaise. It will be of no surprise to this House that all it wants to do is tax, tax, tax. That is clear because of the massive 7% tourism tax levied by the council on hotel stays. That is the highest in Scotland—more than Glasgow or Edinburgh. As a result, hotels are sitting empty, with the council content to punish vendors and visitors alike.

Damian Hinds: As the Government look to introduce this hated so-called overnight visitor levy in England—*[Interruption.]* I believe they are. Labour Members always say, “Don’t worry, it’s not very much money. It will all be hypothecated. It will have no effect on the inbound tourism industry.” Perhaps some of them might look at the example of my hon. Friend’s home city of Aberdeen and consider what could happen.

Douglas Lumsden: Lessons must definitely be learnt from what has happened in Scotland, because we are seeing a big impact.

Why would someone start a business in Aberdeen now? New businesses have to factor in rent, business rates, insurance, energy costs and waste charges, and that is before they even get to national insurance or staff costs. There is a huge cost to doing business, and it is no wonder that our high streets are struggling. My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) made an important point about business owners, because often they decide not to take a salary, or to take very little. We have heard about zero-hours contracts, but that does not apply to them, and neither does the minimum wage. Often they are going without in order to pay all their costs.

We have organisations that are trying to make a difference. Our Union Street in Aberdeen, for example, does a great job of providing businesses with incentives and provides start-up grants for new businesses, but it is a private organisation. It should be the council, city council and Governments that are doing more to help industry.

Summer jobs are critical for the hospitality sector. I think of the beachfront in my constituency, where we are fortunate to have two whole days of summer every

year. It is so important that those businesses have the flexibility to employ part-time, seasonal workers. Across the city there are so many great businesses that benefit from seasonal workers. I think about Codona’s, a funfair at the beach, which employs hundreds of people, but it is most busy during the summer period. That is also the case for cafés in places such as Duthie park, bustling when the weather is good. They need that flexibility. Recently we have been fortunate to have a huge expansion at Aberdeen harbour, under the stellar leadership of Bob Sanguinetti. That means that cruise ships can now visit Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. That is a tremendous asset, but it is seasonal and we need to ensure that our hospitality sector is resourced to cope with the demand.

We need to support our hospitality sector, but the SNP and Labour Governments have been woeful at doing that. We have seen job taxes, business rates, bureaucracy and red tape, and all that is hindering our industry, harming our jobs, causing businesses to fail and impacting young people the most. The Government need to think again, allow our hospitality industry to thrive and support our motion today.

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

3.31 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I really do not get what the Labour party has against people enjoying themselves, having a bit of fun and spending some of their hard-earned cash on things that give them pleasure, whether that is having an occasional flutter on the horses, a drink in the pub with mates, a meal out with friends, a family holiday or indulging in a bit of retail therapy. But the Government—let us be in no doubt—have made policy decisions that have deliberately undermined those sectors, jeopardised the viability of once-thriving businesses and decimated the workforce, especially summer jobs. Labour has whacked up swathes of taxes and made it more difficult and expensive to hire people. Tourism, hospitality, leisure, pubs, bars, restaurants, sport, theme parks, casinos, events, nightclubs, shops, music and art venues all used to be dubbed part of the “fun economy.” Well, not under Labour. They are now the overburdened, overtaxed, struggling-to-survive economy.

We know that Labour Members are generally a glum bunch, but why do they want everybody else to be dragged down to their misery? Do Government Members have any idea what people in the country are saying, or who they are blaming for having to close their family businesses, for losing their jobs or for not having the opportunity of a summer job? I have been travelling across the country—that is how I got this tan; by actually getting out there and doing my job—listening to stakeholders, business owners, workers and industry bodies, from Wales to Scotland, St Ives to Skegness, the Cotswolds to Chester, and yesterday in Bognor. Indeed, it is the sunniest place in the country, as I found out yesterday.

This is what I heard: “Labour don’t understand business. They don’t care about business. Labour hate the private sector. They don’t understand because they have never had a proper job. They don’t understand the importance

of cash flow. Have any of the Cabinet ever run their own business? They care more about people on welfare than about workers. They said they would not put up tax—they have. I will never trust them again”. That is what people are saying. *[Interruption.]* It is transparently clear that those on the Government Benches are not hearing this, which is why I am doing my job by telling them.

A coastal hotelier said to me, “I used to hire 10 people over the summer. I will be lucky this year to hire just one.” A restaurateur told me, “I advertised for two summer jobs. I had 270 applications.” Sadly, I heard many people say this well-known phrase: “I wouldn’t trust Labour to run a bath, never mind the country.” Those are not my words but the public’s—the eminently sensible British public, who we are listening to, and I wish the Government would too.

Labour MPs must surely be hearing the same things in their own constituencies, which begs the question: why are they allowing the Government to do so much damage in their constituencies? By raising national insurance, whacking up business rates, imposing more regulations and restrictions on the labour market, and failing to bring down energy costs, this Government have destroyed jobs, and especially summer jobs, all while whacking up spending on welfare.

Two pubs a day are closing down. StirrUps in Evesham in my constituency announced just this weekend it was closing because

“it has become impossible for us to continue operating”.

Another pub landlord told me that, despite looking busy and having a turnover of over £1 million, the pub is actually unprofitable and may soon have to close. Yesterday I met a small amusement park and seaside arcade operator, who told me he cannot afford even to open on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays now—and this is getting into peak season—because if he did, he would lose money because of higher taxes and higher energy costs, and he is not hiring as many summer workers either.

It used to be the case that people looking for summer jobs could just walk into a pub, bar or restaurant in a seaside resort or in London. That is not happening this year because of Labour policies. Of the nearly 200,000 jobs lost since the Chancellor’s first Budget, over 100,000 have been in tourism and hospitality. That is thousands of summer jobs that have not been created because of this Government’s policies, depriving thousands of young people of the opportunity of their first job.

And yet, in their infinite wisdom, as if the sector is not already taxed enough, the Government are planning to bring in a new tourism tax—despite the former tourism Minister, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), who is sitting opposite me, saying in the House of Commons previously that the tourism sector is already “taxed enough”. Despite the Government cutting the tourism marketing budget and the UK already being one of the most taxed countries in the world for travel and tourism, this Government think it will help the sector if they impose more taxes on it. Only a Labour Administration could genuinely believe that the answer to the sector’s problems is more taxes. It will be a disaster.

A £2 per person, per night levy would add £56 to the cost of a one-week family holiday for four. That, in some cases, is more than the cost of the accommodation.

UK Hospitality polling has found that 57% of people said a £50 increase would put them off taking a holiday. It would particularly damage the shoulder season, which is so vital to sustaining the economies of our already challenged coastal resorts in non-peak months. There is also no guarantee that the money raised through such a levy would be reinvested into tourism promotion or the visitor economy overall. In other countries where tourism taxes exist, they are often accompanied by permanent lower VAT rates. There is huge concern, too, about scope creep and future rate increases.

As we enter the fag end of this Chancellor’s time in office, her legacy will be as the destroyer of jobs and of opportunities. Moreover, this economic disaster has been the result not of external circumstances or even genuine mistakes, but of deliberate and conscious policy decisions made by a Chancellor, a Prime Minister, a Government and a party who simply do not get business and do not have even the most basic grasp of economics. You cannot tax your way to growth. You cannot create jobs if you implement policies that make it more expensive and more difficult to hire people. You cannot say that you are on the side of workers if there is no work and, instead, you incentivise welfare.

Let us be clear: this Government have brought in some of the most anti-business—and therefore anti-worker—policies this country has ever seen. Labour has increased taxes by £62 billion in the last two Budgets—that is over £2,000 per household. We warned, business warned and even the Treasury warned that this Government’s tax hikes would jeopardise jobs. They did not listen. We warned that failure to deal with a ballooning welfare state would inevitably lead to even higher taxes. We warned that their unemployment Bill would inhibit hiring. They went ahead and pursued job-destroying policies anyway. The cost of keeping the unions happy has been the destruction of the hopes, aspirations and opportunities of a generation of young people.

It is of little consolation that the near 200,000 people who have already lost their jobs under Labour will soon be joined by the two leading architects of this economic havoc. Labour may be changing leader, but the problem is that it will still be Labour—big Government, high tax, living beyond its means and anti-business. It will still be Labour, spending other people’s money since 1900. As has already been mentioned, this Government are well on their way to securing the unenviable record of every Labour Government since the second world war leaving office with unemployment higher than when they started.

If anything, the indicators are that the new Labour leader and, if rumours are correct, the new Chancellor will be even more anti-business. It is the private sector, business and especially the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, including thousands of small family-run businesses, that are paying the price for Labour’s mistakes and poor judgment. The damage is falling particularly hard on the young, because tourism, hospitality and retail jobs skew young.

I know that we are all in disbelief at the recent Office for National Statistics figures revealing the true scale of youth unemployment, which has risen to 16.2% among 16 to 24-year-olds. Astonishingly, that is even higher than during and following the pandemic. We have also heard several hon. Members talk about the 1 million NEETs. The Government’s recent announcement about

[Nigel Huddleston]

subsidies for employing young people in hospitality would not be necessary if they had not done so much damage to the sector in the first place.

We Conservatives know that the best thing we can do for working people and to lift people out of poverty is to help them get a job. We have a far better record on doing that than Labour. Look at the improvements in educational standards under the Conservatives and on jobs. Between 2010 and 2014, Conservative-led Governments oversaw the creation of 4 million jobs, an average of 800 a day. This Government are destroying jobs to the tune of hundreds a day. Overall, unemployment has risen to 5% from January to March 2026. Job losses and youth unemployment are the inevitable, expected and entirely predictable consequence of Labour anti-business policies.

There is an alternative: a pro-business, low-regulation, low-tax Conservative alternative. We are developing policies based on the sound Conservative values and principles of smaller Government, lower tax, personal responsibility, living within our means, defending our borders and protecting our citizens. We Conservatives are the party of business, aspiration, opportunity and enterprise. Those are sound Conservative values and they are sound British values. Before Government Members object, I know that we made mistakes: we make mistakes when we drift away from those values, but we will not be doing that again. The difference between Labour and the Conservatives is that the Conservatives get the country into trouble when we drift away from our values, but Labour get the country into trouble when it sticks to its values.

On policy development, the vast majority of businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure space would benefit from our policy of 100% business rates relief. Our plan would benefit 250,000 businesses and cover bills up to £100,000.

Turning to a few key points made by colleagues during the debate, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) rightly made an important point about the much-maligned soft skills that are vital to career development and the importance of giving young people experience. The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) revealed that he was once a grave-digger—I am sure there is a joke in there somewhere about the current state of the Labour party, but I have not worked it out. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) made an important point about international comparisons and lessons learned from places such as the Netherlands.

My hon. Friend the Member for Exmouth and Exeter East (David Reed) spoke passionately about tourism and mentioned the respected body PASC, which I too have worked with in the past. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) highlighted how retail, hospitality and leisure businesses are facing challenges on multiple fronts, and that they can appear to be very busy and need more workers, but they simply cannot afford to hire more people. My right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) mentioned that she got 50p per hour in her first job—I am afraid I must be a little bit younger, as

I got 99p per hour for my first job. She made an important point about there being 700,000 graduates unemployed at the moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) highlighted the need for Government often to get out of the way. Again, that is a very sensible, decent and proper Conservative value. My hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) highlighted the disconnect between the Minister's opening speech and the reality of what is happening out there in the real world. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Douglas Lumsden)—I welcome him to his place—highlighted the damaging experience of the tourism tax in Scotland and how many business owners are actually earning far less than the minimum wage. That is a very important point.

My hon. Friends the Members for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) and for Mid Bedfordshire made the important point that they have experience of floor sweeping. That will be of extreme value, because we need to do a huge amount in cleaning up the mess made by this Government on the economy, but we are up to the task. We are the only party up to the task, because the Conservative party is the only genuinely pro-business party left in British politics. By backing business, we are backing workers, and that is backing Britain. Please join us in doing so.

3.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall): It is a pleasure to close this debate after so many thoughtful contributions from hon. Members across the House. Many difficult questions have been raised. I thought of following the example of the soon-to-be-former hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) in just resigning to avoid those difficult questions—[*Interruption.*]. I will resist the encouragement.

It has been fantastic to listen to hon. Members talking about their own experience of Saturday and summer jobs. It allowed me to imagine the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) running around with multiple plates balanced on her arms, and the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) getting busy with his chamois. I pictured the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Douglas Lumsden), who I belatedly welcome to his position, as a postie in shorts, fighting the rain coming off the North sea. I pictured the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) with long, flowing locks getting busy scrubbing pots in the Italian sunshine. That was important, because it allowed me to picture Conservative MPs doing something productive. More importantly and seriously, it was a reminder of the importance of our first employment experiences in making ourselves into fully rounded human beings and workers.

My job was working on Saturdays before going to university and in the summers at Beveridge fishmongers' in Giffnock. The antisocial teenager in me would want to be in the back of the shop filleting something, but every time a customer came in I had to remake myself and find confidence all over again. It is in no way an overstatement to say that all the Saturday and summer jobs that hon. Members have spoken about are why we are all here. They gave us that first chance and opportunity to find confidence in ourselves, as many hon. and right hon. Members have said.

However, I will caution Conservative Members. Yes, this is about experience and people finding an opportunity and, as some have said, avoiding the long-term scarring effect of youth unemployment, but for many young workers this is about paying the bills. These jobs are not a nice additional thing. I think of the young woman with a family who I met; she had a zero-hours contract and simply did not know from month to month whether she would be able to pay her rent or take her kids to anything special.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Sean Woodcock) spoke powerfully about how insecurity in the workplace is linked to the health of the economy. When people's incomes are hollowed out, it hollows out the centre of our towns and ends up in the empty high street shops that we see.

Rebecca Smith: The Minister makes a very interesting point about city centres being hollowed out, but the main thrust of this debate is about young people doing summer jobs before they go back to school or university in the autumn. They are the very young people who would ordinarily take those wages to buy a hot chocolate in Lorenzo's, like I used to, or to go and buy the new pair of trainers that they have saved up for. If they do not have a job in the first place and do not come from a family in which their parents can subsidise all those things, they miss out on that opportunity. While I accept the point he is making, will he accept the point I am making? The very thing we are discussing this afternoon is part of that problem, and removing those young people from the market altogether will not help.

Blair McDougall: The reason I am responding to the debate by talking about the impact of zero-hours contracts is that Conservative Member after Conservative Member rose to speak in defence of those contracts. Of course, many people value flexibility in the workplace, but some employers have used that flexibility to take advantage of their employees, including young employees.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): Summer jobs are really important, as are summer schools. Will the Minister join me in welcoming students from the Burnley summer school, who join us in the Gallery today, and will he perhaps include in his speech the fact that over the Tories' time in power from 2010 to 2024, 7,500 pubs closed across Britain—many of them in Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield—meaning that those jobs just did not exist for people?

Blair McDougall: I am very happy to welcome that summer school from the Dispatch Box, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on getting that into *Hansard*. I also congratulate him on teaching those students a lesson about the hypocrisy from the Conservative Benches, which they will get used to.

Many hon. Members spoke about seasonal workers as if the legislation was somehow going to force seasonal contracts to be permanent contracts. That is simply not the case—where people genuinely value that flexibility in the workplace, they will be able to continue to work in that way.

Douglas Lumsden: The Minister speaks about zero-hours contracts almost as if they are the devil's work. Does he accept that those contracts give people the flexibility they want when they are doing a job? For a lot of

people, a zero-hours contract fits in with their lifestyle; they do not want to be committed to working so many hours a week.

Blair McDougall: Where the workers that the hon. Member describes feel that way, they will not have to change their contracts. We are talking about the people who work for the same employer as their main job, week after week, without any certainty of income. The right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) said that only 3% of workers rely on a zero-hours contract as their main job. That is one in 25 workers. *[Interruption.]* In his constituency, there are 60,000 people of working age, meaning that hundreds of people in his constituency do not have the right to regular hours.

Damian Hinds rose—

Blair McDougall: I will take the right hon. Member's intervention. Maybe he can say why he thinks those hundreds of workers in his constituency should not have the right to full-time employment.

Damian Hinds: I can tell the Minister that 3% is a relatively small percentage of 100%, and many of those people are students. The Labour party used to speak about zero-hours contracts as if they were taking over the entire economy, but that is simply not true—they are a perfectly legitimate form of employment that works for some people. I described the situation of my constituents who have one zero-hours contract at their term-time address and another at their home address. What is wrong with that? If it works for the employer and for the employee, why is Labour so against that flexibility?

Blair McDougall: Those people will still be able to have those contracts under the legislation, but we are talking about potentially hundreds of people in the right hon. Member's constituency—that was his formulation—who rely on zero-hours contracts as their main form of employment, with no certainty of income from month to month. That cannot go on in this country; it is fundamentally unfair.

Several Conservative Members mentioned business rates, which the Government take incredibly seriously. The Conservative party began the revaluation without any plans whatsoever for any transitional support or relief for the people affected by it; Labour introduced a support package worth £4.3 billion to protect ratepayers from seeing large overnight bill increases because of that revaluation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant) said, over half of ratepayers will see no bill increases this year, and 23% will see their bills go down. Plenty of arguments could be made about whether we have gone far enough and how far our continued reforms of business rates should continue, and my colleagues in the Treasury will do that, but for members of a party that had no plans for any relief whatsoever to be saying now that they will spend £4 billion on abolishing those rates altogether, without saying where it will come from, is frankly ridiculous.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies) mentioned the great British savings this summer, and made a very fair request for those in

[*Blair McDougall*]

the Treasury, as they look at the overall impact of that, to look at the impact on individual young people as well.

Many Opposition Members rightly raised the impact of increased national insurance contributions. As I have said before from the Dispatch Box, we recognise that that was a big ask of business, but what it did was say to the international money markets that we were a serious country again. That has been seen in lower mortgages, and in lower borrowing rates for businesses. I understand the genuine concern expressed by Opposition Members about the impact on youth employment, but I would say that it is at best a partial explanation, given that employers of workers under the age of 21 and those employing young apprentices do not pay national insurance.

The hon. Members for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) and for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) and the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green suggested that whenever a Government add to existing business costs, we should think about the cumulative impact rather than viewing it in isolation, and that is an entirely fair argument. Every time we ask something of businesses, that gives us in government a further incentive and, indeed, responsibility to do more to remove costs from them. That is precisely why, through the £2.5 billion youth guarantee package, businesses are being given a £3,000 incentive to employ 18 to 24-year-olds who are at risk of long-term unemployment, a £2,000 incentive to hire foundational apprentices, a further £2,000 to hire apprentices aged between 16 and 24, and fully funded costs for 16 to 24-year-old apprentices. That, of course, is on top of all the other work that we are doing to reduce the costs on business.

Rebecca Smith: I am glad that the Minister has brought up the subject of fully funded apprenticeships for those under 25. As soon as that was announced, an electrician in my constituency contacted me and said, “That is all well and good, but I still have to pay the higher wages.” Although such businesses are not paying national insurance, this is not as free, or as cheap, as the Government maintain. Will the Minister accept that it is not 100% correct to say that these are fully funded apprenticeships, because those businesses still have to pay increased salaries?

Blair McDougall: As was said earlier, we believe that people working full time should be able to afford the basics in life. My point is that we are dealing with the issue of youth unemployment by incentivising businesses to employ young people.

Many Opposition Members mentioned red tape. They will not have to wait terribly long to see the work that the Secretary of State and I have been doing to reduce the administrative burden on business. Many others spoke about additional costs being imposed on business. Let me remind them that our target to reduce that

administrative burden by £5.6 billion is a net target, and they will not have to wait very long to see the progress that we have made in that regard.

David Reed: The Minister is coming out with these great plans. Can he confirm that the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) agrees with them, and will implement them when he becomes Prime Minister?

Blair McDougall: Of course he does. It is in the Labour party manifesto. He has spoken about backing our industrial strategy, and this is an incredibly important part of it.

The hon. Member for Exmouth and Exeter East (David Reed) spoke about how beautiful his constituency was. [*Interruption.*] Yes, I know—I am looking at him. Later this month I shall be on my way to a holiday in Cornwall, and perhaps I will stop off in his constituency with my family. So many Opposition Members spoke of our imposing a tourism tax on local areas, but there will be no such imposition. This is devolution, allowing local areas to decide whether they want to invest in that or not.

I can confirm that we will not move our amendment, but this Government are proud to be taking employment law into the 21st century, proud that we are rebalancing business rates for smaller businesses to help young people get jobs, and proud that we are backing our high streets. We have commissioned Alan Milburn to investigate the high level of youth unemployment, and we look forward to the publication of his final report in the autumn. The report will be backed by evidence and the real experiences of young people in a changing labour market. What it will not be based on is outdated, Dickensian ideas of getting 13-year-olds working late into the night before school. This Labour Government will act, and these reforms will deliver the national renewal that our country needs.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I put the Question, let me say that it is a shame that those at the Burnley summer school have left. The Minister will want to be careful about using the word “hypocrisy” in the Chamber.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House regrets the combination of the rise in employers’ National Insurance contributions, the impact of the Employment Rights Act 2025, and the regulations that make it more difficult for young people to get their first job; further regrets the destructive impact that the Government’s policies have had on entry-level, flexible and seasonal work in particular; also regrets the Government’s plans to give Mayors powers to introduce an overnight visitor levy, making staycations in England less attractive and less affordable, while risking jobs in the tourism and hospitality industries that depend on domestic visitors; calls on the Government to change course to support summer jobs, flexible working and seasonal work, on which the hospitality, leisure and retail sectors depend; and further calls on the Government to abolish business rates for high street businesses, to boost the economy and save summer jobs.

Early Release of Prisoners

Madam Deputy Speaker: I inform the House that Mr Speaker has not selected the amendment. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

4.1 pm

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to exempt from automatic early release under the provisions of the Sentencing Act 2026 any offender who has been convicted of a sexual offence against an adult or a child, including rape and grooming, or convicted of the attempt, conspiracy, or incitement to commit such offences; further calls on the Government to bring forward legislation to enact this change immediately; and regrets that the Conservative amendment to the Sentencing Act 2026 that would have secured these exemptions was not agreed to.

We gather for this important debate at a dangerous but very strange moment. It is dangerous because from September, the Government will start releasing serious criminals from prison part-way through their sentences. Among them, as things stand, will be many violent criminals, including killers, rapists and child sex offenders, because Labour and the Liberal Democrats voted against our amendment to exclude them from the early release scheme. Thanks to those Labour and Lib Dem votes, some of those released may be convicted members of the rape gangs.

Our position remains clear: not one of these dangerous, disgusting people should ever have been included in Labour's early release scheme. It seems that the next leader of the Labour party—the next Prime Minister—disagrees with the Justice Secretary and with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards)—the sentencing Minister—and agrees with us. His people told the *Sunday Times* that he wants to prevent child sex offenders from walking free. They say that his advisers are working on primary legislation, but they also say that as the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) is not taking office before the summer recess, they might not be able to act in time.

That is what is very strange about this dangerous moment. We have a Prime Minister squatting in Downing Street, holding on until the world cup final, recording videos in empty rooms about his achievements and legacy, and pretending that he will intervene to overturn Jarell Quansah's red card, with no mandate, no purpose and no authority; and we have the next Prime Minister—indeed, the only candidate to become Prime Minister—saying that he disagrees with what the Government whom he is due to lead will do this September, but that he lacks the time or the power to do anything about it. That is pathetic. The House is sitting this week and next before the summer recess; there is plenty of time to act. The Government could amend the Sentencing Act 2026 to exclude rapists and child sex offenders through emergency legislation. They could lay new commencement regulations, delaying the instruction of the early release scheme, and give the new Prime Minister enough time to get his act together.

We have invited the Government to do those things in the motion before the House, and we understand that they will not contest it. After voting for the Sentencing Act and against our amendment to exclude sex offenders from the early release scheme, today they have folded,

but they still cannot tell us the plan. Will they bring forward emergency legislation? Will they bring forward new commencement regulations? We know that these Ministers are in office, but not in power, so will the right hon. Member for Makerfield tell us, and the victims of these criminals, what will happen?

We should remember how we got here, for this is an ideologically anti-prison Government, and many of their policies look likely to continue under the new Prime Minister. *[Interruption.]* The sentencing Minister is chuntering from a sedentary position. I understand why he is anxious; I have seen the tweets that he sent about the right hon. Member for Makerfield, and I am sure that the next Prime Minister has, too. He said he was going to be “worse than Jeremy Corbyn” and had the

“political antennae of a dead cat”.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Gentleman should say “worse than the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn)”.

Nick Timothy: Thank you for correcting me, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was quoting the tweets so exactly that I forgot my responsibilities.

As I was saying, this is an ideologically anti-prison Government, and many of their policies look likely to continue under the new Prime Minister.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): The hon. Member calls this an “ideologically anti-prison Government”, but in 14 years of Conservative Governments, there was a net increase of 500 prison places. In the very first Division post the King's Speech in this Parliament, I remember voting to deal with that problem, and we had to vote to reduce sentencing times to deal with that mess; otherwise the criminal justice system would have collapsed. Does he not agree?

Nick Timothy: I think the hon. Gentleman would do well to not take the Whips' questions, when the Whips have just given up, in the face of the wall of opinion in the parliamentary Labour party, and having given ground in this debate.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that those early votes to which the hon. Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) referred were actually a Trojan horse to allow sex offenders to be released under such schemes? We have brought this motion to the House to make sure that we protect the British public.

Nick Timothy: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. What I was trying to say gently to the hon. Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) was that, if the argument is still that this Government need to let sex offenders out of prison because of a capacity problem, Labour Members will be embarrassed by the policy that is about to be introduced by the new Prime Minister, who agrees with us, not with the hon. Member.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): As my hon. Friend considers the evolution of the Opposition's justice policy, might he give consideration to taking the expansion of prisons, or the development of new prisons, out of

[Simon Hoare]

the ordinary planning arena, as it once was? Prisons should be viewed as elements of critical infrastructure, and our sentencing and detention policy should not be dictated by the availability of square footage.

Nick Timothy: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Over a period, the construction of prisons has become needlessly expensive and needlessly time-consuming, as has the development of other critical infrastructure in our country. As we come forward with our plans to increase the capacity of our system, we will definitely look at those barriers.

The Prisons Minister says that only a third of prisoners should be locked up. The sentencing Minister says that a pretty big chunk of the prison population should not be there. The Government have legislated to get rid of short-term sentences, effectively decriminalising shoplifting and many knife crimes. They want to reduce sentences for criminals based on their age and, unsurprisingly, their identity. For some, they want to scrap custodial punishment altogether. They want to increase the age of criminal responsibility to 14, so that criminals such as the killers of Jamie Bulger and one of the Fordingbridge gang rapists can avoid criminal trials. They even want to weaken sentences for some murderers.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia), the last Conservative Government granted early release, largely in secret, to more than 10,000 prisoners, including domestic abusers and those who posed a risk to children, without putting appropriate safeguards in place, and then they called a general election when the prisons were full. Can the shadow Minister understand why we Labour Members will not take any lectures on criminal justice from the Conservatives?

Nick Timothy: The hon. Gentleman resembles one of those Japanese soldiers found in 1950 who were still fighting the second world war. The Whips and the Labour party have given up on this debate, and he is still reading out the planted questions given to him earlier today by the Whips, before they bottled it and folded. [Interruption.] I would be happy to give way again, if the hon. Gentleman wants to keep on with this argument, but he is chuntering from a sedentary position.

The first action of this Prime Minister—the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), if hon. Members can keep up—was to announce that he would let tens of thousands of hardened criminals out of prison early. Between September 2024 and December 2025, under the standard determinate sentence 40 scheme, more than 50,000 prisoners were let out early. It is no surprise, as prison governors have been lining up to tell the Government, that in the rush to let criminals out, more prisoners were released in error than at any other time on record. It is no surprise that prisons are finding it harder to ensure that released prisoners have a plan for housing and work—but that is not the only mess caused by this reckless policy.

Prisoner recalls are at a record high. In fact, more criminals have been recalled to prison than released under SDS40, but Ministers refuse to tell us how many recalled prisoners were let loose through early release. Now the Government are going further. Under the

Sentencing Act 2026 and SDS33, thousands of prisoners will be let out after serving just one third of their time. More than 7,000 victims have received letters telling them that the perpetrators of the crimes against them may be set loose. No wonder the Justice Secretary is hiding in his ministerial office, rather than defending his record, or the policy that has now been abandoned.

In January, as this House considered Lords amendments to the Sentencing Act, the Minister told the House that “nothing in the Bill changes sentences for prisoners convicted of the most serious, heinous crimes”. —[*Official Report*, 20 January 2026; Vol. 779, c. 199.]

We all knew that was nonsense, because when we tabled amendments to exclude from SDS33 those convicted of the most serious offences—rape, sex offences, child sex offences and more—the Government whipped their MPs to vote against us. That would be bad enough on its own terms, but the Government have completely lost control of the process for early release. They do not even know who is scheduled to be released, or when. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) asked Ministers to break down which offenders would be released when, and to disclose what crimes they had committed. The Minister told the House that it was

“not possible to know future release data precisely so far in advance”.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): There is a perpetual uncertainty about this issue, as my hon. Friend describes, but at the heart of it is the distance between the popular expectation of what criminal justice should deliver, and what the Government are putting in place. I am not saying that this began with this Government—there is a more fundamental and existential problem—but, in the end, every time Governments do this kind of thing, people lose faith in the justice of the criminal justice system.

Nick Timothy: I strongly agree with my right hon. Friend. The statistics show that between 1993 and 2012, our prison population grew very significantly, and through that period, crime fell. It plateaued after 2012, as the population grew, and that was a mistake. The Opposition are willing to accept that that was one of the errors of the coalition Government and the Conservatives’ time in power. We need to move on from that, and we will develop policies so that a future Conservative Government can build the prison capacity that the country needs.

D0r Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Left liberals may not like this, but it remains the case that the public expect the criminal justice system to exact retribution on those who have offended against society. If we do not do that, then individuals may wish to take the law into their own hands. We do not do that in a civilised country; we expect the state to do that on behalf of society. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we constantly diminish the sentences we hand down to serious and dangerous offenders, society may begin to lose faith in the Government it expects to do that work on its behalf?

Nick Timothy: I agree; prison works. It works because it punishes the guilty, gives justice to the innocent and takes dangerous people out of circulation, away from

the rest of society, and, in doing so, reduces crime. This is a matter of common sense for most people in the country, but it is a deeply controversial thing to say among many criminologists and policy wonks. I am very clear in my belief that prison works and that we need to use prison far more than we do.

Only last week, when my hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) asked the Minister to guarantee that convicted rape gang members would serve their sentences properly, he refused to do so. Lord Timpson, speaking for the Government on Channel 4, went even further:

“It is impossible for us to say exactly who will be released, where and when”.

The first 700 released prisoners are due to walk free on 2 September, and more will follow every month thereafter.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): In view of what my hon. Friend has just said, the constituents of Members across the House just want a clear undertaking that dangerous criminals—rapists and others—will not be set free. The Government have obviously dug themselves into a hole and have thrown in the towel this afternoon. We have a limited amount of time left before the summer recess. Is my hon. Friend in a position to say very clearly, for the benefit of those in this Chamber and outside, that the Opposition are willing to throw our weight in behind the Government if they will make the necessary amendments to win the time that they need to get this right?

Nick Timothy: I completely agree. I am happy to say that if the Government want to bring forward emergency legislation to fix this in primary legislation or, if they want to buy themselves a little more time to consider things more fully, to introduce new commencement regulations delaying the introduction of the early release scheme, the Opposition will completely support them in doing that.

For now, however, we do not know. The Government are not in a position to tell us who will be released, what crimes they have committed and when exactly they will be released. When will Ministers know the identity of, and the crimes that have been committed by, those who are due to be released? Are we to wait until they have re-offended, and the details emerge as they are arrested, charged and prosecuted all over again? Is the cost of this ineptitude yet more crime, yet more victims of crime and yet more lives ruined? A Government who cannot tell the public who they are releasing from prison have no business releasing any of these dangerous criminals.

Today, the Government have caved under Conservative pressure, but we still do not know what the policy will be. We have a Minister unable to answer: a political eunuch humiliated by his current boss, the Justice Secretary, and his next boss—if he gets a job—with nothing to say but “Wait for Andy”.

The approach of Ministers to all these concerns—legitimate concerns, shared by people up and down the country—has been to say, “Nothing to see here.” They still tell us that it will all be fine, but they have not had the nerve to ask their MPs to vote on it. The Government say that the criminals they release early will be managed “under strict licence conditions” and can be recalled if those conditions are breached, as though this is some

kind of special new initiative. Of course they are released under licence, but the Government refuse to say what those conditions will entail, whether they are new conditions or tougher conditions, what safeguards are in place and what resources will be deployed to ensure that these criminals do not reoffend or disappear from the radar. If they will not even tell us how many prisoners released under SDS40 have been recalled to prison, how can we trust them with what they say about SDS33?

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am a little puzzled by this excuse that offenders can always be recalled if they breach the terms. Presumably, a breach means that there has been a fresh victim of a crime, so it is rather pointless to give that as a reassurance. Does my hon. Friend know what proportion of the prison population is made up of serious sexual or other serious offenders? I cannot believe that it is such a high proportion that even if the prison system were utterly full, they could not release other inmates rather than such serious criminals.

Nick Timothy: My right hon. Friend puts his finger on the button. This is what we have been saying, and the Government have been saying in response: “No, this is absolutely necessary. We must release these serious sex offenders otherwise there will be a crisis in the prison system.” It is clear that the right hon. Member for Makerfield—the next Prime Minister—agrees with us, not with them. That is why they have folded in this afternoon’s debate. I feel very sorry for the Minister. It is one man, two guvnors, and he is in a very difficult position. Of course it is possible, even if we accept that we need an early release scheme of the kind the Government are introducing, to exclude the sorts of offenders that my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East has described.

As I was saying, if the Government are releasing record numbers of prisoners in error, how can we trust them to get these processes right?

It is easy for debates like this to be lost in statistics, technocratic jargon and legal language, so I will end on this important note. Fiona Goddard was just 14 when she was abused by a rape gang. Seven of her abusers were convicted. In June last year, Fiona received a letter from the Ministry of Justice informing her that her abusers were likely to be eligible soon for early release, having served just half their sentences. Last month she received another letter saying that under the Government’s Sentencing Act, her abusers may now be released after serving just one third of the time she was told they would serve in prison originally.

Fiona and several other victims—Sarah Wilson from Rotherham, Carly and Jessica from Huddersfield, Erin from Dewsbury, and the mother of a victim from Rochdale, who has since died—have written to all Members of the House. Several of those brave women and some others are in the Gallery today. They have asked us, in their words

“to hear the pain behind this letter...support an amendment to the Sentencing Act”

and exclude sex offenders from the early release scheme.

We can only imagine the suffering and torment that these women have experienced. To be told that those who abused them over many years may now be back on the streets long before they were supposed to be is not just disgusting but terrifying to them. It is shameful that

[Nick Timothy]

the Justice Secretary has refused to come to the House today, and it is ridiculous that the Government have bowed to our argument and accepted our motion without telling us or the victims what they plan to do instead. Victims are left in limbo. Are we going to get emergency legislation? Are we going to get new commencement regulations? Which offences will be excluded from the early release scheme? How is this possible when Ministers previously said that it was not?

The Minister is about to get to his feet, but I am afraid that he has no authority and no idea what will happen next. This dying Government need to be put out of their misery, and we need answers, not evasion, from the only person who can answer—the right hon. Member for Makerfield.

4.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): I thank the shadow Justice Secretary for his opening remarks. This is a profoundly serious matter for all Members in this place, victims across the country—including those here in the Gallery—and indeed all members the public.

Confidence in our law and order system must be maintained. We must all, therefore, recognise that we as a country face a challenge: to ensure public safety and protect victims while maintaining a functioning prison estate. I have no doubt that this is a priority for us all.

To begin, it is imperative to recognise the genesis of the Sentencing Act 2026, its implementation and provisions and, ultimately, why we are debating these issues. On 5 July 2024, the Home Secretary, in her first day in office as the then Justice Secretary, was presented immediately with a criminal justice system in crisis. There were fewer than 100 places left in the adult male estate. A day one decision for her was the nature and scope of an emergency release scheme, not whether there should be one. We all remember the chaotic scenes that we saw in the weeks afterwards. There were similar scenes when such last-minute release schemes were implemented by the last Government: judges were told not to jail the most serious offenders due to a lack of prison places and criminals walked away, with a lack of time to provide the most robust community measures.

The Conservative party released more than 10,000 prisoners early for a series of emergency measures taken to manage the capacity crisis they created. Those schemes were introduced at short notice, without the long-term reforms necessary to put the system on a sustainable footing, but there was no option but to act to prevent a collapse of the criminal justice system, which would have seen sex offenders and others able to act with impunity.

A prison capacity crisis is not just a problem for our prisons; it means the unravelling of the criminal justice system completely, with courts unable to hear cases, police unable to make arrests and a grinding halt to law and order in our country. Therefore, in the aftermath, the Government rightly wanted to ensure that would never happen again. The Home Secretary—then the Justice Secretary—commissioned the right hon. Sir David Gauke to undertake an urgent review of how we sentence offenders. On its conclusion, Gauke found that under

the previous Administration action was taken only when the criminal justice system was within three days away of collapse.

We recognised then that a two-pronged approach was required. One part was to build more prisons, backed by capital investment. That is how we have been able to embark on the biggest prison building programme since the Victorian era, with 14,000 new prison places by 2031. Two years into this Government, 3,200 places have already been delivered—contrast that with just 500 extra places over 14 years under the Conservative party.

In the 14 years of Conservative government, 23 prisons were closed. We would not be having this debate if those decisions had not been taken.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is right: prisons were closed that, in my view, might have been kept open. Has he looked at those prisons to see if any of them could be brought back quickly into use? Clearly that would be much faster than building new prisons. Has he looked to other secure facilities that might be used as prisons? During covid, the Government acted quickly, passed laws and put Nightingale hospitals in place. Why can we not have emergency prison places rather than letting these dangerous people on to our streets to do more harm?

Jake Richards: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's intervention. He has been consistent on this, although we do not agree on everything when it comes to criminal justice matters. The Government have looked at all options, including whether we can reopen those prisons closed by the last Conservative Government. I was struck by the shadow Justice Secretary's welcoming of the suggestion that there should be new planning reforms around how we build prisons, because every time we try to build a new prison in a Conservative MP's constituency, the Conservatives oppose it. It has happened time and again, with one thing being said at the Dispatch Box and their MPs arguing something completely different in their local media.

Sir Roger Gale: There are people in the Gallery and in the public out there who want to know that dangerous criminals will not be released at the start of September. That is what they want to hear; we do not want to hear the history. We want an answer from the Minister. He heard the offer from the shadow Secretary of State in reply to my question. We are prepared to back the necessary legislation before the recess to put a stop to this. Is he prepared to take that offer—yes or no?

Jake Richards: What we will not do is put our head in the sand, which would lead to another prison capacity crisis, which would lead to another urgent, chaotic early release scheme as we saw under the last Conservative Government time and again. I cannot look victims in the eye and tell them that is good for them or for the country, and I will not do so. That is why, when the Home Secretary was Justice Secretary—

Nick Timothy: Will the Minister give way?

Jake Richards: Let me make some progress first.

The Home Secretary recognised that alongside prison building, there would be a need to reform sentencing, and for that be done above party politics. That is the principal reason why she asked Sir David Gauke, a former Conservative Justice Secretary, to undertake an independent sentencing review.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): A great man!

Jake Richards: Some Opposition Members still think he is a great man. I do not think that is a universal view on the Opposition Benches.

Following publication of the review, the Sentencing Bill began its passage through Parliament and received Royal Assent on 22 January this year. It was explained during its passage that many of its provisions would come into effect only in the autumn of this year. Any Government would continue to assess how best to achieve sustainability in our prison system, while ensuring public safety and confidence. Every decision that this Labour Government have taken has been based on keeping the public safe, protecting our criminal justice system and delivering justice for victims. That will continue to guide all future decisions, under this Prime Minister and the next Prime Minister.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): Can the Minister not understand that people out there, such as my constituent Leanne Vaughan—her daughter was killed by a hooligan driver, and she had to wait 28 months before he was sentenced to 66 months in prison, but then was released after 21 months—do not believe what he is saying? It is appalling. People are heartbroken by their losses, and this Government are not meeting their expectations or ours.

Jake Richards: I understand. I meet victims all the time in my role at the Ministry of Justice. Before being elected to Parliament, I represented many victims of child sexual abuse every day in courts up and down the country. I understand the issues that victims such as his constituent face. I impress on the hon. Member that the Sentencing Act and the provisions that we are debating today have not yet come into effect. I am happy to speak with him outside the Chamber about that individual case, but I just put that in the context of the Sentencing Act and the provisions implemented by this Government.

I will deal briefly with the specific cohort of offenders cited in the motion. The grooming gang scandals remain one of the gravest betrayals of our time. We are determined to get to the truth behind years of systemic failure on the issue. I am sure that the whole House joins me in paying tribute to the victims and survivors who have so bravely spoken out about their ordeal. As I have said, before entering Parliament I spent the best part of my career representing just some of them. I know personally just how difficult it is for them to speak out.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I took part in Rupert Lowe's independent rape gang inquiry—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I think the right hon. Lady means the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe).

Esther McVey: I took part in the independent rape gang inquiry, meeting victims who had waited such a long time for justice and to see their abusers put behind bars. What does the Minister have to say to those victims who received a letter to say that their perpetrators are back on the streets? Is that a mistake and it will not happen? Ministers had said that those who have committed the most serious and heinous of crimes would not be on the streets. Can he take this opportunity to say that those letters were a mistake?

Jake Richards: I am not sure which letters the right hon. Member is referring to, because none of the letters sent out by the Ministry of Justice has referred to people already being released. I understand the concerns that she raises. We take our engagement with victims incredibly seriously. The purpose of the letter is not merely for communication; it is also so that victims can have a say in licence conditions when offenders are released. Offenders are released as things stand. The Sentencing Act 2026 changes that for certain offenders, and there is a process in place by which probation ensures that the community is kept safe with robust licence measures. That will continue.

We have improved the Probation Service's powers. We are putting £700 million into the Probation Service, which is the biggest investment for a generation. I understand the right hon. Member's concerns—I really do—but I gently suggest to her that criminals have been released from prison for a long time. There are measures in place, and we need to ensure that they are as robust as they can be.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Everybody would appreciate some clarity that when we are talking about the letters, those are specifically the letters informing victims that the Sentencing Act 2026 will affect when their perpetrators will be released. The issue that has been raised by many victims is that these are blanket letters; they are not personalised. They do not say which perpetrator. In the letter, it says that "some" will be managed in the community. These victims have been so failed by our justice system at every step that when they receive such a letter, they assume that it means their perpetrator will not be managed in the community. Can the Minister please reflect on the impersonal letter that is sent, sometimes by email, to inform victims that what they thought was true is no longer true, and that their perpetrator may be out sooner than they had expected?

Jake Richards: Absolutely. The hon. Lady's call for us all to reflect on that will be taken up. I know that the Justice Secretary and the Victims Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), who is sitting next to me, will have heard that. There will be further correspondence; it was not a blanket correspondence by any means. The Government and the Probation Service want to engage with victims as much as possible to ensure that their voices are heard every step of the way. I am grateful for the intervention.

Nick Timothy: We have brought this motion to the House. The Labour party has accepted that motion—it will not contest it and the House will not divide. Having accepted what we have put in the motion, will the Minister tell us what the plan is to ensure that rapists and sex offenders will not be released, starting from

[Nick Timothy]

September? Will the Government bring forward emergency legislation before the summer recess? Will they bring forward new commencement regulations—yes or no? The Minister has our commitment of support if he does that. If he is not in a position to say so, because it is up to the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) and he does not yet know, the Minister can just say that.

Jake Richards: As happened on numerous occasions under Boris Johnson and Theresa May, in Opposition day debates the Government are quite within their rights not to divide on an issue—an Opposition day is an Opposition day.

This Government are dealing with the prison capacity crisis that we inherited. We are facing a situation where, if the Sentencing Act measures are not implemented, in October or November of this year we will be back where we were in July 2024. The Sentencing Act received Royal Assent in January and some of its measures are being implemented from September onwards. The Government will always balance making sure that we have a sustainable prison system and never going back to the crisis that we saw under the Conservatives with public safety and confidence in the system. That will continue under this Prime Minister and under the next Labour Prime Minister.

Sir John Hayes: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way a second time—he is very generous—and for his kind remarks about my consistency. He also mentioned our differences, and I will explore those in greater detail in due course, with your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether I can be helpful to the Minister. This matter seems to go well beyond party politics, because we have a crisis in prison numbers and this is an occasion on which we might find common cause and seek a way forward. Indeed, that offer has generously been made by those on the Opposition Front Bench, so perhaps the Minister, who I suspect is a rather decent man at heart, should take up that offer in the spirit in which it has been made, and see whether we can sort this out in a way that protects all our constituents from harm.

Jake Richards: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's kind words, personally, but I gently say that the Opposition party has no plan for how to deal with the prison crisis that its amendment would have brought about later this year—there is no plan; there is no suggestion; there is no idea of where they would put the criminals we are locking up every day. By the end of this Parliament there will be more criminals behind bars than ever before under a Labour Government. We are building more prisons than since the Victorian era. There is no plan from the Opposition. It is very easy and straightforward to bemoan the changes in the Sentencing Act, which received Royal Assent in January, but the Opposition have to come Parliament with a credible plan for capacity.

Sir Roger Gale: Will the Minister give way?

Jake Richards: I will not give way another time.

Once prisoners are released, offenders will be subject to strict licence conditions. We are adding tougher restrictions as part of the Probation Service's toolkit for

managing offenders when they leave prison. That includes restriction zones, which can be used for the most serious sexual and violent offenders, pinning the offender to certain areas rather than restricting the movements of victims.

We are ramping up tagging to monitor offenders in the community, with thousands more subject to 24/7 monitoring and curfews. We are already tagging at record levels, and we will invest a further £100 million to expand our ability to monitor even more offenders. That is the biggest expansion of tagging in history. Also, while on licence, offenders can be recalled immediately if they cannot be safely managed in the community.

To carry out all that additional supervision, we need a Probation Service that is fighting fit. That is why we are increasing probation—

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): I understand what the Minister is saying about the looming prison crisis, but I just wonder whether he can explain to us how releasing dangerous sexual predators and grooming gang members fits with our manifesto commitment to halve violence against women and girls?

Jake Richards: I understand my hon. Friend's intervention. Let us be clear that many of the offenders we are talking about have been released previously and would continue being released but for the Sentencing Act. This is about what measures we put in the community to ensure that the community is safe, and that is why we are investing more than ever before in our Probation Service and why we have recruited a further 1,300 probation officers this year. We are refocusing supervision to devote more time to dangerous offenders so that we can better protect the public. This is ultimately the choice: either strict licence conditions in the community for those who have already served time in prison under the changes; or, simply put, the collapse of the system altogether, leaving sex offenders and others to act with impunity.

I understand how distressing it can be for victims when an offender in their case is released. That is why we are taking steps, as I have already touched upon, to contact those eligible for and opted into the victim contact scheme to let them know how these changes will affect them, but I recognise that this will not cover all victims affected. That is why, through the Victims and Courts Act 2026, we will for the first time provide a new dedicated route for all victims to request information about an offender. We must ensure that we get this right, which is why it is taking some time to implement carefully, but this is proper engagement with victims rather than the chaotic botched emergency release schemes that we had under the previous Government.

Sir Julian Lewis: I have a fairly simple question. Does the Minister have a clear idea of what categories he regards as constituting dangerous offenders, and if he does, what percentage of the prison population is made up of these people? If it is something like 10%, 15% or 25%, that still means that there are 75% or more of other categories of prisoners who could and should be released before those in that dangerous category are even considered.

Jake Richards: Sentencing judges always consider dangerousness and risk to the public, as probation officers do. Every offender has a level of dangerousness, which is risk-assessed by probation as and when they leave prison. That has happened for the last 50 years and will continue to happen under the new Sentencing Act.

I want to end again by reflecting on the horrific grooming gangs scandal, which lays heavily on our national conscience, and the women and girls, often young girls, who were systematically raped and exploited and then disbelieved by those who should have protected them. Those who prey on children must face the full force of the law, but in order to do that, we need a prison system with enough space. The previous Government left prisons on the verge of collapse. We prevented the disaster of running out of places altogether, and the breakdown of law and order it could have caused, but only just. Now we are ensuring that we never again return to that position, building prisons at an exceptional rate and delivering landmark reforms to sentencing to ensure that there is always a cell available for the most dangerous offenders and to end the cycle of capacity crisis.

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

4.43 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): May I first pay tribute to every victim and survivor of some of the most horrific and vile crimes imaginable, including those who join us in the Gallery today? They have waived their right to anonymity and raised their voices so that others do not have to. They are calling for greater protections for victims, who feel consistently failed by the justice system as it stands, and they represent a much larger and often voiceless part of our society, including those who never came forward, and those who did come forward but did not receive justice at the end of it. These are the people who spend their lives scanning crowds and looking around street corners, fearful that they will bump into their perpetrator, or perpetrators, again, and I commend them for their bravery and determination to ensure that nobody else suffers in the way that they have done. The abuse that they have experienced at the hands of cruel, calculating monsters never leaves them, and I share their anger and frustration that after countless reviews, reports and inquiries, spanning many years and many Governments, the system continues to fail them and recommendations remain unimplemented.

I think we all agree that, in a properly functioning justice system, as a matter of principle, no victim should have to endure being told that their perpetrator is being released earlier than expected for any offence. When a sentence is handed down, victims deserve the certainty of knowing where they stand and how long their perpetrator will remain behind bars. We have heard just today from victims who were reassured by the judges in their cases that their perpetrators would serve a certain length of time—only to then receive this vague letter, which we have been talking about, telling them that that may no longer be the case.

That does not happen in any other element of our justice system. When a Government introduce a new sentence—a new crime—it is not retrospective. The

Government have come forward with a positive change by upping the sentence in relation to women who are killed in the home, which currently carries a lower sentence than offences relating to those who are killed outside of the home. That is not retrospective, but the campaigners for the change said that they understand that the justice system is not retrospective. The same should apply to sentencing after the fact.

Victims are understandably angry about the format of the letters they received, which were not personalised and provided no specific information about their cases. The letters did not provide information about when their perpetrators would be released, and also said, as I mentioned to the Minister, that some of those released would be managed in the community. That will naturally lead many to fear the worst—that their perpetrators will be free to roam without restriction. Why would they not think that, when they have been failed so many times by the system? The vagueness and ambiguity need looking at. I hope that the Minister will take that away, so that the MOJ's mass communications are worded in a way that does not feel so impersonal.

It is worth saying, and has been said many times before, that the justice system inherited by this Government left victims and society more broadly in grave peril. It risked the state convicting criminals of serious offences but having no space in which to imprison them. A capacity crisis in our prisons would also have left victims and survivors fearful, and it clearly needed to be addressed.

Throughout the passage of the Sentencing Act, we were concerned about the implications for other parts of the justice system, which were already at breaking point, and their ability to absorb the additional strain. The probation system, where staff are already facing ever-increasing caseloads without being appropriately resourced, has now been tasked with managing those released earlier than before, as well as those serving community sentences. Meanwhile, the prison system itself was failing to keep hold of dangerous offenders—in some cases accidentally releasing them and losing track of them altogether.

We were also concerned about the implications of the Government's proposals for the early release of offenders convicted of extremely serious crimes, including those discussed today. Ministers in both Houses reassured us that the most serious offenders would be exempt from these measures, which is clearly not the case. That is why the Liberal Democrats have written to the Justice Secretary calling for child sexual offenders, including those convicted of offences connected to grooming gangs, to be exempt from the new early release provisions in the Sentencing Act.

The Government have promised the biggest expansion in prison places since the Victorian era, and have delivered on part of that promise by increasing capacity. That new provision should now be used to ensure that child sex offenders serve the same proportion of their sentence as they did previously, giving victims the reassurance that their perpetrators will remain in prison for the period that they were led to expect at sentencing.

We spend the equivalent of just two weeks' welfare spending on the entire justice budget. That covers our courts, our prisons and the Probation Service. That lack of seriousness is why the justice system often lurches from crisis to crisis—that is a plague on all our houses—but for the victims and those in the Gallery today, a functioning

[*Jess Brown-Fuller*]

justice system is everything. It is the difference between being able to move on with their lives and being forever traumatised by a system that fails them.

Will the Minister therefore set out how many prisoners currently in the prison estate have been convicted of child sexual offences, including offences connected to child sexual exploitation and grooming gangs? If there is sufficient capacity in the prison estate to exempt those offenders from the early release scheme, will he do so? Finally, what measures will this Government bring forward to restore confidence among all victims, including those who never came forward to report abuse or who were afraid to do so because they feared that they would not be believed? As a whole House, we have to do better.

4.49 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): It is right first to acknowledge the condition of our prison estate, the issues with capacity and the impact it all has overall on our criminal justice system. I associate myself with the Justice Minister's comments on all of that from earlier.

I want to say early on in my contribution that I will not get involved in a political tit-for-tat on who did what or who did not do something when they were in power. This is far too serious an issue for people, and to sink to political point scoring leaves a bad taste in my mouth and does no one any good whatsoever. People convicted of sexual abuse against an adult or child, of rape, of grooming or of the attempt, conspiracy or incitement of offences should not be allowed early release from prison. That is not a left-wing or right-wing political debate; it is what is just and right for survivors.

Looking closer to home in my constituency, the statistics in Clackmannanshire show that it is the most dangerous place in Scotland for women and young girls to grow up in. I have been fortunate enough to visit support groups and mental health organisations and to meet volunteers in my constituency. I have heard from women and also from men who have survived rape, sexual abuse and other indescribable things. They may be at home watching this debate, and they and the people in the Gallery will be looking at the discourse in this debate. What should be at the front of all our contributions is the welfare of survivors, because I have heard from survivors, and many tell me that they feel like an afterthought when it comes to receiving justice. It is not right that they should live in fear and terror that the person who committed the offence could be released early. Survivors must matter above all else. Convicted sex offenders should serve the entirety of their sentence, and I urge the Government to adopt that and reflect on what my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Wavertree (Paula Barker) said in her earlier intervention.

4.52 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Disraeli, the great Conservative Prime Minister, said:

"Justice is truth in action."—[*Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 11 February 1851; Vol. 114, c. 412.]

When criminal justice deviates from what the public see as the truth, the faith in its delivery is undermined. People want to see that justice is done and seen to be

done, and that punishments for wickedness are dealt with appropriately. I take a different view from the Minister about the character of a retributive approach to criminal justice, as I do think that retribution is an important part of satisfying a legitimate public thirst for appropriateness—that is to say, when something awful is done, people expect the person responsible for that horror to be treated accordingly. They do not take the view, which has prevailed for successive decades affecting all kinds of Governments, that we should, in the first place, treat the criminal as though suffering from an illness. The treatmentist approach has dominated thinking on criminal justice for most of my lifetime is out of tune with popular sentiment.

The truth is that crime is not an illness to be treated; it is a perverse choice by those seeking to gain from it. That might be financial or, in the case of sexual crime, about lust. When we speak of wickedness, let us be straightforward: these kinds of instincts have been endemic in humankind since we fell from the state of grace, so we should not assume that people are not capable of the worst horrors—all of human history shows that they are. When that occurs, people expect those who exercise power to deal with it emphatically, without fear or favour.

We need a criminal justice system that defends the innocent and punishes the guilty, and I make no apologies in making a case for punishment. People should be punished when they do awful, wicked things, so I want to see more people locked up for much longer. I do not think I am out of tune with my constituents, because I think they would say exactly the same.

What we actually have is public policy that is taking us in exactly the opposite direction. We are seeing people sentenced and, as though that sentence is meaningless, then serving half of it. What is the purpose of a judge agreeing a sentence when the victims of the crime know that the person responsible for it will only serve half the time that the judge insists is necessary for punishment to be done?

Early release will not just affect minor criminals; we have heard from Members across the Chamber that it will be applied to people of all types. When my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) asked for clarification about numbers, answer was there none. We do not know how many of those who will be released remarkably early are likely to pose a considerable danger to my constituents, the Minister's and my right hon. Friend's. I was not generous but accurate in describing the Minister as a decent man, and I think the least he owes us is, before the debate concludes—he can get a message sent to him from on high, by which I mean the Box over there, not from God—to be precise about the number of people in each of the categories that have been described today who will be released early. How many people convicted of manslaughter, how many child sexual offenders and how many rapists will now be on the streets as a result of this policy?

The Minister has come to the House and said, "This is a matter of practicality because there are insufficient prison places to hold all those there." We know that there are two reasons for that beyond the desire to lock people up. One is the number of foreign national offenders in our prisons, so let us have some clarity about the number of those who are being deported. Is the number

increasing dramatically, and if not, what are the impediments to those offenders returning to their country of origin?

Secondly, there are large numbers of prisoners on remand because the throughput of the courts is insufficient. How many people are on remand? How long have they been in prison? What steps will the Government take to improve the throughput in our court system that allows fewer of those people to be clogging up our prisons? We have to assume that some of them are innocent; not everyone who is on remand will later be found guilty, so there may be innocent people in prison, but we are going to let guilty people—we know they are guilty, because they have already been sentenced—free. That seems to me to be entirely inappropriate.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Will the right hon. Member give way?

Sir John Hayes: I am always happy to give way to the hon. Lady.

Carla Lockhart: I thank the right hon. Member for giving way; he is speaking very eloquently. The British people believe in a simple principle: if you do the crime, you should do the time. We in Northern Ireland, unfortunately, have witnessed the early release of prisoners under the Good Friday agreement, the impact that it has on victims and the retraumatisation of victims. I agree with his point totally. When we speak about prison capacity, would we not all agree that the airport is where foreign nationals should be, not the high street, which will retraumatise victims?

Sir John Hayes: Not for the first time, the hon. Lady has brought both insight and character to our considerations. She has been consistent in raising this issue in the House. From the experience in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, we know the effects of early release: many of the people released early will go on to commit other crimes. The figures are really quite shocking. Official data shows that there were 870 notifications of serious further offences committed by released prisoners in 2024-25, including 56 murders and 107 rapes.

When, from time to time, I make the case for capital punishment as a sentence available for the worst possible crimes, I am told that we could not possibly have that because we might make mistakes. However, we know that many people who have committed murder and subsequently been released have murdered again. Some of the people we are about to release will commit awful, horrible crimes. Not only will their victims be traumatised by fear, but crimes are almost bound to be committed by those people, in reality, notwithstanding the efforts of the Probation Service and the police, and that will be on the Minister's head—I do not think he wants that, for he could not possibly defend it to his constituents. I do not think that that any Member of the House would be comfortable with the idea that a decision taken here might have that effect.

I implore the Minister, as I did earlier, to speak to the shadow Minister to see if the House can come together to find a solution to the problem. I know it is not straightforward, and that other Governments have wrestled with it. None the less, this issue surely stretches beyond the party divide, and is one that we can all use our endeavours and our imagination to try to solve.

Paula Barker: The right hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time. Does he agree that this House is at its best when we put party politics aside, as my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) said? We owe it to all our constituents and to the country as a whole to come together and find a solution to this problem; that is not beyond the wit of man, and is within the scope of this House.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Lady is right. If you will allow me to digress for a moment, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am often asked by constituents—I imagine other hon. Members are asked the same question—“How on earth do you get on with people on the other side of the House?” I respond by saying that I get on with them just as well as I do with the people on my side when we come together to fight a battle, take up a campaign, or defend a cause that we believe is right and good. No party has a monopoly on wisdom. No Government get everything right. Governments make mistakes, as indeed do parties, and when we are big enough to acknowledge that publicly, we grow in respect; we are not diminished by it. The hon. Lady has grown today by her suggestion, and I hope that the Minister, too, will grow when he accepts it.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): We will be in a bizarre situation: the House will come together and express an unopposed view on what we should do about this issue, but before we have even done that, the Minister has indicated at the Dispatch Box that that view is immaterial and will not make a difference.

Sir John Hayes: Before I deal with that directly, may I say that in championing the interests of victims, my hon. Friend has done the Conservatives and the whole House proud? He has a remarkable record of standing up for victims, having met victims' groups and formed a connection with them that has rightly encouraged their trust. I always take his interventions on this subject seriously. He is right that there is space and an opportunity to have a mature discussion, not about where we have come from—that is pointless, as was said earlier—but about where we go from here. There are ways in which we could address the matter that would avoid our letting the most dangerous criminals on to the streets.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): If this is an issue of practicalities, as we have heard, can we not assume that there might be common ground on the idea of withdrawing visas from those countries that will not take back their offenders? That would lessen the pressure to release as many prisoners as are projected to be released.

Sir John Hayes: My right hon. Friend is right. The figures are stark: one in eight prisoners is a foreign national taking up valuable prison space. There are 10,376 foreign national criminals in our prisons today, which represents around 12% of the total prison population, and they cost almost £650 million a year. Absolutely, we should address the issue that my right hon. Friend raises; we should look at those countries that will not take back offenders, and at how obstacles might be overcome. That would relieve pressure on prison space and perhaps provide a way for the Government to confirm that they will not let violent offenders, child groomers and sexual offenders on to our streets.

Sir Roger Gale: I am sorry to labour this point, but given the consensus that I think there is in the House this afternoon, and in the light of what the hon. Member for Liverpool Wavertree (Paula Barker) said, let me say this. By my reckoning, we have five working days, or a maximum of six, before the summer recess, and some potentially dangerous people are likely to be released in September. We can use the time that we have, and can work with the Government to get whatever is necessary on the statute book to address this issue in the short term, while we deal with the longer-term issue. Am I right?

Sir John Hayes: My right hon. Friend is right. We are perfectly entitled to make that request of Government, as he has done in eloquent terms. It seems to me that the plan to release up to 6,000 criminals in September needs to be stalled, so that we can think again. There is a good argument for removing sex offenders, rapists, those guilty of manslaughter and those involved in grooming children from the list of those to be released. That is the least that could be done, and the opportunity is there to do it. If I may say so, the fact that a Member as senior as my right hon. Friend has made that suggestion should in itself carry significant weight.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend recall that when the Government put forward their proposals, they said that the most serious and heinous crimes would not be affected by the scheme? The reason we are in this position is that statements made at the Dispatch Box were, to put it mildly, inaccurate. In fact, very serious and heinous criminals will be released in September unless, as he suggests, the scheme is paused, and paused it should be.

Sir John Hayes: As my hon. Friend will know, the Sentencing Act facilitated early release. Did we not ask then for clarity about what that meant, in the terms that he describes? What kind of criminals would be released? What damage might they do? What assessment had been made of the risk of this policy? It is not as if the Government were not pressed on all those things, but there has been a remarkable lack of clarity—for example, the Prime Minister said, “It is impossible to say who will be released, where and when.” Frankly, you cannot get less clarity than that, can you, Madam Deputy Speaker?

We need to know that more innocent people will not be put at risk. The very least we should do is deal with the issue of serious sexual offenders and, in particular, those responsible for abusing children. I make no apology for quoting particular cases. Shabir Ahmed, the Pakistani ringleader of the Rochdale grooming gang, was freed despite warnings that he was “unsafe” to be released into the community. He was jailed for 22 years for 30 child rape offences. The parole documents that reveal that he was deemed unsafe for release into the community include his belief that it was

“acceptable to sexually abuse children”.

That is a chilling thought, and I know that decent people across this House, and across this country, will be shocked by it.

A woman groomed and raped as a child by a friend of her family has appealed to the Government to abandon their plans to free him nearly two years early.

Jade Belgrove waived her anonymity to describe the Government’s early release scheme as an “absolute disgrace”. Her case highlights that women and children are at risk from rapists and sex offenders who are freed early. She was raped aged 14. She deserves justice, if justice is indeed “truth in action”, as Disraeli said.

I differ from the Minister on the purpose of criminal justice. I believe that the treatmentist perspective that has dominated for a very long time needs to be challenged; I believe that just retribution should be at the core of how we deal with the wickedness that I have outlined. However, let us put all of that to one side. Those are issues of principle, and although there may be differences of principle between us, the Minister did not come to the Chamber to advocate for a principle. He did not say, “We are doing this because of some high-minded view about how we should deal with crime”; he said, “We are doing this because we can do nothing else—because of practicalities.” Therefore, as we are dealing with practicalities, let us look at what can be done to fix the problem, and let us do so early, so as to find a solution to it before September.

In doing so, let us broadcast a message from this House today that people need not walk in fear because dangerous people are going to be released on to the streets of their village, town or city; Parliament has said that that cannot be so. If we were to do that, public faith in Parliament would be a little stronger, a little restored. That is the request that I make of the Minister, because I stand by and for the people, having been chosen by the people to do so.

5.12 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): As we all contribute to this debate, we must remember who is at the heart of it: those victims and survivors who, let us be honest, have seen politicians come in and out of their life ever since those heinous crimes were first reported—since they first experienced the darkest of moments. Politicians have been trying to get to solutions, but it was only two weeks ago that we heard that the Bradford district and Keighley would finally form part of the national grooming gangs inquiry, and we are still debating the issue at the heart of this, which is the trust between victims and survivors and a state that continues to let them down. That includes national Government, of course, but also local government, and all those organisations that have safeguarding responsibilities.

For decades, many of those victims and survivors have fought hard for accountability and justice, and to be heard by the state. The independent inquiry into child sexual abuse—IICSA—produced 22 solid recommendations, but neither the previous Government nor, to date, this Labour Government have implemented all those recommendations. I simply ask the Minister: why not? That feeds into the issue of trust.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): A constituent of mine is an official, a civil servant who works in support of the IICSA. Having had emotional interviews with so many victims of the crimes that we are discussing today, he cannot fathom why Governments have not yet fully implemented those recommendations. Does the hon. Gentleman share that frustration?

Robbie Moore: I absolutely do share that frustration. If we are serious about addressing one of the biggest national scandals that the country has ever faced, we surely cannot have a scenario in which Professor Alexis Jay produces a detailed report—having done a huge amount of outreach in dealing with those who have experienced child sexual abuse—only for the state to fail in its responsibility to enact its recommendations. I have long called for all those recommendations to be implemented in full. There was a gap during which gang rapes of victims and survivors who had experienced child sexual abuse were not looked at properly. Baroness Casey then produced a detailed report, which came before Parliament in June 2025, recommending a national inquiry, but more than 18 months later, we are still in the same position.

We have had the announcement that Bradford district and Keighley will be investigated in that inquiry, alongside London, but where else are those victims and survivors across the country being let down? This is an important point, because if we are not delivering accountability and justice through an inquiry that now has three years before reporting back to the Government, we are not dealing with the crux of the issue of re-establishing trust between those who have been let down by the state and those in whom that trust needs to be re-established.

That brings me to the very heart of the issue. The Government are now considering releasing prisoners early—perpetrators who have carried out some of the most horrendous crimes that anyone in the country could have imagined. Dual nationals, for instance, have been released early. Last year in Keighley, eight men were convicted of carrying out gang rape, two of whom had dual nationality, and two of whom were sentenced in their absence from court and are now living a life of freedom in Pakistan. Where they are living is common knowledge, but they have escaped justice because the courts did not have the ability, or rather the common sense, to remove their passports during the trial and the sentencing. That is a disgrace, and it only builds on the scenario that the state is not delivering for those victims and survivors.

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend has done a heroic job in highlighting the perennial problem in his area and beyond it. The reluctance to acknowledge that these grooming gangs were run largely by men of Pakistani origin is exacerbated when those very people, once caught and convicted, are released early. The lack of faith that was bound to come from that reluctance will now be exaggerated—doubled—when these people are let out of prison, where they ought to stay, probably forever.

Robbie Moore: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. In a moment or two, I will read out some descriptions of the feelings, and the frustrations, of the many victims and survivors who are hugely anxious and fearful that their perpetrators will be released early, because the sentences that are being given to those perpetrators are nowhere near long enough. Many of those victims and survivors are having to see sentences served concurrently, which is exactly what happened in the case of perpetrators of gang rape in my constituency decades ago. I had to challenge the Attorney General to call in those cases under the undue leniency scheme so that the sentences could be longer.

I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend that the sentence should be life. Those who carry out these heinous crimes should not face weak sentences of up to six or eight years—sometimes much less than that.

The fact that victims and survivors receive a standardised letter—it is not personalised at all—that makes them fearful that their perpetrators may be released on to the streets early brings shame on this Government. I have read those letters. The first paragraph says:

“These changes have been introduced with the aim of improving the effectiveness of sentencing and better managing offenders in the community.”

What absolute cold-heartedness! It is an outrage that the Government are releasing that narrative to victims and survivors. Who on earth signed off the letters that have gone out to survivors who are deeply worried about those perpetrators?

I will take some time to read out to the House how some of those victims and survivors are feeling. I was lucky enough to meet those who are up in the Gallery earlier today. I put on the record my admiration for both Amy Clowrey and David Greenwood from Switalskis, who have worked for decades with victims and survivors from Rotherham, Rochdale, Telford and across the wider Bradford district, to ensure justice is delivered.

Sarah Wilson was just 11 years old when her exploitation began in Rotherham. She was a little girl forced to undergo a virginity test, and her innocence was stolen from her on the same day. For years she was raped and trafficked up and down the country by countless men. For 11 years she fought long and hard for the little girl she once was, and over two years she endured three criminal trials under Operation Stovewood. Those trials have now resulted in 125 years of justice against seven men. But how does that make Sarah feel? She says:

“I feel that all my hard work fighting for that little girl I used to be has been thrown back in my face like it was all for nothing. It seems like they have had a huge slap on the wrist and are allowed back out to reoffend. I’m scared that in a couple of years I could potentially see some of my perpetrators back on the same streets they abused me on. I’m scared of the repercussions. These are some of the most dangerous to walk our streets.”

Those are Sarah’s words after receiving one of these letters. I will continue to read this out, because it is important that the Minister, the Government and the Justice Secretary understand the anxiety that this has caused.

Erin—not her real name—was exposed to child exploitation in the Kirklees area between the ages of 12 and 21. She was subjected to abuse by older Asian—Pakistani—men, many of whom were notorious criminals involved in drugs. A number of the perpetrators are now serving lengthy sentences after Erin assisted the police in recent operations. How does receiving one of these letters from the Government make her feel? She says:

“I am writing in devastation and fear regarding the Government’s plan for the early release of prisoners. I am a survivor of severe, long-term abuse. I spent years of my life bravely fighting through the legal system to bring the men who harmed me to trial. The justice system had already failed me by giving them prison sentences that were shorter than the time I spent fighting them in court. Before that, the systems that were meant to protect me, including social services and the police, failed me too.

Now I feel as though I am being punished and terrified all over again. Hearing that the men who abused me may be released early has completely broken my sense of safety. My family and I still receive threats from these men and their families to this day.”

[Robbie Moore]

Early release would be a disaster for her, and I hope the Minister will respond to each and every one of the points I read out.

The name Fiona Goddard is very familiar to this House. She first contacted me when I was elected back in December 2019, in the hope she might find someone willing to fight her corner. I have huge admiration for Fiona. At the age of 13, she was taken into care by Bradford council. She was initially placed at Edgefield children's home, where she was first exposed to child sexual exploitation. She continued to go missing on a regular basis. Fiona fell victim to a campaign—a campaign—of rape and sexual assault over five years. She believes that up to 100 men were involved. Following a criminal trial in 2019, under Operation Dalesway, nine men were convicted of crimes relating to sexual exploitation.

How does Fiona feel as a result of receiving this letter about how, under this Government, the perpetrators could be released early? She says:

“Since finding out that some of my abusers may be released from prison, my mental and physical health has deteriorated significantly. I no longer feel able to keep myself and my family safe. I have been trying to raise money so that I can move out of the area, because the thought of them being back on the streets... is terrifying.

I always knew that these men would be released one day, but I believed I had more time to rebuild my life and prepare myself for that reality”,

after those convictions. She went on:

“Finding out that they may be released early has completely set me back. I have barely left the house. I feel constantly anxious, frightened and unsafe. I can barely sleep, and when I do, I do not feel rested. This news has affected me so deeply that my physical health has also suffered, resulting in hospital admissions.”

That is the result of this letter from the Government. Who, I ask the Minister, signed off these letters?

Jessica was exposed to child sexual abuse from the age of 12 in Batley, Dewsbury. She was sexually abused by over 50 men in this period. Between the ages of 12 and 16, Jessica was introduced to other men by a girl known to the police, who was older than her. In 2022, as part of Operation Tourway, her perpetrators were finally convicted. How did it make Jessica feel to receive one of these letters from the Government? She said:

“It's made me feel worthless all over again and like my safety does not matter at all. These people are going to be released back into the town and community where I live. For my safety I think I will have to move.”

She had always known that one day they would be released, but she did not think it would come this soon. She went on:

“It's just so unfair that they're not even going to serve the sentence that was handed to them”.

She knew that the sentences given were far too short in the first place. She says:

“When I received the letter, I just started crying. I am now only two years out of court and my case took eight years to get to court. They might not even serve eight years”,

as a result of the reassessment by the Government. She just cannot believe that two years after going to court, she now has to go through the trauma of the perpetrators being released early, which she says is “soul-crushing”.

Carly was 12 when she became involved with a group of Asian men who sexually abused and exploited her. Her abuse continued throughout 2004 to 2011. As part

of Operation Tendersea, Carly gave evidence at the trial in late 2018 that secured convictions against three of the men. As a result of receiving one of these letters, she says:

“I am extremely disappointed...that my perpetrators and abusers will only be serving 33% of their sentences, so they are going to be released as early as September. It is just another kick in the teeth.”

She feels incredibly disappointed that what little justice they had been given has been taken away. She says:

“We cannot let people who have abused children for years and decades onto the streets. How is it safe? It is not safe for our children, and it's not safe for the next generation of children. You are just releasing them back onto the streets for them to commit further offences, with a probation system that is fully broken.”

There are three more quotes that I will read out, and I will not apologise for doing so, because these girls have faced the most horrendous crimes. Jade was the victim of rape aged 14, and waived anonymity to describe the Government's early release scheme as “an absolute disgrace” that put women and children at risk from scores of rapists and sex offenders freed prematurely. She said that the two rapes left her with a “life sentence”, while the rapist who groomed her will just get a slap on the wrist. Recalling the moment that she read and digested the content of the letter, she said:

“I felt sick, to be honest. I felt like my rapist was being protected again”—

protected by the state—

“It's an absolute disgrace they can make victims feel back to being unheard and vulnerable. The fear all comes back because you know they're going to be out so much sooner than you had in your head originally.”

Other than murder, Jade thinks that these are some of the worst crimes that should get the most severe sentences. She continues:

“It's put such a fire in my belly because it scares me so much that so many predators and paedophiles are getting out, which scares me for my children's future because they're just back on the street again.”

That is as a result of this Government.

Angela was first raped by her stepfather when she was just eight years old. She tried to tell people but was ignored by school support staff and social services. The abuse continued until she was 15, when she refused to go home from school until the police got involved. She suffers from long-term post-traumatic stress disorder and hearing loss in both ears from repeated head trauma. This was her response on receiving the letter:

“It took three years for me to get justice and I was let down repeatedly by adults who should have been protecting me. My abuser was sentenced to a minimum of 10 years in prison of which he has only served six. The email received”—

it was an email, not even a letter, that came from the Ministry of Justice—

“was for all intents and purposes the government saying they do not care about the safety of women and children. I feel completely let down and made to feel like my safety and that of other victims isn't valued. This decision is an insult to women and the children we were who had to endure such violence. We deserve justice, I deserve to have time to put my life together without fear. I should be enjoying my degree and being in my twenties, having the normal stresses of a young woman. Instead I am having to fight for myself all over again. This decision is so obviously wrong that it amazes me it was even a discussion in the first place. It undermines everything we as victims went through.”

Finally, I will read a quote from Charlotte:

“From the age of eight years old until I was 13, I was raped and beaten by my older brother. In February 2025, he was arrested and charged with 20 sexual offences. In June of 2025, he pleaded guilty to nine out of the 20 charges and received a sentence of five years”—

just five years.

“In an email breakdown of his sentence from the judge, it shows all the reductions he got to his sentence for different factors, such as his age and admitting part of what he did. At no point was there an increase for my age or my pain”—

with Charlotte being so young.

“His sentence went from 21 years down to 5, of which he was supposed to serve two thirds...

My children are just starting to get their happy mum back after spending so long scared and broken. My life was ruined at just age 8. I spent 21 years living in fear and embarrassment and questioning why me.”

She said that

“5 years was not long enough and him being able to walk free after a year and a half”

will be hugely detrimental to the rest of her life. Unfortunately, Charlotte now needs medication just to be able to function.

These are the exact words of many of the victims and survivors who have received these letters, and there will be many, many more across the country. Why on earth will the Government not use the time remaining in this place before recess to bring forward emergency legislation to counteract the recommendations included in the Sentencing Act 2026, put a stop to this issue and reassure the many victims and survivors who are sat up in the Gallery right now and across the country that those perpetrators will not be released early?

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for yet another powerful contribution on this issue. He is an incredibly powerful advocate for the victims of these heinous crimes. I pay tribute to the victims and survivors and thank him for his work. As he is rightly saying, and as our right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) has also said, there is time now to do something. There is consensus across the House today for something to be done to stop these people being released early and to save the survivors and victims from the impacts on their physical and mental health, and on their safety, that my hon. Friend has articulated. Does he agree that the Government should listen to the voice of the House and to the voices of survivors and act now?

Robbie Moore: I absolutely agree. The reality is that this should not be political—this is about the difference between right and wrong. I have never understood why those in positions of responsibility, be it at a national or local level, would stand in the way and actually try to stop justice and accountability. We have unfortunately all seen that in our own local areas. I have seen it in my own area in West Yorkshire, where, as a matter of fact, the previous leader of Bradford council blocked the attempt to get an inquiry into the Bradford district, and the Mayor of West Yorkshire did not want an inquiry to focus on West Yorkshire. They all changed their minds following the release of the Casey review in 2025 and are now advocating for complete justice and accountability to follow—quite rightly. However, the point is that

people in positions of responsibility should not have to be dragged to the position of advocating the difference between right and wrong.

That is why I plead with the Government and the Minister to do the right thing, which I am sure she could do right now, in summing up today's debate: reassure the victims and survivors that the letter that was sent out was wrong, that it should not have been signed off, and that it should not have created the huge levels of anxiety, fear and concern that the victims and survivors have faced. I simply ask the Minister to do the right thing when she sums up at the Dispatch Box.

That brings me back to my initial point: this is about trust. The reality is that many of us fought hard to get that national inquiry and to get the attention on to our local areas. However, if victims and survivors do not trust the state to be on their side and feel that their perpetrators are going to be released early, why on earth would they come forward and contribute to the national grooming gangs inquiry? With the statutory inquiry into group child sexual exploitation beginning imminently, it is vital that it is not undermined by victims being afraid to speak out against their abusers for fear of unduly lenient or reduced sentences or, indeed, their perpetrators being released early.

The reality is that cases such as Fiona's are a direct consequence of the decisions taken by this Government and this Justice Secretary. They cannot seriously think that the best way to manage resources is to allow dangerous rapists and abusers back on to the streets before justice is served.

I have a few questions for the Minister. What is she doing to provide reassurance to those victims and survivors who have rightly raised their concerns? How is she categorising “dangerous offenders”? That question has been raised by many Members, but so far the Government have been unable to answer it. How many of these rapists, paedophiles and those who have carried out some of the most heinous crimes are going to be realised? Will the Minister confirm to Sarah, Erin, Fiona, Jessica, Carly, Jade, Angela and Charlotte, and the many other victims and survivors who have received these letters, that their perpetrators will not be released as a result of the Government sending out these ridiculous, cold-hearted letters?

5.41 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), whose incredibly powerful speech gave voice to the victims and the impact that the horrific abuse has had on them. He has led on this issue consistently in this House, and his words should carry incredible weight.

Today we are debating what should be an uncontroversial motion: to exclude from the Government's automatic early release scheme anyone convicted of a serious offence against a child or an adult, including rape, and anyone convicted of attempted conspiracy or incitement to commit such offences. By any definition, those are some of the most serious crimes. I find it very difficult to understand how anyone would oppose the common-sense position that sex offenders should not benefit from the Government's early release scheme.

[James Wild]

Sadly, it has been necessary to bring forward this motion, because Labour Members and Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords voted down our amendments to the Sentencing Act that would have done precisely that: prevent the early release of such offenders. Now it seems that there will not be a vote and our motion will simply be accepted. That is very welcome if it reflects a shift in policy, but the Minister who opened the debate was not clear whether he accepted that shift in policy or was simply making a tactical retreat on a vote that the Government knew they would lose. He repeatedly set out the rationale for the changes, as he had done earlier today to the media.

The urgency is clear. Thousands of victims have received letters—my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley spoke about the offensive nature of those letters and their dreadful impact on victims—telling them that in September the first wave of criminals will be released. Others will not yet have been informed. The Minister once again failed to give the basic figure for the number of sex offenders who will be released under the provisions. Surely he must know—it is his job to know—and he should be honest and up front with the House.

We can already picture the unedifying scenes of bottles of champagne being opened at the prison gates when these offenders are released. Meanwhile, the survivors of their crimes will—as they told every Member of this House in the letter to which the shadow Justice Secretary has referred—be feeling scared, heartbroken and angry that their perpetrators are not facing justice.

The Minister once again rolled out the Aunt Sally argument that without these measures the justice system would have fallen over, but it is now two years since the general election; two years in which the Government have chosen to let people out early rather than take action on prison places. There are 16,000 people on remand in our prisons, yet the Government are failing to ensure that our courts are used to the maximum capacity. Today, for example, 14% of the Crown courts are not sitting. Where is the commissioning of emergency prison capacity? Where is the greater use of the rapid deployment cells that the previous Government rolled out, including at HMP Norwich in my county? Where is the urgency? That should be a national priority.

Sir Ashley Fox: Does my hon. Friend agree that in tackling the Crown court backlog, the Government were far too slow in uncapping the maximum number of sitting days for Crown court judges and that they are also wasting a great deal of time and effort in trying to curtail the right to jury trials, which will have no appreciable effect on the Crown court backlog? That is in fact wasting parliamentary time and civil service time on a reform that we know the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) will most probably junk.

James Wild: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The Lady Chief Justice appeared before parliamentary Committees to tell MPs that she could have more sitting days if only the Government would produce, I think, about £20 million of funding—a fairly minimal amount in the scheme of the £1.3 trillion that the Government spend every year—rather than go down the route of removing people's right to jury trials in certain cases.

The prison places coming online are those commissioned by the last Government. Yes, I accept that we should have commissioned more, but the Minister has confirmed in parliamentary answers that no new prisons have been planned or approved by this Government since the general election. Politics is about choices, and Ministers have chosen early release and softer sentencing rather than ensuring public protection and punishment. That is despite Ministers saying that the most serious and violent offenders would be excluded from this change. Anyone who has listened to the testimonies shared with the House by my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley could not consider that they do not represent the most serious and violent offenders.

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. It would be straightforward for the Government to issue a statement—a written statement would do, actually—on the back of this debate simply excluding the kinds of offenders that have been highlighted by a variety of hon. Members, and in particular by my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore). When the Minister winds up, she might confirm that the Government intend to issue such a statement, and we could then move on.

James Wild: I agree with my right hon. Friend. It looked like Labour MPs were set to be whipped against this motion to stop the early release of sex offenders who had committed crimes against children. When I was first elected to this House, I had to explain to my Whip and the Minister in post that I would not support a measure to bring forward an early release scheme for offenders—I expect that many of my newly elected colleagues did the same—and that measure was withdrawn.

While MPs may not be whipped to vote against the motion, and there seems to be common cause from Government Members in the Chamber, we heard nothing in opening from the Minister, who spoke but failed to address the next steps. There might be some grounds for optimism as apparently the right hon. Member for Makerfield is looking at how to tighten the scheme to exclude such offenders, but if that change is to happen, the legislation needs to come forward now.

We know that the new Prime Minister will not be in post until we have risen for the summer recess. Tomorrow and Thursday, we will have general debates in the House. The motion—it looks like it will pass without a Division—calls on the Government to bring forward legislation immediately, so if the Government are accept the motion, what is their plan? Will they bring forward commencement regulations to delay implementation, as set out earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy)? Will they table emergency legislation tomorrow, Thursday or next week? We had no response on that from the Minister, which I found deeply disappointing.

Those who were in the Gallery earlier and those victims across the country deserve answers today on what the Government will do. By passing the motion, we can begin the process to prevent those guilty of rape or grooming from being released early, we can provide reassurance to victims that we put their interests first, and we can show that public protection is our priority.

5.49 pm

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The Scottish Government famously take no lessons from anyone, but perhaps in sentencing we might learn something from them, because they are in the grip of soft-touch-justice fever. There is a warning from Scotland about rapists and sex offenders, because rapists there will be set free more than two years early under the latest expansion of that soft-touch-justice approach, as the Scottish Government fail to grip the prison places crisis. The average jail time served by people who are guilty of rape will be reduced by more than two years and four months as a result of Scottish National party proposals to automatically release long-term prisoners after only two thirds of their sentence.

Rape Crisis Scotland chief executive Alev Taylor said:

“Organisations like ours have fought hard to maintain the exemption of rape and sexual offenders from early release schemes, both to ensure the safety of survivors and to maintain overall confidence in the justice system.”

What a searing indictment, from someone who has seen the aftermath of one of the most awful crimes that can be committed: the violation of a person's body, which leaves physical scars and lifelong mental scars.

I have visited HMP Dumfries, where the SNP's former chief executive Peter Murrell, estranged husband of ex-First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, is beginning a five-year-and-three-month sentence for embezzling £400,000 from his party and, it is suspected, from the public purse. I do not envy him, despite headlines about the jail being “cushy”. The staff there struggle with a lack of resources in a Victorian-era prison ill-suited to the modern world. Governor Andrew Hunstone made it clear to me that the loss of liberty is a genuine and serious punishment in itself, and that is the core point of justice. Loss of liberty is what serious criminals rightly face. The public know that simple truth, and legislators should not be lily-livered about it.

Politicians salami-slicing sentences is a betrayal. It is a betrayal first and foremost of victims. It is a signal of, “Yes, you have suffered, but we politicians are awfully fixated on prison numbers.” It is a betrayal of the police who work so diligently and so hard to bring criminals to justice. It is a betrayal of the courts themselves, as it ties the hands of those who pass sentences, effectively neutering them. It is also a betrayal of the public, because justice delayed is justice denied, but so too is justice watered down.

Today we televise sentencing hearings while simultaneously pulling the wool over the public's eyes, because what may sound like a hefty sentence is automatically subject to a craven rolling back or to early release. I am all for rehabilitation, and I am all for helping people who have served prison time getting back into society, but we must all be about the victims. Our constituents want custodial sentences to be real, not illusions. The public know that custodial sentences are about punishment, not revenge. They also know the deterrent effect. Legislators who are too queasy to accept that should get out of the way. A well-regulated and just society must have prisons, no matter how many so-called progressive politicians would will them away. Prison works. We should use it, and sentences should be served in full.

5.53 pm

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): As Members of Parliament, we often go around our constituencies and talk to many of our constituents across the political spectrum, and the thing I always say is that the people who come to this House—not that we do not get things wrong, and not that we do not disagree—are doing so because they want to make a real difference to people's lives. They want to make an impact. While we may sometimes disagree about how that is to be achieved, there are good intentions right across the political spectrum.

When we face a situation such as the one we face today, it becomes so much more important that we do not act in a party political manner, but in a way that is in the best interests of those who have been hurt the most. We have all witnessed it. Every single one of us has seen constituents who have been impacted by the 7,000 letters that went out, informing them that the people who have done them harm will be released early. I cannot imagine how crushing that must be.

This is not something that we have to sit idly by and just accept; it is something that we can genuinely change. The statistics have already been covered by so many others, but I must say that there is something fundamentally wrong when 62% of rapists and 83% of child groomers will be let off early. This is not about party politics; this is just about good judgment and doing the right thing.

I understand that the Minister has been sent out by her absentee boss to make the argument. I know, because we have all been in that situation when we have been in ministerial office, where we are sometimes sent out to make arguments we do not feel comfortable with or are not necessarily happy making. I urge the Minister not to ignore the victims and the people who have been impacted by this legislation, but to take action. She can utter mild and inconsequential words at the Dispatch Box, but this means that victims are going to spend not just another day and not just another week, but multiple weeks, not knowing what is going to happen. As we go into summer recess, it will be week upon week without clarity, and that will erode their confidence and make them worry about the person who has done them so much harm. I urge the Minister to do what is right by the victims, against what is right by her absentee boss.

Sir John Hayes: There are times in this place when a combination of popular sentiment and the power of argument become overwhelming. I have seen it happen whoever has been in government. At that point, it is important for Governments to change tack and, as I said earlier, Governments grow when they do so. It seems to me that those two things have been evident beyond doubt in this short debate. Will my right hon. Friend echo those calls made earlier to implore the Government to take a step back, think again and act quickly?

Sir Gavin Williamson: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. We have a moment of what I believe is cross-party unity, because behind the Minister, I believe that those on the Back Benches of the Labour party do not want the Government to go down this course. On the Opposition Benches, we do not want the Government to go down this course. We want to make sure that there is a solution that supports and protects victims—the people

[Sir Gavin Williamson]

who Ministers said would be protected but who have not been as a result of the measures in the Sentencing Act.

It is important to act. As has already been pointed out, there are acres of legislative time and opportunities. It is not as if the general debates that are pencilled in, as worthy, important and valuable as they are, could not be moved to facilitate the legislation and the votes in this House to get this corrected. I would say to the Ministers that they must not sit there passively acting as a shield for their absentee Secretary of State, who does not seem to care or be interested in the victims who are being impacted by his legislation—not our legislation, but his.

Action is required, and if Ministers sit there and do not take the action that is required, they will be as guilty as the Secretary of State is for bringing such flawed legislation to the Floor of this House in the first place. Do not sit by as victims suffer. Do not sit by as people worry, stress and fear about what will happen to them in the weeks ahead, while the Labour party is going through internal trauma and is not providing a clear and direct way to help these victims. I implore the Minister to be bold, to act and to show some leadership, which has been completely absent from the Secretary of State.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): In the wind-ups, I call the shadow Minister.

6 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to close this crucial Opposition day debate, and I thank all Members who have taken part for their thoughtful contributions. Before I say anything else, I want to acknowledge the people I met earlier today, along with other MPs on a cross-party basis, and who were in the Public Gallery: Jade, Charlotte, Jessica, Sarah, Erin, Carly and Angela. I also want to mention someone who has not been mentioned today: Isabelle, whose daughter took her own life when she saw the perpetrator of her crimes released early under the ordinary early release schemes. I particularly want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for reading out all the victims' words, and letting everybody hear exactly what they have said. That was really powerful. I also thank him for acknowledging the many people watching at home, who are not here. They include Fiona Goddard, who was one of the first people to speak out after receiving her letter.

Those people are often referred to as victims, and they are victims, but they are not just victims. Being a victim does not define them. They are people with voices that they want us to hear. They came to this debate because, at the very least, they want answers from the Government, and they want MPs to support them by taking different decisions that will put them, their experiences and their welfare first. I want to say to them directly: we hear you, and I hope that by the end of this debate, the Government will have followed suit and heard you too.

When the Minister responds, I hope we will finally get answers to some of our basic questions. This Government have had eight months to answer these

questions. When are people being let out, and what offences have they committed? Those are basic things that we still do not know. Instead, the Government have had to write to thousands of victims, not with answers and information, but with just enough to make each of them worry deeply about what might happen, and about whether their perpetrator will be released early; they did not know whether, or when, that would happen. That has made things much, much worse.

Victim Support, which supports thousands of victims every year, has a number of questions that it thinks it is important for the Minister to respond to, and I would like to ask them now. It wants to know how people who are not eligible for the victim contact scheme, or who have chosen not to sign up to it, will be able to access information. Those people will hear these stories and read these things in the press, and will see them discussed in the Commons. Who can they approach to find out the answers to their questions? Do the Government know what proportion of victims have been reached and informed about possible changes to their case? Are the victim contact schemes set up to be contacted? How many people are raising this issue with them? What questions are the schemes being asked? What themes are emerging? What extra support are the Government offering victims, to help them back into support services to which they lost entitlement because of the length of time that has elapsed since the offences?

The Government have not been honest with the public about this policy from the very beginning, or with MPs—not just once, on a minor point of detail, but on the three promises that mattered most to every victim who received one of these letters. The first promise was on what the Government described, and still describe, as an “earned progression model”. That framing was designed to reassure. If release must be earned through demonstrated rehabilitation, surely the truly dangerous cannot simply walk out. That is what the public were told, but that is not what the Sentencing Act ensures. Members do not need to take my word for it; the Library briefing note on the Bill said in black and white that release under these provisions is automatic, unless the prisoner actively disqualifies themselves through serious misbehaviour in custody. That is not earned release in any way, shape or form. It is automatic release, which is a fundamentally different proposition. Ministers knew that, and they knew the difference when they chose that language. I said that in Committee on the Floor of the House and on consideration of Lords amendments in January. The Government had every opportunity to correct that, and they have chosen not to.

The second promise was that the most serious offenders would not be included in the scheme. The Lord Chancellor said that, and the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards), repeated it throughout the passage of the Act. I asked him directly, in Committee, whether Labour MPs voting against our amendment to exclude certain offenders would be able to say to the survivors of child sex abuse that they had supported a Government who wanted to classify thousands of child sex offences as being not among the most serious offences. There was no satisfactory answer from the Minister. The Minister has failed repeatedly, during the urgent question and during the debate today, to explain how it is possible for a Government to say

that their release scheme excludes the most serious offenders, while including in it people guilty of offences such as rape, the rape of children and child grooming. That is for them to justify.

To make matters worse, the Government have now changed the wording they use, months after passing the Act. They now say that only “the most dangerous offenders” are out of the scheme. That is hardly any more of a justification. Do we really think that these offenders are not also dangerous? It is another example of this Government’s manipulation on this issue. That wording relates to the true exclusions—of those on extended determinate sentences, which are for perpetrators whom the judge feels are particularly dangerous. I told the Government during the Act’s passage that that did not exclude serious offenders, and they did not listen. Now they are using the right wording, so they are technically closer to being correct, but they are still deeply wrong in every way that matters.

The third promise, or the third way in which the Government rammed these changes through the House, was to pretend that the measures were a short-term fix to a short-term prison capacity crisis. They are not. There is no sunset clause in the Sentencing Act. This is not emergency legislation; it is a permanent change to the law. When the Act was passed, it did not set an end date. It does not state, “Once 14,000 new prison places are built, these provisions will lapse.” It is a permanent and profound change to our sentencing laws that will be in place regardless of how many prison places are available. Victims, MPs and the public deserve to know that.

The Government made three promises—three fundamental misrepresentations of what they were doing and the implications of the Act. Those are three questions that the Government did not have an answer for when the Act passed, and still do not have answers for now. We are just weeks away from the start of the releases in September, and we still do not know how many criminals are being released and what offences they have committed.

I have been asking the Government about this for months. My freedom of information requests in March and April 2026 were refused, and my oral questions in March and May were deflected. I tabled a named-day question after the commencement order was laid in June. The deadline was missed; it was only with the intervention of Mr Speaker that we got a response, but it was not an answer. It did not give us the figures.

Sir Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend had a very important UQ here in the Chamber, and Mr Speaker himself asked that Ministers respond to Members of Parliament when they make requests for information about their constituencies. I followed Mr Speaker’s guidance and tabled those questions to the Minister as named-day questions. None of those has been answered, and it has been quite a number of days since the named day passed. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister should address these points and answer these questions as quickly as possible?

Dr Mullan: Mr Speaker could not have been clearer about the reasonable expectations of Members of this House in relation to the early release of serious sexual offenders and others into their constituencies.

What did the Minister, the hon. Member for Rother Valley, say during the UQ? He said that the numbers were in the impact assessment. He repeated that twice, and he was absolutely wrong. I have read the impact assessment. Every Member who has read it will confirm that it does not contain the breakdown of offenders and their crimes that we asked for. What it contains is a description of a qualitative process of internal discussion between departmental officials to arrive at a broad estimate of the effect on the overall prison population. There is no table showing how many rapists or child groomers are going to be released. We know that is not just an omission because the Prisons Minister himself, Lord Timpson, said on “Channel 4 News” last week:

“It is impossible for us to say who will be released, where and when.”

“Impossible”—his word, not ours. He was asked again and again, but could not answer. The Minister at the Dispatch Box told Parliament that the numbers were available to us all. The Prisons Minister told Channel 4 that it was not possible to provide the numbers. Only one of them is right. What is the truth? I think that they actually do not know. I think the Ministry of Justice did not model the eligible cohort by offence type before passing the legislation. It pulled a lever of this magnitude, affecting potentially thousands of the most serious offenders in our prisons and their victims, and it did not even know what sort of vile criminals it would be letting out of prison early. That is a disgrace.

Robbie Moore: We are in this ridiculous scenario where after a huge, long fight, we now have an independent inquiry focusing on Bradford and Keighley for the national grooming gangs inquiry, yet as that process starts, perpetrators who undertook some of those most heinous crimes are being released early. There is therefore a risk that those victims and survivors across the Bradford district will be less willing to come forward and give evidence and contribute to the inquiry. Does that not concern my hon. Friend?

Dr Mullan: I can tell my hon. Friend that it is not just a risk; it is a reality. A number of the victims we met earlier said that they were speaking to people who wanted to come forward, and to speak and contribute to the inquiry, but they saw what was happening to those who had spoken up and who had an offender sent to prison, and who now see that the offender will be released even earlier. They ask, “Why would I risk these people being let out even earlier than they otherwise would have been?”

Sir Julian Lewis: By coincidence, last night, BBC Three rebroadcast the three-part series about the online predator Alexander McCartney, who was caught when a victim reported him. It turned out that he had groomed 3,500 victims online around the world. In one case in America, he caused a 12-year-old girl to shoot herself dead; he knew that she was threatening to do that. The programme ended with the chilling statistic that out of 3,500 victims, only four had actually reported him to the authorities. It was one of those reports that led to the end of this terrible campaign. Back in 2024, the programme revealed that he had been sentenced to life imprisonment, with a minimum term of 20 years. What

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

do the people who saw that series think about the fact that it now appears that he might be out in a fraction of that time?

Dr Mullan: The only comfort I can give is that there are some exclusions to the early release scheme. If someone is on a life sentence as a minimum term, or on an extended determinate sentence, release does not happen earlier; but we know that more than 90% of the offenders sent to prison every year for child grooming are on a standard determinate sentence and will be eligible for early release.

The Government have quite rightly highlighted the challenges around conviction rates, and I accept the criticisms that the Government have made about the reduction in conviction rates—it is an incredibly important issue—but people do not go to court for the sake of it. It is not done just for the hell of it. They go to court and want a conviction so that a sentence is passed that is an appropriate punishment. The Government take away people's motivation to speak up when they undermine the outcome.

Let me be specific about what an assurance that serious offenders would be excluded from the scheme would actually mean in practice to a victim. We talked earlier about Fiona Goddard, a survivor of rape, sexual assault and child grooming, whose abusers were sentenced to between 16 and 20 years in 2019. I again pay tribute to her courage. Fiona received a letter from His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, telling her that people who abused her may be released early. She talked to the press and went to the media, and a journalist raised her case with the Ministry of Justice. The Ministry of Justice said officially, in a quote that was read out on "Good Morning Britain" when Fiona appeared on it, that the most serious offenders would be excluded. It said that to a journalist, in writing, and it was broadcast to the nation, with this victim listening in. It was saying that Fiona's abusers had not committed offences serious enough to allow her to be protected, and would not be excluded from the scheme.

Survivors were in the Gallery today because letters landed through their doors telling them exactly the same thing. When the Minister says that serious offenders are excluded, they are saying, to every single victim who receives one of those letters, "Those are not serious offences. They are not heinous crimes. They are included in the scheme." That is absolutely appalling, and thousands of people have received those letters.

I say to every Labour Member that this is not a partisan observation. During the urgent question, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips) said there should be more exemptions and that Members should work together on this, and the hon. Members for Liverpool Wavertree (Paula Barker) and for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) have contributed to this debate. Let us be clear: there are hundreds of Labour MPs, and not a single one of them has come to the Chamber today to defend the Government's policy and position. That is absolutely extraordinary and tells us what we need to know. It seems that the Government just want to keep their fingers in their ears and pretend this is not happening.

I want to be clear about what has actually happened under this Government. At the same time as this Labour Government have released over 60,000 criminals early, prison capacity has fallen on their watch, so we have roughly 500 fewer prison places under a Government who seek continually to attack our record on prison building. I accept the criticism—we should have built more prison places—but in their time in office, the figure has gone down. As with so many issues, from police numbers to teacher numbers, things have got worse under this Government.

We have more than 10,000 foreign national offenders in our prisons right now, representing around 12% of the prison population and costing hundreds of millions of pounds a year. The Government could have moved faster on deportation and freed up those places. As I said, I am clear about our failings in government, and I am happy to say it again: we did build more than 14,000 prison places, but we closed too many prisons that were not fit for purpose, and that has created challenges in the system. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and I have said, and as Members on both sides of the House have said for a long time, the failings in the prioritisation of our justice system go back many decades, over many political parties.

I say this not to make a political point but to demonstrate that these are long-term issues. When Labour was last in office, it introduced the existing automatic halfway release for all offenders. Despite that, prison capacity was so tight that Labour released 80,000 prisoners early. When Labour was last in office, it made use of early release schemes because it failed to build enough prison places to keep people in prison.

Sir John Hayes: The concept of parole is age-old, but parole was based on merit; people were considered for parole if they were felt to be worthy of it. This is entirely different—this is about an automatic process, regardless of merit, and it flies in the face of both popular sentiment and natural justice.

Dr Mullan: As I said, we inherited the existing system of automatic release. During our time in office, we sought to raise the time served before automatic release to two thirds for some of the more serious offences.

I recognise that there are challenges in the prison population, and I am raising Labour's record to make it clear that these have been challenges for multiple decades over multiple parties, including the Lib Dems when we were in coalition. That is why we have gone as far as we can with our motion to enable the Government to achieve the absolute minimum that we could ask. I do not want any serious offenders let out of prison before they have served their time. Again and again in the meeting with victims earlier, they told us how appalling it is to hear a sentence in the court, knowing that in the vast majority of cases, prisoners will never, ever serve it. I wish that people could serve even longer sentences than the ones we currently give out, but we all know we are not in a position to make those promises.

Our amendment to the Sentencing Bill was broad and sought to ensure that any serious or violent criminals—for example, people who kill by dangerous driving, people who commit manslaughter or people who commit child neglect and cruelty—were excluded from these

early release schemes. The Government insisted that that is not possible, and Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs defeated us on that amendment. We are not even asking for that today. Our motion purely calls on the Government to exempt those convicted of sexual offences against an adult or a child—that is all we are asking for today.

The challenge for the Government is this. They say it is absolutely necessary to keep particular people in prison, but they do not even know how many of these people they will be letting out. For example, if they do not know that 500 rapists are going to be released, they cannot tell us, “Sorry, but we really need those 500 extra places—we don’t have the capacity” because they did not know that when they passed the legislation.

The incoming Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), is reportedly exploring how to tighten the scheme for child sex offenders, and we welcome that, but I want the House to understand the timeline, because it is closing. The commencement order was laid on 8 June without a ministerial statement, a “Dear Colleague” letter or a response to any of the questions raised by the shadow Justice team. We do not know the details, but we understand from reporting that the first 700 offenders will be released on 2 September, and then a similar number will be released each month for the following nine months. We understand that the total number could be between 5,000 and 7,000 offenders, but we do not know because the Government will not tell us.

The House rises for the summer recess at the end of next week and any new Prime Minister will be in Downing Street shortly after that. When Parliament reassembles in September, the first criminals will be about to be released. In fact, the first Prime Minister’s questions that the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) will take will be on the day those offenders start getting out of prison. The Government, the Lord Chancellor and Ministers have had every opportunity to act differently. They could have excluded serious offenders, made a statement when the commencement order was laid and answered our questions and our freedom of information requests, but at every turn they chose not to do so.

I say with all sincerity that we know that Members on all sides of the House agree that a single sex offender released earlier than their sentence demands is one too many. There are Labour Members in the Chamber who we know agree with that. Indeed, 40 of them abstained when we originally divided on the legislation—they did not go into the Lobby and say that they believed that it was right to let rapists and child sex offenders out early. They all had doubts and some of them have spoken in today’s debate because of those doubts.

We have now descended into farce. We have been told that the Government will not oppose today’s motion and we expect it to go through, but the Minister made it clear that as far as he is concerned, that does not matter one jot and things will carry on as normal. Parliament is expressing its will today and there is an expectation that the Government should respond to Parliament’s will, but the Minister has already made clear his intention not to give a monkey’s. A vote in favour of today’s motion is to say that Parliament believes that rapists and child sex offenders should not be released early, and that victims deserve better after eight months of evasion

and a commencement order laid without a word of notice to Parliament. A vote in favour of the motion would send a clear message that this House has come together to support victims.

To finish, I return to the victims I met earlier. It was a privilege to meet them. They asked us, MPs from different parties, whether what they are doing—coming here today, giving up their privacy, reliving their trauma and fighting for a conviction in the first place—was worth it? I told them that it was worth it and that it made a difference because the Government will not oppose the motion, so they have won and they have got the motion over the line. We are going to ensure that that is the case, whatever the failings of my party or the Labour party on the issues of justice, going back over many decades.

When I was frustrated earlier by the Minister’s failure and inability to answer basic questions yet again, the Minister told me to calm down. Well, I will not calm down. Whatever our failings and the Labour party’s failings during its previous time in office, victims of rape and child sexual abuse do not deserve to pay the price of political failure over many decades. We will carry on ensuring that this Government are held to account and MPs do not let down and betray the victims of some of the worst possible offences in our justice system because of misleading efforts by the Government to pull the wool over their eyes. The wool has not been pulled over the eyes of MPs from all sides of the House. It is time that the Government came clean about what they are doing and listened to the House, because this House says, “No, we do not want those people released”. The House will vote and tell the Government that, and it is incumbent on the Government and the incoming Prime Minister to listen.

6.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Catherine Atkinson): I am grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. As Minister for Victims and Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls, I pay tribute to the victims and survivors of the grooming gangs scandal who have so bravely spoken about their ordeal, some of whom were in the Public Gallery today. Women and girls were systematically raped, exploited and abused, often over many months, and in some cases over years.

We have heard Members raise some horrific cases and we have heard some powerful testimony. The authorities that should have protected them and pursued justice on their behalf failed in those duties. Through Baroness Anne Longfield’s independent inquiry into grooming gangs, we must now get to the truth of what happened, because for far, far too long we saw a failure to act. I welcome the call of the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for the implementation of recommendations that we have seen over many inquiries and investigations, including in the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, which conducted a two-year investigation into child sexual exploitation by organised networks. That report was nearly 200 pages long, and I read it. I pay tribute to the victims who gave evidence to that inquiry and to so many other investigations.

As Baroness Longfield has made clear, there have already been more than 800 recommendations by previous inquiries, investigations and reviews. I spent seven years

[Catherine Atkinson]

doing public inquiry work. It is absolutely essential that we listen when recommendations are made, and that is what this Government are doing. We have already been taking action to implement recommendations, and we accepted all the recommendations of Baroness Casey.

Under this Government, prosecutions and convictions for child sexual abuse are at their highest levels. The Government have made grooming an aggravating factor so that the impact of these crimes is recognised in sentencing, but we must ensure that there is always enough space in prisons. It does not keep a single victim safe if we have nowhere to lock up offenders.

Dr Mullan: I have a really easy question. The Minister is talking about grooming gang perpetrators and the like. How many of them will be released as a result of this policy? How many spaces are they taking up that you need to free up?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I know that this is a very sensitive debate, but we do not use “you” and “yours”.

Catherine Atkinson: There is no specific offence on grooming gangs. This Government have been absolutely clear that we will ensure there will always be prison cells for people when they are convicted and sentenced to custody. The Conservative Governments committed to delivering 20,000 additional prison places by the mid-2020s.

Paula Barker: The Minister has stated from the Dispatch Box that victims have been failed, and I absolutely concur with that statement. She has also mentioned that there are record numbers of convictions. Does she agree that if we release these abhorrent individuals, who have committed the most heinous crimes against women and girls in our society, we will see those numbers fall again, because victims will not come forward? Are the victims not being failed again if we release these perpetrators? I implore her to listen to the debate and come forward with emergency legislation or, as the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) has said, with a written statement tomorrow.

Catherine Atkinson: I have listened very carefully to this debate. I will always listen to victims, but I want to ensure that I can look them in the eyes and know that when offenders are convicted and sentenced to custody, there are prison cells for them. That is where we were left by the last Government in real difficulty.

Jess Brown-Fuller: I seek clarification. The Minister said that the Government have added grooming as an aggravating factor. Will every person sentenced to an offence related to grooming gang scandals now get an extended determinate sentence because the aggravating factor will be added, or will they still be eligible for standard determinate sentences?

Catherine Atkinson: It adds to the seriousness of the offence—it is considered an aggravating feature when it comes to sentencing. Obviously, sentences are determined by judges, as is absolutely right, to ensure that we maintain the rule of law. However, grooming is an

aggravating aspect, as opposed to binding the final sentence that a judge gives. There will always be mitigating and aggravating considerations for the judge, and grooming has been made a clear aggravating feature. However, I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this point if she would find that useful.

The Conservatives added just 482 prison places during their time in office, or 34 per year. If they had not closed 23 prisons, such as HMP Holloway, we would not be where we are now—if that prison had not been sold off to build flats, we would have more capacity. In comparison, the previous Labour Government added 27,830 places to prison capacity, and this Labour Government are embarking on the largest prison-building programme since the Victorian era. We have already delivered over 3,000 places.

Jess Brown-Fuller: I do not expect the Minister to know the answer to this question, but I would appreciate it if after the debate she could update the House on what progress has been made on HMP Dartmoor. It was closed in 2024, and it has been suggested that it will be closed for three years. That could open up capacity of an additional 400 spaces without needing to build a new prison.

Catherine Atkinson: I will ensure that the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards), writes to the hon. Lady.

Steve Barclay: Will the Minister give way?

Catherine Atkinson: I am going to make some progress. Conservative Members have talked many times in this debate about how we got here, but they have not been honest about how we got here.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Catherine Atkinson: I am going to make some progress. I did work experience with the police as a teenager, back when this country had a Labour Government who were recruiting thousands of additional police officers.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. It is clear that the Minister is not giving way just now; she may choose to do so in a moment.

Catherine Atkinson: I trained to be a barrister and spent my first years in practice at a time when victims waited months for their court trials, rather than years. At that time, the previous Labour Government were delivering the prison places we needed, but I then watched from inside the profession as 14 years of Conservative-led Governments dismantled it, bit by bit and piece by piece. Cases were delayed for years, courts were shuttered, and offenders were released with nowhere safe for probation to send them. That is not a coincidence; it is a choice, repeated by successive Governments for 14 years.

Dr Mullan: Will the Minister give way?

Catherine Atkinson: I am going to continue to make some progress, but I will give way shortly.

Dr Mullan: Will she give way on that point?

Catherine Atkinson: I want to finish the point, because it is essential that we know where we started, which was with the cutting of 20,000 police officers from our streets. It took a decade to claw back what austerity destroyed in a few years. Conservative-led Governments closed 295 courts and tribunals, including 162 magistrates courts—half the entire magistrates estate—and part-privatised probation in a reckless experiment that every serious review called “irredeemably flawed”. It cost the taxpayer hundreds of millions of pounds to unwind that and bring probation back into public hands. That is on top of the 23 prisons they closed. That is the record, and it is the Conservatives’ record, not ours.

When Conservative Members ask why we have had to act, I ask them to reflect on what 14 years of neglect actually built: a prison system running at 99% capacity. At one point, it was fewer than 100 places from total collapse. Let us be honest about what that would have meant. If prisons run out of space, courts cannot sentence anyone to custody. If courts cannot sentence anyone to custody, they cannot function. If the system cannot function, police officers have nowhere to take the people they arrest. It is not hyperbole; it means the total breakdown of law and order, which is not in any victim’s interest, however serious their case.

Dr Mullan: I have tried to have a fair hand with the victims who attended Parliament today. I invited every Member to meet them, and I facilitated meetings with Labour and Liberal Democrat Members. So what I say now is universal. One of the aspects of last week’s urgent question that infuriated those victims was the Minister talking about our record. They said to us at the meeting that they had voted Labour in the past—that, indeed, they had voted for various different parties in the past—and they recognised that a lot of issues were involved, but they did not want to see again and again, having come to Parliament to ask about what would happen to them, a Minister getting up and attacking us. So I say to this Minister, “Do not fall into the same trap.”

Catherine Atkinson: No one in the Government takes decisions about release from custody lightly. These decisions affect public confidence, victims, communities, and those responsible for managing offenders in the community. That is why, at every stage, our overriding priority has been clear: protecting the public, while ensuring that the criminal justice system remains able to function effectively.

However, I also want to make it absolutely clear that release does not mean freedom. We are delivering tougher punishment outside prison. We are ramping up tagging to monitor offenders in the community to record levels, with thousands more subject to 24/7 tracking, curfews, strict licence conditions and exclusion zones, and with offenders sent straight back to prison if they break the rules. These offenders do not walk out of prison gates and disappear; where they can go, who they can see and what they can do is tightly controlled, and many remain under intensive supervision and monitoring right up until the end of their sentences. We are increasing

probation and community punishment funding by up to £700 million, and we have recruited 1,300 additional probation officers this year. Let me contrast that with what was done by the Conservatives—not only their part-privatisation of probation, but the way in which they treated it.

Sir Gavin Williamson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Could you advise me on whether the Minister, in summing up the debate, is meant to touch on the motion at hand? It seems to be being largely ignored at present.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The right hon. Member, who has been here longer than I have, fully understands that I am not responsible for the content of the Minister’s speech. The Minister may comment, if she so wishes.

Catherine Atkinson: What I wish to do is pay tribute to the work of our prison and probation officers, many of whom do some of the hardest jobs in public life.

The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) spoke about the need to speed up criminal justice, about the number of people on remand and about the need to reduce reoffending, which is what this Government are doing. He also spoke about foreign national offenders, and this Government are deporting such offenders in greater numbers than ever before.

The hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) criticised the time taken to lift the cap on sitting days, although it was the Conservatives who capped sitting days in the first place. The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) repeated the famous quote that justice delayed is justice denied. That is absolutely true, and this Government are taking action on it.

Robbie Moore: Will the Minister give way?

Catherine Atkinson: I will not give way.

A number of hon. Members have spoken passionately about victims, and rightly so. We understand that these issues will be difficult and upsetting for many victims and their families, and victims must remain at the heart of our justice system. The Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), talked about wanting never to see releases earlier than would be expected, but we have seen emergency release after emergency release for years, and we are taking action to stop that happening going forward. We saw 10,000 early releases under the Conservatives, and it is right that we communicate openly with victims who have opted into the victim contact scheme. That is why victims who are engaged in the scheme continue to receive information about an offender’s release and have the opportunity, quite rightly, to make representations about licence conditions.

Robbie Moore: Will the Minister give way?

Catherine Atkinson: I will not.

Licence conditions include exclusion zones and a non-contact requirement where appropriate. All victims will also have a clear route to request the information

[Catherine Atkinson]

that they need to plan for an offender's release through the new dedicated helpline. We need to contrast that with the chaotic approach that we saw under the Conservative party. Victims were told only days before their offenders were let out, and in some cases they were not told at all. No Government want to make these choices, but we are transparent, supporting victims and ensuring that they are properly informed throughout the process.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put.

The House divided: Ayes 115, Noes 0.

Division No. 50]

[6.41 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	French, Mr Louie
Andrew, rh Stuart	Garnier, Mark
Argar, rh Edward	Glen, rh John
Atkins, rh Victoria	Grant, Helen
Bacon, Gareth	Griffiths, Alison
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi	Harris, Rebecca
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Hayes, rh Sir John
Barclay, rh Steve	Hinds, rh Damian
Barker, Paula	Hoare, Simon
Beavers, Lorraine	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Bedford, Mr Peter	Hollinrake, Kevin
Begum, Apsana	Holmes, Paul
Bhatti, Saqib	Huddleston, Nigel
Blackman, Bob	Hudson, Dr Neil
Bool, Sarah	Hussain, Mr Adnan
Bowie, Andrew	Hussain, Imran
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Brandreth, Aphra	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Burghart, Alex	Johnson, Kim
Burgon, Richard	Jopp, Lincoln
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Lake, Ben
Cartlidge, James	Lam, Katie
Chowns, Dr Ellie	Lamont, John
Cleverly, rh Sir James	Leishman, Brian
Cocking, Lewis	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Cooper, John	Lockhart, Carla
Costa, Alberto	Lopez, Julia
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Lumsden, Douglas
Cross, Harriet	Malthouse, rh Kit
Davies, Ann	Mayhew, Jerome
Davies, Gareth	McVey, rh Esther
Davies, Mims	Medi, Llinos (<i>Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake</i>)
Dewhurst, Charlie	Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	Moore, Robbie
Duffield, Rosie	Morton, rh Wendy
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Duncan-Jordan, Neil	Mundell, rh David
Easton, Alex	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Fortune, Peter	Norman, rh Jesse
Fox, Sir Ashley	O'Brien, Neil
Foy, Mary Kelly	Patel, rh Priti
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Paul, Rebecca
Freeman, George (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)	Philp, rh Chris

Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)

Ramsay, Adrian
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Hannah
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
Trickett, Jon
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Whately, Helen
Whittome, Nadia
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wood, Mike

Tellers for the Ayes:
Rebecca Smith and
James Wild

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:
Sir Christopher Chope and

Sir Edward Leigh

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to exempt from automatic early release under the provisions of the Sentencing Act 2026 any offender who has been convicted of a sexual offence against an adult or a child, including rape and grooming, or convicted of the attempt, conspiracy, or incitement to commit such offences; further calls on the Government to bring forward legislation to enact this change immediately; and regrets that the Conservative amendment to the Sentencing Act 2026 that would have secured these exemptions was not agreed to.

Nick Timothy: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your advice. I listened very carefully to the Ministers who opened and closed the debate, and the position appears to be that while the Government Whips feel that this is a proposition that cannot be defended, the Ministers at the Ministry of Justice think that it must be defended. In fact, the Ministers in effect said that, regardless of the result of this vote and regardless of the will of the House being expressed, the policy will continue. Could you advise me on whether this contempt for the will of the House is in keeping with the business and the rules of this place, as well as the ministerial code?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The hon. Member has most definitely put his point on the record, but it is not a matter for the Chair. The Table Office can advise him further. No doubt those on the Treasury Bench will also have taken note.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Electricity Capacity (Amendment and Transitional Provision) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 14 May, be approved.—(*Claire Hughes.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Speed Limits in Torwood Village

6.58 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): I present this petition on behalf of my constituents in Torwood village, who are incredibly concerned about excessive speeding, which is negatively impacting their quality of life through increased noise pollution and which also poses a serious danger to their and road users' safety. I note that the petition I present today builds on a similar petition that 75 local people have signed, showing the strength of feeling about this issue in Torwood.

The petition requests

"that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Falkirk Council to introduce a reduction in speed limit to 20 or 30 miles per hour in Torwood Village to enhance the safety and wellbeing of the village community."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Alloa and Grangemouth,

Declares that the village community of Torwood has seen a significant rise in traffic, including heavy freight, since Forth Valley Hospital and a new slip road from the nearby M876 were opened; further declares that this poses a risk to residents' safety as they attempt to cross busy roads, for example to access public transport, or use their own cars; and further declares that the noise pollution from the increased vehicle traffic is disturbing local residents during the day and night and reducing comfort in living in the area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Falkirk Council to introduce a reduction in speed limit to 20 or 30 miles per hour in Torwood Village to enhance the safety and wellbeing of the village community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003214]

Local Government Reorganisation in Staffordshire

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I rise to present a petition that represents not just the names on the petition but the many thousands who have signed the petition, complaining and protesting against the proposal by the Government to force Staffordshire Moorlands into local government reorganisation. The people of Staffordshire Moorlands say no to Stoke, which they have said in their many thousands on the internet in online petitions. The petitioners request

"that the House of Commons urges the Government not to proceed with any plan to include Staffordshire Moorlands in a new combined or unitary authority or regional devolution deal without the clear consent of local people in Staffordshire Moorlands."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Staffordshire Moorlands,

Declares that the Government has consulted on a proposal to create a new unitary council across north Staffordshire, encompassing Staffordshire Moorlands, Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme; further declares that this is

despite continued fears of bankruptcy in Stoke-on-Trent, with the Government having to intervene in February 2024 with a £42.2 million bailout package; and further declares that a merger could leave Moorlands residents on the hook for future costs, and that it would place the unique identity and heritage of Moorlands towns and villages at risk.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government not to proceed with any plan to include Staffordshire Moorlands in a new combined or unitary authority or regional devolution deal without the clear consent of local people in Staffordshire Moorlands. And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003215]

Water Supply Resilience in Tunbridge Wells

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I rise to present this petition regarding water supply resilience in Tunbridge Wells. This is further to a local petition on the same matter started by the fantastic students at St John's primary school, which has gathered 610 signatures—children's signatures—and has since been shared with 15 other local primary schools.

Tunbridge Wells recently experienced two severe water outages due to failures in South East Water's network. The outages caused significant hardship and forced 23 schools to close over many days, which deprived children of valuable learning time.

The petitioners request

"that the House of Commons urges the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to require South East Water to improve the resilience of its network in Tunbridge Wells, so that families and pupils do not again face a prolonged period without access to clean running water."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Tunbridge Wells in Kent,

Declares that a local petition by pupils of sixteen primary schools calling on the Government to require South East Water to improve their water network in Tunbridge Wells has generated a lot of interest; notes that Tunbridge Wells recently experienced two severe water outages as a result of failures in South East Water's network; further declares that these outages caused significant hardship and that 23 schools were forced to close, depriving children of valuable learning time; and further declares that access to clean running water is a basic necessity, and that South East Water must take urgent action to improve the resilience of its network to prevent such failures from recurring.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to require South East Water to improve the resilience of its network in Tunbridge Wells, so that families and pupils do not again face prolonged periods without access to clean running water.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003216]

Longridge Community Hospital

Maya Ellis (Ribbles Valley) (Lab): I am proud to present this petition on behalf of residents in Longridge in my constituency of Ribbles Valley regarding the future of Longridge community hospital, which serves patients

[Maya Ellis]

across a large semi-rural area, many of whom need health services within easy reach of their homes and families.

The petitioners, and those who signed two similar petitions—combined they have over 3,000 signatures—are calling on Lancashire and South Cumbria integrated care board to improve the consistency of its communications and protect the long-term provision of services at Longridge community hospital.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to direct NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care Board to commit to a full reopening of the hospital to provide health services to benefit the community, and to promptly address fire safety concerns, providing a timeline to reassure residents of when to expect a resolution to their concerns.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Ribble Valley,

Declares that Longridge Community Hospital serves patients in a wide geographical rural and semi-rural area, many of whom need health services within easy reach of their homes, but its inpatient services were temporarily closed in November 2025, with beds relocated to Chorley Hospital in December; and further declares that this temporary relocation has placed strain on many residents and left people fearful of the future of health services in the Longridge area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to direct NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria Integrated Care Board to commit to a full reopening of the hospital to provide health services to benefit the community, and to promptly address fire safety concerns, providing a timeline to reassure residents of when to expect a resolution to their concerns.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003217]

Independent Schools: Regulation of Proprietors

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Claire Hughes.)

7.3 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to draw the House’s attention to a hugely concerning issue that has recently unfolded in my constituency: the sudden closure of Durham high school.

The lack of communication and clarity from its owners, Galaxy Global Education, up until the very final moments of the school year left staff and families heartbroken and in shock. Founded in 1884, the local institution spent 142 years providing an outstanding educational environment rooted in our local community. Indeed, in 2024 it was named independent secondary school of the year for the north-east by *The Sunday Times*.

In early 2026, the school was still issuing marketing material and advertising pupil enrolment opportunities. Pupil enrolment was still being offered as recently as the beginning of June. Parents had parted with significant sums of money to secure places at the school, yet only a few weeks later what seemed to be an assured future in new hands has fallen apart. Members may ask what went wrong.

In 2024, the school was acquired by GGE as part of its proposed expansion into the UK independent school sector. The stated mission of the company was to operate independent schools and promote international education opportunities. As Durham high school has found out to its cost, however, the reality has been different.

Following the acquisition of the school, which formerly operated as Durham high school for girls, the parent company incorporated a new UK company, Durham Education Ltd, to run the school under the umbrella of GGE. At a meeting on 27 June 2025 designed to allow parents to understand more about GGE, attendees were told that there would be investment in the school for at least five years to help make it financially viable. One of the parent company’s first acts was to mandate a shift to co-education from September 2025, claiming that it would increase the student roll and secure the school’s future. That was resisted by some families as there was no consultation, and GGE actively silenced parent feedback.

The school became Durham high school. But, having demanded that shift, the promised investment to fully install male changing facilities at the school did not materialise. GGE also seemingly blocked the senior leadership team’s efforts to make it work. In one specific instance, the school’s leadership proposed a co-educational integration plan requiring only £3,000 of investment from the parent company, but GGE flatly refused. That starved the school of minimal resources while setting a benchmark designed for failure.

This is not an isolated incident; there is a clear pattern across the country. We saw warning signs when GGE acquired and closed Malvern St James, but in that

case there was at least some notice. Durham and another GGE-owned school in Wales, Ruthin school, have been afforded no such courtesy.

Becky Gittins (Clwyd East) (Lab): As my hon. Friend mentioned, Ruthin school in my constituency is also owned by Galaxy Global Education. As of last week, with the abrupt closure of the school, which is thought to be one of the oldest—if not the oldest—independent schools in the UK, parents were left bewildered, having prepaid for the next term, and staff were left without any employment rights discussions or proper redundancy processes. Most importantly, students were left devastated, not knowing about their future. Does she agree that this is a really important call for more transparency and the ability to hold any such organisations that propose to educate our young people to account?

Mary Kelly Foy: I thank my hon. Friend for the intervention. I completely agree. The way in which the company has acted towards pupils, parents and staff is outrageous. The least it could do is to provide some clarity and support going forward. Later in my speech, I will ask the Minister about some lessons that can be learned.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on securing this debate. She has brought to the attention of the House and the Minister to something that is incredibly important: the takeover of any school with little or no discussions with the staff, the principal, or the board of governors, little or no contact with the parents, and certainly no talk or discussions with those who have input into the school. Does she share my concern—I believe that she will—that when influences from outside this country have bought a school, through whatever the allegedly nefarious process may be, the only way in which that can be stopped is for the Government and our Minister to bring in legislation that ensures that it cannot happen over the heads of local people at a school of historical importance?

Mary Kelly Foy: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. It seems that this overseas company had no intention of educating our children in the UK, and legislation should be strengthened or put in place to stop this happening again.

It is as though GGE saw the fallout of their decision to inform Malvern in advance and attempted to hide from any further scrutiny by giving the other schools zero notice. It is abhorrent. When I contacted GGE's directors to demand answers, they were at pains to point out to me that they have done all they can to support staff and families. They even alluded to the Government's introduction of VAT on independent school fees. That is nonsense. Since the VAT changes were announced, Durham high school's roll only dipped from 288 to 281—a net loss of just seven pupils. The school has a physical capacity for 650 pupils, and a financial break-even point of roughly 350. A senior staff member said in their parting message:

“Whatever you read, this isn't a VAT story. It isn't a falling rolls or unstoppable decline story. The truth is deeper, and more complex, and eventually truth will out.”

It seems clear that there was never any genuine effort by GGE to make this school a success. Speaking to union

representatives at the school, I am told that repeated requests to see even a basic plan for how the company would secure the school's future were rebuffed.

What do we know about GGE? Very little seems to be the answer. It was only incorporated in the UK in April 2025, and I understand that it has not yet been possible to assess its level of available cash, debt levels, profitability or inter-company lending. The structure of the company seems equally opaque, spread across several companies, school-operating companies and overseas interests. One of those beneficial owners ultimately traces back to the Cayman Islands, with no transparency at that point.

What is clear is that one person holds a significant amount of power, and they were the person with overall control of the school until its closure. Shangqin Gao, a Chinese national, holds roughly 75% of GGE's shares. As I understand it, the school has had no contact with this person. The House may note that this individual is also linked to two other businesses: Shine Space Management Ltd and Galaxy Capital Real Estate. The latter was incorporated only two years before the purchase of Durham high school.

All this background leads us to the crux of the situation: more than 280 children have been left stranded without a school, staff have been left without jobs and young women who sat their public exams this summer may not even be able to collect their results in the school where they studied. Local suppliers have been left facing significant losses due to unpaid invoices. Crucially, children with additional needs who thrived in this intimate environment have been thrown into limbo. They must now search for alternative specialist provision potentially miles away from home, or face being absorbed into mainstream settings.

Our local secondary state schools that provide top-class education and often win prestigious awards—such as St Leonard's, Durham Johnston and Belmont—are all just about full. There is not enough capacity to easily absorb these pupils. As well as throwing these families into crisis, GGE has also heaped pressure on the local authority. Will the Minister liaise with Durham county council to ensure that the admissions team is appropriately supported?

The conduct of GGE in the final days, weeks and months of the school's operation reveals the true nature of this business.

As the company ran down the school, the financial team carefully managed the remaining funds to ensure they could pay staff salaries for June, despite GGE blocking the school from paying suppliers. Yet days before payroll was due, an unexpected invoice was received from GGE that would have wiped out those payments entirely, and GGE required the massive bill to be paid that same day. Thankfully, the school business manager prioritised the livelihoods of the hard-working staff, paid the wages and ignored the demand. However, in a final blow to devastated staff, I heard just yesterday that the administrators have informed them they cannot claim unpaid salaries for July and August, despite already carrying out their work for the academic year.

A cynical mind would look at how Durham Education Limited was put into administration and conclude that it benefits a parent company to position itself as a major debtor upon any future sale, especially when the

[Mary Kelly Foy]

ultimate ownership of the land is in doubt. Despite assurances from GGE, the entire debacle bears the hallmarks of a land grab. In Durham, the prime real estate on which Farewell Hall sits is estimated to be worth around £10 million. That brings me to the core question: what can the Government do to stop predatory overseas companies asset-stripping our educational institutions and treating our children's futures as real estate speculation?

Schools such as Durham high served as a safety valve for the local authority's overstretched school place allocations. Despite that, entire families have been thrown to the wolves so that an overseas corporate entity can access prime land on the edge of a historic city centre. Section 128 of the Education and Skills Act 2008 rightly gives the Secretary of State for Education the power to bar unsuitable individuals from managing independent schools. Yet with the opaque structure of the business and the fact GGE has been able to rapidly churn through directors at Companies House, shuffling responsibilities and moving its statutory administrative offices to anonymous London addresses, it seems that oversight on such businesses is patchy. How can we ensure in the future that what has happened in Durham, Malvern and Ruthin does not happen elsewhere?

To be clear, my key asks of the Minister are as follows. Will the Minister help families in Durham, Ruthin and Malvern get clarity on what steps were taken by the Department for Education, Estyn and Ofsted to ensure the suitability of GGE? Will the Minister commit to reviewing the governance structure of all the affected schools? Will she advise me whether an independent investigation could be called into GGE's management of Durham, Malvern and Ruthin to establish exactly what happened? Will she advise me on efforts that the Government, the local authority or the school community can take to preserve the Durham high school site for educational use, rather than allow a historical education asset to disappear? Finally, will the Minister take steps to close corporate loopholes and ensure proper regulation is in place for foreign investors in UK schools? We need robust legal mechanisms within the DFE to prevent foreign capital from severing historical school properties from their educational purposes. We need statutory protections that stop predatory owners transferring freeholds out of educational charities into private, for-profit shell companies.

What happened at Durham high school will not simply go away. My constituents may be down but they are certainly not out, and they are driven by a desire for justice. Though they understand it may be too late for their beloved school, they wish no other family or hard-working member of school staff to have to go through the pain and uncertainty that they have felt.

Last Friday, my team joined families, pupils, staff and trade unionists outside the school gates for a final act of solidarity. The compassion, mutual respect and dignity that was on display is something that GGE would do well to learn from. I am sure that all of us across the House might agree that no matter the nature of the establishment, the education of our children is a public good, not a real estate portfolio. What happened to Durham, Ruthin and Malvern cannot be allowed to happen again.

I will close with the words of Mrs Middleton, the acting head for the school's final weeks, who has been highly commended for the compassion and dedication that she has shown to the entire school community during the most horrendous circumstances:

"On the final day we came together. Of course, there was sadness. There were tears. But there was also laughter, celebration, joy, and a deep sense of knowing one another. The hardest words I have had to say over these past few weeks were: "It's time to go." No one moved. So I left the stage, and Mrs Rochester and I walked the children out. Senior Leaders had planned to stand outside, greet parents and clap the children out. All the staff joined us. And for over an hour we clapped, talked, cried, hugged and clapped again. In that hour there was no complaining. No anger. Just togetherness. A community to the very end."

7.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Olivia Bailey): I sincerely thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for calling this debate, for her excellent speech and for her important advocacy on this crucial topic. I also join her in commending Mrs Middleton for her compassion and leadership; she has painted a powerful image of the staff clapping the pupils out on what must have been a very sad day. I also thank all Members who have contributed on this important topic this evening.

The subject of this debate, as I know through my colleague's recent ministerial correspondence and her speech this evening, has rightly drawn much attention. I am incredibly sorry to hear of the closure of Durham high school, which is clearly a much-loved local school. I am particularly sorry to hear of how suddenly this news was communicated and the significant disruption this will cause to the children's education. When schools are closed in the state sector, we of course make every effort to minimise disruption, and this is something I would expect equally of leaders in the independent sector. It is clearly concerning that that has not happened in this case.

As private businesses, private schools are responsible for ensuring their long-term viability and are free to make their own business decisions. However, while the Government do not play a role in the decision to close a private school, I can assure my hon. Friend that in this case, as with any closure, we are working closely with the local authority to ensure that places are available in local, state-funded schools for any child who requires one. I am happy to keep her up to date with this. I was also shocked to hear about the apparent nature of the behaviour of the owners of the school, including towards senior leaders, families and pupils. That is not the way we would all expect a reasonable and responsible owner to act while managing the closure of a business, especially one that affects children and families.

On my hon. Friend's points on how the owner of Durham high school has acted, I know that she has raised this directly with the Insolvency Service and with colleagues at the Department for Business and Trade. While we understand that the owner is not currently in administration, there are robust protocols that will be followed if an administrator ends up being appointed. This process would include considering the conduct of the company's directors and an assessment of whether further review or investigation was warranted. Where

evidence of misconduct is identified and enforcement action is in the public interest, the Insolvency Service will of course take appropriate action.

On the wider issues my hon. Friend raises in relation to how the owner has conducted business at Durham high school, Ruthin, Malvern and other private schools, I know that this has been raised through the relevant channels at the Department for Business and Trade. On all cases where there is potential malpractice, my colleagues at the DBT will take the necessary action. On the topic of our statutory powers in relation to independent schools, the Department has a robust system in place around how proprietors are registered and regulated. The proprietor is the person or persons legally responsible for the running of the school. They are responsible for ensuring that all the independent school standards are met, including in areas such as safeguarding, health and safety, and quality of education. When a new private school wants to register, as 105 did successfully in 2025, they must set out how they will meet the independent school standards, and the Secretary of State carries out a number of safer recruitment checks on the proprietor of any proposed new school. These important, wide-ranging checks include an identity check and an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service check, as well as checks to ensure that the proprietor is not barred from working in regulated activity with children, is not the subject of a prohibition from management order, and has the right to work in the UK.

The Secretary of State has powers to prohibit a person from managing a private school. Any such prohibition prevents a person from being a proprietor of a private school. Any change of proprietor is considered a material change, and therefore the Secretary of State carries out the same suitability checks that I have already set out.

Recognising the importance of the proprietor role, this Government have recently taken powers via the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 to allow the Secretary of State by regulations to create a fit and proper person test for proprietors of private schools. We are currently considering what might fall under this test, so this debate is timely and useful.

Becky Gittins: In the light of what we have heard this evening, does the Minister agree that the case of Galaxy Global Education warrants the Department for Education's considering the recording of information about not only who is running independent schools, but the ownership

of independent schools? Will she meet me and other affected MPs, alongside colleagues in DBT, to ensure that, where there are issues of widespread foreign ownership and business malpractice, we can get together and eradicate them from our independent schools sector?

Olivia Bailey: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her advocacy on this topic both in the Chamber and outside it. I am extremely concerned to hear of the practice that has been described this evening. I am happy to meet with her, my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham and any other affected Members, along with a relevant Minister from the Department for Business and Trade, to talk about those wider issues. I will come shortly to the specific point she makes about recording ownership.

The ownership details of private businesses are available at Companies House. If the school is a charity, as around half of all private schools are, the Charity Commission will hold additional information. On the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd East (Becky Gittins), I have asked officials for advice on ways that we could consider recording the ownership of private schools to understand better who is potentially making any profit or who is taking relevant business decisions. I also reassure my hon. Friends that we keep our registration and regulation regime under continuous review.

I acknowledge the strong views expressed by hon. Members, and again thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham for bringing this issue to the attention of the House. Whenever a school closes, it is a sad and challenging time for both parents and children, and my thoughts are with all the families affected by the closures in my hon. Friends' constituencies.

I assure the House that the safety and quality of education provision for all children in this country is something that I take incredibly seriously whether a child is at a private school or a state school. When it comes to how we register and regulate our private schools, I have taken on board the points raised across the House today and will continue to work to ensure that our system is as robust as it can be, so that all children receive the fantastic education they deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

7.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 7 July 2026

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

UK Aid Policy: Global Funding Trends

9.30 am

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered UK aid policy in the context of global funding trends.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this vital and timely debate. We are effectively about to have a change of Government, which will mean an opportunity for a reset. Usually we come to these debates avid to hear what the Minister has to say, but today we might not reflect on the past so much as look to the future. Of course, I commend the Minister for his efforts. I will not commend him too much, because that might not help him in the weeks ahead as the Government are reformed, but I acknowledge his personal commitment to these issues.

As the Prime Minister moves on, the cuts in official development assistance and the way in which they have been carried out, with nothing seemingly learned from the lessons of the merger of the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, surely cannot be part of his legacy that he will wish to promote. Notably, this Government are presiding over cuts to our overseas aid budget that are deeper and faster than those being implemented in the United States under the Trump Administration. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's resource DEL budget has reduced by nearly 20%, over £1.5 billion, with bilateral programmes accounting for almost half of that and no detail yet available. Indeed, stakeholders are still waiting for the FCDO to publish its bilateral allocations for ODA, which are reportedly being held back until just before the summer recess.

I do not demur from the arguments about hard choices when there are limited resources or, specifically, the need to increase defence spending, but part of that is also about acknowledging that these decisions have consequences, often for the poorest and most vulnerable communities on the planet.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I am the chair of the water, sanitation and hygiene all-party parliamentary group and a big champion of WaterAid's "Time to Deliver" campaign. One million mums and babies lose their lives each year because of a lack of access to water during childbirth. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, in looking at humanitarian and global aid, we should make sure that remains a basic provision and a priority?

David Mundell: I absolutely do. I will come on to the most effective way in which limited resources can be used, and that is clearly one of them.

We need to have honesty in this debate and acknowledge that reductions and changes in funding have consequences. We must have that honest dialogue and move away from the sort of speak that has become commonplace, such as "mainstreaming". Everything now is to be mainstreamed. In my view that means no resources will actually be devoted to it; it will simply be part of some wider general budget. That has specifically been the case in relation to women and girls, which is something we must push back against.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman sits with me on the International Development Committee, so he will know as I do that, to date, the Committee has found that there is still no detail on how "poverty alleviation is prioritised and tracked"

under the new model going from donor to investor. Does he agree that if poverty reduction is to remain a primary focus of ODA, we need to understand better how these things will be tracked?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I commend him for his work on the International Development Committee. I will come on to the Committee's report on the future of development, which highlighted that very issue. The Committee sought to help this Government take forward their stated objectives. I hope the incoming Government will grasp the report's recommendations and move forward in the way the hon. Gentleman outlines.

Although citizens across the world might have been distracted by the Democratic Republic of the Congo almost knocking England out of the world cup, sadly for that team, the situation at home still verges on the catastrophic. It is an example of where unthought-out and unstructured cuts and changes have a devastating impact. We see the spread of Ebola in parts of the DRC, particularly where US funding and structures have been withdrawn. There is no meaningful alternative government structure to provide a health service. That is an absolute example of where funding cuts have a real impact that could spread to the United Kingdom. There was a recent suspected Ebola case in Glasgow, which fortunately did not come to fruition. We need to push back on the idea that Ebola in a remote part of central Africa has nothing to do with us.

We must not be starry-eyed about what happened previously. I was struck by recommendation 7 in the Committee's report and, in a much more favourable climate for international development, by an article in *The Guardian*—I am sure my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) will not tell the Leader of the Opposition that I read an article in *The Guardian*—saying that, in the context of the previous Ebola outbreak, which was successfully tackled, the international response that Sierra Leoneans saw on the ground comprised outsiders setting up compounds, employing local people sometimes to be cooks or drivers, then driving around in white Land Cruisers and not engaging or leaving any positive legacy.

My recent experience of travelling to Malawi is that, while the agencies and others had done a really good job, unfortunately the Malawian Government had not, because they are now totally reliant on those agencies to provide services. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) may recall that,

[David Mundell]

when I was Secretary of State for Scotland and we promoted the Scotland-Malawi partnership, I had to decline to meet the then President of Malawi in his suite at the Dorchester hotel because I felt that was a wholly inappropriate way to discuss how we could give them more aid.

As I said, we cannot be starry-eyed on what happened before. There needs to be change and a focus on how we can most effectively deliver aid and support, but we must have a coherent, long-term plan that accepts budget realities and aligns with the UK's wider interests. If the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) is in search of sound advice, I would point him, as the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) mentioned, to the recommendations and huge body of evidence in the International Development Committee's recent report, "UK Aid and Development Assistance in a Fracturing World".

The report called for greater clarity on the Government's theory of change in relation to poverty alleviation, and it suggested how to prioritise programmes and schemes to achieve the Government's stated policies. It also set out a comprehensive vision, which I hope the new Prime Minister might be willing to adopt. If he were to ask my opinion, which I do not anticipate as I do not have a vote in the Labour leadership contest, although maybe I could—in days past, I think people could pay £3 to get one, so maybe there is still time. But if he were to ask my opinion, I would suggest that investment should shift towards programmes that are undeniably value for money. That is where we can make the most profound difference for each £1 spent, doubling down on effective interventions with the greatest multiplier effect.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): As the right hon. Gentleman knows, nutrition is foundational for development, and the UK has been a trusted global partner on nutrition for many years. In the context of the recent reduction in aid spending, does he agree that supporting and developing innovative new mechanisms such as the Child Nutrition Fund is vital to reversing the trend of hunger, malnutrition and starvation while working in partnership with affected nations?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I can think of no better example than the Child Nutrition Fund to achieve what he has set out and our wider development objectives. Malnutrition is entirely preventable and treatable, yet it remains the underlying cause of nearly half of all deaths among children under five. It stifles economic growth, weakens immune systems, and disproportionately impacts women and children, so the Child Nutrition Fund is a perfect example of what the public expect from ODA funding: it puts food in the stomachs of those in need. With a relatively modest investment from the UK Government, the fund has a unique capacity to leverage philanthropic and private capital while mobilising domestic resources. If we want value for money in a stretched budget, nutrition is where we must double down.

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman has talked about stretched budgets. Does he agree that we also need to address debt, because private debt is a big factor in

preventing some low-income countries from investing in their health and education systems? It should form part of the Government's strategy to leverage more money into debt-distressed, low-income countries.

David Mundell: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I commend him and others for bringing the debt issue back to the debate. Obviously, it was a focal point of debate a number of years ago. It appears to have slid down the agenda, but it remains a vital issue, as he has highlighted.

Another vital issue in reference to the Child Nutrition Fund is public support. We all have to acknowledge the need to rebuild public support for development. I put my hand up to being complacent in that regard, as I think many in the sector were assuming that the support would remain. It is still there, but it is all about the questions that people are asked and the context in which they are asked. That is why, for example, the Child Nutrition Fund commands public support: because people see that an intervention by the UK can have the direct effect of saving children's lives. What detracts from public support is where interventions are less easily explainable or there is an inability to be clear that interventions are not wasteful. It was therefore surprising that the Government were at one point proposing to get rid of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, the body that reviews the effectiveness of ODA. Thanks to the cross-party effort of the International Development Committee and others in Parliament, that decision was reversed, at least in part.

I am the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV, AIDS and sexual health, and in the multilateral/bilateral debate—a debate we need to have—I was very supportive of additional funding for the Global Fund. The fund has done a huge job not only in tackling AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, but in providing the backbone of many countries' health systems. That backbone would not be there were the Global Fund not providing support for other issues. I welcome the Government's £850 million contribution to the fund. That amount is a lot more than was previously touted, although it is less than the £1 billion that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield provided. However, of course, there were smoke and mirrors, as the funding is back-ended and the bulk of it will come at the end of the three-year period. That will have an impact on the Global Fund's capacity to carry out its job, which again has direct consequences.

I commend Bel Trew and *The Independent* for highlighting the impact that cuts have already had in the fight against HIV and AIDS.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): It feels to me that there is scope for the UK and European Union countries to work together more closely to tackle the rising global anti-rights movement. Given the progress in Hungary, it feels like there is an opportunity to start to push back on the age of impunity. Does the right hon. Member agree that we should put human rights—especially sexual and reproductive rights and health—on the agenda of the upcoming European Political Community meeting, which will be held in Dublin in October?

David Mundell: I agree with the principles that the hon. Gentleman has set out; I will come on to that topic now. We need to see UK leadership in co-ordinating a

response to such issues. Because of political decisions taken in the United States, certain groups will be deprived of help and support. We need to have a role in ensuring that there is co-ordination so that the support goes in, whether through country donors, philanthropists or non-governmental organisations. LGBT communities, for example, will not get that support unless we are proactive in ensuring that co-ordination. Although I welcomed the announcement that the Foreign Office still has an LGBT budget, I do not see the issues that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned being proactively tackled at this time, and we need to be at the forefront of that.

I will draw my remarks to a close, as other Members wish to contribute. I was going to touch more on British International Investment—perhaps my International Development Committee colleague, the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law), will do so—but I will make the point that BII has to play a much greater role in alignment with UK Government policy, whatever the policy is. That does not mean that BII should not be independent in making investments, but the position of equivalent bodies in other countries is to be aligned with Government policy. I am not convinced that BII is at the moment, and given the scale of its investment, it needs to be.

I have tried to range over the issues of the moment, and I look forward to the contributions of other Members. As I said at the start, there have been one or two good things in the last couple of years, but I do not think this is a glorious part of the Prime Minister's legacy. I hope that, going forward, we can have that reset.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Clive Efford (in the Chair): I remind Members to stand in their places if they intend to contribute. I intend to call the Front-Bench speeches at 28 minutes past, so that gives you roughly seven to eight minutes each. That is a rough guide; there is no hard limit.

9.50 am

Dr Beccy Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. We meet at a moment when the global aid system is under extraordinary pressure. I thank the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for securing this incredibly important debate.

Current projections suggest that cuts to international aid could contribute to as many as 14 million additional deaths by 2030, including 4.5 million children under the age of five. That is the human cost of dismantling the world aid architecture at speed.

The United Kingdom is not alone in reducing aid spending—the United States, France, Germany and Canada are all scaling back their commitments—but that does not make our choices less significant; it makes them more significant. When every major donor retreats at the same time, there is no one left to step into the gap, and yet the challenges we face today do not stop at national borders. Conflict, climate change, forced displacement, pandemics and antimicrobial resistance affect us all. Investment overseas is increasingly an investment in our own security and prosperity here at home.

Global health provides perhaps the clearest example of why this matters. Viruses do not stop at passport control. The first line of defence against the next pandemic is not at Heathrow or Dover, it is in strong public health systems thousands of miles away. Our national health service and the health security of people across Britain depend on a global health system that works effectively for everyone.

That is why I welcome aspects of the Government's approach. I welcome the decision to provide protection for key multilateral health organisations, and I am proud that the UK has made ambitious commitments to the Global Fund and to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance—institutions with a proven ability to deliver vaccines at scale and to reach communities that fragmented programmes often cannot.

The Government are also right to recognise that countries want autonomy, not dependency, and that our role should be to help to build resilient health systems that countries themselves can sustain and own. That is the right long-term objective.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the hon. Member agree that one of the most cost-effective ways of helping, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, is to allow local people to avail themselves of clean drinking water, which can transform lives?

Dr Cooper: I agree 100%. My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) has already talked about his role in the water, sanitation and hygiene all-party parliamentary group. Access to water is an absolutely essential health determinant.

Partnership and resilience building are incredibly important, but they cannot be the whole answer. A strategy designed to strengthen systems over many years does little for a clinic that is closing next month. Communities facing the loss of essential services are not reassured by a long-term theory of change, much as we love that in the development arena. They are worried about whether medicines will be available, whether healthcare workers will be paid and whether the lights will stay on. Withdrawal is fast, capacity building is slow, and people are falling through that gap.

That is why, to be honest, the decision to withdraw support from the Global Polio Eradication Initiative and the Pandemic Fund is really quite disappointing. The Government's own impact assessment warns that these choices increase the risk of disease outbreaks. We are closer than ever to eradicating polio, a disease that has blighted generations of children, and yet, potentially because of cuts to official development assistance, we are stepping back from that goal. I urge us not to.

I am equally concerned about the dismantling of the Fleming Fund. Antimicrobial resistance may sound a little abstract, but it is not a distant or theoretical threat. Just ask anybody what they think will happen if their antibiotics do not work when they need them. It is one of the most pressing public health challenges that we face. The effectiveness of antibiotics underpins modern medicine and protects countless lives every day. Our NHS depends on those medicines continuing to work. Recent outbreaks of serious infectious diseases remind us just how much rests upon them.

[Dr Beccy Cooper]

As we have just been reminded, health does not exist in isolation. Clean water, good nutrition and quality education are health interventions by another name. For example, children whose mothers have received a secondary education are far more likely to be fully vaccinated. Although I welcome the prioritisation of healthcare spending, we cannot ignore the reality that in practice many of the programmes being cut are health programmes, too.

Nowhere is that more evident than in Africa. The continent bears about a quarter of the world's disease burden while possessing only 3% of the global health workforce, yet bilateral aid to Africa is facing a 56% reduction—the steepest regional cut across the entire ODA budget. Multilateral institutions will of course continue to play an essential role, but we should not be so naive as to believe that they can absorb cuts of that scale without consequences.

The consequences are already becoming clear. In Malawi, an estimated 250,000 adolescents could lose access to family planning services each year. In Somalia, fewer women, girls and boys will be able to access lifesaving healthcare because of these decisions. Behind every statistic is a human being whose opportunities, health and future are being diminished.

There is also a broader question of fairness. The NHS benefits enormously from healthcare workers who trained overseas before coming here to serve patients across the United Kingdom, which we sometimes forget in our conversations about immigration. It has been estimated that the UK has saved about £14 billion by relying on health professionals educated and trained elsewhere, and many of the countries from which those workers come are themselves grappling with fragile and understaffed health systems. That is not a windfall; it creates a responsibility. We have a duty to invest back into the health systems from which we have drawn so much expertise, not to withdraw support at the very moment that those systems are under increasing strain.

The lessons of Ebola, covid-19 and antimicrobial resistance are ultimately the same: we cannot isolate ourselves from global threats, and the cheapest crisis is the one that we prevent. Ministers have described these decisions as exceptional measures taken in difficult fiscal circumstances. I recognise those pressures, but we have a responsibility to keep people safe, including people here in the United Kingdom. We are weakening the protection of some of the world's most vulnerable communities, and in doing so we are undermining our own health security here in Britain. For those reasons, I urge my Government to look again. We need a credible, serious and urgent plan to restore aid spending, not only because it is the right thing to do but because it is in our national interest.

9.57 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I thank the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for raising this important issue and for the passion and detail that he conveyed. I welcome the Minister to his place; I very much look forward to what he has to say. I also look forward to the contribution of

the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who is always here in these debates.

We meet at a sobering hour. The global landscape for official development assistance is contracting before our very eyes, and funding is falling right across the west. At home, our aid budget is projected to come down to 0.3% of gross national income. I understand the intense fiscal pressures facing our nation and the absolute necessity of strengthening our national defence in a dangerous world, but as the aid pot shrinks, our moral responsibility does not diminish; it intensifies. When there is less to go around, it is a matter of profound duty to ensure that every single penny that we set aside is well spent. We cannot afford waste, bloated bureaucracy and Whitehall-centric projects that fail to hit the ground.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman raises the principal point that this money will go from aid to defence. The reduction will be £4.8 billion in 2026-27, and then £6.5 billion. We obviously appreciate the need for defence investment, but that money is being transferred to the most profligate and incompetent spending Department in Government: the Ministry of Defence. Those of us who have been here for a number of years can remember Nimrod, which cost £4 billion and was scrapped. The Bowman radio system cost £2.5 billion and was scrapped. The Daring-class destroyer went £1.5 billion over projected expenditure. The Ajax armoured fighting vehicle has cost £4 billion and probably cannot be used. The sale of married quarters lost £4 billion. We are taking money that is desperately needed to save lives and giving it to a Department that has wasted money time and again.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Gentleman has made his point well. I am not sure whether the Minister will be able to answer that, because he is not in charge of defence, but the point is none the less well made.

Being wise stewards of public money also means that we must take a hard, honest look at where our money is going. Aid was never meant to be a permanent, open-ended dependency; its ultimate goal must be to help nations to stand on their own two feet. We still see today vast sums of British taxpayers' money flowing into middle-income countries with excellent economies. For example, India has a fast-growing economy, an expanding space programme and burgeoning domestic wealth. Surely common sense must prevail. We should be deeply wary about continuing to fund countries that are now clearly on their feet and fully capable of looking after their own citizens. Our priority must shift; I have a solution that I will put to the Minister at the end of my speech. We must concentrate our precious, limited resources on the poorest of the poor—on those forgotten nations that desperately need a helping hand just to get on their feet.

To achieve true value for money, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office must radically change how it delivers aid. For too long, vast sums of UK aid have been swallowed up by massive international agencies and expensive consultants sitting in metropolitan hotels miles away from the suffering. The right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale mentioned conferences being held in hotels while people

starve on the streets. This is not efficiency. If we want maximum impact for the British taxpayer and maximum relief for the world's most vulnerable, we must empower local, on-the-ground bodies. We must trust the people who know the area, speak the language, live among the communities and truly understand the complex realities on the ground.

In particular, I want to champion a group too often overlooked by modern technocrats: our Church missionaries and faith-based organisations. They have been doing their job for literally hundreds of years, carrying out physical, emotional and biblical charity. These men and women do not fly in for a three-month contract and fly out when a crisis hits. They have been in place for years, sometimes for decades and often for generations. They are there in the poorest villages of Africa, the remotest parts of Asia and the most dangerous corners of the middle east. They have built deep, unbreakable bonds of trust with local people. They know exactly who is starving, which clinics lack medicine and how to distribute resources without a single penny being siphoned off by corruption.

I say respectfully to the Minister, who knows me well, that when the FCDO partners with established missionary networks, it is not funding expensive administrative overheads. My Strangford constituency has many churches and faith groups, including the Church of Ireland, the Methodists, the Baptists, the Presbyterians, the Elim Church and many others. They are funding pure, direct delivery. They are utilising infrastructure that is already built, relationships that are already formed, and a dedication that money simply cannot buy.

As I have mentioned in other debates—I hope the Minister can give me a reply today—the networks are there and the people are there. In particular, the Elim missions in Zimbabwe and Swaziland are working with farmers to till the land and produce their own food. At the same time, they are involved in healthcare and education. As we reshape our aid footprint, will the Government commit to bypassing the bloated international middlemen and graduated economies? Will the FCDO actively channel our precious, reduced resources into the trusted, long-standing Church missionaries and local bodies that offer the ultimate value for money?

Let us ensure that British aid is defined not by the billions we spend but by the lives we save through those who know how to save them: the Church missionaries and faith-based groups. They are happy to partner with the Government, and they should be invited to do so.

10.4 am

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): It is a delight to participate in the debate, and I thank the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for securing it. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am a member of the IDC and a former development banker. I share many of my IDC colleagues' reflections on the need for clarity and to be steadfast in our pursuit of the overarching goal of the UK's foreign development policy, which is poverty alleviation. Our report sheds a light on the fact that there is a much greater need for clarity, transparency and measurability of the outcomes we are looking to deliver in particularly constrained circumstances.

That said, I wholeheartedly support the Government's shift from the mindset of donor to that of investor. That is necessary not just because it is what many developing countries are asking of us, but because it is the only way we will get the scale of investment that is needed to transform the fortunes of the world's poorest countries. Whichever way we look at it—whether it is the sustainable development goals financing gap or any other interpretation—the scale of capital need is enormous and cannot be met by the multilateral development banks, let alone our development aid budgets.

Let me move on from the hand-wringing we are all so used to in our favourite sector, towards a much more normative, positive pitch for the role the UK Government can play as we head into the G20, where we have the chance to set the tone of development globally. We can play a unique role in three areas: first, the global debt system; secondly, our influence on multilateral development banks and development finance more broadly; and thirdly, the mobilisation of private sector investment. I know the Government are incredibly invested in those three themes, which align with our shift from donor to investor, but let me be clear about what will work to deliver shifts across those three agenda items, at least in my experience.

On global debt, the UK is home to the vast majority of emerging markets' sovereign debt. England is the jurisdiction under which it is governed, with the other key jurisdiction being New York. In my mind, it is incumbent on this jurisdiction to try to right the wrongs addressed by the private Member's Bill introduced last year by my hon. Friend the Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous), who is no longer in his place. It is incumbent on us to build not just a more sustainable debt system, but ultimately the financial capacity of these countries, and to take the agenda very seriously.

I welcome the work of the London Coalition so far, including the steps to strengthen the common framework and the term sheet, which suggests pause clauses that might prevent some of the frankly usurious debt obligations on developing countries from building up during restructurings. I also welcome the need for transparency, which is another workstream of the London Coalition. But we must ask ourselves whether this is sufficient. Are voluntary measures and the self-regulation of the City as the leading emerging markets bond market sufficient?

As a key player in the G20, can we take a stand on delivering a much greater ambition to ensure that best practices move from being voluntary to being a gold standard for the market? If there are concerns about the market impact, one has only to look back to the previous round of global debt reform under Gordon Brown, and the concerns raised by the City then. Let us be honest: not all investors are created equal. A big pension fund that just happens to have exposure to Ghanaian sovereign debt is not the same as a debt-distressed hedge fund.

Creditors will have different views about whether a real ambition from the UK to put reforms on a statutory footing will scare the markets. I encourage the Government to engage very strongly; I would be happy to provide evidence from the City and from economists working on global sovereign debt to support the fact that, rather than being all doom and gloom, this might be an opportunity to reset the sustainability of the sector and, in doing so, build financial capacity.

[Noah Law]

With that financial capacity, we could mobilise a far greater sum of investment than ever before. I know that is the ambition of the Development Minister, Baroness Chapman. If we can get the financial capacity right for these countries, it may be that the cuts to aid will pale into insignificance—to put it bluntly—compared with what investment could be mobilised if we get the macroeconomic structure right.

Multilaterals also have a role in mobilising private capital, but some, particularly larger, multilaterals, which we have fervently supported, are currently not taking on sufficient risk, and in many cases are crowding out commercial banks and are too focused on debt. They need to be more catalytic in their work. BII sets a good reference point, and it also serves a good reference point for project development, or what the International Finance Corporation would call upstream project development.

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): The hon. Member mentioned multilaterals. We have seen massive cuts to aid. As many people will know, I worked for 30 years in the WASH sector, which had been cut by 85% before the recent aid cuts, and is so important in changing people's lives. Does the hon. Member agree that, given the movement to multilateralism and multilateral support, we should see that channel used to direct much larger funds to the very poorest and to sectors such as WASH—although not to WASH exclusively—so that we can see a real improvement in people's lives around the world?

Noah Law: I agree that alongside the shift to more risk capital, which will also support that goal, and more upstream project development with local partners, there needs to be a focus on the world's very poorest, and on getting capital into markets that do not currently have the capacity to support it. We have to move on each of these fronts: on global debt reform, on engagement with the multilateral development banks and our own development finance institutions, and on the private sector. Only by getting the capacity right, and by getting the work that the MDBs and the DFIs do right, will we be able to mobilise capital at scale. In my experience, WASH in particular suffers from being uninvestable for development finance, partly because the ability of DFIs to provide support at the municipal level and for city regions is underdeveloped. I urge the Minister to work with, for example, Urban 20 colleagues to address the issue.

James Naish: My hon. Friend mentioned multilaterals. I wanted to put on the record my concern, shared by a number of IDC members, that it will be much harder for us to influence the multilaterals when most of our money is going there, rather than to bilateral aid. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that we need to resource appropriately to achieve maximum leverage within the multilateral system?

Noah Law: I do share my hon. Friend's concern. In a time of constrained resources, there is a bit of a knee-jerk reaction to move everything into the multilateral space to get more bang for our buck but, as we have seen, it is not as simple as that. One does have to be wary when trying to make that money go further. I am glad that there are examples, particularly on the climate finance

front, of where our Government have stepped up to ensure we maintain the agenda of the multilateral development banks.

To sum up, we need to be serious about the potential need for a statutory footing for some of the reforms to the global debt system, which the UK is uniquely well placed to address. We need to push our multilateral development banks and development finance institutions to go further, to take more risk and do that upstream development work. In doing so, we need to mobilise the private capital that at the minute is unable to get to the world's poorest countries.

10.14 am

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) on securing this debate and on leading a galaxy of great speeches. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper); she and I have worked together on global health partnerships, and I agree with everything that has been said.

I will pick up on a couple of points that have been made. There has been focus on Britain's G20, and I am sure that is an important opportunity for Britain to provide some leadership on this issue. As we get older, we tend to look back at the past through rose-tinted spectacles, but I acknowledge at the outset that British development policy is at its best by far when it is conducted on an all-party basis. It is not a Labour, Conservative or Liberal policy; it is a British policy. That was one of its great glories in the past.

The Government did well in their recent conference, where they brought together a lot of interested parties and helped to underline an appropriate agenda. Those of us who really care about this issue must also be careful, because in Britain we are still spending an enormous amount of taxpayers' money, and it is doing a lot of good. Although it has been greatly and savagely diminished, a lot of the spending is very good, and I want to make that clear. I am also very pleased that the Government have stuck to the 2023 White Paper, which was effectively an all-party White Paper.

Tom Hayes: The right hon. Gentleman makes a critical point. Obviously, we have seen public support wane in recent years, but protecting and preserving that narrative of the good that we do in the world is important. As a country, we often tend to look at the floor rather than looking up at the sky. As a country, we have a monarch of high standing, we are a permanent member of the Security Council, a NATO partner, a founding member of the United Nations and a global financial hub, and we have world-leading universities and research institutions.

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one of the things that can come out of this and other debates that we have around the topic is not hand-wringing, as we have heard repeatedly in this Chamber, but an opportunity to think about how we build on our successes and celebrate the good that we have done?

Sir Andrew Mitchell: I do not really agree with that because, while the hon. Gentleman cites a number of areas where Britain makes a big contribution, there is a

big black hole where we have cut off our legs in respect to international development. I will say a word or two about that in a moment.

The importance of turning from donor to investor is absolutely right; but if investors are investing in a poor country where there is not adequate health and education, that country's workforce will not be able to attract suitable investment. We must be worried about that. We must always focus on the results agenda, showing that the British taxpayer is getting 100p of value for every £1 spent.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale about the importance of saving the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, but we have to accept that we will not get a major boost in public support unless it comes from the top. We had an era of huge support, led by Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Theresa May. If there is not support at the top, public support cannot be won back and sustained—particularly if there is a Prime Minister who is foolish enough to say from the Dispatch Box that DFID is like an ATM in the sky, spewing out taxpayers' money.

Finally, the only point on which I disagree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale is in respect of BII, which of course follows the Government's lead. The Government are the 100% shareholder in BII and are therefore able to set out very clearly what its priorities should be, but they should then leave an organisation like BII to get on with following that mandate.

I argue that there have been three great losses from the Johnson and Starmer premierships. Bear in mind that in the last year of the last Conservative Government—do not tell the Treasury this—we spent nearly 0.6%, so there was huge support. However, there are three areas where we have seriously lost out. The first loss is to Britain's reputation, as a result of the cuts. As has been pointed out, the cuts in Britain are more savage, pro rata, than the cuts in America. The damage to Britain's reputation is acute. I argue that, since the Suez crisis, international development has been the only area of indisputable British international leadership—and we have lost that.

Secondly, we have lost out on British interests, particularly in respect of the rampant nationalism now being pursued at a time when we need international co-operation to tackle the great scourges mentioned in this debate. Above all, the poorest people in the world, who were reliant on British expertise, support and cash, have lost out.

Now is a chance, with a new leader. The right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) was part of a Government who championed international development. He knows about that. Now is a chance to make some changes. I urge Labour Members to rise up now and say that the historical interest and support of the Labour party have been for international development. People might expect the beastly Tories to cut aid and development, but they do not expect the Labour party to do that. Now is a chance to have a real reset, which should include three things.

First, the reset should include an acceptance that the vapourisation of DFID and the merger was an ocean-going disaster. Everyone who has had anything to do with it

knows that perfectly well. It has led to a huge loss of skill. I urge the Government to decide, if not to restore DFID, at least to set up an agency to take action on helping to restore our reputation and the huge agglomeration of expertise in London that resulted from DFID.

Secondly, we should move back to 0.7%, as is the law of the land. We should do that, however, over a number of years. We cannot provide that amount of money overnight, but over five or six years we should try to move systematically back to it.

Finally, we should understand what this Government do not understand: defence, diplomacy and development are linked very tightly indeed. The idea that taking development money and putting it into defence is the answer to the—admittedly absolute—requirement to spend more on defence is absurd. Development is the other side of the coin to defence. I hope that the new Administration, when they come in shortly, will take account of some of these matters.

10.22 am

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford, and an honour to follow the contributions by the right hon. Members for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) and for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell). I thank the former for securing this very important debate.

It is shocking that we are in this position—that a Labour Government, who are supposed to share the principles of concern for the vulnerable, for equality and for solidarity, are the Government who have presided over the biggest ever single cut to the UK aid budget. As the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield mentioned, aid, our investment as a country in international development, has historically been a matter of cross-party consensus. That is crucial. This is not a party political issue; it is about our fundamental humanity as politicians and as a nation. Disappointing is not the word; it is shocking and shameful that we are in this position and that this Government have slashed aid to such an extent. It is short-sighted, because aid is an investment in building a better and a more secure world, and it is immoral, because aid does work. As the hon. Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper), with all her experience in public health, communicated so clearly, aid saves lives. The effect of the cuts that we have seen in the UK and globally will be millions more deaths—millions. Every single one of them is an individual human being whose life could have continued. This is utterly extraordinary. It is immoral.

Tom Hayes: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Chowns: Very, very briefly, as I have almost no time.

Tom Hayes: In which case, continue.

Dr Chowns: I thank the hon. Member. We know that aid works; I have seen it myself. I worked in international development for several decades before coming to this place. I have seen, in Malawi, how the provision of clean water literally saves lives. I have seen, in Burundi, how work on HIV and AIDS literally saves lives. I have seen in northern Uganda how investment in conflict

[Dr Chowns]

resolution, conflict prevention and rehabilitation of child soldiers works to rebuild lives and livelihoods. I have seen, in the Philippines, how international aid has helped a community devastated by a tornado to rebuild lives and livelihoods.

Aid works. No, it is not perfect—of course it is not. Yes, we do need to do better. Yes, we know how to do that. We know how to build longer-term programmes, how to work better with local partners, and how to channel money in ways that are focused on outcomes rather than just on bean counting. We know all that, and we have been doing it for decades—yet what has happened? The rug has been pulled out from under aid, and for what purpose? To put the money into defence spending, which, as the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) pointed out, has itself too often been a black hole, with cancelled programme after cancelled programme costing billions. In the aid sector, we have focused on results and on outcomes. No other sector is so closely focused on results.

Why was that done? Let us remember that this aid cut was put in place on 25 February 2025. That was one month after Donald Trump returned to the White House and two days before the Prime Minister went to the White House, touting this aid cut and redirection of funding into defence, as part of his strategy for sucking up to Donald Trump. Look how well that worked. It did not—it was never going to.

This country has betrayed its proud record of supporting international solidarity, and for what? It is crucial that we move back towards investing in aid, because it is lifesaving, because it is the long-term investment that we need to make the world a safer and more secure place, and because international solidarity has to be part of our identity as a country. That is not just about aid; it is about engagement with the debt crisis and with our trading relationships, and it means that we need to look at new sources of funding, such as “polluter pays” taxes, to generate new streams of revenue to invest in these lifesaving and life-changing programmes.

But one thing must be clear: we cannot cut aid and expect to build a more secure world. This aid cut—this shameful Labour aid cut—makes the world a less secure place for us and for the millions of people directly affected. I very much hope that the new Labour Government will reverse course.

10.27 am

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for securing this debate, because we rarely talk about this subject in the Chamber.

The Government do not seem to want to talk about aid and development very much, but they must and they should, because our world is on fire, because cuts to development make it worse and because it is within the British national interest to support it. I am sure that, if my party had cut the aid budget that far, I would not want to talk about it either.

The deplorable aid cuts, from a proud 0.7% to 0.3%—the biggest cuts to aid this century, amounting to a 50% cut in bilateral aid to Africa alone—are in danger

of stripping the UK of much of its proud reputation on the global stage. I must note at this point that, despite continual prompting from members of the International Development Committee, of which I am one, the Government are still yet to publish their country allocations of aid, which makes it very difficult to scrutinise the damage.

However, we do know, and the Government know, that these cuts will cost lives. Combined with those caused by the collapse of USAID—the United States Agency for International Development—the lives lost will likely be in their millions. That includes in countries where we have a legacy, such as Afghanistan, where 45% of the population needs humanitarian assistance and which is no longer prioritised within the UK’s aid budget. In 2022, we contributed \$488 million; today, it is \$32 million. We have also heard how global aid cuts have caused such damage to health systems in the DRC that the response to tackling the Ebola crisis has been made significantly harder.

I know the personal commitment of many Members in this room, and of the Minister, but this is where we are: the party of DFID and Make Poverty History has become a Government of aid cuts so extreme that they outstrip the Trump Administration in their brutality. A Labour Government who followed Donald Trump in cutting aid have outdone him—a Labour Government whose legacy in development, just two years into their Administration, is already far worse than the Conservatives’.

Yet once there was consensus. I agree with the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) on almost everything he said but particularly on leadership. It comes to a pretty pass when a Conservative Member urges Labour Members to rise up and be radical. He said that he had the best job in the world as Development Minister. The British did the best job in the world in development. There was consensus.

Building on the work of the previous Labour Government, the coalition Government delivered the commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income on development, which had been a Liberal Democrat manifesto promise since the 1970s. In coalition, we reached the UN aid target and NATO’s defence spending target at the same time, proving that investment in development and defence are not mutually exclusive; in fact, as we have heard, they are complementary.

As I and others have said, defence, diplomacy and development support each other and strengthen any coherent foreign policy. We have heard from some of the UK’s most senior former military chiefs that reducing development capacity today stores up greater instability, greater cost and greater risk for tomorrow. That means more defence spend down the line, and look how we are scrabbling about for it now.

Development brings benefits to Britain. It is strategic, and mutually beneficial because investing in peacebuilding, prosperity and stability keeps us safe here too. Take guarding against another pandemic. Covid was not so long ago, and we are told with certainty that there will be another one. Given all the pandemic’s death, its destruction of economies and its long tail of social and mental health challenges, I am sure that many hon. Friends will share my dismay at the decision by the Government to discontinue funding the Pandemic Fund.

What about climate change? When harvests fail through drought or flooding, malnutrition sets in, communities fight for pasture and people migrate. In May, the Government broke their pledge on the Green Climate Fund by announcing a cut of 50%, while their new international climate finance target of over £6 billion of public money, which I note is committed over three rather than five years, also seems to be a reduction.

Tom Hayes: I used to work in the international development sector for Oxfam, thinking about how to increase public support for international aid. I agree with what everybody in this room is saying, but we have a problem in our country that people in growing numbers do not support it, and I fear that we, as a Parliament, have to tackle the complacency that we are exhibiting here in the Chamber. Leadership matters, but how can we in Parliament actually grow that support to sustainably fund poverty alleviation?

Monica Harding: The hon. Member is 100% right, and I will come to that slightly later in my speech.

We hear a lot from the Government about migration. Each 1% increase in food insecurity in a population compels 1.9% more people to migrate. They are escaping war, too. The largest single group of unaccompanied minors in small boats has been from Sudan, the world's greatest humanitarian disaster, in the midst of a brutal civil war. But this is just the tip. The wider Sahel is a tinderbox. Millions are expected to fall into crisis or, worse, into hunger in this lean season, as armed violence escalates across the region. Thousands of schools are closed due to insecurity, health systems are buckling under the weight of need, and still we cut.

Do the Government understand the reality of these cuts at this inflection point, when the world is on fire? Do we not need some honesty with the public on where ODA is actually spent? In 2025, £2.4 billion was spent on in-donor refugee costs, in comparison with £1.3 billion spent on humanitarian assistance. Lifesaving ODA is being spent on propping up a broken asylum system, with less and less spent on the causes that brought those people here in the first place.

We can assume that the cuts came first and the strategy second, given that the cuts announced in February 2025 seemed to take everyone, including the then Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), by surprise. Since then, the approach has often seemed confused and incoherent. The IDC has asked for clarity on the Government's theory of change to reach their shared objective of poverty alleviation.

Of course, upheaval like this can create opportunity and wake us up from our stupor to make the case for aid outside of our own echo chamber, and to re-imagine our aid and development spend. But tearing down the system before the plan is in place is never a good idea. The answer for many things that have failed to be funded is that they will be "mainstreamed", which is a euphemism for "disappeared".

British aid and development worked. Millions of children vaccinated and educated; safe births; clean water and sanitation; lives saved—all achieved by well under 1% of this country's GNI, and it gave the UK

influence and leverage on the world stage, a seat at the table in global fora and friends in trade and diplomacy. Why not celebrate that?

Instead, the Minister for Development suggested:

"The days of viewing the UK Government as a global charity are over".

Does the Minister before us today really believe that, or does he hope, like us, that with a change in leadership and a new Prime Minister, a focus on the long term will come back, with a realisation that doing the work now will make Britain safer and more powerful down the line? Does he not agree that framing the debate to pitch defence against development is wrong, and that, as the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) said when she resigned as Development Minister,

"it will be impossible to raise the substantial resources needed"

to fully fund our defence capability

"just through tactical cuts to public spending"?

And so it is: there is another hole—a £4.7 billion hole—in the defence budget, despite the aid cuts that were supposedly meant to fill it. Is it not right that the new Prime Minister must lay out the urgency of the debate on funding our defence and our development spend, and the benefits that it can bring to Britain?

Great damage has been done by our retreat from aid to the reputation of our country and our shrinking influence. While we retreat, others whose values may not match ours are making a play for Africa. With rapid population growth and an emerging labour force, Africa will become one of the world's biggest markets, and the Government should place themselves in the best position to take advantage of that.

The Government have a chance now, with a new leader in place, to take the long-term strategic view, repair the damage, return to the world stage and remember their moral responsibility and the strategic benefit to Britain. It is not too late, but it is nearly.

10.36 am

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) on securing this important and timely debate. As ever, he brings considerable knowledge and experience on development issues and, importantly, an understanding that the world in which we deliver development has fundamentally changed—as indeed do a number of other speakers today, not least my constituency neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell). I think it is fair to say that few in this place have the depth of knowledge that he brings to the debate.

Today, the international landscape is defined by conflict, instability and strategic competition. Russia continues its illegal invasion of Ukraine. Sudan has become the world's worst humanitarian catastrophe. Fragility stretches across the Sahel and the horn of Africa. China is using finance and infrastructure investment to expand its geopolitical influence. At the same time, donor budgets across western democracies are under increasing pressure.

Against that backdrop, Britain must ask a simple question: how do we ensure that every pound we spend overseas delivers the greatest possible benefit for the

[Wendy Morton]

British people—our national security, our prosperity and health—as well as for the recipients? That is why we Conservatives believe the debate should not simply be about the size of the aid budget; it must be about reform.

Following the Government's decision to reduce ODA from 0.5% to 0.3% of GNI, the spending review allocated £8.9 billion in '27-28 and £9.4 billion in '28-29. We believe it is right to go further, reducing ODA to 0.1% of GNI, and delivering almost £7 billion of savings across those two years, to help fund the sustained increase in defence spending required in today's far more dangerous world. But reductions in spending alone are not enough; they must be accompanied by genuine reform. That is where I fear the Government have failed to provide the meaningful clarity that we deserve.

After two years in office, Ministers continue to speak of moving from donor to investor, yet we still do not know what that means in practical terms. I gently point out that it was almost a decade ago that the Conservative Government published a strategy for how to do economic development. Can the Minister explain what criteria are now being used to determine whether a programme represents value for money and serves Britain's national interests? Which programmes have been cancelled? Which partnerships have been scaled back? Which priorities have been strengthened? What measurable outcomes will the Government use to judge success? I believe the British taxpayer deserves answers and so do we, as parliamentarians.

The Conservatives' approach is clear. We believe Britain's development mission should be redefined. Development assistance must be tightly focused on advancing Britain's economic interests, national security and wider strategic influence. That means asking of each and every programme whether it strengthens Britain's security, supports economic resilience, helps to prevent instability, counters authoritarian influence or creates stronger, long-term partnerships.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Lady always makes incredibly important and helpful contributions. In my contribution, I suggested that there is another way of doing things, which is working alongside church groups and faith-based organisations. Does she feel that that is a possible way to spend money and have influence more wisely?

Wendy Morton: The hon. Gentleman always brings great passion to this place and is never afraid of sharing ideas. I think we are at a stage with development where we are, I think all of us, looking for more answers and ideas. It is also important that we look to partners in other donor countries, and learn from them too.

Coming back to the point about longer-term partnerships and areas where programmes should be helping us, if they do not we should ask why not and why British taxpayers are funding them. That also means introducing far greater conditionality. The British taxpayer rightly expects the organisations and countries receiving our support to demonstrate accountability, transparency and good governance.

That principle must apply equally to the multilateral system. Under the previous Conservative Government, Britain led international efforts to reform UN agencies, reduce duplication and introduce stronger performance-based funding. We challenged international organisations

to deliver better value and greater accountability. What reforms is the Minister pressing for across the United Nations and the wider multilateral development banks? What conditions are attached to UK funding? What discussions has he had with our international partners about driving greater transparency and accountability throughout the multilateral system? What are the Government doing to promote positive reform where it takes place, such as that being rolled out by the president of the World Bank, Ajay Banga.

Equally important is the role of bilateral and minilateral partnerships. Britain's relationships, particularly across the Commonwealth, remain one of our greatest strategic strengths. Rather than relying on large multilateral institutions, how are the Government exploring more agile bilateral and minilateral partnerships that can better advance our economic and security interests? What discussions has the Minister had with key partners, particularly across the Commonwealth, about developing those new models of co-operation that deliver greater impact, stronger accountability and better value for the taxpayer? Have the Government also explored the potential for development partnerships with countries such as Japan and South Korea, as well as the Nordics and Germany? These are allies whose interests align with ours in different parts of the world, and they matter for our security and prosperity.

Economic development must sit at the heart of our approach to international development. Conservative Governments demonstrated that development is not simply about grants, but creating jobs, building markets and enabling countries to stand on their own feet. As we heard today, British International Investment has become one of Britain's genuine development success stories, mobilising private capital to support sustainable economic growth. Can the Minister tell the House whether BII will receive further support, and what level of private capital do the Government expect to leverage through development finance?

If development is to support Britain's national interest, global health must also remain central. The Conservatives have a proud record of supporting Gavi and the Global Fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Those investments have not only saved millions of lives but strengthened Britain's own health security. Can the Minister confirm today the Government's future commitments to Gavi and the Global Fund, and, importantly, the sequence of that funding?

I want to turn quickly to a humanitarian crisis, because Sudan cannot be ignored. It is now the world's worst humanitarian emergency. Will the Minister tell us what additional action Britain is taking to secure humanitarian access and what discussions are taking place with regional partners?

I am conscious of the time. I am coming to an end, but I first want to touch on Ukraine, which I visited earlier this year. One of the gravest humanitarian issues arising from the war is the systematic abduction and forced deportation of Ukrainian children. Can the Minister update us on the latest support the UK is providing to help locate, identify and reunite the children with their families?

Conflict is increasing, donor funding is under pressure and strategic competition is intensifying. Britain's development policy must change, too. I hope the Minister will explain not only where the Government are spending the money, but how their approach is being fundamentally

reformed to meet the realities of a more dangerous and contested world. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Efford. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for securing this debate. I thank all Members who have contributed and will do my best to respond to the points raised.

Twenty years ago, many believed that globalisation, economic growth and international co-operation would steadily drive down poverty and expand opportunity across the world. That ambition remains as important today as it was then, but the world has changed dramatically. We are living through a period of geopolitical fragmentation, increasing conflict and economic uncertainty. The assumptions around development policy no longer hold, so we must adapt. Many traditional and significant donor countries have announced or are carrying out reductions to their official development assistance budgets. Global aid fell by 23% in 2025—the largest year-on-year reduction we have ever seen.

As this House is aware, the Government made the difficult decision to reduce the UK ODA budget to fund a necessary increase in defence spending. That was a tough decision that many Members have talked about today, and not all Members agreed with it. I understand that, but it was the right decision given the threats our country faces. Constrained ODA, though, is only part of the story. That is clear when we look at Africa, where the annual financing gap—the difference between the investment Africa needs each year to deliver the sustainable development goals and the funding it can currently access—is around \$1.3 trillion. In contrast, aid to sub-Saharan Africa totalled \$66.5 billion in 2024. That gap demonstrates that traditional ODA flows have only ever amounted to a small fraction of what is actually needed. In other words, ODA can only be part of a solution, not the whole solution. Continuing to work in the same way and expecting different results is no longer defensible.

Low-income and middle-income countries have been calling for change for some time. They want long-term genuine partnerships based on mutual respect and shared priorities, not paternalism.

Dr Chowns: The argument that aid is only a small part of the solution to global poverty and inequality is not a controversial one, but lower-middle income countries have not been calling for the change that the hon. Member's Government have delivered: the biggest slash in the aid budget altogether. If he believes that aid expenditure and development investment need to be done slightly differently, let us make the argument for that, but cutting it should play no part in the sorts of changes he talks about.

Chris Elmore: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I have to say, it is in complete contrast to my conversations with foreign Ministers. Some of them are exhausted by the idea that we dictate the terms of aid funding, and exhausted by the fact that we put a project in and then move away five years later with limited output.

Dr Chowns: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Elmore: I will not give way. The hon. Lady posed the question and I will answer it. When I have had conversations with Ministers globally—[*Interruption.*]

Clive Efford (in the Chair): Order.

Chris Elmore: I understand the hon. Lady has significant experience in this field. I am talking about meetings that I have had with Ministers while serving as a Minister in the FCDO. They are clear that they want a different approach in how overseas aid is funded. They want a different approach in economic growth and investment. I have had more conversations with my ministerial counterparts on investment into digital infrastructure than I have on deciding to run a project for five years and then walking away from it. The hon. Lady and I are not going to agree. The difference for me is that I am not going to shout from a sedentary position—I have too much respect for the House for that.

My ministerial counterparts want long-term, genuine partnerships based on mutual respect and shared priorities, not paternalism. To reflect that new reality, we are modernising our approach to international development through four essential shifts. The shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), raised the first point, so I hope I can answer her question. First, we move from donor to investor. There has been some criticism around that term today, but there is a key point. It means partnering with countries to unlock growth, jobs and trade through innovative finance and private sector investment. That is what those countries are asking for, not the dictatorial response, "We will do this to you." We are doing it with them, not to them.

Secondly, we are moving from service delivery to support systems, and are helping countries to build their own education, health and economic systems so that they can thrive without aid. Thirdly, we are moving from grants to expertise, leveraging UK strengths such as our world-class universities, the City of London, the Met Office, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, and our education, health and tech sectors.

Fourthly, we are moving from international intervention to local leadership, working in partnership with local actors and organisations, rather than making interventions that are driven internationally. That is the key point that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about. Having better delivery on the ground with people who understand it has to be the way forward, so hopefully I can offer him some reassurance on his question to me and the shadow Minister.

Those shifts reflect how we are prioritising the ODA budget.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The Minister is talking about the importance of long-term partnership. Last week, I was proud to lead the first British parliamentary delegation to Syria since the fall of the Assad regime. I had a number of conversations with Ministers, who asked for technical support from our Government, particularly on special educational needs and disabilities. Some 27% of Syrian children are disabled, following the war. They also asked for us to reopen the embassy in Syria, for business support and a lot of other things. Does the Minister agree that now is

[Melanie Ward]

the right time for a new development partnership with the Syrian Government, as that nation hopefully builds from the ashes?

Chris Elmore: On the wider work on Syria, I agree. The Minister for the Middle East, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), is working hard to bring about more support for the new Syrian regime, and we continue to prioritise that. My hon. Friend's wider point about expertise is right, and that is exactly what the ODA changes bring about. We are using our expertise in education, health and—dare I say it—planning. I have had a number of conversations about planning and infrastructure investment in countries. It is about listening to what those countries actually want us to help with, rather than saying, “We think we know what is best,” so I agree with her wider point.

The shadow Minister and a number of other colleagues spoke about the multilateral system. I happen to be the UN Minister, and UN reform is very high on my agenda. That is not just about the Secretary-General's discussions about UN80, but about wider reform of the international civil service and the international architecture system, which Baroness Chapman and I are leading on in the Foreign Office. The shadow Minister is right to challenge us on that, but I assure her that we have led the charge in my 10 months in office, not just as a member of the Security Council but as a leader in the UN multilateral space, to bring about more reform in the UN system.

David Mundell: Could the Minister give some examples of how we will maximise our impact in those multilateral organisations, given that the balance of funding has moved towards them?

Chris Elmore: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise that matter, and I will come to it later in my speech, particularly when I discuss the multilateral development bank system, which other Members have raised.

We will prioritise multilateral organisations in the ODA budget, where the international system is required to deliver at scale and with legitimacy. We are backing the most efficient parts of the multilateral system to multiply our investment. For example, we are prioritising multilateral development banks, which are the largest source of development and climate finance and are able to lend to partner countries on the most affordable terms. That includes the World Bank's International Development Association, where each £1 we invest unlocks £4 of additional finance, and where we have increased our contribution by 40%. It also includes the African Development Fund. Our £650 million contribution will allow it to leverage up to £1.6 billion in grants and concessional loans, including by issuing bonds on the London stock exchange for the first time.

At the same time, we remain committed to reforming the global development system, and will strengthen its most important parts: humanitarian aid, health, climate and the global financial system. I assure the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale that that reform and our influence remain absolutely crucial to the FCDO's wider work.

I come to a point that I know the right hon. Gentleman cares deeply about: the vital support work on HIV and AIDS as a key part of development infrastructure. I pay tribute to him for his many years of work in that space. The UK remains a steadfast global leader in global HIV response. We are working with key partners such as the Global Fund, the World Health Organisation, Unitaid and UNAIDS to strengthen health systems, prevent new HIV transmissions and save lives. Our commitment is backed by action. In 2025, the UK co-hosted the eighth replenishment of the Global Fund with South Africa, helping to secure \$12.64 billion for the fight against HIV, tuberculosis and malaria, including a UK pledge of £850 million.

We also recognise the vital role of UNAIDS. It provides world-class HIV data, co-ordinates the international response and ensures that global communities continue to be heard. As the organisation undergoes significant change, the UK will continue to support an effective and responsible transition that protects essential functions and delivers the best possible outcome for the global HIV response.

Alongside that, we are investing in innovation, including by expanding access to the new long-acting HIV prevention and treatment technologies. That has the potential to transform the global response and help put the world back on track towards ending AIDS as a public health threat. As we do so, we will continue to champion an approach that is inclusive and evidence-based, focused on key populations, communities and those most at risk from HIV to ensure that hard-won gains are protected for future generations.

It would be remiss of me not to respond to some of the comments on LGBT leadership in the multilateral system. I am the Minister responsible and can assure the House that we will not shy away from our responsibilities under a multilateral platform. I recently announced a £21 million fund, £3 million of which will go to Kaleidoscope for its international response in supporting LGBT communities around the world. While I remain Minister I will never shy away from my responsibilities to challenge and ensure that communities who are being suppressed and seeing their rights rolled back are not ignored. Meanwhile, we are prioritising our bilateral support for countries and communities that need it most. We are committed to £1.4 billion a year over the next three years for places with the highest humanitarian need. That includes fully protecting the budgets for Ukraine, Sudan and Palestine, and protecting funding for Lebanon during the ongoing crisis.

I briefly want to answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper) about polio. I reassure her that we are doing our utmost by investing £1.5 billion in Gavi between 2026 and 2030. That is about shifting investment to where it works, and looking at immunisation as a way to eradicate polio. It is not about a lack of support, but about ensuring we get development right in making such decisions.¹

In a changed world, we need to take a new approach, which is exactly what we are doing. In May, the UK hosted the Global Partnerships Conference, which brought together participants from Governments, multilateral organisations, business, tech, philanthropy and civil society. I heard at first hand from partners the importance of genuine partnership as the basis for our modern development approach. That approach combines our

1. *Official Report*, 9 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 8WC. (Correction).

diplomatic network, our financial sector, our expertise and businesses for a far greater impact. It is the essence of going beyond aid and using the full range of UK capabilities to support partner countries. That is our vision for international development and how we will meet the global challenges that we face.

10.57 am

David Mundell: I thank the Minister for his response, which is a picture from the current Government. This is a moment for reset, which I hope the incoming Prime Minister will take on board along with many of the things said in this debate, as well as the International Development Committee's recent report on the future of international development in a fracturing world. This may be an echo chamber, but we can all make a difference in making the case for international development, which we have to do outside here. We have to be bold enough to challenge some perceptions. Most people think that a huge percentage of the UK budget is spent on aid. They do not realise it is 0.3%; they think it is nearer 40%. There are many misconceptions out there, which we must lead on challenging.

At this moment, Labour MPs are the ones with the opportunity to make a difference. I have been through several changes of Prime Minister, and I know now is the point at which they can be influenced. They are not influenced once they are in No. 10, when it becomes much harder—it is now, as they cross the threshold. We have heard passionate contributions from Labour MPs and I know others feel the same. My appeal is the same as that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell): make that difference now and get international development back on the Government agenda.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered UK aid policy in the context of global funding trends.

Carlisle-Settle Railway: 150th Anniversary

11 am

Clive Efford (in the Chair): I will call Ms Julie Minns to move the motion; I will then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and from the Minister. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the 150th anniversary of the Carlisle-Settle Railway.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford, as we celebrate a remarkable milestone in the history of one of Britain's great railways. This year marks 150 years since passenger services first ran along the Carlisle-Settle railway, linking Carlisle with communities across Cumbria, the Yorkshire dales and beyond. A hundred and fifty years on, it remains a railway of national significance, renowned for its engineering, celebrated for its scenery and cherished by the communities it serves.

For Carlisle, this railway is far more than a transport link. It is part of our city's history and identity. It has helped to connect our city to the wider north for generations, bringing people, ideas, commerce and opportunity. Today, it is fitting that we come together to celebrate not only its past, but the people who ensured that it would have a future.

The story of the Carlisle-Settle railway began in the great age of Victorian railway building. It was one of the last great railways constructed in Britain and was undoubtedly one of the most ambitious. Building it required extraordinary determination. More than 6,000 navvies worked along the route, enduring isolation, appalling weather and dangerous working conditions to carve a railway through some of the most challenging terrain in England.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Some of the navvies who helped to build that railway would have come from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I congratulate the hon. Lady on her assiduous commitment to her constituents: she is making a good name for herself in this House. Well done to her; I wish her well.

Will the hon. Lady join me in urging the Government to ensure that the Department for Transport actively applies the invaluable infrastructure and community-led preservation lessons learned from the Settle and Carlisle Railway Trust to protect our vital regional connectivity and heritage lines across all the nations of the United Kingdom, including the heritage links in Northern Ireland?

Ms Minns: It is always a pleasure to be intervened on by the hon. Member. As I will go on to say, there are many lessons from the history of the railway line that we can apply to the challenges that community groups across the country raise when they are campaigning for their local railways. We can learn a lot from the Carlisle-Settle railway.

Entire settlements were established to house the workforce, who founded many of the villages along the line today. Their story is an important part of the railway's heritage and deserves to be remembered alongside

[Ms Minns]

the engineering achievements for which the line is famous. The engineer responsible for the project was John Crossley. As Cumbrian ramblers will testify, the terrain over which he engineered the line is not forgiving. Construction was frequently halted by snow, flooding and frozen ground. One contractor withdrew altogether after underestimating the severity of the landscape and weather conditions. Despite those challenges, the line was completed and open for passenger services in 1876, just 11 years after Parliament had passed the enabling Act. I am sure the Minister wishes he had a few John Crossleys on hand for some of our rail projects today.

The railway required the construction of 14 tunnels and 22 viaducts. The most famous, the Ribbleshead viaduct, stands 104 feet high and comprises 24 magnificent arches stretching across the north-west landscape. Soon after crossing Ribbleshead, trains enter Blea Moor tunnel, which is driven deep beneath the moors for more than a mile and a half. The line also travels to Ais Gill summit, the highest point reached by any mainline railway in England. There are fascinating stories along the route. In Lazonby, local legend tells us that the tunnel was constructed at the request of a local vicar who did not wish the railway to pass directly in front of his vicarage. One hundred and fifty years later, the structures remain, as a testament to Victorian ingenuity, determination and ambition.

Despite its engineering significance and strategic importance, the future of the Carlisle-Settle railway became increasingly uncertain during the second half of the 20th century. In 1963, the Beeching report recommended the withdrawal of passenger services from the line. Although those proposals were not immediately implemented, station closures and service reductions followed. By 1970, all stations apart from Settle and Appleby had been closed and passenger services had been reduced to just two trains a day in each direction. In the 1970s, the railway suffered years of under-investment. Freight traffic was diverted on to the electrified west coast main line, ageing infrastructure deteriorated and viaducts and tunnels were allowed to fall into disrepair. By the early 1980s, British Rail was arguing that the cost of maintaining the railway could no longer be justified, and proposals were made to close it entirely.

What followed was one of the most inspiring grassroots campaigns in British railway history. In June 1981, before closure had even been formally announced, the Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line held their inaugural meeting in Settle town hall. They recognised the threat and they acted. Soon, they were joined by local authorities, rail users, railway development groups, environmental campaigners and communities along the route.

When closure notices appeared in 1984, the campaign intensified. Campaigners challenged BR's assumptions and highlighted the railway's wider value. They argued that its tourism potential had been overlooked. They argued that its role as a strategic diversionary route had been underestimated. They argued that closure would damage the communities who depended on the railway. They were right. The campaign also exposed what many regarded as a policy of closure by stealth: reduced services, diverted traffic and inflated repair estimates, all to justify closure.

The publicity surrounding the campaign encouraged people to start using the railway in unprecedented numbers. The number of passenger journeys rose dramatically, from 93,000 in 1983 to 450,000 by 1989. In 2025, almost 1 million journeys were made along the Carlisle-Settle railway.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I commend the hon. Lady for raising the issue: the Carlisle-Settle railway line is so important, and Carlisle is a great railway town with such a strong tradition. Does she agree that the points that she makes about the campaign for the Carlisle-Settle line are also applicable to the Borders railway extension from Carlisle to Tweedbank? That extension would bring the tourism benefits, scenery and opportunities that keeping the Settle-Carlisle line open has brought.

Ms Minns: I completely agree with the right hon. Member, who is my constituency neighbour and friend. The spirit that we see today in the Borders rail campaign is exactly that which we saw in the Carlisle-Settle line campaign. He is absolutely right about the economic benefits, which have already been demonstrated between Edinburgh and Tweedbank and could also be realised in the Carlisle-Tweedbank extension. I am grateful that this Government, alongside the Scottish Government, have ensured that funding is now in place for the viability work on the remaining leg between Tweedbank and Carlisle.

On 11 April 1989, the then Secretary of State for Transport, Paul Channon, announced that consent for closure would be refused, as repair costs were found to be lower than was originally claimed, and passenger growth had demonstrated the continuing viability of the line. That remains one of the most significant victories for community transport campaigning anywhere in the United Kingdom. Today, as we celebrate the anniversary, we should acknowledge every person who played a role in that achievement: the volunteers, campaigners, railway staff, local councillors, passengers and community leaders who fought for the railway's future. They ensured that future generations would continue to benefit from this remarkable line.

There is perhaps no more touching symbol of the campaign than Ruswarp the border collie, whose owner Graham Nuttall served as the first secretary of the Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line. Ruswarp famously signed, with his paw print, the petition to save the railway. After Graham Nuttall tragically lost his life while walking in Wales in 1990, Ruswarp remained at his side for 11 weeks before they were found. Today, a bronze statue stands at Garsdale station, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge), commemorating Ruswarp's loyalty and courage. It has become one of the most beloved landmarks on the railway and a reminder of the devotion that people have shown to protecting the line.

The story of the Carlisle-Settle railway did not end with its reprieve. In many ways, a new chapter had begun. Today, the line is operated by Northern Trains and supported by an outstanding partnership of organisations. The Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line continue their invaluable advocacy and volunteering work, the Settle and Carlisle Railway Trust helps to preserve and promote its heritage, and the Settle-Carlisle Railway Development Company serves as an accredited

community rail partnership, working to encourage tourism, education and community engagement. Their efforts have transformed the railway into one of Britain's great rail success stories.

The line continues to bring thousands of visitors into Cumbria, Westmorland and Yorkshire every year. It supports our local economies, connects our rural communities and introduces new generations to our railway heritage. This anniversary year demonstrates that spirit perfectly. Schools, volunteers, artists and community groups are all helping to tell the railway story through events and exhibitions. I was particularly pleased to see the commissioning of a new play, "Lives Along the Line", by Yorkshire playwright Joan Barnard, which the Vagabond theatre group will perform this summer at Appleby public hall and the Victoria Hall in Settle. The play will bring to life the stories of the people whose lives have been shaped by the railway over the past century and a half.

What makes the Carlisle-Settle railway so special? It is one of the most beautiful railway journeys in the world. Few railways can rival its combination of dramatic landscapes, historic stations and iconic engineering. From my home of Carlisle, through the Eden valley and to Yorkshire's three peaks, it offers views that attract visitors from across Britain and beyond. However, its importance extends far beyond tourism. For many communities, it remains a vital transport link, providing access to employment, education, healthcare and leisure opportunities. For rural communities along the route, it remains every bit as important as those who campaigned to save it understood it would be.

The railway also continues to play an important strategic role in the rail network. When the west coast main line is closed because of engineering works, weather events, which are sadly all too familiar in my part of the country, or any other disruption, the Carlisle-Settle railway provides an invaluable diversionary route. In an age in which resilience and redundancy within critical infrastructure are increasingly important, the line's value stretches far beyond the communities it serves. The railway's resilience was demonstrated once again following Storm Desmond and the major landslide at Eden Brows in 2015 and 2016. The subsequent repairs demonstrated the continued commitment to preserving this vital railway for future generations.

As we look ahead to what I hope will be another 150 years of the Carlisle-Settle line, we should remember the lesson at the heart of its story, which is that infrastructure should never be judged purely through the lens of short-term accounting; we must also recognise the social value, strategic importance, connectivity, resilience and heritage. Had closure gone ahead in 1989, Britain would have lost one of its greatest railways. Instead, thanks to the determination of campaigners and communities, we are celebrating its 150th anniversary.

I ask the Minister, my friend and fellow rail enthusiast, for reassurance that the long-term future of the Carlisle-Settle railway remains secure, that the Government recognise its ongoing strategic value to our national rail network, and that the community organisations and volunteers who do so much to support the line will continue to receive the backing that they deserve. I also ask him to join me in paying tribute to the Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line, the Settle and Carlisle Railway

Trust, the Settle-Carlisle Railway Development Company and all those whose dedication continues to sustain this remarkable railway.

Most importantly, I ask the Minister to join me in thanking the visionaries who refused to accept that this railway's story was over. Because of them, trains still run between Carlisle and Settle; because of them, communities remain connected; because of them, future generations will continue to enjoy one of the finest railway journeys anywhere in the world. Long may that continue.

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Efford. I heartily congratulate my very good and hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) on securing this debate on the anniversary of the Settle-Carlisle railway, and I thank other Members for their contributions.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her continued advocacy on behalf of her constituents. This is a moment of celebration of our railways, but it is also a time to reflect on the present and the future. I welcome the opportunity to address some of those points today.

The Settle-Carlisle railway, which is celebrating its 150th anniversary, is, of course, one of the most historical and spectacularly scenic lines in the UK, with a long and colourful history of innovative engineering and dogged determination by the rail visionaries who fought to keep the line open against all the challenges it has faced—a legacy that my hon. Friend is certainly working hard to continue.

I am delighted to assure my hon. Friend that the future of the line is indeed secure. The introduction of the Yorkshire Dales Explorer has brought thousands of new visitors to the line, investment at Horton-in-Ribblesdale station and secured the line's invaluable role as a support route for the west coast main line. These all demonstrate the line's ongoing importance to our network and this Government's commitment to its future.

I am pleased that there is such a strong community rail involvement with this historical line. Community rail is all about connecting communities to the railways, and at the heart of the community rail concept are community rail partnerships. The Settle-Carlisle Railway Development Company has done some wonderful work in this area. It has been an accredited community rail partnership for more than five years, working to support the local economy and benefit communities along the line.

Its work includes organising station open days and art installations, running projects to support access to the railway and environmental initiatives with community organisations, as well as providing a range of services and products that benefit locals and visitors alike. The company achieves so much for the benefit of communities along this historical line. I congratulate it on its most recent reaccreditation, awarded in recognition of its community-centred projects and services provided across the Yorkshire dales and Cumbria.

I also pay tribute to the work of the Settle and Carlisle Railway Trust, which does so much valuable work in helping to restore, preserve and maintain the historical buildings and structures along the route, sparking the imagination and engagement of the public.

[Keir Mather]

The railways, of course, have changed so much since the first passenger trains on the Settle-Carlisle line, and I think it is appropriate to raise where this Government see the future of this railway. Rail reform will put passengers and customers back at the heart of the rail network. The Railways Bill, of which I know my hon. Friend is a keen supporter, is progressing through Parliament and will create Great British Railways, which will bring track and train together under one publicly owned and accountable body to reduce fragmentation and improve decision making. GBR will work closely with local mayors and local authorities to make sure that services meet the needs of their areas and better integrate with other modes.

I now turn to Northern Trains and its performance as the main operator on the Settle-Carlisle line. I am pleased with the introduction of the Yorkshire Dales Explorer, which links Greater Manchester and Lancashire to the Settle-Carlisle line and the dales. I also hope that my hon. Friend's constituents are able to partake in Northern's offer of discounted tickets between Leeds, Settle and Carlisle, in honour of the 150th anniversary. But that does not mean there is not more work to do.

Northern's performance leaves room for improvement. We have an improvement plan that outlines the steps that the operator will take to improve reliability, with a target of 90% of all its trains arriving within three minutes of timetable and cancellations below 2%. I am pleased that the latest rail period results show that cancellations on the Leeds-Carlisle route were only 1.24%, but we need to work to improve punctuality, with 77% of trains arriving within three minutes of timetable. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend to improve services for both tourists in her remarkable area and her constituents. Northern is also in discussions with train manufacturers to procure new train sets to replace the oldest trains in its fleet. The procurement of up to 450 new train sets will offer increased capacity as well as more accessible trains for passengers.

In January and April this year, the Settle-Carlisle route played a critical role in supporting passengers during several closures of the west coast main line for engineering work. To avoid lengthy replacement bus journeys, Avanti West Coast operated its bi-mode Evero trains over the historical route—the first time in more than a decade it has been used for that purpose. Feedback was incredibly positive, underlining findings from the rail watchdog, Transport Focus, that passengers prefer to stay on trains than take replacement bus services—that is certainly my preference, too—even if it involves a longer journey. Avanti hopes that the Settle-Carlisle route can continue to play an important role as a diversionary route over the next decade, especially when a significant volume of renewal activity is required on the northern section of the west coast main line.

On infrastructure, Network Rail recently installed a footbridge with lifts at Horton-in-Ribblesdale station, allowing the closure of a high-risk level crossing and enabling a rail connection to the nearby quarry. The scheme was a mix of public and private investment, including a contribution from the quarry along with the Access for All fund. Connecting the quarry by rail safeguards the future of the facility while reducing carbon emissions by taking lorries off the road.

The 150th anniversary of the Settle-Carlisle line is an opportunity not only to celebrate extraordinary railway heritage, but to recognise wider investment to ensure that rail continues to support communities, connectivity and economic growth for generations to come. That investment includes the £323 million west coast north modernisation programme, which is the biggest improvement programme on the northern section of the west coast main line in decades.

Network Rail and industry partners are working together, in the spirit of Great British Railways, to keep passengers moving while replacing ageing infrastructure, particularly the overhead line equipment that powers electric trains. Over the past two years, Network Rail has renewed around 200 km of overhead wires on the northern sections of the west coast main line. The work will improve reliability and deliver a more resilient and better-connected railway for passengers and freight. From the Settle-Carlisle line to the west coast main line, rail remains a vital part of connecting people, places and opportunities across the north and Scotland.

My hon. Friend will recall the Department's investment of £13.5 million as part of the £38 million Carlisle station gateway project, part funded by the borderlands inclusive growth deal and delivered in partnership between Network Rail and Cumberland council. The scheme provides a new public square to the rear of the station, an enhanced Court Square to the front, new lifts and increased car parking capacity. Works are on site and the Scott & Brassey public house has now opened in the restored first-class waiting room, with passengers enjoying a selection of great local ales. I often travel up to Glasgow, and I will avail myself of those great local ales as soon as I make contact with Carlisle station.

To conclude, I assure my hon. Friend that the Government are firmly committed to honouring our railway heritage and improving services for passengers in rural communities across the north. She continues to be a resolute champion of the Settle-Carlisle railway, and the Government are committed to supporting her and her constituents as she continues to do so. Here is to the 150 years to come.

Question put and agreed to.

11.23 am

Sitting suspended.

Future of British Horseracing

[CAROLYN HARRIS *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of British horseracing. It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I am very grateful to hon. Members for attending this debate. I will be very generous with interventions, but I hope that hon. Members will not intervene for the next 45 seconds—they will see why.

“The final open ditch is fence number 14. Il Est Francais by about a length and a half. Jukebox Man in second now, being pushed along by Jango Baie in third. They’re bunching up towards the fourth from home and it’s Il Est Francais. He’s now joined by The Jukebox Man on his outside. Jango Baie right there in close third. Djelo now makes a big move round the outside and is now in fourth. Just covered up is Gaelic Warrior and Banbridge. Master Chewy on the inside. Fact To File on the outside. Still no more than four lengths split this star-studded field of eight as they make their turn for home.

Three fences to go in this Ladbrokes King George and it’s now Jango Baie on the outside with The Jukebox Man, and Djelo is right there with Gaelic Warrior on the inside. Banbridge tries to go through between two horses. Fact To File was away on the outside towards the second from home. The Jukebox Man has a lead by a neck. On the inside, Gaelic Warrior. Banbridge, the reigning champion, with every chance. Jango Baie right up the inside. Still a length between the leading four of the King George. Over the final fence. Banbridge, a nose in front, Gaelic Warrior to the inside and Jukebox Man racing towards the line in a head-bobbing finish. In the centre, Jukebox Man; on the far side, Gaelic Warrior; and on the near side, Banbridge, in a classic renewal of the Ladbrokes King George.”

The reason I focus on that is because I was there on Boxing day last year to watch the running of the King George. There was an audible gasp as the four in the fray came round the final bend into the straight. Members should have heard the roar. I think the whole of Spelthorne was on The Jukebox Man, owned by Harry Redknapp. When he crossed the line—it was very close—the place simply erupted. And the reason I am focusing on Kempton Park racecourse in my constituency is that it is under severe threat because, in around 2017, the Jockey Club sold an option to Barratt Redrow to make an application to flatten the racecourse and put up to 3,500 homes there.

The proposal had been seen off under previous planning rules. However, hon. Members will be aware that, under the new national planning policy framework, there is an assumed yes for planning purposes if a proposed development is within 800 metres of a train station with two departures an hour in the same direction. That is despite the racecourse being on highly protected metropolitan green belt, some of it being floodplain and all of it being an internationally famous, iconic racecourse.

My aim in securing this debate is to highlight the risk that this proposal could happen. It is policy, not rules, so hopefully the Minister will be so furnished as to advocate for one of our most important sporting venues—most important to horseracing in particular—when the application is submitted.

Barratt Redrow told me on 20 March that it was going to put in a planning application by the end of this year. After I started campaigning vociferously for Kempton

Park, it elicited a media statement from the company on Friday that it had no plans to put in a planning application during this calendar year.

However, my area is undergoing local government reorganisation. On 1 April 2027, Spelthorne borough council will be no more and we will be subsumed into west Surrey and, if I have my way, south Middlesex. I can see what Barratt Redrow is going to do: it will wait until 1 April and then the planning application will go in. That will last until the end of 2028 unless there is a live planning application under consideration, in which case it gets extended for a further two years.

Obviously, I am agitating locally. My residents in Spelthorne love their racecourse and have no desire to see it flattened and turned into housing so, as any Member would, I started a petition. It has received over 3,500 signatures so far. I also organised a public meeting in the Magpie pub in Lower Sunbury last week, attended by about 70 people.

However, I really wanted to get a view from horseracing itself on this proposal. Although I go to Kempton Park, I do not know horseracing inside out, so I reached out to a number of people in the racing industry, and I have been blown away by the response. I wish to share with hon. Members certain aspects of that response. In doing so, I pay tribute to someone in the Public Gallery who, in my book, is racing royalty—Nicky Henderson. He has been fantastic in galvanising horseracing and the response we have received.

I will start with an email I received from a chap called Richard Dunwoody:

“As a steeplechase jockey, I enjoyed some of the best days of my career at Kempton Park racecourse. Two of them were when partnering with the great Desert Orchid to win the King George VI Chase in 1989 and in 1990. Hats flew in the air. The roars were deafening. As Dessie crossed the line, his ears pricked.

It would be a tragedy to lose this racecourse. With the introduction of all-weather racing, Kempton Park has indeed changed over the years, but the standard of racing at the course has not. Jockeys and horses of the very highest level still compete there, as we witnessed last year in the renewal of the King George. Four horses took the last fence line abreast, with Harry Redknapp’s The Jukebox Man taking the honours by the narrowest of margins.”

The journalist Brough Scott wrote that it was:

“As good as it gets.”

And, yes, Kempton Park is indeed as good as it gets when it comes to grade 1 sporting venues. We cannot let it fall to property developers.

Nicky has also garnered support from other names in racing—the list is like “Who’s Who?” From the National Hunt world, there is support from Nicky Henderson, Paul Nicholls, Dan Skelton, Willie Mullins, Ben Pauling, Jamie Snowden, Alan King and Fergal O’Brien. And from the world of the flat, there is support from John Gosden, Roger Varian, Richard Hannon, Andrew Balding, Ralph Beckett, Charlie Hills, Ed Walker and Eve Johnson Houghton, and there is support from a number of people in the racing press—for example, people probably saw Marcus Armytage’s column at the weekend. And the list goes on.

The list of names boils down the reaction I have had. Here is a decent example of the wider reaction:

“Sir, I am Dan Skelton, I’ve been involved in horse sports all my life and have been a National Hunt racehorse trainer for 13 years. I am currently Champion Trainer of the UK.

[*Lincoln Jopp*]

I am writing in support of Kempton Park Racecourse remaining exactly that. KPR is an elite racing venue steeped in history, with a lot more to offer in the future. Horseracing is the second biggest spectator sport in the UK, and a major contributor to the UK economy and its culture. As an employer, British Racing takes care of a great many thousand individuals and families with specific skills, and quite obviously in more rural destinations. Any job losses in our current economy would be disastrous.”

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Like my hon. Friend, I am no expert on the racing world, but I am lucky enough to represent Fakenham racecourse. Does he recognise that the loss of a racecourse impacts not just the racing world but the community that hosts it, both in direct employment and, importantly, in the indirect employment that supports the surrounding community and infrastructure? Furthermore, does he agree that, when a course goes, it goes forever and will never be replaced?

Lincoln Jopp: My hon. Friend makes two outstanding points. The race commentary I read out is just the tip of the iceberg. Sitting underneath that, in order to produce a race, is a whole ecosystem and industry of equine specialisms, including stables, stable lads and trainers. The whole thing culminates in a race, but it supports a whole industry. He is absolutely right to say that, if we lose it, we will never get it back.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I would like to add to the list of our glorious racecourses. Bath racecourse is Britain’s highest flat racecourse, and it adds so much to the community. We have plenty of races, but we also have family and big sporting events. It was also an important centre for the vaccination programme. It is not just horseracing; the whole city benefits from having a racecourse. As has already been said, we lose something great when they go. I would like to hear a bit more about how we can save our racecourses.

Lincoln Jopp: The hon. Member makes a very good point. I think Europe’s largest antiques fair happens at Kempton Park racecourse twice every month. I have been around it and met stallholders who travel from Germany and France. It is absolutely enormous and produces oodles of cash for the Jockey Club—I cannot understand why the Jockey Club would want to sell the family silver.

How can we save our racecourses? First, everyone should be going racing. It is a bit like the local pub—use it or lose it. Secondly, we need to educate a lot of people about horseracing, so that things like planning applications are considered from a position of understanding. I am obviously doing my bit by advocating as much as possible.

Dan Carden (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): I am delighted to be here to support the hon. Member’s debate on the future of British horseracing. Aintree racecourse is in my constituency. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and declare my interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on racing and bloodstock.

I have been passionate about horseracing since I was very young. Despite the challenges it currently struggles with—and I will say a few words on that when the hon. Member has concluded his speech—British horseracing is the best in the world. It is a global leader in what it

does, and people want to be part of it, but it needs the Government, and the industry as a whole, to find strong leadership from within and to work together to make sure that this incredible product is protected for the future.

Lincoln Jopp: The hon. Member reminds me that I, too, should declare that I am a member of the APPG, and that he is my chair. I received the following email from Kerry Lee:

“I am writing to express my full support for your opposition to the proposed redevelopment of Kempton Park Racecourse and to thank you for securing Tuesday’s debate.

Kempton is far more than a racecourse. Since opening in 1878, it has become part of Britain’s sporting and cultural heritage. It is one of the country’s few truly year-round racecourses, staging over 70 fixtures annually through its all-weather track while also hosting the prestigious King George VI Chase and some of the finest jump racing in the world. It is nationally significant sporting infrastructure”.

She goes on to say, to the point made by the hon. Member for Liverpool Walton (Dan Carden), that it is “an internationally recognised venue and a major economic asset that, once lost, can never be replaced.

Locally, it supports jobs and generates substantial spending for hospitality, retail, transport and many other businesses, while providing valuable green space. Nationally, it underpins an industry supporting tens of thousands of jobs”.

as my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) pointed out,

“across racing, agriculture, veterinary services, transport, media, tourism, hospitality and countless rural businesses. Internationally, it strengthens Britain’s reputation as a global leader in horse racing, attracting overseas owners, investment and visitors...This debate is about far more than one racecourse. It is about protecting jobs, heritage, tourism, green space and one of the most successful global industries. Once Kempton is lost, it is lost forever”—

I will continue with these quotations until Members get bored or intervene.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I am also a member of the APPG chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Walton (Dan Carden), and I have a couple of points to make. The first is about the cherished memories horseracing gives us, which I have had since I was a young lad. My mum’s cousin had the Prince of Wales pub at Newmarket, which was amazing, and we used to go and visit her. I have seen Desert Orchid finally get his head in front up that Cheltenham hill—the four-time winner of the King George, split by The Fellow one year, I think; Nicky Henderson, and Kauto Star and Denman fighting it out; Red Rum; and Frankel’s scintillating form in the Newmarket Guineas. Horseracing just brings so much wonderful passion and pride. It is also about patriotism and our country, because it goes back generations.

I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Sally Jameson) will talk about Doncaster racecourse in a second, but I have the National Horseracing College in my area. We talk a lot about young adults going into new industries and about young adults with special educational needs and disabilities, as well as about the importance of 18 to 24-year-olds being able to find jobs that are not necessarily behind a desk or that do not require lots of theory. The National Horseracing College employs about 40 people and has 130 apprenticeships a year, and it is absolutely marvellous.

This is also about the jobs and the industry, and what it can do to inspire young adults to get into a profession that is amazing as a career.

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. I ask Members to be brief with interventions.

Lincoln Jopp: I think the hon. Member was being kind to me there, as much as anything else. I thank him for his point, and he is right. Everywhere I have lived, I have gone to the races. I used to go to Perth races; when I was in the Army, I used to go to Catterick races. The racecourse is part of the experience of a place.

This is from Alan King at Barbury Castle stables:

"I have run horses at Kempton Park for over 25 years, training over 100 winners.

In my opinion Kempton is in the top four of British Racecourses. It is a very fair track and attracts top class horses in both National Hunt and Flat Racing. Its other huge attraction is that it produces decent going mid-winter which is the only southern track that provides this.

I think it is irreplaceable."

This is from Philip and Sarah Hobbs:

"As a trainer of National Hunt horses for 40 years I am very opposed to Kempton Racecourse closing down to build houses.

It is the home of the King George on Boxing day as well as plenty of other important races, and is very free draining maintaining good ground in the winter. It also has a place providing plenty of opportunities for flat horses on the all-weather circuit."

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): The hon. Gentleman is clearly passionate about the horseracing sector. Did he see the incident at the Grand National festival earlier this year, when Gold Dancer broke his back during the race and was whipped to continue? As a result, when he got over the finishing line, it was too late for the vets to save him. That is not an isolated incident. Last year, there were 254 deaths of horses due to horseracing. In too many cases, the horses could have survived their injuries, but the owners judged that the damage was not worth it in terms of the financial value the horses could bring. Given all that, and the 641 instances of recorded whip abuses, if the horseracing sector is serious about its future—I recognise it matters to many people—it needs to show that horses will not be treated as expendable assets but as the beautiful animals they are, and future deaths must be avoided.

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. The last two interventions were long enough to be speeches. I cannot allow interventions of that length. There is a process where you apply to speak and you will be called to make a speech, but interventions need to be short, as the name suggests.

Lincoln Jopp: The hon. Member speaks with passion about animal and horse safety. I do not know a single owner, trainer or jockey, or anyone involved with horses, who does not care deeply for them. At Kempton Park, I have been struck by the extensive lengths the racecourse goes to in redesigning fences and barriers to ensure that animal welfare—horse welfare—is a very high priority. I did not see the incident the hon. Member referred to, but I take it on trust that the industry cares deeply for its animals, which are both highly prized and very expensive.

This is from Martin Fetherston-Godley:

"Dear Mr Jopp...As a former racehorse trainer, I am very concerned to hear that one of our premier racecourses could...be sold for redevelopment. Kempton, with its all weather track, offers valuable opportunities all year round to flat racing owners and trainers and hosts some of the most important races in the jump racing calendar. With its proximity to London and its good transport links it is also a highly valued local amenity. I would like to add my voice and support to preserving Kempton Park's status as a racecourse."

I would not like hon. Members to think that I was in any way scraping the barrel by now. Mr Russell Grant—he was not in horseracing, but I believe he is the nation's favourite astrologer—said:

"Good morning...Someone has just told me that"

you are

"leading a campaign regarding the proposed development of Kempton Park.

Is this true they want to build over the racecourse?

Do let me know if I can help. Kempton Park is one of the four jewels in the Middlesex sporting crown."

Another email states:

"Good afternoon Lincoln, I have read the article in the Racing Post today regarding the application that Barratt Redrow intend to make for Planning Consent on the land at Kempton Racecourse.

With the closure of Chelmsford, the importance of retaining Kempton as a dual purpose racecourse providing owners with All Weather racing all year round and National Hunt racing during the winter, within easy access of Central London, has become even more important.

I have horses in training in Lambourn for both the Flat and National Hunt, where for the latter Kempton is probably the best drained and fairest course in the United Kingdom, rarely impacted by adverse weather.

I understand the house builder's option to purchase the course expires in 2028, which suggests that it is likely to be exercised within the next year. The Council should resist any Consent which would mean that Kempton Park has to close for racing as it is not only Green Belt, but also a course supported by all owners and trainers, providing employment for many".

I am not going to continue with these quotations—I think the Minister and hon. Members have got the message.

I was really surprised when I reached out to horseracing, because I thought it would speak with 50 or 60 different voices, but the whole of horseracing—with the exception of the Jockey Club—appears totally united by the notion that we must save Kempton Park racecourse from development. The Minister may be concerned that I am being a nimby, but I can reassure her that if she wants to build homes in Spelthorne, I can show her other places that are not on iconic racecourses, green belt and partial floodplain. I hope I have given her enough political ammunition so that she can go away, make some inquiries and ensure that if this planning application ever sees the light of day, strong signals could be sent to Barratt Redrow about its ultimate lack of success. If it wants housing in Spelthorne, I can direct it elsewhere.

Several hon. Members rose—

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members to bob if they wish to be called in the debate, and they should be brief. I intend to call the Front Benchers at 3.28 pm, and I suggest that all interventions be kept short.

2.55 pm

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I declare that I am also a member of the APPG on racing and bloodstock.

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate on the future of horseracing. Few places understand the cultural and economic impact of that industry better than Doncaster. Horseracing has been part of my constituency's story for more than four centuries, and Doncaster racecourse is one of the oldest in the country. It has been home to the St Leger since 1776, and this September marks the St Leger's 250th anniversary. It is an event that honours centuries of sporting heritage and continues to captivate racing fans from across the world. I am sorry to disappoint hon. Members in the Chamber, but it is the St Leger that is the most iconic racing event in this country. I hope everyone, including the Minister, will be able to join us this September.

Local success reflects the importance of the industry nationally. Horseracing contributes more than £4.1 billion to the UK economy, supports 85,000 jobs and remains the country's second largest spectator sport. It is a major employer in my constituency and across Doncaster, an important part of both rural and urban economies, and defines Britain's sporting heritage. If we want a successful future for horseracing, the industry must have the confidence to invest. That means providing greater certainty over its long-term funding and ensuring that Government policy reflects the unique contribution that racing makes to our economy and our communities.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her advocacy for the sector. She will know that I have Uttoxeter racecourse in my constituency. For over 60 years the horserace betting levy has helped courses such as ours, but some of that levy does not go to racecourses such as Uttoxeter in the same way that similar levies in European countries go to their racecourses. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Horserace Betting Levy Board should look to give more support to courses such as ours?

Sally Jameson: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I want to highlight the unique relationship between horseracing and betting. Key income streams, including the horserace betting levy, media rights and sponsorship contribute around £350 million a year to racing. It is therefore vital that any changes to regulation recognise the potential impact on the industry and ensure that the economic and community value it brings is not diminished.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her excellent speech. The point she raises is apt, and what she describes is currently happening. I am sure she will share my concerns and welcome comments from the Minister about how we can mitigate the unintended consequences the Government have unfortunately brought about—particularly the big betting companies reducing their sponsorship in the horseracing sector as a result of the recent changes to the tax regime. That was not intended, but it is happening and the impact is being felt right now.

Sally Jameson: I thank my hon. Friend for his important contribution on an issue that I know is really salient in his constituency.

I also want to raise a growing concern about the black market and the unintended consequences that regulation can create. There is clear evidence that illegal betting activity has increased significantly in recent years. The shift away from regulated markets risks worse outcomes for horseracing fans and for the Exchequer, due to lost tax revenue. Most importantly, it deprives the horseracing industry of vital levy income. It also creates serious integrity risks, as bets placed through illegal operators are far more difficult to monitor and investigate, which makes it harder to protect the sport from corruption. I therefore welcome the Government's recognition of the challenge, which includes investment to tackle illegal gambling and the creation of a dedicated taskforce. That action is essential to ensure that customers remain in the legal betting market. I hope the Government will do more work in that area in the future.

For constituencies such as mine, this debate is not simply about sport; it is about protecting jobs, supporting local businesses and our city centre, and preserving an important part of our national heritage, ensuring that racecourses such as Doncaster can continue to thrive for generations to come. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response, and I hope she will provide reassurance that the Government are committed to working in partnership with the industry to secure a sustainable and prosperous future for British horseracing on the 250th anniversary of its most iconic race.

3 pm

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. It is a pleasure to see leading trainer Nicky Henderson here today. That should indicate how important this debate is to the racing industry. I congratulate my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) on securing this debate. I should make clear at the outset that my husband is a board member of the Racecourse Association and chairman of the National Horseracing College.

Previous speakers have set out the importance of the horseracing industry to the economy, tax receipts and jobs, not to mention its importance to local communities and to sporting excellence in the UK. This sport is genuinely world-leading, and we should all be immensely proud of it. I do not actually think the Government need persuading of the case; they already understand it. That can be seen from last year's Budget, when the Chancellor exempted horseracing from her increases in gambling taxes, something that was welcomed by the horseracing industry following its "Axe the Racing Tax" campaign.

I do not fear this Government deliberately seeking to destroy or undermine horseracing in the UK, but I very much fear them doing so inadvertently through ignorance. I am not asking them to do something to support horseracing. Instead, I am urging them not to do two things in particular that would decimate horseracing in the UK if they went ahead.

My first request is that the Government direct the completely hopeless Gambling Commission to abandon any form of financial risk assessment or affordability

checks in relation to the betting industry. The previous Government rightly said that any checks should be entirely frictionless, but the pilot that has been carried out has been a complete failure. Rather than flogging a dead horse, the Government and the Gambling Commission must abandon this policy.

Despite the claim that financial checks are not being carried out—merely showing the incompetence of the Gambling Commission, which is made up of people who know nothing about gambling and do not even understand their own policies—those checks are already driving punters in their droves to the black market. Roughly 10% of gambling in the UK is now carried out on the black market, and that is growing rapidly, all due to the Government's tax policies and the Gambling Commission's regulatory policies, which mean that the regulated sector cannot compete with the black market. That is, of course, bad for player protection, and it is also devastating for the horseracing industry, which relies on the betting industry and punters for much of its income.

Wera Hobhouse: British horseracing gets significantly lower returns from the gambling industry than our neighbours France and Ireland. Does the right hon. Lady not agree that it is disappointing that betting levy reform did not deliver better support for the industry?

Esther McVey: Better support is needed from everywhere—that is what I am talking about—but those are key issues that are undermining the industry. That is why I will press on with the key matters today that are threatening the racing industry.

Will the Minister assure the House that those affordability checks will be abandoned, despite today's senseless announcement by the Gambling Commission? My second request is that the Government ignore the siren voices of the Social Market Foundation and its recent policy suggestion to double the tax on category B gaming machines from 20% to 40%. The SMF tried to portray itself last year as a friend of horseracing, and unfortunately some in the industry, who should have known better, were taken in. That proposal proves beyond doubt that the SMF is not a friend but an enemy of the horseracing industry.

Such a swingeing increase in the tax rate—which would also destroy casinos and bingo halls—would virtually collapse the remaining betting shops in the UK, whose numbers have already reduced rapidly in recent years. Regulus Partners has calculated that this policy would close 70% of the remaining betting shops, reducing their number from 5,500 to just 1,500. Each and every betting shop contributes a significant amount of money to horseracing through levy payments and, especially, media rights payments. Will the Minister set out how much money horseracing gets from betting shops and take this opportunity to rule out the Government carrying out the SMF policy proposal? Will she also explain how many betting shops she believes will close if the SMF tax proposal on machines is implemented?

The simple fact is that, if the Minister will not stop the affordability checks and does not get a grip on the reins of the out-of-control Gambling Commission, and if the Government will not rule out vastly increasing the tax on category B machines, any promise today to support horseracing will be completely worthless, and

will undermine the Chancellor's policy in the last Budget. I await the Minister's speech with great interest, as will the entire horseracing industry.

3.5 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Harris. I once again congratulate the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) on securing the debate. I will not repeat all the points colleagues have made; people know my passion for the sport. I know the Minister enjoys horseracing and is keen to be supportive to the industry. I look forward to what the Government and colleagues in Westminster can do, working with the racing industry in the years ahead, to take it from strength to strength.

I will start with the strength of British horseracing. There was a battle last year over the racing tax because the Government were going to look at horseracing in the same light as online casinos and gambling. That was totally and utterly wrong; horseracing is an incredible industry, employing up to 100,000 people across the country. It is important to all our communities, with 60 racecourses across the United Kingdom. It attracts a remarkable amount of investment, especially flat horseracing, through all the work around breeding racehorses for a global industry. The Treasury does not quite understand the investment that horseracing brings into this country; I would like to see it do a better job.

I share concern and opposition to the way in which affordability checks have been brought about and implemented. I do not know of any other significant public policy such as this, which will have a major impact on the revenues that go into the Treasury, that can be made and implemented by a quango outside the view of Parliament and away from Government Ministers. I would like the Minister to be honest about her Department's remit over the Gambling Commission, and where authority for this policy lies. Where does authority lie when we want to challenge it because it is not working?

It has already been mentioned that the impact is on the black market, on people who do not go racing, who are at home and decide to use a virtual private network—which can be done easily—and gamble where there are no rules. They do not know who they are gambling with, where the money they may receive has come from or the links to criminality that we can be certain are pervasive. The Treasury should look first and foremost at the criminality and the potential loss to the black market of people who want to gamble legally. I have worked long and hard over many years on all types of addiction. I know good things can be done to improve the behaviour of bookmakers, regulation and health support for people who struggle with gambling. Mrs Harris, you have spent many years in this place and I am sure you are watching this debate from the Chair with interest.

Let me make a couple of more general points. This incredible British product, which captivates many parts of the globe and makes some of the most successful and wealthy individuals want to come and play British horseracing, is something we do not make enough of in this country. It is powerful for our diplomacy, for investment in this country and for bringing people together, including the working-class communities up and down the country who get so much enjoyment from attending a day at the races. We need that to continue. There needs to be a

[Dan Carden]

much broader review of the financing of British horseracing that takes account of the money from bookmakers, the levy and so much more.

I will finish my contribution with one little fact: breeding is currently a loss-making activity in this country. The number of thoroughbreds being bred each year has been in decline for several years. It is very difficult to make a profit in the current climate, and that should not be the case. There needs to be better leadership from within horseracing and better link-up with Government, and we need to appreciate what we have in this country.

3.11 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) for setting the scene incredibly well, as he always does on this subject, which is very close to his heart. It is always a pleasure to see the Minister in her place, and I look forward to her answers. She is very involved in her Department, and it is well known that horseracing is one of her passions.

Everybody has spoken about their own racecourses. I do not have any in my constituency, but the neighbouring constituency of South Down has the Down Royal and another at Downpatrick. Almost every one of my neighbours owns horses. Some of them are for show jumping, and some are for racing at Down Royal, Downpatrick and elsewhere. I understand the importance of this subject to my neighbours. The hon. Member for Spelthorne has also shown passion for his constituency and has put on record the importance of retaining the racecourse there.

As you probably expect, Mrs Harris, I want to speak about the title of this debate: the future of British horseracing. I know that it is your job as Chair to be independent, but you have had a very deep interest in gambling in the past. I want to talk about gambling and the Gambling Commission.

We meet today to discuss an industry that is woven into the very fabric of our national heritage. British horseracing is a magnificent sport, a massive rural employer and a source of immense pride and community across the length and breadth of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. From the stable hands and breeders to the racecourse staff, thousands of livelihoods depend on its continuing success, and I want to see that as well. However, as we look forward to the future of this great sport, we must do so with a sense of deep caution, a steady hand and a clear moral compass.

The relationship between horseracing and the betting industry is historical and undeniable, and betting provides vital financial lifeblood that keeps our racecourses open and their prize purses funded. However, we cannot and must not allow our support for the sport to blind us to the devastating social realities of problem gambling. I see the fallout in our communities: families torn apart, livelihoods ruined and mental health shattered by the grip of gambling addiction. Therefore, any vision for the future of British horseracing must be fundamentally rooted in an unwavering commitment to gambling awareness and robust player protections. We must welcome the implementation of balanced safety measures, such

as frictionless financial vulnerability checks, which are absolutely critical, that are designed to catch unaffordable harms before they destroy lives.

There are those in the racing industry who fear the financial impact of these regulations. I understand their anxieties about falling revenues, but I say to the industry, and very respectfully to the Minister, that sustainability cannot be built on the backs of vulnerable people losing money that they just do not have to spend. True sustainability means creating a safe and transparent environment in which the casual punter can enjoy a flutter responsibly while those at risk are intercepted and protected. That is the point that I want to make today. It is something that you, Mrs Harris, have been at the forefront of in this House. I have always supported you in all the ventures that you have taken forward in the House, and that is one that has been successful.

The future of racing depends on its social licence. To safeguard that licence, the sport must step up and lead from the front. We need to see gambling awareness embedded in every single level of the racing experience. Information should be prominently visible at racecourses and throughout TV broadcasts, and integrated into every digital betting platform. When the Minister replies to the debate, will she please give me the reassurance that I wish to have on that matter for my constituents and others outside the House who are listening to this debate in Westminster Hall?

We must ensure that a meaningful portion of the revenue generated from race betting is directly and transparently funnelled into independent research, education and treatment for gambling harm. Mrs Harris, you and I and perhaps many others in this room have had occasion to meet some of those who have lost family members to gambling; gambling took over their whole life, and they eventually succumbed to taking their own life, as they saw that as the only way out. We must ensure that never happens again. Constituents back home have asked me to put this on record in the House, so I am doing that today.

I also have these questions for the Minister. First, as the Government work to secure the long-term funding and governance of British racing, what assurances can she give that gambling harm prevention will remain at the heart of national policy? Secondly, will the Minister commit to working with the sector to ensure that we protect this historic British sport, because we want to see it retained—we know its significance—and, most importantly, the vulnerable individuals and families in our communities? Let us build a future for British racing that is prosperous, but above all safe, ethical and responsible.

3.17 pm

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) on securing this debate. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, where I detail hospitality received from the Jockey Club last July. I am also a member of the APPG on racing and bloodstock.

Much of the home of horseracing is in my constituency of Ely and East Cambridgeshire. The July racecourse, Newmarket equine hospital, many of the studs and

yards, including the National Stud, and Newmarket's famous rearing stallion statue are all in my constituency. Horseracing provides jobs and great days out, and it cares for much of our beautiful landscape, yet it feels under attack from many angles.

As we have heard, horseracing depends on the income from the betting levy. I am grateful that the Government listened to calls to double gambling duty on remote betting, rather than harmonising all gambling tax rates, but I am worried, like others, that plans to extend affordability checks could damage horseracing.

I recognise the dangers and problems that gambling can cause, including the psychological distress and the financial and social difficulties. Government attempts to reduce that damage are worthy, but they will be counterproductive if they continue to drive people to unregulated sites. I understand that the Gambling Commission has announced that it will introduce financial risk assessments, with a phased implementation. I ask the Minister to monitor that closely and ensure that those assessments do not cause unintended harms.

In my constituency, I have a small bioenergy plant that is under threat of closure due to the removal of Government subsidies. Its sister plant in Thetford takes the bedding waste from local stables to produce energy and organic fertiliser. That plant is also under threat. Gaining a small income from waste bedding instead of having to pay for its disposal is important for the industry. I ask the Minister to talk with colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to help them understand the significance of these small bioenergy plants to horseracing and other rural industries.

Planning policy, as we have heard, also needs to respect the horseracing industry. Breeding, training and racing horses needs a lot of land. The Newmarket area has wonderful soils and clear water from chalk streams, which grow the excellent grass that in turn develops thoroughbred horses. We must not allow the genuine need for new housing and green energy to damage the water and grassland, or to restrict the land available for the horseracing industry.

The Sunnica solar farm has been approved, despite the concerns expressed by the horseracing industry, among others. It is vital that we mitigate any damage. In particular, we must have strong regulation and enforcement to ensure that any fire in the battery energy storage units can be managed without damage to the surrounding area, people, horses, wildlife and our precious watercourses. Applications for further solar farms must take account of the needs of the horseracing industry, particularly the studs where breeding mares need a calm environment.

We also have a speculative application in the area for something called Forest City. That is causing a worrying amount of concern and stress for people, because it would completely destroy the environment of the area and really damage the horseracing industry. Unless it puts in a planning application, answers all questions and has that planning application decided, it can continue to cause stress and angst in the area with its well-funded plans that have no detail behind them.

To end on a positive note, I was honoured to attend the National Stud graduation ceremony last week. We celebrated with the 29 graduates, all of whom have jobs to go to following their qualification. They are people

from all areas of our economy and from all backgrounds. Of course, some of them have always been interested in horses, but some did not know they were interested until they heard about the scheme and got involved. We had a taxi driver and someone who had been cooking burgers. They have all qualified with this prestigious qualification and, as I say, they all have jobs to go to. These people are the future of horseracing. Will the Minister join me in congratulating the graduates and thanking the staff at the National Stud for running an excellent training programme?

3.22 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) for securing this important and timely debate. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, where I detail hospitality received from the Jockey Club. I am also a member of the all-party parliamentary group on racing and bloodstock.

Horseracing is the UK's second-most attended spectator sport, after men's football, with over 5 million people visiting British racecourses every year. Horseracing attendees, contrary to popular belief, come from a diverse range of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, with 39% of horseracing tickets purchased by women. British horseracing is undeniably a huge success story. Across all metrics, British horseracing remains a force to be reckoned with, particularly in terms of its economic and cultural impacts. Our races attract the best horses, and we have the best bloodstock and some of the best trainers. Racing is a British cultural institution.

Jim Shannon: For the record, the hon. Member for Spelthorne referred to an exciting horserace and mentioned Banbridge—I think it came in third. Anthony Peter McCoy is the most famous jockey from Northern Ireland. Hailing from Moneyglass in County Antrim, he is widely regarded as the greatest National Hunt jockey of all time. He rode 4,358 winners and was crowned British champion jockey for a record 20 consecutive years. That tells you what Northern Ireland does, Mrs Harris, and we can do it better than anybody else.

Helen Maguire: I thank the hon. Member for his excellent contribution.

Racing is a British cultural institution that sets the gold standard for quality and is steeped in a rich history and prestige. Horseracing dates back more than three centuries, with thoroughbred horseracing first created here in the UK. It remains closely connected with royalty, a tradition that has continued with His Majesty the King. I was delighted that he came to the Epsom Derby this year, because this connection only further boosts its global reach.

Horseracing is a soft power asset in the British arsenal that is already working hard for the UK on the international stage. Four of the top 10 races in the world are held in the UK—more than any other country. Royal Ascot alone is broadcast to over 300 million households across 180 different countries.

In 2023, the British Horseracing Authority reported that the racing industry had direct revenues in excess of £1.47 billion. Its annual contribution to the British

[Helen Maguire]

economy was a staggering £4.1 billion, and the industry supports over 85,000 people, employing them in racecourses, training yards, stables and breeding organisations, as well as in the betting industry.

In Epsom, I have been absolutely delighted to go and see the training yards and meet the really hard-working individuals there. British horseracing simply would not be what it is today without those people working behind the scenes. It is vital and it underpins many local communities, particularly rural ones.

I have seen the positive impact of British racing in my constituency, which is home to the Epsom Downs racecourse and hosts the famous Epsom Derby. I was fortunate to be able to attend the Derby in June, which was an incredible, exciting and fantastic event—anyone who has not attended it before should do so.

A report commissioned on behalf of the Jockey Club highlights how economically significant the Epsom Derby is on a national scale, and how it is just as important on a local scale for the constituency and the county that it calls home. The report found that its economic impact in 2024 alone was over £63 million, and the races' events, hospitality and visitor spending accounted for over £56 million of the total. The Epsom Downs training facilities and employment opportunities came in a close second and third, each bringing in an estimated figure of between £2.5 and £3 million. The revenue brought in by the event highlights that horseracing is an anchor institution in the local economy, contributing nearly £1 billion of capital through supporting regional hospitality and cultural industries in east Surrey.

Given the importance of the horseracing industry, it is disappointing that the reform of the horserace betting levy did not better deliver support for it. The levy yield for the 12 months to 31 March 2025 reached almost £109 million. That is the fourth successive year of increase, and the highest yield since the levy collection reforms of 2017, but it is still short of the 2007-08 record of £116.5 million. I urge the Labour Government to reconsider their decision not to support extending the levy to overseas racing, because the income of the industry continues to fall. In the past two years, the levy board estimates that betting turnover on British racing has fallen from £11 billion to £8.5 billion. The board says,

"falling turnover is unlikely to prove a positive for the sport's long-term health."

Does the Minister agree that British horseracing is an international success story, a source of global soft power and a vital community asset in many towns across the UK?

Wera Hobhouse: Does my hon. Friend agree that, with good intentions, the Government wanted to do something about gambling addiction, but so much gambling is now done on the black market? We should look at gambling addiction as a public health issue and look at other reforms to support the horseracing industry.

Helen Maguire: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I was recently at a Gamblers Anonymous meeting so that I could understand the real-world consequences of gambling at first hand.

What actions are the Labour Government taking to ensure that British horseracing continues to thrive and prosper? Support is more important than ever and has public backing. The 2025 report of the APPG on racing and bloodstock found that 53% of Britons say that horseracing is an important part of their culture; 66% say that they view racing as an important part of the identity of towns such as Newmarket, Doncaster and Cheltenham, as we have heard from Members representing such constituencies today; and a further 56% state that they support a law requiring greater reinvestment into British horseracing.

I would also like to highlight serious concerns about the future of Kempton Park racecourse—as the hon. and gallant Member for Spelthorne spelled out today with his racing commentary—which is currently under threat from housing development on the entire site. If that goes ahead, it will have a devastating impact on the Epsom horseracing community, due to its close proximity to Epsom Downs.

Kempton Park is a major source of various racing opportunities throughout the year, offering a safe, all-weather race surface. If lost, it would require Epsom horses and their trainers to travel much further distances to find suitable races. That is simply unacceptable, so I urge the Minister to consider the consequences of that closure and redevelopment on the Epsom horseracing community if they go ahead. If such an application is submitted, is it possible to find a compromise that would keep all parties happy—for example, with a development going ahead only on the back lands of the Kempton Park site while the racecourse is maintained in its current form?

As well as supporting the industry and our racecourses, we need to ensure we protect the horses, which are the backbone of the sport. Animal Aid reported that in 2025, 254 horses were killed due to racing, while 641 total whip abuses were recorded across 515 incidents. That is absolutely tragic, and we must do more to protect our racehorses.

The Liberal Democrats are clear that animal welfare must always be upheld and that human entertainment will never be an acceptable justification for poor animal welfare. We are calling on the Government to prevent the abuse of racehorses and to reduce avoidable deaths by creating an independent regulatory body for horse welfare. That body would be separate from the British Horseracing Authority.

I would like to highlight the tireless campaigning by my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon), a fellow supporter of British horseracing. For over a year, he has repeatedly championed greater equestrian safety, particularly for horses and their riders when on our roads. I urge the Minister and all those here today to listen to his campaign and support his private Member's Bill on horse and rider safety.

We cannot talk about horseracing without talking about betting and gambling, which many view as synonymous with the sport. The Liberal Democrats have been calling for reforms to protect people from gambling harms. We recognise the dangers of gambling, such as psychological distress and financial and social difficulties. We also recognise that there is a distinction between the harms posed by betting on horseracing and those posed by online gaming slots, which is why we proposed doubling the rate of remote gaming duty and

did not support the Government's proposals to harmonise gambling tax rates. We are thankful that the Government listened to the Liberal Democrats and adopted our proposal, but we continue to believe that more decisive action is needed to combat the harms caused by gambling, and especially gambling advertising.

I reaffirm my support for British horseracing, which is an undeniable success story. I urge the Minister to reflect on the contributions made here today and to listen to my calls to guarantee that we continue to do all we can to support this important industry.

3.31 pm

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and highlight that I have visited and met a number of trainers in my two years as shadow Minister, as well as with the APPG. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) on securing this important debate. No one can doubt the passion with which he speaks for British horseracing, racing more widely, and his constituents, who have raised concerns about the future of Kempton Park racecourse and the sport more broadly. Dare I say that he might have a future in commentary, given the opening of today's debate? So watch out, Ruby Walsh! It was very impressive.

Like my hon. Friend, I enjoyed the King George and seeing Harry Redknapp being the winning owner. In fact, I have enjoyed going to Kempton over the years. It means a great deal to a large number of people—not just the community immediately around the racecourse, but the wider London and south-east community, which sees Kempton Park as one of its home courses, alongside Lingfield, which is slightly closer to where I live in south-east London.

I understand my hon. Friend's concerns about the development proposals that might come forward and this Government's weakening of green-belt protections, an issue that I have raised on several occasions as the shadow Sports Minister. We are talking today about the impact that this might have on British horseracing, but the concern is felt across all of British sport. In particular, part of the broader concern around the impact on planning protections is the future of Sport England. If we are going to continue to have great British sports, we must ensure that future and current generations have somewhere to go and watch sports, whether that is at the elite level, as we are talking about today, or the grassroots. I hope the Government listen carefully to that concern. It is not just a Department for Culture, Media and Sport issue, but a local government one. The concern is felt across this House and across a number of sports.

More broadly, today's debate is about the future of British horseracing as a whole. I enjoyed the contributions from a number of Members who I know care passionately about the sport and work very hard as part of the APPG. Horseracing is one of Britain's greatest sporting success stories. It is woven into our national identity and remains one of our most successful global sporting exports. It is also of enormous economic importance, particularly to our rural economy. British horseracing contributes around £4.1 billion to the UK economy

every year, supports more than 85,000 jobs and generates around £300 million annually in tax revenues for the Treasury. More than 500 training yards and 660 stud farms support rural communities across the country. More than 5 million racegoers attended Britain's 59 racecourses last year, with attendances increasing by 5% year on year.

The industry's value extends far beyond those headlines, as we all know. It supports hotels, pubs, restaurants and countless small businesses across the country. It provides opportunities for people from every background, with institutions such as the National Horseracing College, which we have heard about, and the British Racing School. British breeding attracts significant international investment, and our welfare standards are rightly regarded as the best anywhere in the world. In fact, since 2000, British horseracing has invested £63 million into veterinary research, which has helped to reduce fatal injuries on the racecourse by around a third. Alongside a number of Members who have spoken, I have had the privilege of visiting some horseracing facilities across the country.

As the shadow Minister with responsibility for sport and gambling, I recognise the unique relationship between horseracing and betting. Unlike almost any other sport, horseracing's finances are fundamentally intertwined with a well-regulated betting industry. Media rights, sponsorship and the horserace betting levy contribute around £350 million every year to British horseracing. I smiled when listening to some Members argue that we should have tighter regulations on gambling but who then also complained about a reduction in funding for horseracing. For me, that position is classic—it is a certain party trying to look both ways. I do not think that most people in racing recognise that position, and we have to be honest about the trade-offs at play. We support evidence-led, proportionate regulation that protects the most vulnerable people while allowing the 22.5 million adults in Britain who bet each month to do so safely.

Today, the Gambling Commission has announced that following a protracted pilot period, there will be a phased introduction of affordability checks over the course of an implementation period of an unspecified length. That has already caused huge concern. We had hoped that the Government and the Gambling Commission would reflect seriously on this issue, but unfortunately, that has not been the case.

On a number of occasions, I have raised my concerns about the lack of Government oversight of the decision made by the arm's length body, which was also raised by the hon. Member for Liverpool Walton (Dan Carden). It seems a complete dereliction of duty from the Government, and DCMS in particular, to have allowed the Gambling Commission to go ahead without bringing the plans back to Parliament following the pilot. It is deeply concerning to me as a shadow Minister, and it is deeply offensive to this House, whose elected Members would like to scrutinise these decisions on behalf of the British public. It is disappointing that this decision has gone ahead, and there will be severe financial consequences and implications for the sport of horseracing and jobs in this country.

We can look at a variety of aspects of this issue. There is an element of intrusion into the lives of people who just want to bet safely with their well-earned money in a safe environment. I think we can all see the risk of consequences. I remember a debate in this place during

[Mr Louie French]

the last Parliament. I was one of the few Members in the room without a horse track in their constituency, or any ministerial or shadow ministerial responsibilities, but I raised the same concerns about the impact of such a policy on British horseracing. Let us consider the amount of money that is spent in a week at Cheltenham or Aintree. We could see these regulations being triggered very quickly, which would lead to more and more people being driven to the illegal black market. That should be a concern for every single Member of this House; regardless of their perspective on gambling and horseracing, that is the biggest threat to gamblers and to people suffering from addiction in this country. Because of the potential unintended consequences, we must not continue with this policy.

I find it completely unacceptable for Members to stand up in this place and advocate for British horseracing and for safe, regulated gambling in this country, but then to continue to put in the way hurdles and obstacles that drive the black market in this country. Enough is enough. We have to be honest about the decisions we are making as policymakers, and we have to be honest that the Government are ducking decisions and allowing the Gambling Commission to make them without the scrutiny that there should be from this elected House. Around 120,000 horseracing bettors could face enhanced financial checks, and the majority are expected simply to refuse them, which will reduce betting turnover and cut levy income for the sport, all while moving those punters into the black market, which is growing significantly under this Government.

The previous Conservative Government made it clear that these checks should only proceed if they can be delivered entirely frictionlessly, yet following the Gambling Commission's pilot, decisions were delayed and independent analysis was not fully published. More concerning, this policy has now been signed off for implementation without key stakeholders in horseracing and betting being able to see that vital evidence, such as NatCen's independent review of the pilot. The Gambling Commission is now operating beyond its remit, and it must be brought to task by this House or by the Government. I hope that the Minister will agree that like other policies introduced from the gambling White Paper in 2023, this decision needs to have full and proper parliamentary scrutiny.

I appreciate that the Minister and the Department are very busy with another race that is currently under way to decide who will be the future Prime Minister, as well as, perhaps, the race to be the future Member of Parliament for Clacton—I understand that has been set off while we have been in this Chamber. However, the fact that this decision has been taken unilaterally by the Gambling Commission shows a clear abdication of duty by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. I believe, sadly, that DCMS has failed to grasp and deal with the necessary details in this case.

The situation is quite simple. The checks being proposed have been proven by the Gambling Commission's pilot not to be “fully frictionless”, which had been promised by Ministers in this Government as well as in the previous Government. Evidence suggests that illegal betting has expanded dramatically in recent years, as

more and more burdens and taxes have been placed on the regulated market, directly resulting in significant migration away from it.

I have said a number of times that I have no problem with bashing the bookies, but I want that to be done in the most traditional sense—that is, by those who have a bet on the horse that they want to win—and not by the Government continuing to drive this underground, illegal, black market trade, which we know is fuelling some very dodgy characters overseas. As we know, illegal operators pay no UK tax. They make no contribution to horseracing. They provide none of the consumer protections required of licensed operators and they create serious integrity risks for the sport. The Treasury is already estimated to be losing around £300 million annually because of this illegal activity, and that figure is only likely to increase because of punitive tax rises by this Labour Government and the introduction of these financial checks.

The Government cannot claim that they have not been warned—I have spent the best part of two years warning them that this will only get worse, and I know that there are Labour Members in this House who share my concerns. If we generally want consumers to remain protected, we should encourage them to stay within the regulated market rather than unintentionally pushing them elsewhere. The horseracing industry also needs and deserves clear engagement from the Government, so I hope that the Minister will answer a number of questions, all of which are fairly straightforward.

Will the Minister commit to stronger engagement with the British Horseracing Authority and the wider industry, regardless of who is in No. 10? Will she ensure that the “Anti-Gambling Commission” publishes a full update on the financial risk assessment pilot before any further decisions are made? Will she require that the Gambling Commission publishes an implementation timeline for these intrusive checks? Will she also say what steps will be taken to ensure that answers from credit reference agencies will be consistently given with results, and that there will be no discrepancies between agencies' recommendations? Finally, will she work across Government to ensure that British horseracing continues to receive the scrutiny and support deserved by an industry that contributes billions to our economy, sustains tens of thousands of jobs and forms such an important part of British sporting heritage? I urge the Government to heed my words today and to do all they can to support British horseracing traditions.

3.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) on securing this vital debate on the future of horseracing. There have been many valuable contributions and I will try to respond to all the points that were made to me. Of course, I am not the Gambling Minister—that is Baroness Twycross, who sits in the other place—but I will also ensure that she writes to Members about some points.

The focus of this debate is the future of Kempton Park, and I know that the hon. Member is deeply concerned about the long-term option agreement on the racecourse land, which runs until 2028, as well as

the local anxieties around potential housing development on green-belt and floodplain land. He made a couple of points about the national planning policy framework. Where the NPPF seeks to support the development of land connected to railway stations, that does not grant automatic permission or remove appropriate local oversight. I have asked my office to reach out to my counterpart in MHCLG, who I am sure will meet him—the hon. Member for Spelthorne will appreciate that planning is an issue for local authorities and MHCLG. I know that the Gambling Minister, who I spoke to earlier today, will be happy to meet him, but this particular point on planning is for MHCLG.

The hon. Member showed in his speech that he is a strong advocate for his constituency and the industry. He shared examples such as the many emails and the public meeting at the Magpie pub. Clearly, this issue is of real concern to his constituents, and I recognise the significance of the track—I think he said that it dates back to 1878.

Although the developer has stated that a planning application is not imminent this year, the Government fully recognise the immense sporting and cultural value of this historic venue. Kempton Park is home, of course, to the iconic King George VI Chase on Boxing day. That legendary steeplechase and mid-season highlight of the jumps calendar is fiercely defended by leading trainers and racing fans alike, some of whom have joined us in the Public Gallery.

The hon. Member illustrated that point very powerfully in his opening remarks. I draw his attention to the fact that there are 40 examples of racecourses represented on the national heritage list for England, with grandstands, pavilions and racing stables included. I encourage the hon. Member to submit an application to Historic England if he would like a specific part of Kempton Park racecourse to be considered for listing.

I reiterate that, although any specific development proposal remains a matter for local government and the independent planning process, we completely understand how much this internationally famous racecourse means to the heritage of British racing and the local community. I am sure the hon. Member for Spelthorne will appreciate where these decisions lie, but after this debate I will write to him and set up these meetings, as I have committed to doing.

His Majesty's Government recognise the significant contribution that racing makes to British culture and its particular importance to the British economy, as has been rightly mentioned. It plays a central role to the livelihood of many different communities. I am well aware, from my time as the shadow Minister for Gambling, of the strength of support on both sides of the House for horseracing, as well as some of the concerns and challenges faced by the sector.

British horseracing is a world-class industry; it is the envy of the global sporting community, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Walton (Dan Carden) rightly highlighted. It was a joy to see him in his home city last week. Flagship events such as Royal Ascot, the Cheltenham festival, Goodwood or York are major international attractions. We have two Members here from Doncaster, my hon. Friends the Members for Doncaster Central (Sally Jameson) and for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher); it is important to recognise the 250th anniversary of the St Leger

festival. It was a delight to join my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central in 2023 on the day that His Majesty the King attended. I have been pleased to go to the St Leger on more than one occasion, and would be delighted to go back. Being just down the road from my constituency, I know just how important Donny racecourse is.

Beyond the glamour of some of the elite festivals, horseracing is an economic powerhouse. It is our nation's second largest spectator sport, contributing more than £4 billion annually to the economy and supporting approximately 85,000 jobs, many of which are vital to the sustainability of our rural communities. As the Minister for Tourism, I am aware of Britain's reputation as a global leader in horseracing and breeding. Indeed, it is promoted worldwide as part of the GREAT Britain and Northern Ireland campaign, demonstrating the role that sport plays in soft power.

I recognise the concerns of industry and Members that have been raised about the introduction of financial risk assessments. The Gambling Commission today announced its intention to implement these assessments through a careful, phased approach. The commission outlined that the recent pilot demonstrated that these assessments can successfully identify individuals in severe financial distress without intruding on the overwhelming majority of customers.

Crucially, the pilot showed that, for those that did reach the threshold for assessment, checks can be undertaken without friction in 97% of cases. We must remember that it affects only 0.5% of customers. However, I fully appreciate the concerns put to me. The policy was established in the 2023 White Paper under the previous Government and has been in force for three years, subject to a two-year pilot and a phased implementation. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), and others have raised concerns and put questions to me, and I recognise that he has taken a keen interest in the subject. On 16 November 2023, he put a written question to the then Gambling Minister, the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), under the previous Government. In his reply, that Minister talked about how the current system was inconsistent and how they wanted to bring some uniformity.

A point was put to me by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Walton about where the policy is set. The policy is set by Government; it started under the previous Government and has continued under this Government. The Gambling Minister, who sits in the other place, is responsible for that, and its implementation is for the Gambling Commission. Having spoken to the Gambling Minister, I know she has met the Gambling Commission and put many of these questions to them. I am sure that the Gambling Commission would meet any Member of this House; I can set up those meetings if that would be welcome. I have heard the points that Members have put to me, and I will take them back to the Gambling Minister.

Mr French: I think we are beyond this “he said, she said” about what happened in previous Parliaments. The commitment from the previous Government was clear that these checks must be frictionless. The Minister also said at the time that the checks should be frictionless, but she has acknowledged in her comments that they

[Mr French]

are not completely frictionless, so why are we proceeding with something that is against what the previous Government and this Government have said is their policy?

Stephanie Peacock: I recognise the point made by the shadow Minister. I quoted him in recognising his consistency on this issue, and I noted that he put questions on this to the previous Government. Around 97% have been frictionless in the pilot. Obviously, it has not yet been rolled out, but it will be, and it will be kept under close consideration.

The hon. Member also put another couple of questions to me. I understand that the evidence will be published in due course and the implementation timeline will be published after the summer. If he would like to meet the Gambling Minister, I am sure she will meet him and other hon. Members who are interested.

Horseracing holds a unique position as the only sport in receipt of a direct, Government-mandated levy, which is paid by bookmakers at 10% of gross profits and is projected to return £110 million to the sport this year. Following a comprehensive review of the levy, a written statement to the House in March outlined that there will not be legislative changes to its rate or scope at this time.

In last year's Budget, the Chancellor announced that British horseracing was specifically carved out of the increase to gambling duty, which affected overseas racing and other forms of betting. We recognise that bookmakers already contribute through the 10% levy and we want to acknowledge the valuable role the sport plays in British culture. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), who is no longer in his place, raised the unintended consequences with me. I will ensure that the Gambling Minister writes to him, and I will reflect those concerns to the Treasury.

As announced last week in our response to the consultation on fees, on-course bookmakers will now be charged on the basis of gross gambling yield rather than days of operation. That removes a significant financial disincentive for bookmakers to attend smaller race meetings and will result in a fee reduction for 44% of operators in this category.

I am incredibly encouraged by the proactive and ambitious steps that the racing sector is taking to innovate. The British Horseracing Authority's work on Project Beacon and Project Pace shows exactly the kind of forward-thinking strategy needed to protect and grow the sport.

Members have raised valid points about the risk of consumers moving to the unlicensed illegal gambling market. The Government recognise that that threat exists. We are taking action in this space, including providing an additional £26 million funding over three years to enable the Gambling Commission to increase its enforcement activity. The illegal gambling taskforce, chaired by Baroness Twycross, is actively considering what more can be done to tackle those threats and will meet again later this month.

We are also committed to ensuring that the licensed sector is not placed at a commercial disadvantage. To support that, we will soon launch a consultation on

banning unlicensed gambling sponsors in sport and will continue to work across Government to crack down on illegal advertising.

Finally, I want to touch on the issue at the heart of the sport—the welfare of the animals. Over the last 20 years, British racing has invested more than £47 million in veterinary research and education, with funding from the levy board and more recently the Racing Foundation. To build on that progress, the levy board is committing £3.7 million to disease surveillance, veterinary science and education programmes starting this year.

Esther McVey: I appreciate that the Minister might not be able to answer some of the very specific questions I raised, so could she make sure that the Gambling Minister writes to me with the answers?

Stephanie Peacock: I absolutely make that commitment. I touched on some of the points that the right hon. Lady made, but I will make sure that she receives that letter.

British horseracing is a cherished part of our national heritage and an invaluable contributor to our economy. As I have reflected in this place before, I have a number of happy memories of going to the races myself, down the road from my constituency to Donny races, and to York races, where I spent a wonderful day with my late, great agent, Jim Andrews, who sadly passed away shortly after that time. I always think of him when I think of York races.

3.53 pm

Lincoln Jopp: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Sally Jameson), my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), the hon. Members for Liverpool Walton (Dan Carden), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Ely and East Cambridgeshire (Charlotte Cane), as well as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), and our own resident expert, my hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French).

I am grateful for the Minister's reply. I took great note of what she said, and I hope they were also listening to it in the boardroom of Barratt Redrow. I look forward to rereading her words tomorrow, because they told a very large story.

I also thank all of racing who have come in behind this campaign to save Kempton Park racecourse and the members of the public, including my own residents, a number of whom have come up here today, and those from racing more widely.

I hope that racing is reassured that the expert voices that have been given airtime today show that there are some very fierce advocates for horseracing, and we look forward to it having a bright future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of British horseracing.

3.54 pm

Sitting suspended.

Fraud Strategy 2026-29

4 pm

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of increasing fraud protections and the Fraud Strategy 2026 to 2029.

It is a pleasure to lead this debate with you in the Chair, Mrs Harris, and I thank the Minister for being here.

Fraud has been spreading like the plague for years, infecting almost every aspect of daily life: online, on the phone, at work or out and about. People do not know who or what to trust. Fraud costs the UK economy more than £1 billion a year, yet sentencing is well below its 2010 level. In 2025, British consumers lost £1.2 billion to fraud—a four-year high.

What does that rise mean? My constituent's small business in Ilton was scammed out of more than £3,000 worth of orders through a credit card scam, wiping out their business. Another constituent's elderly mother had debts run up by an estranged relative, who used her details to the extent that bailiffs came round. Another constituent was tricked into investing hundreds of thousands of pounds into a building company that then shut down. Lots of constituents have been defrauded out of thousands of pounds by tradespeople for half-done work or work that never actually happened.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. My constituents have similar concerns about the impact of fraud, especially on vulnerable people. I have spoken to the noble Lord Hanson, who has been developing the strategy, to outline those concerns. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the direction in the new UK fraud strategy, the expansion of the “Stop! Think Fraud” campaign and the promotion of proactive policing are good things that should be welcomed?

Adam Dance: They are good things and I will come on to them later, but we do need more support for vulnerable adults and young people—something I will also come on to.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We need to get a balance. I spoke to the hon. Gentleman beforehand, and we must be incredibly careful not to let the state overreach in the process. Does he agree that a law-abiding citizen should be able to walk into their local bank and spend, withdraw or transfer their own hard-earned money without being treated like a criminal suspect? We must ensure that the fraud strategy does not become a nanny-state charter that forces ordinary people to prove to a bank clerk why they want to spend their own money.

Adam Dance: I agree with some of what the hon. Gentleman said, and I will come on to talk about why banks should have more face-to-face contact with people instead of sending them online.

It is even simple, little things. One constituent was scammed into paying a clean air zone charge, which does not exist, because it popped up on a sponsored page on Google. Another agreed to send Amazon vouchers to their elderly mother, but they actually sent them to a scammer.

In April, in response to this problem, the Government came forward with the 2026 to 2029 fraud strategy. They have committed £250 million to the plan over the next three years. There is a lot to welcome in the strategy, particularly the establishment of the fraud victims charter and the new Report Fraud scheme to replace Action Fraud, which was totally useless.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): I will make my intervention very quick, Mrs Harris. Unfortunately, Police Scotland and the Scottish Government have not opted to join the Report Fraud scheme. That means that my constituents do not benefit from it. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that they should make progress in joining it?

Adam Dance: I totally agree that Scotland should join, because we should work together against fraudsters, not in isolation or silos.

Short of catching the fraudsters themselves, my constituents who were defrauded provided every scrap of evidence that they or their businesses could, but they were all told by Action Fraud that there was no line of inquiry. I welcome the strong start on international co-operation and the introduction of an online crime centre, a new abuse taskforce and more data-driven policing. If properly supported, that work could help us to take a proactive approach to addressing the types of fraud that my constituents were victims of. Will the Minister look into whether the cases that Action Fraud failed to follow up can be reopened with those new systems in place? Lots of my constituents are still out of pocket.

Despite that, there are still some real challenges with the strategy. The big question is whether, given the scale of the problem, £250 million is enough. Will we be able to afford the technology and the workforce to keep up with fraudsters? Is the strategy fully costed, or will we find ourselves in a situation like that of the defence investment plan, for which the money just is not enough? I know for a fact that we do not have enough police officers to do outreach to all the people vulnerable to fraud in Yeovil and south Somerset. Given that we are losing billions to fraud, surely it would be a smart move to invest a bit more in fighting it. The expansion of awareness campaigns such as “Stop! Think Fraud” is great, but what are the challenges to that? How will current approaches be improved to reach more people and be more effective, given that fraud cases are still on the rise?

Another glaring issue is that the strategy provides no changes to the current system of largely voluntary charters and Ofcom oversight of social media and tech platforms to prevent fraud. Two thirds of authorised UK financial fraud last year happened on social media. In fact, through things like paid advertising, these companies could be making a profit from fraud on their platforms. It is not good enough, so why are the Government and Ofcom not doing more?

The Online Safety Act 2023 gives us tools to fine social media companies for not reducing harm, but will they be properly used? Will the Minister commit to push Ofcom to prioritise fraud enforcement? Will the Government give Ofcom a hard deadline to implement the fraud advertising codes of practice, which would set out rules for ads online?

[Adam Dance]

We could talk for hours and hours about the different types of protection that need to be in place, but sadly for me—and luckily for everyone else—we do not have hours, so I will focus on the cases of two constituents and the questions about safeguarding that they raise.

Christopher lives with developmental language disorder and struggles to produce or retain complex information. He is very agreeable and is known to give consent even if he does not really understand, which makes him incredibly vulnerable. He was targeted by romance fraudsters, who misled him, largely online, into believing that he was in a romantic relationship with one of their gang. He was convinced to travel to Hungary to buy a property for them to live in. He invested £70,000 in a property that was never transferred to him. After that, he was persuaded to purchase a rundown property in Yeovil and was misled into joining a property scheme that he could not afford. He ended up taking on loans to manage his debt. My team and I managed to get him the £70,000 back from Lloyds after his therapist reached out to us, but that case raises serious questions about how effective protections are for the most vulnerable people. About 7% of the population have DLD, and many more have other forms of learning difficulties, which can make them just as vulnerable, so we are not talking about a small number of people.

Banks' fraud protection systems rely on automated texts or AI, which the fraud strategy continues to support as a key safeguard, but that is not good enough for someone with communication challenges or learning difficulties. Christopher's therapist faced endless barriers in trying to get in contact with Lloyds; they were turned away from the branches and told to go online.

We need clarity from the Minister about how the Government will work with the banks to ensure that their safeguards are accessible for people with neurodiversity and disabilities. Will the fraud victims charter establish a right for vulnerable people to access in-person specialised support in bank branches or banking hubs? We also need clear routes for therapists and support providers to flag concerns to financial services and the police. Christopher should not have been able to take out those loans without it being flagged.

The second case that I want to raise is that of Jason, a veteran who served in the Navy. He has come up from Somerset to sit in the Public Gallery today—welcome, Jason. Jason was a victim of wealth creation and property investment schemes run by trainers who styled themselves as social media influencers and targeted veterans and military personnel. These influencers promote themselves and their lifestyle online. They then go to veterans such as Jason, bigging up their military background to build trust. The combination of slick social media, a background that people think they can trust and the promise of training courses that offer financial freedom can be pretty convincing. That is especially true when we consider that far too many of our veterans are facing hardship that, according to Trussell, means that they are twice as likely to run out of food than those who have not served.

In reality, the training courses do not deliver the skills and high-figure salaries promised. Instead, people get basic technology and mindset training. The people running these schemes know that what they offer is absolutely rubbish, but they will convince people to invest in more

sessions and to recruit others until they are trapped. Jason ended up spending over £20,000 on training. It got so bad that he even considered taking his own life. Thankfully, Jason is with us and has turned things around. He is now working a fantastic job and has completed an Ironman to raise awareness and money for his community. Sadly, others felt they could not find a way out, like Danny Butcher, who took his own life and in whose name a foundation has been set up, of which Jason is a trustee.

The fraud strategy does not give us much on how to deal with cases like that, where people are clearly being taken advantage of and misled, but where proving fraud is a challenge. I hope the Minister will commit to looking into how measures in the strategy can be used to investigate these types of practices. What we urgently need is proper protections and warnings on social media about the risks posed by this industry. We already have warnings in place for gambling and social media. We even provide warning labels for public service broadcasts. Why can we not do that for wealth creation influencers?

Jason and other veterans have been fighting for the Financial Conduct Authority to fully regulate the property training industry across the UK. Jason is not the only one, and I have heard from many people who have been drawn into this. The Government also need to investigate the practices and impact of the broader influencer wealth creation industry. It is not just veterans, and if we do nothing, more and more vulnerable people will be ripped off.

It is no overstatement to say that we are fighting a war with fraudsters. For far too long they have been one step ahead. I hope that the Minister will be able to address the issues we have raised today and will commit to setting up a meeting with me and her ministerial colleagues, so that we can talk in more detail about these cases. This issue is not going away, and I will not either until I have seen stronger protections put in place.

4.12 pm

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dame Angela Eagle): It is a great pleasure to be in this Chamber with you in the Chair, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) on securing the debate. I also thank him for how he has set out some of the very difficult problems that all our constituents have faced as technology has provided the wherewithal to industrialise frauds and scams, often from abroad.

There is now no way to get a handle on what they are doing without involving ourselves in international co-operation. As technologies advance, the threat of these kinds of activities evolves, and we have to do what we can to try to keep pace with them and hopefully get ahead, so that we can do some prevention rather than trying to pick up the pieces after terrible things have happened.

At this juncture, I express my empathy and sympathy with the hon. Member's constituents, some of whom he has mentioned today, including Christopher, who was the subject of a romance fraud, and Jason, who was subjected to fraudulent behaviour and the temptation of wealth creation that was not really there.

One thing that has struck me very strongly since I took up this post three weeks ago, and from my own constituency caseload over many years, is how invidious

and difficult it is for the victims of these kinds of behaviours to admit that they have fallen into a trap, because many of them feel a bit silly and embarrassed and do not know where to turn to try to get redress. The way that redress has worked in this country in the past has not kept pace with the industrialisation of fraud, its international aspect and its sophistication. It has been difficult, therefore, as the hon. Member for Yeovil recounted, for systems to keep up.

People feel not only embarrassed, worried and a bit shameful that they have fallen into those traps, according to my constituency caseload, but they do not find it easy to get redress. I congratulate the hon. Member on his constituency work, and the way he has used the systems that we are putting in place to ensure that the money can be refunded in many cases, though obviously not all.

My esteemed colleague Lord Hanson leads on this area of work. Despite all the innovations in our constitution since I have been in this House, we do not allow Lords to speak in Commons debates, thank goodness. I am here, however, and more than happy to talk to Lord Hanson about some of these issues.

Before I come to the points raised, I want to make some simple but important ones of my own. Fraud is high volume and high harm, for the reasons the hon. Member for Yeovil outlined. Hon. Members will know that is true from their experience in advice surgeries. It deprives law-abiding people of their hard-earned money; it hits businesses with sometimes crippling losses; it destroys lives and livelihoods; it destroys confidence and mental health; it drains our economy; and it weakens our resilience and undermines confidence in the rule of law.

This problem is directly linked to my work as Security Minister, because it helps to fuel some of the most serious threats we face as a country, as well as causing the human harm we have heard of today. Our response has to match the scale and impact of the threat. I believe the Government have acted with clarity and ambition, with the new fraud strategy published in March, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. I thank him for acknowledging that he was happy to see elements of that, such as crucial international action and the replacement of Action Fraud—it was so difficult to see any action coming from it that it would have been better named “Inaction Fraud”. Thankfully, that has been replaced.

As the strategy is put into effect, it will include Report Fraud, victim-support schemes and charters on advertising. In its broadest sense, the strategy brings together all parts of the system, including Government, law enforcement, industry and civil society, and goes further and faster in our fight to disrupt fraudsters and protect the public. The strategy is built on clear principles: to disrupt criminals, to safeguard people and businesses, to respond strongly, to protect victims and to enforce the law.

The Government have invested £250 million and will work with everyone to clamp down on the fraud epidemic. We will try to make that money work as hard as possible in co-operation with other parts of the system to get best value for money. To some extent, that is my answer to the question the hon. Member for Yeovil asked about whether £250 million is enough: it is not a bad start, and

we will see how it develops to ensure that we cover the bases that we need to cover in this area as quickly as possible.

At the heart of the new approach is a new online crime centre, which has over £30 million of investment to bring Government, law enforcement, GCHQ and industry together in one place. Its mission is clear: to identify the technological enablers of fraud, which are rapidly evolving and industrialising, as I said before; to disrupt fraud at scale; and to deliver high-impact interventions at speed. The online crime centre is working on those things even as we speak.

Safeguarding and supporting victims is also at the forefront of the strategy. We are strengthening public awareness through an expanded “Stop! Think Fraud” campaign because it is important to remember that, as plausible as some of these people are, the more we can increase the suspicion and resilience of the people who interact in these systems, the more likely we are to be more resilient to fraud. I acknowledge absolutely that the psychological cleverness of a lot of fraud is something to behold. These people are very clever at what they do. They are very sophisticated in how they draw people in. All of us have a duty to try to warn individuals about the kind of dangers out there from those very sophisticated approaches.

Adam Dance: I thank the Minister for her answers. Does she agree that we should fully regulate the property training industry? That is a huge issue across the whole country and affects lots of people. As the Minister rightly said a second ago, people do not come forward because they are embarrassed, which is also why, unfortunately, they take their own lives.

Dame Angela Eagle: We need to look at where the issues are, where the loopholes are and where people are being exploited. We need to see what we can do, both as law enforcers and as regulators, to close those loopholes. I am not going to say yes immediately to the hon. Gentleman’s question, not least because it is not directly in my bivouac, but he can rest assured that we will look at the trends and see how we can harden the target, if I might put it that way. A whole range of individuals can be scammed and fall for very sophisticated frauds without realising—and by the time they do realise, it is too late.

Obviously the private sector, specifically the banking sector, has an important part to play with the warnings that it puts on its electronic banking systems. We need to do an enormous amount of co-operative work in all this, to ensure that our online crime centre can pick up and collaborate with all parts of the system that is there to try to protect people. As I said earlier, “Stop! Think Fraud” is an important part of that. If something looks too good to be true online, it almost certainly is. We have to get that education out there, be it through influencers or other types of people, to the people who are potential victims in this area.

Adam Dance: On banking, one of the biggest issues for Christopher was that his carer was turned away by Lloyds many times and sent online. We often see that issue because banks are shutting and we have banking hubs. Does the Minister agree that the banks should work more with people with neurodiversity and

[Adam Dance]

disabilities and work more to see those people face to face? There should also be more support in our banking hubs.

Dame Angela Eagle: The banking hubs are at an early stage of their development. They are a good development. At the moment, they are less sophisticated in the services that they can offer. We have to work with banks, which are—because most of their customers wish it—going online and leaving the high street. That does leave in a more vulnerable situation people who perhaps are more vulnerable to being scammed online. In our work with the banks, we have to try to make the case that they need to have special relationships and ways of dealing with those who are neurodiverse or who may be easier, in some ways, to fool. In my experience, almost anyone can become a victim of this kind of fraud if they get caught at a vulnerable moment or when they are upset about something, so we have to deal with education in a much more holistic way, rather than just categorising people. But I understand the hon. Gentleman's point.

Using data from Report Fraud, we are improving our ability to identify emerging fraud trends and local fraud hotspots, which enables us to work with police forces and community partners to deliver targeted interventions where we see they are needed most. We are just beginning to get to the stage at which we can start spotting these kinds of trends and trying to prevent them, rather than trying to pick up the pieces after a fraud has happened.

It is equally important to co-ordinate the fraud protect networks, for which City of London police has responsibility. Bringing together local, regional and national law enforcement, the network helps to reduce the threat of fraud and repeat victimisation through consistent prevention messaging, practical safeguarding advice and targeted public engagement. I think that as we see more of these issues developing, we will be able to see what the trends are and be more preventive and ahead of the trends before they cause damage.

An estimated 70% of fraud has an international element: it knows no borders. As part of our effort to counter that, the UK sponsored the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and Interpol global fraud summit in March. That ministerial summit brought together over 1,000 attendees across 115 Governments, over 40 Ministers and senior law enforcement, and over 500 private sector companies, including big tech, with the aim of strengthening international co-operation, raising global standards and agreeing co-ordinated, multi-sector action plans to deal with fraud. We also want to do what we can to try to shut down some of the scam centres that we know are appearing in particular areas of the world; where we can, we will sign memorandums of understanding with countries that may have a particular issue that we see impinging on our citizens.

The international part is extremely important. As the hon. Member for Yeovil mentioned in his speech, working with the telecoms companies and the big tech companies is equally important. I assure him that our new fraud strategy is particularly aimed at being able to ensure that we bring these different strands together and bear down on the current levels of fraud, which are completely unacceptable.

Question put and agreed to.

Human Rights in Kashmir

4.30 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for human rights in Kashmir.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. As a British parliamentarian, I remain proud of my roots in Pakistan and Kashmir. I continue to be privileged to chair the all-party parliamentary group on Kashmir, which has support from across the political spectrum. It has worked across Parliament and engaged with Government Ministers around one simple principle: the inalienable human rights of Kashmiris must always come first. That is why this debate is extremely timely, as Members across the House continue to be extremely concerned about the seriously escalating tensions in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Before I come on to that, let me put some points on the record very clearly.

For over a decade, I have called out the persecution, oppression and injustice faced by Kashmiris in Indian-occupied Kashmir. Their calls for justice have too often gone unanswered. Their fundamental human rights have been violated. Their right to self-determination has been repeatedly denied to them. For over a decade, I have called out and challenged the most repressive and draconian security legislation: the Indian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, the Public Safety Act and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. This legislation continues to be used to give the Indian armed forces sweeping powers of detention and immunity to persecute journalists, human rights defenders, political activists and ordinary civilians.

In August 2019, we all saw the right-wing Modi Government unilaterally and illegally revoke articles 370 and 35A, stripping Jammu and Kashmir of its special constitutional status. That was followed by mass detentions and unprecedented communications blackouts, severe restrictions on civil liberties and the further erosion of democratic rights. I led the campaign in this place, on every single forum, to call out the illegal actions of the Modi regime. I want to today reassure the sons and daughters of Kashmir who remain under oppression in Indian-occupied Kashmir that their voices will never be silenced. They will continue to be heard loudly and clearly in this place.

I want to make another point for the record before I move on to the substantial part of the debate. There is no comparison between the long-term systematic human rights abuses in Indian-occupied Kashmir and the current situation in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The scale, duration and nature of the repression in Indian-occupied Kashmir remains in a different category altogether. But that does not mean we should remain silent when serious concerns arise.

That brings me to the deeply troubling and worrying situation we have witnessed in recent weeks in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Members from across the House have been contacted by deeply distressed constituents unable to reach loved ones because of the lockdown and communications blackout imposed on parts of Azad Kashmir, now well into its fourth week.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I have been inundated with representations from my constituents who have friends, family and loved ones in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. They are deeply concerned that the blackout has been going on for a month. Does my hon. Friend agree that the only way forward is peaceful resolution and for the Government of Pakistan to return to the table for peace talks, and that our Government can play an important role in making those representations to the Pakistani Government?

Imran Hussain: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I shall come to his point shortly.

For over 1 million British Kashmiris, more than 50,000 of whom demonstrated on the streets of London over the weekend, this is not a distant foreign policy issue. These are their parents, brothers and sisters—their families—and they have been worried sick, staring at silent phones waiting for a call that does not come and hoping that people they love are safe.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab) *rose*—

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab) *rose*—

Imran Hussain: I will give way, but I ask hon. Members to be extremely brief in their interventions because I have a substantial contribution to make.

David Williams: I thank my hon. Friend for his work as chair of the APPG on Kashmir. In Stoke-on-Trent North, I too have been contacted by residents about people who live on both sides of the line of control, and they are seriously worried. We have had reports of shortages of food, medical supplies and baby milk. Does my hon. Friend agree that the UK Government must do all they can to open all possible humanitarian routes?

Imran Hussain: I will take the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner), who may make a similar point.

Dr Gardner: My hon. Friend is correct. I recently met constituents in my office who are deeply concerned about the internet blackout. They are unable to find out if their families are okay and have told me some horrendous stories, including—that is unverified—that a two-year-old child has been shot. Their major concerns are the food shortages and lack of medicines that can go in. Does my hon. Friend agree that the blockades must stop immediately so that children can survive?

Imran Hussain: I thank both my hon. Friends, and I absolutely agree with them. They will know that, as chair of the APPG on Kashmir, I co-ordinated a letter to the Foreign Secretary calling for urgent diplomatic engagement to address those very issues and tabled an early-day motion that now has the combined support of over 70 parliamentarians across the House, so I am grateful to all my colleagues. We have met Ministers and convened emergency parliamentary meetings through the APPG because this House cannot simply look away.

We have all seen deeply concerning reports of continued bloodshed, arbitrary arrests, restrictions on communication and a breakdown in dialogue with representatives of grassroots groups. More recently, we have seen reports

suggesting restrictions on the movement of food and medical supplies into parts of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Those reports are profoundly concerning.

We have also seen reports that those seeking to act as peaceful arbitrators, including senior Pakistani politicians, have been prevented from entering Azad Kashmir. That cannot help to de-escalate the situation. Groups such as the Joint Awami Action Committee have for many months sought to pursue peaceful negotiations around long-standing civic governance and economic concerns. There was a commitment that those issues would be resolved through dialogue.

Criminalising grassroots movements can never be a solution. Most of their reasonable demands were negotiated and met. There remain a number of outstanding issues, most importantly the 12 refugee seats. Of course, there will be strongly held views on all sides of that issue, but whatever view one takes, ordinary Kashmiris should not be made to pay the price for a failure to return to peaceful table talks.

It is deeply unfortunate that the situation has deteriorated to this point. I say to the Governments of Pakistan and Azad Kashmir, and to the Joint Awami Action Committee, that the answer must be dialogue, restraint and peaceful negotiations. I welcome the efforts made in recent days by political figures and others who have called for an immediate return to negotiations. Those seeking to lower the temperature deserve the full support of this House.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend talks eloquently about the need to lower the temperature and de-escalate the situation. One of my constituents was visiting relatives in Kashmir recently and saw with his own eyes a relative shot by the Pakistani authorities who was too terrified to go to hospital because he feared reprisals. Does my hon. Friend agree that the shooting of unarmed civilians and peaceful protesters should not be tolerated by any country?

Imran Hussain: I absolutely agree. While not all the reports have emerged in full because of the communications blackout, they continue to concern the whole House, as they should.

My message to those who use inflammatory and divisive language is that they do not help anyone. Successive Pakistani high commissioners and Ministers have engaged constructively with the all-party parliamentary group in the past. I ask the Governments of Pakistan and Azad Kashmir what message they are sending on human rights to over a million British Kashmiris and the international community. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer)—he could not be with us today, but he is no doubt well represented—for regularly meeting me and the all-party parliamentary group. He has visited Pakistan and continues to monitor the situation and raise the matter directly.

Today, we in this House make an appeal to our Government to send a direct appeal to the Prime Minister of Pakistan and the Government of Azad Kashmir to ensure that this situation ends immediately. The lockdown and communications blackout must end. Any restrictions affecting the movement of food and medical supplies must end. Those acting as peaceful mediators must be

[Imran Hussain]

allowed immediate access. Meaningful table talks with grassroots groups must resume immediately. At the heart of those negotiations must remain one principle above all others: respect for the human rights of Kashmiris. Our Government must play their role for the 1 million British Kashmiris impacted by this situation. They must continue to use every appropriate diplomatic channel to encourage restraint, de-escalation and dialogue.

Ultimately, peace and dialogue must prevail. There is only one sustainable path forward: peaceful table talks. As chair of the APPG on Kashmir, I will continue to work constructively with all those prepared to pursue that objective. I will continue to stand up and be the voice for over 1 million British Kashmiris with family who continue to be directly affected by these events. We will continue to speak out whenever the human rights of Kashmiris are threatened, and I will continue to push for a peaceful resolution in which the voices, dignity and fundamental rights of the Kashmiri people are placed where they always should have been: at the very heart of any lasting settlement.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): I remind Members that they need to stand if they intend to speak, as there are a lot more people in the Chamber than on my list, and that you need to have been here at the start of the debate to be able to make a speech.

4.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) for setting the scene, and I commend him for his words of wisdom and his directions for finding a peaceful way forward. I have supported him every time he has had this debate over the years, and I am happy to be doing the same again. I declare an interest as chair of the APPGs for international freedom of religion or belief and for Pakistani minorities, so this issue is close to my heart, and the hon. Member made the case incredibly well.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak on this matter. I commend all hon. Members who have consistently brought the plight of the Kashmiri people before the House. I have spoken on this matter before and make no apology for returning to it. The situation in Kashmir is not a distant abstraction; it is a lived reality for millions of human beings—people with families, faith and hopes for their children. This United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has both a historical connection to that region and a moral obligation to speak truth to power. I look forward to the Minister's answer—she is much liked and respected by all of us in the House.

Kashmir, divided, disputed and suffering, represents one of the most protracted human rights crises of our age. Whether we speak of India-administered Kashmir or Pakistan-administered Kashmir, the reality for ordinary men, women and children on the ground is one of fear, repression and silenced voices. Amnesty International has documented with harrowing clarity the realities of life in Kashmir: arbitrary detention, torture, restrictions on freedom of assembly, the suffocation of civil society,

and many killings and injuries. These are not abstractions; they are human beings deserving of dignity, justice and freedom.

In any debate, I try to think of the words of Micah 6:8 in the Holy Bible:

“And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justice, and to love kindness,
And to walk humbly”.

That is the reason I am here: to obey that Holy Scripture and speak up for my brothers and sisters across the world, wherever their human rights are being suppressed and wherever they are being persecuted. That is the standard of this House, and we must hold ourselves to it when we speak of Kashmir.

I have been on delegations to Pakistan in the past, and I am due to return, if God spares me, because I feel so strongly about the human rights of the people of that part of the world. I have sat with community leaders, religious minorities, and mothers and fathers who simply want safety and freedom for their children. Freedom of religion or belief—that intrinsic, God-given right—is denied across the Kashmir region. Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Christian communities have all experienced the fragile nature of life when the state does not protect fundamental rights as it should.

The situation in India-administered Kashmir since the revocation of article 370 in 2019 has illustrated the dangers of unchecked Executive power: communications blackouts, thousands detained and journalists criminalised. In Pakistan-administered Kashmir, democratic accountability remains a transformative aspiration rather than a lived reality. Can we honestly say in this House that we are doing all in our power to stand against that? This debate is a chance for us to show our united resolve to speak up for our brothers and sisters in Kashmir.

You told us earlier to be conscious of time, Mrs Harris, so I conclude with this: we must use every diplomatic channel—bilateral, multilateral and through the United Nations—to press both India and Pakistan to uphold their international human rights obligations. I look to the Minister to ascertain how we can seek to play our part in ensuring that the people of Kashmir are not disenfranchised from justice for geopolitical convenience. The heartbeat of this Government's foreign policy must be not only simple human rights but simple humanity. It is with that simple humanity that I speak.

4.47 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) for securing this important debate.

Luton South and South Bedfordshire is a vibrant and diverse area. We have residents with far-reaching global connections, which include a large first, second and third-generation British Kashmiri diaspora for whom Luton is home. They have built their lives and raised their children in Luton, but they also maintain very strong familial ties to Kashmir and regularly travel back to see relatives and loved ones.

One recent example of the strong ties between Luton and Kashmir is our community's remarkable fundraising effort over the past two years. Because of Luton's close

connection to Kashmir, in 2024, UK charity Kids Operating Room approached me and my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) to seek our support for the building of a new paediatric operating theatre in Kotli. Led by local GP Dr Tahir Mehmood, our Luton community and other donors raised more than £300,000 to fund the establishment of a fully equipped children's operating theatre at District Headquarter hospital in Kotli. The project delivered more than 3,300 pieces of specialist equipment, bringing lifesaving care closer to thousands of children. This powerful intervention from our Luton community to support the universal human right of access to healthcare highlights just how connected our Luton community is with Kashmir and why many of my constituents are deeply concerned about the ongoing human rights abuses in the region.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East has set out so eloquently, periods of unrest in the region, followed by authoritarian crackdowns, have become increasingly common, and we are once again seeing serious human rights abuses. The latest unrest began after peaceful protests against the Pakistani Government's proposed electoral changes, which many feared would weaken political representation.

On 5 June, the movement was banned and there were subsequent mobile and internet blackouts. That has resulted in many of my constituents being unable to contact family and loved ones, while British nationals remain stranded in the region without communication or a way to return home. Reports indicate that more than 100 activists and journalists have been arrested, with roadblocks and travel restrictions effectively sealing off the region. Clashes between protesters and police have also resulted in several deaths and many injuries.

While every Government have a responsibility to maintain public safety, over recent years we have seen the unlawful use of tear gas and the use of lethal force, and both protesters and police officers have been killed. It seems to demonstrate a pattern of disproportionate action, preventing freedom of expression, peaceful assembly or access to communication with the outside world.

We are all very aware of the political tensions in Kashmir, and the UK is home to significant diaspora communities of Pakistanis, Indians and Kashmiris. Emerging issues related to Kashmir therefore have the potential to affect our community cohesion here if we do not handle them sensitively.

I know that Ministers are very alive to these issues. Will the Minister ensure that any dialogue and actions relating to events in Kashmir are handled seriously and sensitively and with consideration of the concerns of the diaspora communities? Will she elaborate on what discussions she is having with counterparts in Pakistan to ensure that human rights are being upheld in Kashmir and that communication lines are fully restored? Will she also provide an update on steps being taken to identify and support British nationals who are stuck in the region and to assist them with returning home?

For my constituents, it is vital that we continue to use our influence on the international stage to remain steadfast in our commitment to ensuring equal and inalienable rights for all around the world, including Kashmiris' right to self-determination, and that we call out any Government or regime who infringe upon those rights.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): I intend to start the Front-Bench speeches at 5.8 pm. Will Members please make sure that they keep their remarks as short as possible?

4.51 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): Thank you for calling me in this debate, Mrs Harris. I will be very brief because others wish to speak.

I put on record my thanks to the hon. Members for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) and for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) for the huge work they have consistently done on the issue of Kashmir. The hon. Member for Bradford East chairs the all-party parliamentary group on Kashmir, which has made a huge difference and meant that the issue has been properly debated in Parliament.

The contribution of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) brought together the whole issue, which is fundamentally that the way Kashmir was treated at the time of Indian independence is an overhanging colonial responsibility for Britain that has never been resolved. The matter was referred to the United Nations in 1948 and that is where it still is. At some point, it will have to be returned to, and there will have to be a recognition that this is an international issue that requires an international solution.

The immediate crisis is, in a sense, symptomatic of the partition of Kashmir, with the line of control between Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan-administered Azad Kashmir. The situation in Azad Kashmir at the moment is frankly terrible. I have constituents who have family there or who are there at the moment. The information getting back to us is that there are shortages of just about everything. There is an inability to move about and there are very high prices for food. There are also irrational detentions of people for taking part in protests and the general suppression of any civil and political activity.

That is what happens when the economy spirals out of control and people cannot eat or feed their children properly. Something has to be done. At the very least, one would hope that the British Government—I look forward to the Minister's response—will put whatever pressure it can on the administration in Azad Kashmir and be firmly in touch with the Pakistani Government through the high commission here to ensure that there is a lifting of the sanctions, a return of universal access to the internet, free movement around Azad Kashmir and a preparedness to engage to bring about long-term peace and stability within the region.

Too many people are suffering, there is too much tension, and too much abuse of power is taking place at this very moment.

4.54 pm

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) for securing this important debate.

I speak today not only as a British Kashmiri but as someone who was born in Kashmir. Having left that part of the world when I was just a few months old, it is now not unusual for me to hear about what is going on, in the main, across Kashmir. Let us be in no doubt: the

[Tahir Ali]

disruption and disputes in Azad Jammu and Kashmir have no equivalence or bear any comparison with what is happening in Indian-occupied Kashmir.

The principal enemy of the Kashmiri people's basic rights and dignity remains the extremist BJP Government in New Delhi. Last November, 10 United Nations-appointed human rights experts condemned India's arbitrary arrests, torture and lynchings of Kashmiris over the past couple of years. Those experts highlighted reports of house demolitions and other tactics of collective punishment being used against Kashmiri Muslims. Even the Indian Supreme Court, which has been complicit in the oppression of the Kashmiri people many times, ruled against such actions in 2024.

However, Modi's thugs do not care about their own law, let alone international law and morality. Day after day, families find that their sons are missing, and then they find them dead in canals or ditches. These unexplained disappearances are later ruled by the authorities to be suspected suicides. Day after day, there is new torture, of old and young alike, including children. No one is spared. It is all too obvious what is happening.

The Indian state tries to hide away all its crimes by suspending over 8,000 social media accounts, including the accounts of independent journalists, and imposing media blackouts. However, the truth still comes out. For as long as the Kashmiri people are oppressed by the extremist BJP regime, we will continue to call them out. However, every time that we raise this issue, the Government read out the usual script that this is a bilateral matter between Pakistan and India. Kashmir has never been a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan; it never has been and never will be. It is a mess that was left by a British Labour Government in 1948, but we now have another Labour Government that can right that wrong. Now is the time to step up.

What is happening in Azad Jammu and Kashmir? A 38-point plan or list of demands was put to the Government; 36 have been met. There is a dispute over two points, one of them being the 12 appointed seats that purportedly represent Kashmiri migrants. The only way to resolve this issue is through peaceful negotiations and talks, which can happen only if we have flexibility on both sides. Actually, there are three sides involved: the Pakistani Government; the Government of Azad Jammu and Kashmir; and the Awami Action Committee. Someone needs to co-ordinate and facilitate talks between them, and the British Government can play their part.

We object to the direct shooting of innocent civilians, at least 18 of whom have lost their lives. The internet blackout needs to end and the internet needs to be restored, so that families can stay connected. Most important, however, the people who voice their concerns in this country often find that they are targeted, in the form of their families being harassed in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. That has to stop. Those families are tortured, harassed and then made to read out public statements. That is a violation of all international law and it cannot be allowed to continue.

Dr Gardner: Some of my constituents have been labelled terrorists because they have spoken out and are now unable to travel to visit their families, even if the blockade should end. Does my hon. Friend agree that

that type of draconian abuse of the law must stop and that my constituents should not be labelled as terrorists just for speaking out?

Tahir Ali: I absolutely agree. No one's views, no matter how harsh or difficult they may sound, should be used as a means of torture or a means of distracting them from the agenda by making their families in Azad Jammu and Kashmir feel the brunt of what is being said here.

None of us can agree with what the authorities are doing in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. They are blockading baby milk, food and internet access. That blockade must be lifted and talks have to resume. That is the only way we will find a peaceful settlement to the saga that has been rolling out for the past few weeks in Azad Kashmir.

5 pm

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) not only for his work on the APPG on Kashmir, but for securing this debate.

There are two distinct issues: the first is around Indian-occupied Kashmir and the second is what we are now witnessing in the region of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. In so far as Indian-occupied Kashmir is concerned, the people in that region have been oppressed for decades. That issue has been raised on numerous occasions on very different platforms, including at the United Nations. We know that many resolutions have simply been ignored.

My primary point, which follows on from the speech of the hon. Member for Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley (Tahir Ali), is about the British Government's position. Historically, it has been said that there are two nuclear power nations and that this is a bilateral issue. In my view, and I hope the Government can take away the position set out by several hon. Members in this Chamber, when there are two nations with nuclear capabilities, it becomes an international issue. In my respectful view, I suspect that if the British Government were to adopt a multilateral or international position, it would certainly help the region, which is the most militarised zone in the whole world. Torture, rape and extra-judicial killings frequently take place there.

Coming back to what is close to home—I say home because we have all seen demonstrations here in London on multiple occasions—the United Kingdom is home to about 1.4 million British Kashmiris. They have heritage and family and friends in that region. I will not repeat what has already been set out. British Kashmiris can be found scattered around virtually every constituency in the United Kingdom, so it comes as no surprise that more than 70 Members of Parliament have signed a joint letter asking for diplomacy and dialogue.

One of the biggest problems is that when there is a vacuum of information, we do not know what is happening. That has caused enormous anxieties for families that live in the United Kingdom and have heritage or family back in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Again, I am grateful to the chair of the APPG for his work. I have had several meetings with the acting high commissioner of Pakistan, who has been open and transparent about what they want to see and how they want to resolve

matters. As someone who has direct heritage—like the hon. Member for Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley, I was born in that region—I am more than happy to assist in mediation if our Government are in negotiations with the Pakistani Government, so that we can reach a sensible resolution.

5.4 pm

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris.

I thank the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) for securing the debate. It is clear where I stand on this issue, because I co-signed his letter late last month. Human rights abuses in Kashmir matter deeply to my constituents in Woking. More than half of my local Asian population have ancestry from and links with Kashmir. It is a fundamental issue that is raised with me regularly, and particularly over the last month. I am here to represent them, and to ensure that the British Government show some leadership and ensure that civil liberties are returned to normal in Kashmir.

The Liberal Democrats and I condemn the reports of the excessive and unlawful use of force against the people in Kashmir. For the last two years, the Government there have arrested, banned and clashed with people protesting over flour and electricity costs. In the last month, things have got worse still. These actions have been condemned by human rights groups such as Amnesty International, which has argued that the state has been weaponising anti-terror laws as a legal excuse to crush peaceful protest. Peaceful protesters aspiring for equal rights should never be criminalised.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Many of my constituents are deeply concerned about the safety and wellbeing of their loved ones in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, as tensions continue to rise and communications blackouts and obstructions persist. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is vital that peace negotiations take place between the relevant parties, so that we can ensure an end to the violence and see sustained stability in the region?

Mr Forster: I completely agree. Britain has a long history in the region. I believe we can be a force for good—for a change—in that region, to bring about peace. I will talk about that later.

Dictatorships, not democracies, trigger communications blackouts when they want to hide what is happening. I am afraid that is what is currently happening in Kashmir. The removal of access to the internet and phone networks is a tool of oppression. We have seen that in Iran; we do not want to see it in Kashmir. The communications blackout demonstrates just how dire the situation has become. I believe, given the reports, that 200 people have been killed in the last month but, because of the communications blackout, we just do not know. British Kashmiris, and UK residents with connections there, have been cut off from contacting their loved ones, including British citizens currently in the region.

Although I want to focus on the immediate issues in Kashmir, it is fair to say that a long-term and stable resolution in Kashmir can be achieved only by putting human rights, democratic aspirations and the self-determination of the Kashmiri people at the centre of

our foreign policy. We need a lasting peace, and we can achieve that only with the explicit consent of the Kashmiri people.

For decades, British Governments have hidden behind the convenient diplomatic fiction that Kashmir is strictly a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan. The Liberal Democrats and I urge the Government to remember their historic and moral responsibilities as the co-author of United Nations Security Council resolution 47. The UK must champion the democratic mechanism of a free, fair and impartial referendum, as originally mandated under international law. The Liberal Democrats call on the Government to reject the unilateral changes to Kashmir's status. We believe that any constitutional reform or future governance structure must be led by the democratic aspirations of Kashmiri people, and agreed by them, and that their human rights need to be front and centre.

Let me come back to the matter at hand and the concerns about Kashmir right now. I have some questions for the Minister. How often have the British Government raised issues in Kashmir with the Pakistan Government and the high commission? When was the last time, and when are they going to do so again? When was the last time our Prime Minister spoke to the Government in Pakistan? Finally, what steps are the Government taking to ensure that British nationals in the region, and British citizens with families there, are able to access support and maintain contact with loved ones?

5.9 pm

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) for securing the debate, which is the second he has secured to which I have had the pleasure of responding as shadow Minister. As chair of the APPG on Sri Lanka, I know how much effort goes into running geographic APPGs, particularly those on areas where real difficulties and sensitivities need to be navigated, so I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work.

Kashmir remains one of the most sensitive disputes, with its impacts stretching far beyond the region's borders. It continues to have profound implications not only for the people who live in the region but for wider regional stability, as well as for the diaspora communities here in the United Kingdom that have close family and cultural ties to Kashmir. There is agreement across the House that allegations of human rights abuses should concern us all, wherever they occur. Those concerns should not be viewed through the prism of geopolitics or partisan politics, but through our shared commitment to universal human rights, the rule of law and democratic freedoms.

The long-standing position of the Conservative party is clear: we have never sought to prescribe a solution to the constitutional status of Kashmir. We believe that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting political resolution through peaceful dialogue, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. Equally, however, we have consistently argued that the United Kingdom should not shy away from raising credible allegations of human rights abuses wherever they arise, and should encourage both countries to uphold their international obligations.

I note that the hon. Member for Bradford East secured the debate with a firm eye on the current situation in Azad Kashmir. Reports of the use of force

[Mr Andrew Snowden]

against protesters, internet shutdowns, arrests under anti-terrorism legislation and the intimidation of political activists are of grave concern. Human rights are universal and should be defended consistently, irrespective of which authority is responsible.

Recent events have demonstrated how fragile the security situation remains. The appalling terrorist attack last year, in which 26 people were killed, was a reminder of the continuing threat posed by terrorism in the region. There can be no justification for attacks that deliberately target civilians. India has every right to defend its citizens against terrorism through lawful, reasonable and proportionate means. At the same time, all parties have a responsibility to pursue dialogue wherever possible.

Against that backdrop, I have a number of questions for the Minister. First, how are the Government using their diplomatic engagement with both India and Pakistan to encourage constructive dialogue on human rights, while maintaining the UK's long-standing position that the dispute itself should be resolved peacefully by the parties? Secondly, what discussions has the Foreign Office had with both Governments regarding allegations of arbitrary detention, restrictions on journalists and civil society organisations, and the protection of religious freedom across Kashmir?

Thirdly, given that both India and Pakistan are members of the Commonwealth, what assessment has the Minister made of the role that Commonwealth institutions could play in encouraging dialogue on human rights and confidence-building measures between the countries? Fourthly, following the recent protests in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, what representations have the Government made regarding the reported use of force against demonstrators, and the importance of thorough, transparent and independent investigations into allegations of wrongdoing?

Fifthly, given the terrorist attack last year and the subsequent escalation in tensions between India and Pakistan, what assessment have the Government made of the current security situation, and what steps are Ministers taking with international partners to reduce the risk of further military escalation between two nuclear-armed states? Finally, with elections in the region due to take place on 27 July, what steps are the Government taking with international partners to ensure that they are free from interference and fair for all those who seek to participate?

The United Kingdom enjoys important relationships with both India and Pakistan, and those relationships should enable us to have candid conversations where necessary. Supporting dialogue, encouraging respect for human rights, condemning terrorism in all its forms and promoting regional stability are not contradictory objectives; they are mutually reinforceable. The Opposition will continue to support a balanced and principled approach—one that encourages peaceful dialogue, upholds international human rights standards and seeks lasting stability for all the people of Kashmir. I look forward to hearing from the Minister on how the Government intend to advance those objectives in the months ahead.

5.14 pm

The Lord Commissioner of His Majesty's Treasury (Taiwo Owatemi): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) for securing the debate, and all Members who contributed. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), who could not be here today, but who has continually raised this issue with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

It is clear from the debate that there remains strong interest across the House in the situation in Kashmir, and deep concern for the welfare, rights and aspirations of people living on all sides of the line of control. As we have heard again today, the issue continues to resonate strongly with many communities across the United Kingdom, including those with family, cultural and emotional ties to the region.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): I have been contacted in recent weeks by many constituents who are desperately worried for their loved ones in Kashmir, and who are struggling to reach them because of the communications blockade. Does the Minister agree that such communication shutdowns, which have also been used by Indian-occupied Kashmir, are often an attempt by authorities to hide and cover up the crimes and human rights abuses they are committing? What assurances can she give us that the Government will put pressure on the Pakistani Government to stop any blockade?

Taiwo Owatemi: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. The communication blackout is an issue of concern, which is why the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), met the Pakistani Government in June to raise the Government's concerns.

Let me begin by setting out the Government's current policy and position. The UK has strong and long-lasting relationships with both countries and has consistently encouraged both sides to maintain dialogue and pursue lasting political solutions that support regional stability and security. That is why the Government's position remains that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting political resolution to the situation in Kashmir, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for the UK to prescribe a solution or act as a mediator. This has remained the position of successive UK Governments.

Ayoub Khan: The United Kingdom has many commercial agreements with India. Does the Minister agree that where the United Nations resolutions on human rights violations are not being followed, we should look at sanctioning it through our trade agreements?

Taiwo Owatemi: The UK has remained steadfast in its position since the 1970s, and it retains that stance today.

A number of hon. Members have raised concerns regarding recent events in parts of Pakistani-administered Kashmir, known locally as Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The Government are concerned by reports of unrest,

loss of life and injuries during a recent protest in the region. We have followed developments closely and discussed them with Pakistani authorities.

We are also aware of concerns relating to communications restrictions in the region, which have been especially concerning for British nationals and members of the British-Kashmiri diaspora seeking contact with friends and family. The safety and welfare of British nationals remain one of our highest priorities. In the light of developments on the ground, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has updated its travel advice and currently advises against all but essential travel to the region. Those already in the region should leave to avoid potential disruptions.

More broadly, whenever allegations of human rights violations arise, whether in Indian-administered Kashmir or Pakistani-administered Kashmir, our position is clear. We encourage all Governments to ensure that their domestic laws and practices are consistent with international standards. Any allegations of human rights abuse should be investigated thoroughly, promptly and transparently. Effective engagement with affected communities is essential.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Does the Minister agree that when we discuss Kashmir, we must remember that there are distinct realities? Indian-administered Kashmir has faced decades of conflict, crackdowns and human rights abuses and is the most militarised region in the world. The current situation in Azad Kashmir is worrying, but the two cannot be conflated. Does she agree that the priority in Azad Kashmir must be an immediate return to peaceful dialogue and negotiations?

Taiwo Owatemi: I agree that the issue in the region is concerning, especially in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome), that is the reason why the Minister for the Middle East is continuing to raise the issue with the Pakistani Government.

Several hon. Members have spoken about human rights in Indian-administered Kashmir. We regularly raise human rights concerns with partners around the world, including India and Pakistan, and we continue to encourage all states to uphold their international obligations.

The Chamber has also heard calls for the United Kingdom to play a more direct role in resolving the dispute. I understand the strength of feeling behind those views, but the Government believe that durable progress can be achieved only through peaceful engagement by those directly concerned. Our role is to encourage dialogue, support stability, advocate for human rights and reduce the risk of escalation.

Recent events have also served as a reminder of the importance of maintaining calm in a region that has experienced periods of heightened tension. The United Kingdom has consistently encouraged de-escalation, restraint and diplomacy. We will continue to engage with partners across the region in support of peace and stability.

Many Members raised concerns about communications restrictions, such as my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford East, for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner), for Birmingham Hall Green and

Moseley (Tahir Ali) and for Slough (Mr Dhesi). I understand that communications restrictions are particularly concerning for those with ties to the region, and these issues have also been raised by my constituents in Coventry North West. The continued use of some internet restrictions is worrying, and the United Kingdom is clear on the importance of rights being fully respected. It is important to ensure effective and constructive dialogue with the communities affected and, as I said earlier, that is why the Minister for the Middle East raised those concerns with the Pakistani Government.

On human rights abuses, which were raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Rochdale (Paul Waugh) and for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins), we strongly support individuals' rights to freedom of assembly and expression, and to peaceful political protest. We have consistently emphasised that any human rights violation should be fully investigated in line with international human rights law. Our overseas networks continue to monitor human rights issues across the country and raise them when appropriate with the Government of Pakistan.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I appreciate that the Minister is standing in for the Minister for the Middle East, who is not in his place this afternoon. On bilateral working, the UK Government have settled positions on Somalia, Crimea and the conflict in Israel and Palestine, and we do not recognise northern Cyprus. There is a whole host of areas of disputed territory where we, as a Government, have taken a position and said what we believe the outcome should be. Why is this dispute any different? Why are the Government unable to say, "We believe that UN resolution 47, which we originally supported, should be in play"? Why do we have a different position on this from our position on all the other conflicts and disputed territories in the world?

Taiwo Owatemi: The UK's position has been clear since the 1970s that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution to the situation in Kashmir, taking into account the views of the Kashmiri people.

Mr Forster: The Government have had the policy for 50 years, as the Minister has outlined, but it has not worked. Does she think it is time to change course?

Taiwo Owatemi: I thank the hon. Member for raising that point, but I think I have been clear. I know that this is an issue that many Members feel strongly about, but the current position of the FCDO is clear, and it is abiding by the position it has had since the 1970s.

The hon. Member also asked when the Minister for the Middle East last met the Pakistani Government. In June, he met the Interior Minister and the Minister responsible for law and human rights to discuss the issue. During his visits, our Minister also heard from a number of civil society organisations about the biggest challenges in Pakistan's human rights landscape.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is an advocate for freedom of religious belief and has been chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief for quite a long time. The UK Government are committed to defending freedom of religion or belief for all and to

[Taiwo Owatemi]

promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities. UK programmes promote the rights of religious minorities by facilitating interfaith dialogues, supporting the Pakistani Government to develop progressive legislation, and combating hate speech against marginalised religious communities online. We will continue to urge the Government of Pakistan to guarantee the rights of all people, including those from religious minority communities, in accordance with international standards.

Lastly, there was a question about when the Prime Minister last met the Pakistani Government. He met the Pakistani Prime Minister in April to raise concerns—many of the concerns that have been raised today.

In conclusion, our Government remain committed to supporting human rights, encouraging peaceful dialogue and supporting British nationals. We will continue to monitor developments closely and to raise concerns where we have them, and we will continue to encourage a peaceful and lasting resolution that takes into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people.

5.26 pm

Imran Hussain: I thank all Members who have taken part in this very important debate. Our constituents will no doubt have listened to all the contributions.

May I briefly address the age-old policy that this is a bilateral issue? Let us be absolutely clear in this Chamber that this is an international issue that stems from international law and the birthright of Kashmiris under

international law. We in this place have a moral, historical and legal duty, and it is about time we developed the moral courage to execute that moral duty.

I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister who responded to the debate today, but also to the Minister for the Middle East and Pakistan. He has kept me regularly updated, has visited Pakistan during this period and has assured me that he continues to monitor the situation, relay the concerns of this House and make sure that we push and press towards a peaceful resolution.

I will make this point to the Government again: over 70 parliamentarians now support the call of the all-party parliamentary group—I am grateful to them—and I hope the Government have heard that call clearly. We will not stop. We will continue that campaign, and more parliamentarians will join it.

To go to the root of it, I again urge our Government to continue to use every diplomatic lever to press the Governments of Pakistan and Azad Kashmir to immediately end the lockdown; to immediately restore all communications; to immediately allow full access to food and, in particular, medical supplies; to allow access to mediators and human rights organisations; and finally, to immediately resume peaceful table talks, at the heart of which must remain the inalienable human rights of Kashmiris.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for human rights in Kashmir.

5.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 7 July 2026

TREASURY

Fiscal Risks and Sustainability Report 2026

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): Since I became Chancellor, the UK economy has grown by 2.1%—the fastest growth among European G7 economies in that period, demonstrating that this Government's economic plan is the right one. Growth is the only way to deliver sustainable rises in living standards, and, after falling by 2.3% in the previous Parliament, living standards—real household disposable income per capita—have grown by 1.1% so far this Parliament. We have increased our resilience to global shocks by building stronger public finances and bringing down borrowing—which is less than the G7 average this year—while bringing in an additional £120 billion in public investment through changes to our fiscal rules.

The Office for Budget Responsibility's fiscal risks and sustainability report 2026, which was laid today, confirms the need to boost growth and maintain sustainable public finances. This demonstrates the importance of this Government's decisions to reduce the deficit, unlock a step change in public investment, and strengthen the tax base by announcing electric vehicle excise duty, in order to support a stronger fiscal position.

The FRS is an important part of the Government's fiscal risk management framework. The report fulfils the OBR's duty under the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011 to assess and report on the sustainability of the public finances and the key risks facing them.

This year's FRS provides a detailed assessment of the risks to long-term fiscal sustainability. Since the start of this Parliament, the Government have taken the necessary decisions to put the public finances on a sustainable path while continuing to support economic growth. The Government are bringing down borrowing. Borrowing in 2025-26 was over £23 billion lower than in 2024-25, and the OBR forecast it will continue falling in every year. This strategy is underpinned by robust fiscal rules, which were designed to unlock a step change in public investment while keeping debt on a sustainable path, alongside multi-year spending plans and wider reforms to the fiscal framework that strengthen credibility and transparency.

The Government have taken the decisions needed for long-term security and sustainability. For example, at Budget 2025, the Government strengthened the tax base by introducing eVED to respond to the long-term decline in fuel duty receipts. The Government have also published the defence investment plan, backed by £298 billion of investment over the next four years, to strengthen national security, support long-term resilience and invest in the capabilities needed for the future.

The FRS highlights the importance of productivity growth to fiscal sustainability. Tackling historical under-investment is critical to boosting productivity, and the Government are protecting the increase of more than

£120 billion in departmental capital spending over the Parliament. Decisions taken across this Parliament will raise output in the medium and longer term, as the OBR estimates that the combined supply-side effects of policy announced across the Parliament will raise the level of GDP by over 0.6% after 10 years.

[HCWS195]

EDUCATION

Child Protection Authority Consultation: Government Response

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): The Government have today published our formal response to the consultation on proposals to establish a Child Protection Authority in England. This marks an important step in strengthening how we as a country protect our children.

The child protection system

Keeping children safe underpins this Government's ambitions for opportunity, stronger communities and improved life chances. That means the way we work, and those who work within it, must be clear in their purpose, confident in their practice and effective in what they achieve.

Yet evidence from reviews, inquiries and frontline experience shows that this is not always the case. Too often, opportunities to prevent harm are missed; and too often, when concerns are raised, action does not follow quickly or effectively enough. As a result, there remains a gap between what we know works and what is consistently put into practice.

Many dedicated people work tirelessly to protect children every day. Yet gaps remain between what we know works and what happens in practice. These gaps can leave children and young people without the protection or support that they need, when they need it most.

What we heard

We consulted on the creation of a CPA following a key recommendation from the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. We received responses from practitioners, organisations, experts, and victims and survivors. Their insights have been central in shaping our approach.

A clear message came through: there is strong support for a national body that can bring greater clarity and direction, join up learning and turn it into action and help ensure that good practice is applied consistently.

At the same time, respondents were clear that any new body must make a positive difference to frontline work. It should build on what already works well, avoid duplication, and stay closely connected to the real experiences of children, families and professionals.

Many respondents, particularly victims and survivors, spoke powerfully about missed opportunities to act and the lasting impact this can have. Their voices underline the importance of not only learning from harm, but acting on that learning. Addressing this requires a stronger and more coherent approach at national level, alongside practical support for those working directly with children and families.

The Child Protection Authority

The CPA will provide national leadership to improve how child protection works in practice. It will bring together data, evidence, professional expertise and lived experience to spot risks earlier, support better decision making and help agencies work together more effectively.

A key role of the CPA will be to make sure that learning leads to real change. This includes making it easier for those working with children to access clear guidance and practical support, and ensuring that lessons from reviews and cases are followed through.

The CPA will provide national leadership and oversight of the child protection system. It will ensure that evidence and insight are used more effectively and that learning translates into meaningful change.

It will bring together data, evidence, practitioner expertise and the voices of children, families and survivors to strengthen how the system identifies and responds to significant harm. By doing so, it will support earlier intervention, clearer accountability and more effective multi-agency working.

The CPA will play a central role in:

- identifying emerging risks and patterns of harm earlier, enabling earlier and more co-ordinated responses;

- building a clearer national picture by bringing together information from different agencies;

- promoting and embedding good practice so that learning is consistently applied; and

- supporting the implementation of recommendations, ensuring that where improvement is needed, action follows.

It will also strengthen accountability across the system, working closely with inspectorates, regulators and Government Departments. We are exploring options to legislate, when parliamentary time allows, to equip the CPA with appropriate powers to act where serious or persistent failings leave children unprotected.

Crucially, the CPA will reflect the multi-agency nature of child protection. It will bring together expertise from all agencies that have a role in protecting children and across all settings where children could be harmed. Above all, the CPA will place the experiences and voices of children, families and survivors at the centre of its work.

Reform programme

The establishment of the CPA sits within a broader programme of reform to strengthen child protection.

Through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, we are improving how the system works in practice, including through strengthened multi-agency arrangements and improved information sharing. The Crime and Policing Act 2026 introduces a mandatory duty to report child sexual abuse, while wider cross-Government work, including action to tackle violence against women and girls and new duties of candour for public authorities, is helping to create a more transparent, accountable and effective system.

Together, these reforms reflect a determination to ensure that the system is better connected, more responsive, and more able to prevent harm as well as respond to it.

The CPA will play a critical role alongside wider reforms, supporting more joined-up working between services and helping to ensure that learning leads to better outcomes for children.

Next steps

The Government are committed to establishing the Child Protection Authority and are exploring options to legislate when parliamentary time allows. In the meantime, we will continue to develop the CPA's functions and capabilities, building on the existing work of the child safeguarding practice review panel. I would like to thank the panel's members and chair for their work to date.

This marks an important milestone on the journey towards establishing this new body. We will continue to work closely with partners across the system, and with children, families and survivors, as we move towards implementation.

Our goal is clear: a child protection system that is expert and decisive, better connected, more responsive, and focused on delivering meaningful change; that supports those working to protect children, learns from experience, and acts promptly where improvement is needed; and, above all, that ensures children are protected and supported to achieve and thrive.

[HCWS194]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Software Medical Devices

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Preet Kaur Gill): This Government are committed to ensuring the safe, reliable and effective operation of our critical national infrastructure and our national health service.

Under the Medical Devices Regulations 2002, NHS England is currently the legal manufacturer for software medical devices that underpin essential national services, including systems supporting urgent and emergency care such as NHS 111 and 999. These tools play a vital role in delivering care to patients and supporting the day-to-day functioning of our health system.

Following the planned abolition of NHS England, responsibility for these software medical devices would be transferred to the Department of Health and Social Care. These services will continue to be available to users without disruption.

As the legal manufacturer, NHS England currently undertakes responsibility for ensuring these devices meet required standards of safety and performance.

Following the transfer, the Department of Health and Social Care will continue to fulfil these responsibilities, maintaining the same focus on assurance, patient safety and regulatory compliance.

I am hereby confirming that the Department will ensure compliance of these devices with the Medicines and Medical Devices Act 2021 and the Medical Devices Regulations 2002.

This approach reflects the Government's commitment to upholding robust standards while ensuring continuity of these critical services.

Appropriate governance arrangements will be put in place with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency to support independence and accountability in the ongoing oversight of these devices.

[HCWS193]

JUSTICE

Safeguarding in Youth Custody: Review and Government Response

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): Today the Government published their response to Isabelle Trowler's independent review into the safeguarding of children in youth custody.

No child should ever come to harm, least of all while within our care. That is why safeguarding children within the youth custodial estate, as well as those being cared for by the state more broadly, must be an absolute priority for all of us in Government.

In November 2025, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman published a report into the historical abuse at Medomsley detention centre. There had been shocking and systematic abuse of young men and boys held there, by the very staff who were meant to protect them, between 1961 and 1987. The PPO's report examined what was known by authorities and identified serious, missed opportunities to act. We must ensure that the failings of the past are never repeated.

While the youth custodial estate has changed significantly in recent years, with fewer children in custody and more held in therapeutic environments such as secure children's homes and secure training centres, those who remain often present multiple complex needs. Despite clear progress, there remains troubling evidence that safeguarding issues persist.

In the light of this and the findings of the PPO's report, I commissioned Isabelle Trowler, the chief social worker for children and families to undertake a rapid review of current safeguarding arrangements in youth custody.

I am extremely grateful to Isabelle for undertaking this comprehensive review, and to the whole panel of experts for all their contributions.

The review makes 34 wide-ranging recommendations for the Ministry of Justice and the Youth Custody Service, as well as other partners across Government. It concludes that safeguarding responses within the youth custodial estates are generally robust, but highlights notable failings and areas where more must be done to ensure children's safety while they are within our care.

Importantly, the report addresses the management of allegations against staff and highlights how important independence and specialist expertise are within decision making that relates to child safeguarding. The recommendations also focus on the role of other key partners within the system, including local authorities, and on strengthening counter-corruption measures. Other important functions within the system are also addressed, such as reinforcing the importance of timely and regular vetting and Disclosure and Barring Service checks. I welcome all of Isabelle Trowler's recommendations and support the direction they set both within the youth custodial estate and across Government.

We are committed to working closely with our partners across Government to consider how best to deliver these for the whole system. I thank my colleagues across Government for all the work that has been undertaken on these recommendations so far.

The YCS's capacity and capability is crucial in delivering many of these reforms. That is why we have already begun implementing key changes within the youth custodial estate. We are bolstering expertise within the YCS to ensure there is specialist child protection proficiency, and are establishing a new safeguarding oversight board to provide dedicated scrutiny of risks, allegations and decision making. We have also improved the management of allegations against staff by ensuring that all abuse of trust cases are routinely referred to local authority designated officers and that safeguarding specialists are directly involved in counter-corruption investigations.

As the review makes clear, staff in the secure estate do one of the most demanding jobs in public service. It is our responsibility to ensure that our staff have the support and skills to keep children safe and deliver effective rehabilitation. We are redesigning initial training for frontline youth justice workers and strengthening recruitment to ensure the right people are better equipped in the right roles.

We will be taking forward the Trowler review recommendation for a proactive safeguarding inquiry and will reform the complaints system to allow trusted adults to raise concerns on behalf of children. Ensuring that processes are accessible, particularly for those with additional needs, is also crucial within this work. This will all ensure that children's voices are heard and acted on.

The Trowler review highlights the importance of a whole-system approach to safeguarding. The youth justice system has a strong history of effective partnership working at a community level. We will further enhance cross-Government governance structures and ways of working, bringing together justice, children's services and health partners.

The recommended reforms represent significant change to how we support and safeguard children across Government. Some of these measures will take time to implement and will need careful consideration to ensure they are practical and sustainable for the whole system.

Many of these recommendations will be taken forward as part of the forthcoming youth custody transformation plan, which will set out our longer-term vision for a safer and more effective youth custodial system.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the men who survived the horrific abuse at Medomsley, which was the catalyst for this review. While we cannot change the abuse that occurred, I would like to use this opportunity to reiterate the Government's apology.

On our own behalf and that of past Governments, we are truly sorry for what you endured and for how long it was allowed to continue. Without your courage in coming forward and sharing your experiences, the full extent of the abuse may never have come to light. Hearing directly about the profound and lifelong impact that this has had has only reinforced to me the importance of this work and the imperative of strengthening safeguarding for children in custody today.

I will deposit a copy of "A Rapid Review of Safeguarding in Youth Custody" in the Library of the House. The Government response has been laid before Parliament.

Robert Hamill Inquiry

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): I wish to inform the House that the report of the Robert Hamill inquiry, originally chaired by Sir Edwin Jowitt and now by Sir John Evans, will be published shortly after the summer recess, subject to parliamentary timetabling.

As I set out in my statement of 10 December 2025, the original inquiry chair, Sir Edwin Jowitt, advised the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Owen Paterson MP, on 25 February 2011, that the inquiry panel had fulfilled its terms of reference. However, following announcement by the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland in December 2010 of criminal charges against three individuals for perverting the course of justice, it was agreed that the inquiry report would not be submitted to the Secretary of State or published until the conclusion of these legal proceedings.

Following the conclusion of criminal proceedings in June 2024, a new chair, Sir John Evans, was appointed on 7 October 2024 due to Sir Edwin unfortunately being unable to continue in the role. Since then, steps have been taken to enable the publication of the report, and Sir John has now confirmed that the report is ready to be published.

As the person responsible for the publication of the inquiry's report, I have a duty, as a public authority under the Human Rights Act, to act in a way that is compatible with the European convention on human rights.

On 28 February 2011, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Owen Paterson MP set out that a checking process had been undertaken to meet obligations in relation to article 2 of the ECHR and national security. While I have not yet seen the report, given the significant passage of time since the last checking process was concluded, I have decided to make arrangements for a new one. I can confirm that this has now been completed, and I have received advice that there is nothing in the report which, if published, could breach article 2 of the ECHR by putting the lives or safety of individuals at risk, or would put national security at risk. I am therefore satisfied that the report can be published in full.

Given the time needed for the panel to finalise the text and to print the report, it will not be feasible to publish the report before the summer recess. My officials have therefore requested that the inquiry team retain custody of the report over the recess.

As with the publication of the Bloody Sunday, Billy Wright and Rosemary Nelson inquiry reports, I intend to consider giving advance sight to those who were designated as core participants by the inquiry, along with their legal representatives.

[HCWS197]

TRANSPORT

Automated Vehicles: Protecting Marketing Terms

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I wish to provide the House with an update on the implementation of the Automated Vehicles Act 2024.

Today I have published the Government's response to the "Protecting marketing terms" consultation and laid the Automated Vehicles (Marketing Restrictions) Regulations 2026 statutory instrument.

The purpose of the "Protecting marketing terms" consultation was to identify the words, expressions, symbols or marks that should only be used to describe authorised or listed automated vehicles. These regulations will help prevent end users in Great Britain from being misled into thinking that vehicles that are not authorised automated vehicles can safely and lawfully drive themselves.

Misleading marketing of automated vehicles is dangerous: it can mislead drivers into thinking that they do not need to pay attention to the road. As more manufacturers offer high-end driver assistance systems, misleading marketing risks worsening road safety and could undermine trust and successful adoption of self-driving vehicle technology.

The AV Act sets out an authorisation process to determine whether a vehicle can drive itself safely and legally without being controlled or monitored by a human. This process would be undermined if businesses are able to claim that their vehicles are self-driving without getting the vehicles authorised, which may lead to confusion about vehicle capabilities and driver responsibilities.

Consultation outcome

The consultation demonstrated broad support for protecting certain marketing terms so that they may only be used legally to describe vehicles authorised or listed as able to safely drive themselves. This measure is intended to:

- safeguard the integrity of the authorisation and listing process;
- ensure public safety; and
- build public trust in self-driving technology.

Protected terms and scope

The following terms will be reserved for authorised or listed vehicles:

- Automated
- Automated driving
- Autonomous
- Autonomous driving
- Drive autonomously
- Drive itself
- Driverless
- Self-driving

This protection will extend to different parts of speech and other grammatical forms of these terms. Additionally, the words "automated" and "autonomous" will be protected only when used to describe a vehicle as a whole or a vehicle's overall driving capability, while remaining permissible for specific parts or features—for example, automated windscreen wipers or autonomous emergency braking.

Other terms and enforcement

Although consultees suggested additional terms such as "robotaxi" and "AI driver", these will be regulated under the general confusion offence in section 79.

The Government recognise that, as the technology is deployed, there may be other terms in future that could give a misleading impression that a vehicle is able to drive itself. This is why the protected terms offence

under section 78 operates alongside the confusion offence under section 79. Marketing communications likely to confuse end users into thinking that an unauthorised vehicle is capable of driving itself, including through the use of terms that are not protected, will be enforced through section 79. The Government will keep this under review, with the possibility of protecting further terms in future.

The AV Act places a duty on the Secretary of State to enforce the marketing offences. In practice, enforcement is expected to be carried out by the Department's agencies through civil powers under schedule 5 to the AV Act. Where a breach of the marketing offences results in criminal prosecution and conviction, the Act sets the maximum penalty as a two-year prison term, a fine or both.

Next steps

Some respondents raised an interest in further guidance on part 4 of the AV Act—misleading marketing—and the Government will consider developing supporting materials. A wider programme of education, research and review is also under consideration.

A copy of this publication will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on www.gov.uk

[HCWS196]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Carer's Allowance Reform: Call for Evidence

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): The Government have today launched a Call for Evidence on the modernisation and reform of carer's allowance. This is available on www.gov.uk and accessible format versions will be available on request.

Modernising for the future

Carer's allowance was introduced in 1976 and has not kept pace with changes in how people balance work and caring responsibilities. Many carers want the flexibility to combine some paid work with their caring responsibilities.

We have taken steps to improve the system, including increasing the carer's allowance earnings limit to align with 16 hours at the national living wage, improving guidance for staff and customers, and strengthening processes to identify and prevent overpayments earlier.

We recognise, though, that there is more to do, and are therefore considering how the benefit can be modernised for the future, including through reforms such as an earnings taper and automating the calculation of earnings where possible using data collected by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

Building the evidence base

This call for evidence is an important next step in that process. We are seeking views and evidence to better understand how carer's allowance can:

- support carers to balance paid work and caring responsibilities;
- ensure the system is clear and easy to understand;
- maintain fairness and value for money for taxpayers.

Evidence gathered through this exercise will inform future policy development. We are particularly interested in views on the current earnings rules, including on the earnings limit and whether a more predictable approach to how earnings are averaged would better support carers.

We will consider the wider fiscal impacts of reforms and the need to ensure that support is targeted effectively.

We want to hear from carers, representative organisations and others with relevant experience to shape our understanding and inform next steps.

[HCWS190]

Office for Nuclear Regulation: Strategy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): Later today I will lay before this House the Office for Nuclear Regulation strategy 2026. This document will also be published on the ONR website.

I can confirm, in accordance with paragraph 25(3) of schedule 7 to the Energy Act 2013, that there have been no exclusions to the published documents on the grounds of national security.

[HCWS191]

Petitions

Tuesday 7 July 2026

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

Review of the student loans system

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that changes to the student loan system, including the decision to freeze loan repayment thresholds and alter interest rates, and the introduction of new loans with different repayment thresholds and write-off periods are unfair.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to restore fairness by backtracking on its decision to freeze student loan repayment thresholds, and reviewing the interest rate structure to ensure that student loans remain affordable, proportionate, and supportive of aspiration rather than a long-term financial constraint.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tom Gordon, *Official Report*, 9 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 236.]

[P003205]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister):

Higher education creates opportunity, is an engine for economic growth, and supports local communities. We are committed to supporting the aspiration of every person who meets the requirements and wants to go to university.

The higher education funding system should deliver for our economy, for universities, and for students—which is why we are reforming higher education funding and regulation to better achieve this. Our reforms are already re-gearing student finance to better support disadvantaged students, make things fairer for graduates, and create a more flexible, responsive post-16 education system through the introduction of the lifelong learning entitlement.

The fiscal situation this Government inherited means that we have also had to make the tough choices necessary to protect taxpayers, students and our world-leading higher education sector, now and for future generations. We inherited a challenging situation, and it is going to take time to fix it.

We have already taken decisive action to make the system fairer for students, including:

Future proofing maintenance loans by committing to increase them in line with forecast inflation every year—delivering a 3.1% increase for the academic year 2025 to 2026, and a further 2.71% increase for the academic year 2026 to 2027. This will take the maximum loan for a student living away from home outside London to £10,830 in the academic year 2026 to 2027.

Making care leavers automatically eligible for the maximum rate of maintenance loan from the academic year 2026 to 2027, providing vital extra support for one of the most vulnerable groups in society.

Re-introducing targeted, means-tested maintenance grants from the academic year 2028 to 2029. These will provide

disadvantaged students with up to £1,000 per year on top of existing maintenance loans, funded by a levy on providers for international students.

We are also making the system fairer for graduates:

Maximum interest rates on plan 2 and 3 student loans will be capped at 6% from 1 September 2026, for the academic year 2026 to 2027, delivering stability and protection for graduates from escalating student loan interest.

We increased the repayment threshold for plan 2 loans to £28,470 in April 2025—its first increase since 2021—and we increased it again on 6 April this year, to £29,385. This is higher than the average graduate salary three years after graduation of c. £28,100.

The plan 2 repayment threshold will remain at £29,385 until April 2030. At this level, a graduate whose salary is £30,000 will repay around £4 a month. A graduate whose salary is £50,000 will repay around £154 per month.

Overall, the student finance system removes up-front financial barriers so that everyone with the ability and desire to enter higher education can do so. Student loans continue to offer lower-earning graduates unique protections that are not found in any commercial loans. Repayments are made based on a borrower's monthly or weekly earnings, not the interest rate or amount borrowed. Those who earn below the repayment threshold are not required to make any repayments at all, and any outstanding loans—including interest accrued—are written off at the end of the loan term at no detriment to the individual borrower.

As such, the student finance system remains heavily subsidised by Government. For loans issued to full-time undergraduate students in financial year 2024-25, we expect 29% of plan 5 loans and 32% of plan 2 loans to be written off. This is a deliberate investment in our people and the economy.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

London Borough of Bromley's membership of the Greater London Authority

The petition of residents of the constituency of Beckenham and Penge,

Declares that the London Borough of Bromley's continued membership in the Greater London Authority (GLA) secures critical economic, social, and cultural benefits for its residents; and further declares that any proposals to remove the Borough from the GLA would threaten vital public services, including transport lifelines like the Over-60s Freedom Pass, free primary school meals, and major investment projects such as the transformation of the Crystal Palace National Sports Centre.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Bromley Council and other relevant bodies to maintain the London Borough of Bromley's status as an integral part of Greater London, safeguarding the public services, capital investments, and transport infrastructure that residents rely upon.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Liam Conlon, *Official Report*, 2 June 2026; Vol. 786, c. 1138.]

[P003203]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nesil Caliskan):

This year marks over 25 years since the establishment of the Greater London Authority as London's strategic city-wide authority, created under the Greater London Authority Act 1999. Since its creation, the GLA has played an important role in providing city-wide leadership for the capital, working in partnership with London boroughs to support Londoners, strengthen communities and drive economic growth across Greater London.

The Government recognise the value of this partnership model. London's success depends on effective collaboration between the Greater London Authority, led by the Mayor of London, and the 32 London boroughs and the City of London, each of which has an important and distinct role to play. Over the past quarter century, that close working has helped deliver strategic transport, planning, housing, economic development, environmental improvement and cultural investment across the capital.

The London borough of Bromley remains an important part of Greater London and makes a significant contribution to the capital's economic, social and cultural life. As with other London boroughs, Bromley's residents benefit from participation in pan-London arrangements and from partnership between boroughs and London-wide

institutions. Programmes such as the freedom pass, which is managed on behalf of all London local authorities, demonstrate the practical value of London-wide co-operation for residents across the capital.

The Government also recognise the importance of strategic investment and co-ordinated public services in improving outcomes for Londoners. More recent examples of London-wide and borough-supported collaboration include the Mayor's universal primary free school meals programme and wider investment in sport and community participation across the capital.

The Government believe that strong co-operation between the GLA and London boroughs remains vital to delivering for residents. Bromley, like every London borough, has a key role in shaping the future of the capital, and the Government support continued constructive partnership between London's institutions in the interests of local communities.

The Government will continue to work with the Mayor of London, the GLA and London boroughs to support effective governance, strong public services and investment that benefits Londoners across the whole capital.

Written Corrections

Tuesday 7 July 2026

Ministerial Corrections

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Steel Trade Measure

The following extracts are from the statement on the Steel Trade Measure on 25 June 2026.

Chris Bryant: Since we announced our measure in March, we have engaged intensively with the European Union and UK industry. We have reached a mutual outcome with the EU as a result of those discussions. On our side, we will increase the EU's quota access from the announced 1.58 million tonnes to 2.08 million tonnes, and the EU will announce quotas under its own measure shortly.

[*Official Report*, 25 June 2026; Vol. 788, c. 533.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for Trade, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant):

Chris Bryant: Since we announced our measure in March, we have engaged intensively with the European Union and UK industry. We have reached a mutual outcome with the EU as a result of those discussions. On our side, we will increase the EU's quota access from

the announced **1.63** million tonnes to 2.08 million tonnes, and the EU will announce quotas under its own measure shortly.

Lisa Smart: The quota increase and product code removals are positive steps, so I have just three questions. First, categories 14 and 27 cover specialist steels required by aerospace, defence, Formula 1 and precision engineering, which cannot be sourced domestically in the required grades and volumes. Do those categories fall within the 11 product codes that have been removed from the arrangements?

Chris Bryant: I think the hon. Lady was confusing product codes and categories. If I start with 17, we have increased the quota by a significant amount. I hope that that will reflect the lack of production at the moment, which several Members have already raised with me. We have done that specifically to answer those questions. We have done likewise in category 14, stainless bars and light sections.

[*Official Report*, 25 June 2026; Vol. 788, c. 537.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for Trade, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant):

Chris Bryant: I think the hon. Lady was confusing product codes and categories. If I start with **27**, we have increased the quota by a significant amount. I hope that that will reflect the lack of production at the moment, which several Members have already raised with me. We have done that specifically to answer those questions. We have done likewise in category 14, stainless bars and light sections.

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**not later than
Tuesday 14 July 2026**

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