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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
(HANSARD)

HOUSE OF LORDS

OFFICIAL REPORT

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Abbreviation	Party/Group
CB	Cross Bench
Con	Conservative
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
GP	Green Party
Ind Lab	Independent Labour
Ind SD	Independent Social Democrat
Ind UU	Independent Ulster Unionist
Lab	Labour
Lab Co-op	Labour and Co-operative Party
LD	Liberal Democrat
Non-afl	Non-affiliated
PC	Plaid Cymru
UKIP	UK Independence Party
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party

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House of Lords

Thursday 7 July 2022

11 am

Prayers—read by the Lord Bishop of Manchester.

Food Strategy White Paper Question

11.06 am

Asked by **Baroness Boycott**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they will take to monitor the delivery of the proposals in their food strategy white paper, published on 13 June.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Lord Benyon) (Con): My Lords, I declare my farming interests as set out in the register. The Government food strategy is cross-departmental. We will monitor delivery of the strategy across government, including drawing together evidence on the impacts of individual policies to determine the overall progress of the strategy. We have committed to report on how we are taking forward our actions under the strategy alongside the next UK food security report, drawing on independent analysis from the Climate Change Committee, the Food Standards Agency, and the Office for Environmental Protection.

Baroness Boycott (CB): I thank the Minister for his reply. I am very glad that he is still in his job this morning. However, I beg to disagree. The *National Food Strategy*, in its original state, was a real attempt to bring food together across all the different departments. In fact, the White Paper response from the Government has put various elements back in different departments, and the one chance that we have had since the war to see food systemically as a whole has been thrown away. No one can be in any doubt that the food system is breaking: childhood obesity, health, effects on farming and biodiversity, and now an inability to get three decent meals a day by some 10 million people in this country. How can the Government call this a cross-cutting strategy?

Lord Benyon (Con): I always defer to the noble Baroness because of her great experience and passion on this issue. However, this is absolutely a cross-government initiative. We have set up our cross-government food group, which brings together senior civil servants across government departments and the FSA to examine our strategy and monitor it on key delivery points. We will bring together the monitoring and evaluation of individual policies to enable us, and the wider population, to evaluate the food strategy and how we are performing against our targets.

Baroness McIntosh of Pickering (Con): My Lords, can my noble friend explain how the food strategy addresses the very urgent need to increase our self-sufficiency in food, particularly the parlous state of fruit and vegetable production in this country?

Lord Benyon (Con): On food security, as part of the Agriculture Act 2020, we laid before Parliament our food strategy report, which said that we have broadly maintained a fair degree of self-sufficiency. However, I absolutely agree with my noble friend that we need to improve that. We must encourage farmers to continue producing good-quality food on scale and address that we live in a global food market as well as a national one. There are huge pressures on farmers as a result of short-term issues, such as Ukraine, and long-term issues regarding commodity price spikes.

Baroness Lister of Burtsett (Lab): My Lords, the food strategy White Paper rejects the independent review's recommendation that free school meals should be extended to more children on low incomes, saying that the Government will continue to keep eligibility under review. When school caterers are reporting a steep fall in the number of pupils who can afford school meals, and the Government have provided nothing for children in their additional cost of living crisis payments, is this not the time for action on free school meals rather than further review?

Lord Benyon (Con): The Government recognise the importance of free school meals for those parts of the population that are on low incomes. That is why eligibility to no recourse to public funds families has been announced. We will continue to support families whose children require free school meals.

The Lord Bishop of Manchester: My Lords, the *National Food Strategy* that was produced last year found that the UK's current appetite for meat was unsustainable and that the intake needed to fall by 30% within 10 years to help the environment. I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify what role exists for vegetarian and vegan food in the Government's strategy. It does not appear to be set out, not least when it comes to aligning with the Government's net-zero strategy.

Lord Benyon (Con): I think farming and perhaps also the Government have failed to make the argument between good meat and bad meat. Bad meat is grown on feed lots at a high carbon price to society and damages those farmers who are producing good-quality meat on grass-based systems. That is what we want to encourage. We want sustainable production of meat. We hear what the Climate Change Committee says on the amount of meat that people should eat. We want people to make their own choices but be given the right information on which to make those choices. Vegan diets can sometimes be very damaging to the climate because the materials are sometimes grown where rainforests used to be.

Lord Addington (LD): My Lords, the strategy was supposed to be overarching. What are we doing to integrate things such as good exercise patterns into the food strategy? In particular, what are we doing about access to the countryside, which was part of the Agriculture Act? Are we ensuring that people are getting the chance not only to eat well but to exercise properly? How are we integrating that into things such as transport?

Lord Benyon (Con): The Government are very keen to see more access to the countryside. We are doing this in a variety of different ways, some of which build on the work of the Agnew commission last year. We want to make sure that we are providing access as close as possible to where people live and where they can get to. The noble Lord makes a very good point about transport. We want to make sure that we are working with land managers to create more access points, so people can go by car, park and go on a circular walk or take a bus and access the countryside, because we understand the well-being that comes from greater public access.

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick (Lab): My Lords, taking on board the fact that there is an increase in young people, children and older people suffering from food allergies, will the Minister today commit to working with colleagues to ensure that that level of food allergy is properly addressed through the food strategy and that a programme is put in place to address food allergies?

Lord Benyon (Con): The noble Baroness speaks on a point that affects many people across these islands. I will take her point and relay it to the relevant Minister in the Department of Health, whoever that may be.

Baroness Worthington (CB): Can the Minister tell us who is responsible in government for ensuring that we have secure supplies of food and that we move from a just-in-time delivery system to a just-in-case delivery system? This involves a number of departments of government, but who is responsible?

Lord Benyon (Con): My department has overall responsibility for that, working with other departments. The noble Baroness is right: this is not something government can just mandate. We have an extremely efficient food distribution network and supply chain which was found to be resilient during Covid. It now needs to adapt to a changing world and changing demands from the consumer to make sure that we do not have the vulnerabilities that have been exposed this week in the Netherlands. We want to make sure that we are working with industry to get this right.

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch (Lab): The Minister will know that I have the greatest respect for him, and I am surprised to see that he is still in his place today, but nevertheless can he explain how the important health issues in the Dimpleby report, which are about obesity, controlling junk food, advertising and reducing food inequalities, will be taken forward given that they are not included in the food strategy from the Government, regardless of the fact that we do not appear to have any Ministers to deal with it at the current time?

Lord Benyon (Con): I have a long list here, but I would get in trouble if I read it out. It is all the elements of the Dimpleby report that the Government are taking forward. The noble Baroness is right to refer to issues relating to health and well-being and the obesity strategy. They are massive issues for society and government. We have clear plans to try to tackle them. There have been 14 obesity strategies in her and

my lifetime. I hope we now have one that integrates some really good evidence and that we are implementing through a variety of ways: education, health trusts, GPs and a cross-government approach.

Baroness Manzoor (Con): My Lords, the Government have worked hard to ensure balanced school meals, but there are now reports that suppliers of school meals are beginning to substitute some of the better nutrients that should be provided in school meals with cheaper variants. What are the Government doing to ensure that we do not slip back to high-carbohydrate food for schoolchildren?

Lord Benyon (Con): I will take that point to colleagues in the Department for Education. There are very strict guidelines on the nutritional value in school meals and we want to make sure that local education boards and academy trusts are mindful of those regulations. If they are not abiding by them, we will have to make sure that they do.

Household Waste Recycling Question

11.16 am

Asked by *Baroness Humphreys*

To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to address the fall in household waste recycling rates in England.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Lord Benyon) (Con): Me again, I am afraid. Through our resources and waste strategy and our landmark Environment Act, we will transform our waste system. We are introducing consistent recycling collections across England, creating a deposit return scheme for drinks containers, and introducing extended producer responsibility for packaging to ensure that packaging producers cover the costs of recycling and disposing of their packaging. Through these measures, our ambition is to reach a municipal waste recycling rate of 65% by 2035.

Baroness Humphreys (LD): Will the Minister join me in congratulating the officers, recycling operatives and residents of Conwy Council in north Wales, who in 2020-21 achieved a recycling rate of 70% and are set to repeat that figure this year despite the pandemic? Key to their success is getting the infrastructure right. Councils from across the UK, Lithuania and further afield have visited to learn from its example. Would the Minister accept an invitation to visit to Conwy County to judge its success?

Lord Benyon (Con): There is nothing I like more than visiting beautiful parts of the world to see their waste management processes. On my way, I might look in at West Berkshire, where the local authority inherited a lamentable 19% recycling rate and has now got it to more than 50%; I cannot remember who it inherited it from. We want to see every council doing

that. The measures we have in the Environment Act can provide a means for getting consistency over the country—consistency that has hitherto been absent.

Baroness Jenkin of Kennington (Con): My Lords, it is estimated that 7 million tonnes of food is discarded from the home every year, nearly half of which is edible, at a cost of about £700 per average family per year. The top reasons given are not writing a shopping list, not planning meals and forgetting what is in the fridge. What levers do the Government have to nudge and encourage households to do better?

Lord Benyon (Con): My noble friend is right that households, particularly hard-pressed households, can save a lot of money by managing their food waste better. It is question of encouragement, education from an early stage and support, but it is not for me or the Government to dictate how people operate in their home. This is an enormous burden on society. We have to dispose of this, and I am delighted that food waste recycling will be consistent over the country, but we want to have to recycle much less.

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch (Lab): Further to the Question asked by the noble Baroness, Lady Humphreys, can the Minister explain the growing disparity in recycling rates between England and Wales? Last year, England's rate went down to 43.8% while Wales's rate increased to 65.4%. If Wales can be so successful, why can England not be? What discussions are being held with the Welsh Government so that we can learn those lessons and apply them to England?

Lord Benyon (Con): The noble Baroness is absolutely right that recycling levels have plateaued. Over the pandemic, they went down by 1.5%. The decrease reflects the impact of Covid, with waste tonnages from home increasing as people spent more time at home and waste collections decreasing due to household waste recycling centres being closed. She is also right that there are disparities not just between England and Wales but between different parts of England. That is why, through the provisions in the Environment Act, we want consistency. In every home, even if people move from one part of the country to another, they must know that they can recycle the same articles of their household waste in the same way in all parts of the country to help us hit our targets.

Lord St John of Bletso (CB): My Lords, can the Minister expand on the measures being taken to promote separation and sorting technologies at recycling facilities, to increase the usability and efficiency of household waste in England?

Lord Benyon (Con): There is improving technology in this area. Robotics and artificial intelligence are identifying waste in a way that we were not able to do before so we are able to divert yet more away from landfill. However, the real silver bullet is preventing it getting to the facilities in the first place by stopping packaging and other measures upstream and having many more recyclable products, which we are working with industry to achieve, before we even get to that separation process.

Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb (GP): My Lords, there is never a silver bullet; I do not understand why this Government do not understand that. You need a range of options. The Minister said that recycling has plateaued. That is not true: the Government's statistics from May suggest that it has in fact declined. Why not talk about incineration? As incineration increases, recycling declines, so will the Government bring in a moratorium on new incineration plants?

Lord Benyon (Con): The noble Baroness is right that rates dropped by about 1.5% over the pandemic, as I think I said. I am not sure whether there are any incinerators planned at the moment but I will take her point away because I agree with it.

Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville (LD): My Lords, the Government want to standardise household waste collection services throughout England, as the Minister said. Having moved from an area that collected—separated—nearly everything recyclable to one whose recyclable collection is pretty poor, I am frustrated to be told that I may have to wait two years for the collection to improve. Listening to the Government, however, I may have to wait 10 years for it to improve. Why are the Government dragging their feet?

Lord Benyon (Con): As I said, we passed provisions in the Environment Act that give us new powers to improve consistency and introduce both a deposit return scheme and an extended producer responsibility for packaging. All these measures require working with industry; we are consulting, and have consulted, on them and will bring them forward. The producer packaging measures will be brought forward in 2024.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall (Lab): Will the Minister address the possible small and perhaps niche issue of home composting? A lot of food waste and packaging could be composted but is not. Obviously, this is a more challenging prospect for those who do not have outside space, but what are the Government doing to encourage people who have outside space to use some of it to compost their own waste?

Lord Benyon (Con): That is a very good point. As the noble Baroness rightly says, many households do not have the ability or space to do this but those that do need to be given information. They also need to know what they can do with the end product; for example, we are banning peat as a growing medium and compost can be an alternative to that.

Lord Cormack (Con): My Lords, I wish my noble friend happy travels in Wales and a long period in office, but does he accept that what this country desperately needs now is continuity in government? It would therefore be wise if, when the present Prime Minister resigns, he does not remain as a caretaker but rather has an acting Prime Minister in the deputy in the other place.

Lord Benyon (Con): My Lords, the words “above”, “pay” and “grade” come to mind. There is constitutional precedent on this, of course; I am sure that that is what will be applied.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock (Lab Co-op): My Lords, is the Minister aware that the Scottish Greens intend to fight the next general election on the single issue of independence? Is that not a betrayal of their main purpose, including recycling?

Lord Benyon (Con): I would like to recycle the Scottish Green seats into good blue ones.

Lord Lexden (Con): My Lords, towards the end of 1834, the Duke of Wellington ran the Government single-handedly for some 24 days. I wonder whether there is a case for suggesting that his highly respected successor the current noble Duke, with his well-known environmental interests, be invited to assume the position of Prime Minister on a caretaker basis to improve recycling and clean up our rivers.

Lord Benyon (Con): That is a very good suggestion. I will put it to my honourable friends in the other place. Having a duke in No. 10 is probably long overdue.

Lord McNally (LD): My Lords, the problem with recycling is not just the recycling but the rubbish that is left behind. How does the Minister think the country should deal with the recycling now going on at No. 10 and the rubbish being left behind?

Lord Benyon (Con): I will leave that one for those concerned to deal with.

Lord Bellingham (Con): My Lords, in his reply to the noble Baroness, Lady Jones of Whitchurch, the Minister said that there should be a national strategy. Does he agree that one of the problems faced by the public is that they get confusing and conflicting instructions on packaging waste? For example, it can say “Not recyclable here” or “Widely recyclable. Consult your local authority”. Surely there is an important need for more clarity.

Lord Benyon (Con): There is. Local authorities, which have the interface with the customer or householder, are beholden on this. The drive that we are now pushing to increase recycling rates to 65% will require close working with councils and councils working closely with householders to show them how they can do it with minimal impact on their lives, whatever type of house they live in. We must make sure that we hit our targets because they are important for climate change and the cost of living, as well as for the kind of society, countryside and environment that we all want to enjoy.

Winter Heating Initiatives Question

11.27 am

Asked by **Baroness Worthington**

To ask Her Majesty’s Government what steps they are taking to support people who may struggle to keep warm next winter; and whether they are engaging with energy companies about the need to coordinate initiatives, including public information campaigns, (1) to make people’s homes warmer in a safe way, and (2) to reduce their bills.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lord Callanan) (Con): My Lords, the Government will continue to look at ways to work with energy companies to make homes more comfortable and cheaper to run. To help consumers with rising bills, we are doubling the value of the universal energy bill support scheme to £400 and scrapping the requirement to repay it over five years. Our simple energy advice service provides home owners with advice on decarbonising their homes; we plan to move the service to GOV.UK to improve the user experience.

Baroness Worthington (CB): My Lords, I thank the Minister for his reply. I fear that this Government are somewhat distracted and about to expend considerable effort on picking an unproven loser; I am of course referring to the Energy Bill that was published yesterday and its heavy weighting towards carbon capture and storage and hydrogen. These are expensive and inefficient solutions, and thus will play only a minor role in the transition to a secure, affordable and clean energy system. Energy efficiency and electrifying everything are the clear winners, yet they get scarcely a mention in the 300-plus pages of the Bill. Can the Minister explain what is being done to get energy companies behind delivering these two proven solutions at a pace that will help home owners this winter?

Lord Callanan (Con): Well, we could spend the whole of this Question Time debating those issues. The noble Baroness makes some good points. I am sure that we will have some extensive discussions on those issues during the passage of the Energy Bill. On energy efficiency, I agree with her, of course. It is no secret that I have been working with energy suppliers to try to put in place additional energy-efficiency measures. We will continue to take those forward.

Lord Redesdale (LD): The simplest way of saving money on household bills is through insulation. Will the Government say whether they will redirect their successful efforts in insulating people’s roofs into draught-proofing people’s houses? Some 15% of the energy in a house is wasted through draughts, and a cost-effective method of dealing with that would be a national campaign to deal with draughts in people’s homes.

Lord Callanan (Con): The House and I need no convincing of the value of energy efficiency. As I constantly remind the House, we are already spending considerable sums on energy-efficiency schemes, but I am sure that there is always more that can be done.

Lord Howell of Guildford (Con): First, as well as the improvements that the noble Baroness, Lady Worthington, wisely suggested, has my noble friend noticed that international oil and gas prices are falling quite quickly? They are well away from their original peak. Should we not be ensuring that somehow these benefits get through to households before they are hit by an enormous energy bill increase in the future? Secondly, does my noble friend accept that if we took half the fuel duty revenue off consumers, that would be a huge hit on public revenues, but it would be an even larger saving in public expenditure from the public payments that

have to be made linked to indexes? As a result of the fall in the CPI, that would be a win all round. Will he pass that on to the Treasury?

Lord Callanan (Con): I will certainly pass my noble friend's thoughts on to whoever occupies those great offices in the Treasury in the next few weeks. Regarding his first point, we want to ensure that any reductions in international energy prices are passed on to consumers as quickly as possible.

Lord Whitty (Lab): Does the Minister accept that fuel-poor households will seriously suffer not just during the coming winter but, given the way that the energy market is going, in subsequent winters? Do the Government accept that, in order to deal with the problem of fuel poverty, they need to knock the heads of the energy companies together and introduce proper, targeted social tariffs, and to reintroduce a comprehensive insulation programme that does not depend solely on the rather haphazard procedures under the ECO scheme? That needs to be done as a matter of urgency, in line with the rest of the energy strategy.

Lord Callanan (Con): I am sorry that the noble Lord is so down on the ECO scheme. It is a good programme and, as he is probably aware, we are expanding it to £1 billion a year. It is not the only energy-efficiency scheme we have: there is the home upgrade grant, the local authority delivery scheme and the social housing decarbonisation fund, which is about to launch bids for another £800 million of grants to local authorities and housing associations.

Baroness Hayman (CB): The Minister has said the House needs no persuasion of the importance of energy efficiency, yet the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill currently in front of the House contains no mention of energy efficiency and makes no requirement to take it into account for social housing landlords. Will he have a word with his noble friend Lord Greenhalgh, who is in charge of that Bill, to see whether that can be remedied in Committee? The Energy Bill has 370 pages, and 10 lines alone for the Long Title, so, given that we are dealing with it in very short order, I wonder whether he can assure me that that Bill is fitter for purpose than the Schools Bill and the Procurement Bill have been?

Lord Callanan (Con): There were a number of questions there. The noble Lord, Lord Whitty, mentioned the considerable sums that we will expend on the social housing decarbonisation fund; that funding will be matched by local authorities and housing associations, so we will get more bang for our buck. I am sure that we will have many debates on the Energy Bill. A considerable amount of work has gone into it. There will be some additions to the Bill to cover late policy changes, but I will outline those to the House at Second Reading.

Lord Flight (Con): My Lords, is there any information about the extent to which domestic heating costs are benefiting from global warming?

Lord Callanan (Con): That is a complicated subject but, irrespective of the impact, we can all agree that energy efficiency is a good thing. Using less energy and spending less money on it is an all-round good societal benefit.

Baroness Blake of Leeds (Lab): My Lords, the previous Chancellor—forgive me if I do not have the appropriate way of expressing that—introduced additional payments for the cost of living crisis and they were welcomed across both Houses, but I think we can all agree that they came far too late. At every step the Government have been playing catch-up, which is why an emergency package was needed. Many thousands of households are still struggling, and when winter comes round again energy prices in particular will hit hard, and that is before any mass rollout of energy-efficiency schemes—if they come along—can possibly be in place. Will the Government learn lessons and put support in place in time to avert even more misery next winter?

Lord Callanan (Con): I am slightly confused by the noble Baroness's question. Yes, of course, we are rolling out the energy bills support scheme, which is a £400 payment that will be delivered through energy bills directly to all consumers. There is a considerable package of support. I could list all the other measures if the noble Baroness had time but there is a £37 billion package of cost of living support across the economy.

Lord Forsyth of Drumlean (Con): My Lords, could my noble friend help me? Surely the easiest way to help people faced with large energy bills is to remove the tax from them and cut the 5% rate of VAT?

Lord Callanan (Con): Of course, the rate of VAT has already been reduced on some energy-efficiency measures, but my noble friend makes a good point and I will be sure to convey it to the Treasury.

Baroness Blower (Lab): My Lords, I am sure the Minister recognises that the cost of energy is having a very bad effect on education budgets in schools. I hope he will be liaising with whomever ends up at the Department for Education to see what can be done to ensure that schools are properly heated, as cold children cannot learn and cold teachers cannot teach.

Lord Callanan (Con): The noble Baroness makes a powerful point. I point to the public sector decarbonisation scheme, for which I am responsible, which has already rolled out billions of pounds' worth of improvements to all our public buildings to help make them more energy efficient.

Baroness Garden of Frognal (LD): My Lords, £400 to households is surely a profound waste of public money since a lot of it is going to people who really do not need it. Why can the Government not target the money more closely at people who truly need it?

Lord Callanan (Con): I look forward to seeing the Liberal Democrats campaigning on taking away from people money that has been allocated. It is a universal payment but of course there are considerable extra

[LORD CALLANAN]

funds that have been closely targeted. There are shortages and problems across the economy. That is one part of the package but there are many other parts of the package directed at those most in need.

Baroness Foster of Oxtou (Con): My Lords, for the first time this winter we in the United Kingdom imported shale gas from the USA. Could my noble friend the Minister please tell the House when the report will be published on shale gas extraction for the future?

Lord Callanan (Con): My noble friend makes an important point. The Secretary of State has asked the British Geological Survey to have an additional look at the problems and evidence surrounding the whole issue of shale gas extraction. I would say that the environment in this country is very different from that of the US, but we will certainly respond to that as quickly as we can.

Horizon Europe Question

11.38 am

Asked by Viscount Stansgate

To ask Her Majesty's Government what alternative plans they have prepared in the event that the United Kingdom is no longer a part of the Horizon Europe research programme.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lord Callanan) (Con): My Lords, the Government remain committed to associating to Horizon Europe. We remain disappointed that the EU is politicising science co-operation by delaying association. If the UK is unable to associate soon, we are ready to introduce a comprehensive alternative programme that delivers many of the benefits of Horizon through international collaboration, end-to-end innovation and a strong and attractive offer to encourage talented researchers to build their careers here in the UK.

Viscount Stansgate (Lab): My Lords, I thank the Minister for that Answer. This is the third time that I have asked that Question and it is always the same disappointing Answer. I forget—forgive me—whether or not the Secretary of State in the Minister's department is still in post, but I am a great admirer of the current Minister for Science, who is doing a good job.

Noble Lords: He has gone.

Viscount Stansgate (Lab): He has gone? Then he was going a good job. I can think of no better follow-up question to ask the Minister than whether he agrees with the fact that the Government's policy on Horizon Europe shows a:

“Lack of HMT commitment to shape & funding of a bold Plan B”

and

“risks a deepening brain drain & crisis of confidence & credibility in UK”?

Those were the words of the Minister for Science yesterday.

Lord Callanan (Con): The Minister the noble Lord refers to, one of my ex-colleagues, was doing an excellent job in putting together precisely the programme that the noble Lord asks for. We remain hopeful that the EU will change its position, live up to its obligations and agree to co-operate in science. That is the best way forward for both parties. If it does not, we have allocated £6.8 billion over the spending review period to put in place an alternative programme.

Lord Purvis of Tweed (LD): My Lords, “chaos in No10, breakdown of Cabinet collective responsibility and collapse of public confidence in government represents a constitutional crisis. It is also now seriously undermining our authority in key negotiations on the world stage at a time of urgent international crises” and “destroying our credibility”. Every single word of that was from the ex-Minister George Freeman this morning. How on earth can we secure a good deal for our nation abroad when at home the Conservative Party is inflicting, in his words, “a constitutional crisis” on us?

Lord Callanan (Con): It is clearly a difficult political time at the moment but I have great faith in the institutions of this country. I am sure we will get through it and continue the excellent work that this Government have been doing on all those matters.

Lord Patel (CB): My Lords, let us hope that we succeed with the remaining part of the Horizon Europe programme. I appreciate that the Government are committed to putting that same money back into research but can the noble Lord confirm that the money will go to research, which is where most of our Horizon Europe programme money goes, and not be earmarked for other purposes not regarded as research? While he is at it, can he update us on developments with ARIA?

Lord Callanan (Con): I can indeed give the noble Lord that assurance. The money is a direct replacement and will go to research, but our preference remains to associate to Horizon Europe, if possible. With regard to ARIA, the noble Lord can expect some announcements on the chairman and chief executive fairly soon.

Lord Reid of Cardowan (Lab): Does the Minister accept that this is not just a question of money? Scientific advance depends on international collaboration, networking, exchange of information and so on. Does he accept the gravity of the present situation? Universities are the seed funding of any solution to the productivity issue that is central to economic recovery. At the moment, however, we are cutting ourselves off from Europe, we are suspicious of China and we are introducing a range of legislation, not least the National Security and Investment Act, that will bring great concern and instability to our universities. What measures are the Government taking to address the gravity of that crisis and to assuage that instability, particularly in our institutions of higher education?

Lord Callanan (Con): There were many different questions there. First, I agree with the noble Lord about the importance of international science collaboration. Secondly, we are not cutting ourselves

off from the rest of the world. We remain keen to associate to Horizon Europe and co-operate with other scientific nations across the world. Thirdly, I do not agree with his point about the National Security and Investment Act causing problems for universities. The system is working extremely well and applications are being approved smoothly, as he will see if he looks at the recently produced annual report.

The Earl of Kinnoull (CB): The sorry state of affairs is, of course, the result of the impasse over the Northern Ireland protocol. Can the noble Lord the Minister assure us on two fronts—first, that the plan B concepts will not be brought forward until absolutely the last moment when it is not possible practically to join this iteration of the seven-year Horizon programme, which would come not before the end of this year; and, secondly, that if a plan B comes forward, it would be structured in such a way that the future co-operative and collaborative matters that the noble Lord, Lord Reid, talked about can be taken advantage of because it would be possible to collaborate with a future Horizon programme?

Lord Callanan (Con): Indeed, the Northern Ireland protocol is the excuse that the EU gives for refusing to live up to its commitment. These are separate agreements and issues. We would prefer them to be completely separate. We want to associate with Horizon Europe because it is in both our interests. There should be international science collaboration, as I said in response to previous questions, and we remain willing to sit down and implement the agreement that was entered into, just as soon as the EU is prepared to talk about it.

Baroness Blake of Leeds (Lab): As we have heard, the Minister who floated the plan B to replace Horizon Europe is no longer in place. But even before the Government fell apart, neither the Cabinet nor the Treasury had signed it off, anyway. Can the Government now confirm whether these plans are dead in the water and explain how they will take responsibility to protect the British academic sector from further damage before the UK's associate membership ends?

Lord Callanan (Con): I do not know if the noble Baroness was listening to the replies that I gave but the Treasury is fully committed to the £6.8 billion announced in the spending review. The Government remain keen to get on with this and associate to Horizon Europe if we can, but we are putting in place alternatives that will be just as effective in terms of international co-operation. We will spend similar amounts of money.

Baroness Garden of Frognal (LD): UK participation in Horizon Europe has been of immeasurable benefit to our researchers but, because of their calibre, it has also been of immeasurable benefit to our one-time EU partners. Producing our own scheme will not be the same. What efforts are the Government putting into negotiations to ensure that we can continue to participate in Horizon to our benefit and that of our Horizon partners, too?

Lord Callanan (Con): I agree with the noble Baroness that this co-operation has benefits for both sides and it is a shame that the EU continues to drag science into wider politics. Now, more than ever, we believe that we should be working closely together with like-minded partners, but it is difficult for us to negotiate if we have no one on the other side willing to talk about it.

Baroness Foster of Oxtou (Con): My Lords, there is no justifiable reason for the UK not to be part of the Horizon programme. Does my noble friend agree that this is due not to any reticence from the UK Government but to the EU dragging its feet and placing unnecessary obstacles in the way?

Lord Callanan (Con): My noble friend is exactly correct.

Lord Davies of Brixton (Lab): My Lords, the Minister referred to plan B, and the financial commitment is obviously to be welcomed. Does he agree that the most important issue here is not finance but the international networks established for research? I should like to quote Professor Dame Anne Johnson, president of the Academy of Medical Sciences, who said:

“Horizon Europe provides an important and established framework for the networks and relationships that underpin international health research and benefit patients' health everywhere.” Does the Minister accept that it is the international networks that are crucial?

Lord Callanan (Con): Money is of course important but I agree that the international networks, both with the EU and wider partners, are also crucial. That I why we should like to associate with Horizon Europe if the EU is prepared to sit down and discuss these things with us and to live up to the commitments it made in the TCA. I am sorry that many Members of this House are prepared to make excuses for the EU on this. We agreed it and are prepared to live by the commitment. It is the EU that is refusing to honour what it signed up to.

Road Traffic Offences (Cycling) Bill [HL] *First Reading*

11.48 am

A Bill to amend the Road Traffic Act 1988 and the Road Traffic Offenders Act 1988 to create criminal offences relating to dangerous, careless or inconsiderate cycling, in particular applying to a pedal cycle, an electrically assisted pedal cycle, and an electric scooter.

The Bill was introduced by Baroness McIntosh of Pickering, read a first time and ordered to be printed.

Inheritance Tax Act 1984 (Amendment) (Siblings) Bill [HL] *First Reading*

11.49 am

A Bill to amend the Inheritance Tax Act 1984 to make transfers between siblings exempt in certain circumstances.

The Bill was introduced by Lord Lexden, read a first time and ordered to be printed.

Sewage Disposal in Rivers and Coastal Waters

Motion to Take Note

11.49 am

Moved by Lord Oates

To move that this House takes note of the impact of the current sewage disposal rates in rivers and coastal waters and the responsibility of water companies to alleviate these impacts.

Lord Oates (LD): My Lords, in opening this debate I pay tribute to those who have done so much to highlight the scandal of raw sewage discharges into our lakes and rivers and on to our beaches, particularly Feargal Sharkey, whose tireless campaigning, alongside thousands of people up and down our country, has kept the issue in the headlines and the pressure on the water companies and the Government.

I also acknowledge the role of the national and local media in bringing these issues to public attention, the efforts of the noble Duke, the Duke of Wellington, and Peers from across the House, and their leadership on this issue during the debates on the Environment Act and subsequently. Most of all, I pay heartfelt tribute to my late and greatly missed noble friend Lord Chidgey, whose passionate advocacy for the protection of our precious chalk streams was an inspiration to me and to so many others.

I suppose that we cannot blame colleagues if they are somewhat distracted from today's debate by the farcical Conservative psychodrama playing out up the road in Downing Street. Some may feel that it could not be more appropriate that we are discussing the subject of sewage disposal today. Certainly, it is instructive to note that in the scandal of our polluted waterways also lies the story of a failure of leadership of both government and corporations—a story in which private interests have been put ahead of the public interest, and institutional failure has led to a collapse in public confidence.

The scale of the sewage crisis afflicting our rivers and coastal waterways is staggering to comprehend. In 2021, the water companies were responsible for 368,966 spills, during which raw sewage and untreated wastewater was dumped into aquatic environments for a total of 2,650,290 hours. Even those staggering figures are an underestimate, because over a quarter of storm overflows had no monitors or monitors that were faulty or non-functioning.

This is having a devastating impact on nature. England is home to 85% of the earth's chalk streams—rare and precious habitats that the Government and water companies should surely recognise they have a particular duty to protect. Instead, they are allowing them to be devastated by raw sewage outflows. My late noble friend Lord Chidgey raised this issue during our scrutiny of the Environment Act, highlighting

“the deterioration of our chalk streams through appalling neglect, to the extent that many see streams' diverse ecosystems under severe threat to their very survival.”—[*Official Report*, 13/9/21; col. 1193.]

He talked about his work with organisations across the south-east of England, and from Hertfordshire to the north to Kent in the east and Dorset in the west.

These organisations represent thousands of people who are all deeply concerned about the threats to our unique chalk streams.

I am lucky enough to live about a mile away from the Hogsmill river, one of those rare and precious chalk streams in south-west London. On 26 May last year, Judge Francis Sheridan fined Thames Water £4 million for what he described as the “utterly disgusting” pollution caused by Thames Water when untreated sewage was discharged into the Hogsmill river and a local park. The discharge occurred because of a night-time power failure at the local sewage works. Over a period of five hours almost 50 alarms went off, which should have immediately led to an engineer being sent to the treatment works to fix the problem—but every one of those alarms went unchecked and ignored. As a result, 79 million litres of sludge escaped, which took 30 people over a month to clean up and caused huge damage to local wildlife and much distress to the local community,

Although the power failure may not have been the water company's fault, the lack of investment in back-up generation and the company's failure to respond to the alarms most certainly was. The judge in this case was no stranger to Thames Water's record of polluting waterways. Earlier in 2021, he fined it £2.3 million for equipment failures at a sewage treatment plant in Oxfordshire in 2016, which killed thousands of fish and other water life. Four years earlier, Thames Water was prosecuted for illegally allowing huge amounts of untreated sewage to enter the Thames in Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire in 2013 and 2014. Judge Sheridan found that Thames Water had demonstrated

“a continual failure to report incidents”,

which he described as

“a shocking and disgraceful state of affairs”.

Although the judge imposed a record-breaking £20 million fine, this represented just two weeks of Thames Water's profits at the time.

Of course, Thames Water is not alone in discharging raw sewage into our rivers and coastal waters. Every water company does it, and indeed much of the huge volume of untreated wastewater and raw sewage that they discharge is done so perfectly legally, despite its devastating impact on the environment. As the summer holidays approach and people head to the beach, parents will be horrified to learn of the level of discharges into our coastal waters. Last year, the water companies were collectively responsible for 24,822 spills into the sea over a period of 161,623 hours, including one spill on to Ilfracombe Wildersmouth beach by South West Water that lasted 1,883 hours, and a spill by United Utilities at Morecambe that lasted a breathtaking 5,352 hours.

Of course, many contributing factors and actors have led to this appalling state of affairs in both coastal and inland waters, but the water companies cannot escape their central share of the blame. Their failure to invest sufficiently in reducing these outflows comes at the same time as having paid eye-watering sums in pay and bonuses to their senior executives. Anglian Water, responsible for 21,351 spills lasting a total of 194,594 hours in 2021, provided a total remuneration package to its chief executive of more than £2 million—nearly 100 times the pay of one of its

meter technicians. Northumbrian Water, responsible for 220,560 hours of discharges, provided more modest remuneration—a mere £628,000—but this was still more than 20 times the starting salary of one of its wastewater production operators. Severn Trent, responsible for 461,135 hours of discharges, provided remuneration of more than £2.8 million to its CEO—again, more than 100 times the starting salary of one of its water treatment operatives. Southern Water: 160,984 hours of discharges; remuneration to CEO, more than £1 million. South West Water: 351,875 hours of discharges; remuneration to CEO, £863,000. Thames Water: 163,000 hours of discharges; remuneration to CEO, £1.2 million. United Utilities, responsible for 540,000 hours of discharges, including that 5,000-hour spill at Morecambe: remuneration to CEO, £2.9 million—112 times the pay of one of its process operators. Wessex Water: 151,258 hours of discharges; CEO remuneration, £520,000. Finally, Yorkshire Water: 406,000 hours of discharges; total remuneration for the CEO, more than £1.3 million.

In total, water company executives have paid themselves nearly £27 million in bonuses over the past two years, while pumping sewage into waterways 1,000 times a day. The greed is gobsmacking, the multiples of their salary over that of crucial employees shocking, and the disparity between their remuneration and performance regarding our natural environment utterly staggering. By way of comparison, the chief executive of NHS England is paid somewhere in the region of £260,000 to run an organisation with a turnover in excess of £130 billion. The largest of these water companies, by contrast, has a total annual revenue of around £2 billion. This is of course part of a much wider scandal of excessive corporate pay and ever-increasing pay differentials between top executives and the staff they employ. It is particularly jarring that such rewards are being provided at companies that daily pollute our rivers and marine environment.

At the heart of this scandal is not only a failure of leadership in the private sector, but a failure of government. The institutions charged with enforcing environmental protection go underresourced and targets for improvements are unambitious—and all the while developers continue to have a legal right to connect wastewater to the system, regardless of its constraints, instead of the Government imposing tough requirements on sustainable urban drainage. The Government need to get a grip and they should start by showing a red card to water company bosses and adopting Liberal Democrat plans for a sewage bonus ban, which would stop water company executives being paid a penny in bonuses until our waterways are protected from sewage dumps.

The public have had enough of their rivers, lakes and coastal waters being despoiled by a mixture of government inaction, regulatory failure and corporate irresponsibility and greed. It is well past time for the Government and their agencies to act decisively and bring an end to this sewage scandal.

12.02 pm

Baroness Altmann (Con): My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Oates, for securing this debate and for the excellent and comprehensive way that he has

set the scene, listing the litany of disgraceful discharges and highlighting the prioritising of dividends, profits and shareholder interests above public safety. I have no problem with companies making profits or paying bonuses or high salaries, but not when they do so by behaving irresponsibly. I thank Surfers Against Sewage, River Action and the Rivers Trust for their helpful briefings. I will have some questions for my noble friend at the end, but I just briefly make a few, and I hope important, remarks.

Untreated human sewage is, as the noble Lord, Lord Oates, said, being regularly discharged by water companies into rivers and coastal sea bathing waters—not just routinely but in a way that has been, for far too long, unregulated and not even properly monitored. I am pleased to see the recent changes in legislation, with water companies being required to take their obligations to avoid dumping sewage into our waters far more seriously, and the latest pronouncements from the regulator Ofwat that it will require greater investment in sewage treatment and wastewater treatment.

Noble Lords across the House can be proud of the amendments that we managed to secure in the passage of the Environment Act. I see my noble friend the Duke of Wellington in his place; he was so instrumental in driving forward the cross-party agreements. I thank my noble friend, and I thank the Government for accepting those. It is a great start, but we clearly and urgently need further action to halt this decline in water standards, both for the health of the aquatic ecosystem and, of course, to prevent poor quality water reaching our drinking water.

Indeed, the issue is also a real threat to the health of citizens or visitors who either live near, or swim in—or want to swim in—our rivers or seas. In January 2022, the Environmental Audit Committee said in its report that

“it is vital that the public can trust regulators to ensure ... high levels of water quality in rivers”.

The committee also confirmed that placing a new statutory duty on water companies, to secure a progressive reduction in the adverse impact of discharges from their storm overflows, is a positive step. It recommended that the Government should ensure that the Environment Agency set “specific targets and timetables” for water companies’ statutory drainage and sewage management plans, and also said that Ofwat must prioritise long-term investments, such as storm overflows, in its price review process, especially championing the idea of nature-based solutions—quite right too. The actions of many of our water companies are truly shameful and investment is long overdue, with the fines for illegal sewage discharges often seen as an acceptable cost of doing business, rather than a shameful example of corporate behaviour.

I focus on the fact that it is not just human sewage disposal causing problems. A considerable element of the pollution is caused by agricultural sewage, often from factory farms whose effluent contains antibiotic-resistant bacteria, caused by the overuse of antibiotics in these farms’ intensive livestock rearing. Sewage and wastewater affect 36% of water bodies, and urban diffuse pollution affects 18%. Consequently, our rivers are now failing quality tests due to not just human sewage, but agricultural, or some element of industrial, pollution. We need to address both the human and

[BARONESS ALTMANN]

agricultural sewage discharges. Some 26,000 tonnes of phosphorous ends up in UK waters each year, and the Environment Agency found that agricultural run-off was responsible for 40% of the damage to waterways. So even if we reduced or eliminated all the water companies' sewage discharges, there would still be a significant problem of pollution in our waterways.

I have three questions for my noble friend. First, will the Government set an overall target for restoration of water quality in our rivers to include both human and other elements of sewage and other pollution? Will the Government accept the need to ban flushable wet wipes, which all the water companies agree are a considerable problem in causing some of these overflows? Finally, will the Government strengthen the proposed target of just a 40% reduction in agricultural pollution of our rivers by 2037?

The Deputy Speaker (Lord Brougham and Vaux)

(Con): My Lords, the noble Lord, Lord Campbell-Savours, will be contributing remotely. I invite him to speak.

12.09 pm

Lord Campbell-Savours (Lab) [V]: My Lords, those last three questions from the noble Baroness are very relevant to this debate, and I hope the Minister is able to answer her in the normal way.

I thank the noble Lord, Lord Oates, for introducing this important debate. For me, it is particularly interesting, as for much of my life I have lived in Keswick in the Lake District, an area greatly damaged by environmental events and climate change. I recount the story of when, as a boy, I would stand as part of a crowd on the deck side counting the salmon leaping as they fought their way up and over the waterfall on the River Greta in Fitz Park in Keswick. I have not seen salmon there for years. I recall that it was the same on the River Cocker in Cockermouth and on the Derwent as it flows into Workington. I put it all down to climate change and environmental damage, again including flooding.

Over the years, I have found myself repeatedly in conflict with the water industry, in particular with the former North West Water, primarily over that flooding but also with the Environment Agency over algae blooms. As a local MP, I secured improvements to Keswick sewage works, which was contaminating Bassenthwaite Lake, but problems remain in the Lake District with algae blooms proliferating in a number of areas, including lakes.

The water industry carries a workforce which employs some of the finest and most experienced environmentalists in the land, but its expenditure programmes rarely reflect the real concerns that stand behind many of the decisions it has to take if it is to comply with public expectation. The problem is not only one of resource in terms of investment programmes; for me, the real problem is the lack of transparency over the selective and inadequate monitoring of sewage outfalls. I recognise that the Environment Act 2021 lays down stricter monitoring requirements on the publishing of accurate data on overflows, but I am troubled by the timeframe set out in the current consultation.

Let me quote from the Library article. Under "Timebound targets included", it states:

"By 2050, water companies can only discharge from a storm overflow where they can demonstrate there is 'no local adverse ecological impact' ... This target must be achieved for most ... storm overflows spilling in or close to high priority sites. These sites include sites of special scientific interest, special areas of conservation ... eutrophic sensitive areas and chalk streams."

I ask: why 2050? That is nearly 30 years away. The document continues—I am quoting again from "targets":

"By 2045, all ecological harmful discharges in or close to high priority sites must be eliminated."

The Lake District is a very high priority site. Again, I simply cannot understand the delay. Why not speed up the whole process in environmentally sensitive areas such as the national parks?

A cynic would argue that the Government are ducking and weaving over sewage discharge problems because they fear damaging water company profits and, I suppose, ultimately pension funds. How else can they justify the 8,500-hour leak at the Sedbergh plant, the Budds Farm treatment plant leak and the Embleton leak in my former constituency? They are but a few from a long list to which the noble Lord, Lord Oates, very wisely referred in some detail and which are a product of a combination of water company profit protection and slack management, both accidental and on occasions deliberate.

For the purposes of attending Parliament, I live in Maidenhead in a flat on the towpath overlooking the Thames. I am ever conscious of damage to the riverbed arising out of effluent discharge from what I am told are storm overflows upstream. It is not unknown for those who swim in the river to contract respiratory conditions or infections out of—whatever you want to call it; I shall not use the term—effluent contamination.

The *Daily Mail's* consumer correspondent, Sean Poulter, recently reported a hitherto little reported incident where Southern Water was fined £90 million for deliberately pouring sewage into the sea off the Kent and Hampshire coast. We also have reports of norovirus contamination of oyster beds, again blamed on sewage pollution. I am told that one company has paid a staggering £290 million in penalties since 2010, but, more worryingly, Southern Water is alleged to have paid £126 million in penalties and payments following a series of failures in treatment operations and, more importantly, for deliberately manipulating performance data. I am told that there is a whole list of companies which have similarly been subject to discharge failure penalties.

The scandal of illegal underreporting by licensed facilities requires scrutiny by government. The Environment Agency is reported to have clear evidence of massive underreporting of outfall failure. In almost every case, someone, somewhere, will have taken a decision to breach licensing approvals, and they will know they are breaking the law. My own view, perhaps a desperate one, is: prosecute the water company executives—they are responsible for these decisions—and threaten them with custodial sentences. They should be prosecuted where it can be shown beyond reasonable doubt that they have authorised illegal sewage discharges and agreed either the falsification of data or a decision to hide adverse data on discharge levels.

Levies or fines on water companies do not work, as they place the burden of penalty for malpractice on the back of both shareholders, who without institutional support are powerless at annual general meetings, and water companies themselves. If you want action and progress, go for the directors. The reporting failures will cease immediately. Deceit will be replaced by proposals for action. The threat of prosecution will concentrate minds. It will lead to a new emphasis on transparency, greater accountability and a far more informed public debate on the way forward.

12.17 pm

Baroness Ludford (LD): My Lords, it is a pleasure to follow the noble Lord, Lord Campbell-Savours. Amid this discussion of an unpleasant subject, it is pleasurable to have in my mind the image of leaping salmon, which slightly cheers me up.

I do not have the expertise of others such as my noble friend Lord Oates, whom I thank for this debate, but I want to speak about the Thames Tideway tunnel and my modest role in it. I have had just two things named after me in my political career. One is Sarah's law, a statutory instrument in 2008 whereby I was able to leave this House for a while—to be disqualified in fact, like a traitor or a bankrupt, since that was the only route before the facility of resignation was introduced—to allow me to re-stand for the European Parliament in 2009, but that is history.

The other is “Sarah's tunnel”, which is what is now the Thames Tideway tunnel, which as your Lordships will all know is a major new 25-kilometre sewer being built along the north bank of the Thames—I think the original target date was 2020, which of course has slipped. Its purpose is to capture raw sewage instead of overflows, as now, pouring into the river from some 36 so-called CSOs, or combined sewage overflows, on the Thames and the River Lea.

I cannot remember whether the term “Sarah's tunnel” was coined by a journalist or Thames Water. It must be said that Thames Water found that to be a quite convenient term when it wanted to wheel me out as a shield when local residents were up in arms about the disruption of construction works—including, I recall, in the Southwark constituency of my then right honourable friend Simon Hughes MP. They pointed at me and said, “She's the one who's got to answer for this; not us”, which was a bit much.

I take a large degree of pride in my role in ensuring that the Thames, at least, will finally be cleared up. A large discharge in 2004 killed a lot of fish, which floated on the surface of the Thames and rowers had to plough through them, which they naturally found very distasteful. A petition was then collected and, as a Member of the European Parliament for London, I had the privilege of presenting this to the European Parliament Committee on Petitions. The usefulness of this mechanism is that the European Commission—the enforcer of EU law—had to respond to such a petition. Suffice it to say that that helped lead to the so-called infringement procedure, which culminated, though only many years later in 2012, in a judgment by the European Court of Justice which found the UK in breach of EU law on sewage treatment. I will come back to this court judgment.

That EU law is the snappily named urban wastewater treatment directive. In fact, this was passed more than 30 years ago, in 1991, and came into force, after the usual grace period for member states to comply, in 1998 for larger towns and cities and in 2005 for everywhere. So for nearly 20 years, it has been illegal to discharge raw sewage anywhere, including in the UK—as far as I know, this is either still retained EU law, subject to correction, or is being spilled over to the Environment Act. This directive marked a shift from legislation aimed at end-use standards—testing pollution levels in a river, for instance—to a stricter law regulating water quality at the source, whether domestic or industrial.

I admit that my knowledge of this subject acquired as a constituency MEP has not kept up with the times. My specialisation has always been in justice, home affairs, human rights, and equalities, so I am not knowledgeable about environmental and pollution matters, and my knowledge runs out in about 2012, the date of the judgment by the ECJ. I know that the European Commission has run a consultation on a review, and I think it will respond to the consultation later this year. However, both then and now, domestic regulators have been asleep on the job. I saw recently that Ofwat described the current situation of polluted rivers and seas as “shocking” a few weeks ago. Where on earth has it been for decades? I also know that the Environment Agency funding has fallen 70% in real terms in a decade, so enforcement is much undermined. In that case, the only real enforcement has been by the European Commission, which I will quote shortly.

As we know, the combined system of rainwater and sewage was state of the art—beginning with Bazalgette in the mid-19th century. Of course, this means that if both rainwater and sewage flows increase, so does the combined flow into the sewers. However, we need to keep up with that; we cannot have a static approach and say, “Well, it was okay 50 years ago, so we won't provide any more investment or make any more changes.”

I wanted to speak today mainly to warn against the term “storm overflows”. The Government and water companies love us to use this expression, because it suggests that discharges are somehow exceptional—only when there is a kind of storm which produces the type of flooding that we have seen in the last few years in Shropshire, Worcestershire, Yorkshire and Lancashire. They want us to have that image in our minds, so that we say, “Oh well, how can they be expected to plan and invest for that sort of exceptional event?” I was tipped off about this by a staff member—who shall for ever remain anonymous—in one of the regulators.

That brings me to the 2012 judgment of the European Court of Justice. I was amused to note that the representation of the United Kingdom Government was led by one “D Anderson QC”—and I hope that he does not mind, in his absence, if I say that I assume that this QC was the noble Lord, Lord Anderson of Ipswich. Of course, I am not reproaching him for acting for the UK Government; he would have been acting on the cab rank principle, in the same way that the noble Lord, Lord Pannick, is acting for the Government on the Rwanda scheme.

[BARONESS LUDFORD]

This case was finally brought by the European Commission after years of argy-bargy with the UK Government. The Commission said that, under the directive, member states

“are obliged to ensure that a collecting system is designed and built so as to collect all the urban waste water generated”

by the town it serves. It continues:

“The capacity of the collecting system must therefore be able to take into account natural climatic conditions (dry weather, wet weather, even stormy weather) as well as seasonal variations ... The directive must be interpreted as providing for an absolute obligation to avoid spills from storm water overflows save for exceptional circumstances.”

That is what water companies tell us all the time: “Oh, it’s exceptional.” Clearly, however, with climate change what was once exceptional is now routine. In this case, the Commission pointed out that

“the more an overflow spills, particularly during periods when there is only moderate rainfall, the more likely it is that the overflow’s operation is not in compliance”

with the directive under EU law. This is what that staff member in the regulator said to me: “Don’t be misled by the term ‘storm overflows.’” This is happening once a week into the Thames, purely when there is “moderate rainfall”. The staff member told me not to be fobbed off, and I suggest to noble colleagues that we continue not to be fobbed off.

The Commission continued by saying that the directive required

“waste water treatment plants ... designed, constructed, operated and maintained to ensure sufficient performance under all normal local climatic conditions.”

That is the warning that I want to repeat today. The Commission went on to say that

“failure to treat urban waste water cannot be accepted under usual climatic and seasonal conditions, as otherwise Directive 91/271 would be rendered meaningless.”

This is the point: water companies come along and say, “Oh, it is all exceptional, so we cannot possibly be expected to invest in this.” But they are failing to invest for normal climatic conditions.

The court found against the UK, because it said that it is not exceptional that these discharges are happening. It also went on to say

“in accordance with settled case-law, a Member State may not plead practical or administrative difficulties in order to justify non-compliance ... The same holds true of financial difficulties”.

So the Government and the water companies cannot say that there is a disproportionate cost; they have undertaken to stop these discharges and so they must. Indeed, in its judgment, the court found that there were

“60 waste water discharges from”—

it did not use the term “so-called” here, but I will add it—

“storm water overflows in London per year, even in periods of moderate rainfall”.

That is the situation we are facing.

Against the background of that 2012 judgment, I admit that I do not understand the system of permits for the discharge of raw, untreated sewage—this is my ignorance. Why are water companies being given permission to make these discharges? I do not see how

this is legal under the directive I have mentioned, since this normalises the routine absence of treatment in unexceptional weather conditions.

I end by thanking my noble friend Lord Oates again for this debate, which has allowed me to go down memory lane. If I have achieved one thing, I hope it has been to put noble Lords on guard about the phrase “storm overflows”.

12.29 pm

The Lord Bishop of St Albans: My Lords, I too thank the noble Lord, Lord Oates, for achieving this important debate. Many of the horrifying facts and statistics have been laid out with great clarity before your Lordships’ House.

I live in the city of St Albans, which is built next to the ancient Roman city of Verulamium. We have a 17-mile chalk stream which runs through the city called the River Ver, based on its Roman name; it flows eventually into the River Colne. We have a thriving local group of activists, the Ver Valley Society, which was set up and continues to work with great vigour to protect this really important chalk stream—it is really a stream rather than a river.

In 2021, the sewage treatment works at the top of the river spilled for 2,646 hours—just over 100 hundred days, so nearly a third of the year. Not only was that appallingly bad for this unique ecosystem—chalk streams and chalk rivers are mainly found here in this country—it was also bad because of the residual nitrate in the aquifer and it has led to a very poor state of the chalk stream. Insects at the bottom of the food chain are not as plentiful as they once were. Likewise, aquatic plant life is also suffering. It is unacceptable for this lovely, delightful small river, that many of us walk along regularly for leisure, that goes through our park, to be treated so badly.

When preparing for this debate, I was dismayed to learn that, according to the Rivers Trust, only 14% of England’s rivers are deemed to be in good ecological health and every one of them fails to meet chemical standards. Our chalk streams, of which there are only 200 kilometres in the world, are vital and we owe it to our present generation and to future generations to protect them.

This problem of overflow of untreated sewage has been going on for decades. I do not lay all the blame at the door of our present Government; it has gone on much longer than that. Indeed, I offer the Government a degree of credit in the programme that they are setting up to tackle it. It has been sorely neglected for generations and we really need to see much more radical and much faster action if we are to protect these important focuses of the habitat. My question is on the sheer lack of ambition in these targets. Are we really going to have to wait until 2050 to see 80% of total discharges eliminated? Given the existing poor health of our river systems, we need to move much more rapidly.

I am not going to get into the politics of the privatisation of water companies but it is deeply worrying that it looks as if our companies are not taking this with sufficient seriousness. Nine water companies recorded £2.8 billion in profits despite over 400,000 dumps of sewage in 2020. How can that be acceptable? There is

a fundamental question of time, of course. We have to give them a period to get it sorted out. But unless we have really ambitious targets, nobody is going to move. It is quite clear from what has been happening that lack of enforcement and lack of targets are allowing our water companies to continue doing what they are doing.

We are talking not just about our chalk streams. I think somebody referred earlier to the Lake District and Lake Windermere, where last year there were reports of increasing algae feeding on the phosphates coming out of the local sewage treatment plant and so on. And it is not just sewage run-off. It is also to do with toxic loads of plastic tyres, heavy metals and silt. We had Questions earlier today about household waste being dumped and so on. Indeed, other problems have been referred to of chemicals coming from medicines and other treatments given to animals which are now affecting the health of organisms and ecosystems in our streams and rivers.

Part of the concern is with the farming industry. As someone who is particularly involved in that, I am aware that it is a problem. The noble Lord, Lord Benyon, who will respond to this debate, knows that there are some quick win-wins here with all the latest best practice in farming. I am proud to say much of it happens in Hertfordshire: I go and visit some of our farmers. We are now using computer systems. We are having precision drilling, which cuts down on the amount of grain you need hugely but also precision use of nitrates and fertilisers can really decrease amounts. This is a win-win when the costs are going up. One of the questions I want to ask the Minister is: what discussions are taking place with the NFU to try to roll out best practice which will both help the industry and make a tangible and significant improvement to this problem?

I also agree with the noble Lord, Lord Campbell-Savours, who pointed out compellingly that fines are not the answer—although I hope they will go on being imposed. It sounds to me as if they are simply being factored into the accounts because it is cheaper to pay fines than to do the fundamental work. For goodness' sake, we now have to have an incentive which means that the money going into this has to be put into the long-term solutions. It must come back to a radical look at the bonuses paid to executives. I am not sufficiently close to the industry to know whether it is feasible to prosecute them. I certainly think that, if there are no bonuses paid until there are dramatic improvements each year, that will wake up a number of people in the industry.

Our river systems face an ecological crisis from multiple angles, all of which need to be tackled. Preventing sewage run-off is key to ensuring the safety of rivers such as the River Ver in St Albans, and my hope is that as we address that our biodiversity will be maintained—indeed, increased—and returned to what it was in the past and that we can really see a more confident future for our waterways in this country.

12.37 pm

The Earl of Caithness (Con): My Lords, I am grateful to the noble Lord, Lord Oates, for procuring this debate. I totally agree with him that the discharge of

sewage into our rivers is a disgrace in the 21st century; it should not be happening. It was not the intention when we privatised water, and I declare my interest as the Minister for Water at the time. I say to the right reverend Prelate that I am sorry that we are in the state that we are but I assure him that the investment in water, clean drinking water and pipe renewal has increased incredibly because of privatisation, and I dread to think what the situation would be if it were still in the hands of the taxpayer and we did not have access to that private finance.

I am a little surprised by the timing of this debate because a lot has happened in the last two years and it seemed to me that the noble Lord, Lord Oates, was really speaking about the situation two years ago. He mentioned the Environment Act, and I did not come here to defend water companies or the Government, but I think it is time to put a little perspective into this. The Environment Act was improved hugely in your Lordships' House; I was glad to be part of the group that secured that change. The noble Lord, Lord Oates, did not talk about the Storm Overflows Taskforce that has been set up. He did not mention that, under the Environment Act, by 1 September the Government have to produce a storm overflows discharge reduction plan, so I would have welcomed this debate after the Summer Recess—after 1 September. I need to ask my noble friend: are the Government on time to produce this report by 1 September? In that report, we will be looking for a step change in how the money will be spent and the progress that will be made, and a much tighter timetable. I agree with everything the noble Lord, Lord Oates, said about this, but until we get this report on 1 September, it will be very difficult meaningfully to challenge the Government. All eyes will be on my noble friend for that report.

To dump sewage into water is a complete waste of an asset. Sewage is an asset; it contains phosphate, nitrates and organic matter. As we know, phosphate is a mined commodity and most of its deposits are in Russia, so it will be even more scarce. Sewage is a resource that should be utilised and put back on the land. There should be absolutely no need for any sewage to be discharged into waters in future.

The future is the key question. It cannot be done immediately; it is horrendously expensive. We discussed this during the Environment Bill and got quotes of hundreds of billions of pounds under one option and under £100 billion in another. A step change in the programme needs to be made to improve the situation. I once again have to thank our Victorian engineers for providing a sewerage system that still works, partly, in the 21st century. The way they did it is remarkable and we owe them a debt of gratitude.

The Motion refers only to sewage disposal, but there is a much wider issue: the whole issue of water needs to be looked at in context. I therefore turn to farmers. There is a big opportunity under the new environmental land management schemes to get farmers to work in clusters to improve a whole river system. Along with some other Peers, I was fortunate to have a briefing from the Minister yesterday on what will happen with ELMS. He gave the example of the Ridgeway, a walkway crossing lots of local authority

[THE EARL OF CAITHNESS]

areas. I suggest that, equally, there should be clusters of farmers not only in the catchment area but working together along the whole river. Unless farmers work together, we will not get the changes we want.

I also ask my noble friend about the role of the Environment Agency. I was very impressed yesterday when a lot of emphasis was given by the Minister and his officials to the necessity for Defra to work with farmers and gain their trust. Can the same be said of the Environment Agency? I have not found many farmers who trust it, yet they are an integral part of how we will manage wastewater. What was the role of the Environment Agency in the construction of the chicken farms along the Wye, where there has been so much pollution? Was it involved in that? Did it give an opinion on what the effect of the discharge of all this poultry manure would be? If it was not involved, ought we not tackle the planning system to make certain that it is?

This needs to be tackled holistically. It is no good just blaming water companies; it must be tackled at source by independent regulators such as the Environment Agency and farmers need to be more responsible. As your Lordships know, I am a great supporter of what farmers do. They will produce good food in the best way they can, but they have been directed by politicians to farm in a certain way. At long last, we might be getting into a much better system of farming for the future. There is hardly a farmer I know who does not want to work more closely with nature than they have been able to in the past months. Can my noble friend tell me about that and the Environment Agency? Will he instruct it to work as closely with farmers as Defra is, to try to gain some trust from them?

Another group of people who need educating and admonishing is us. We are the polluters—the people who, as my noble friend Lady Altmann said, put wet wipes in lavatories and throw things away that we should not—who help block up the water companies' pipes, which causes some of the discharges. We waste far too much water. There needs to be a big education programme for us as individuals to realise what damage we are doing, because a lot of us are totally unaware of it.

I move to the question raised earlier of developers having the right to connect to existing sewerage systems—I am sure my noble friend Lady McIntosh will pick up on this, as we were on the same side on this during the Environment Bill. If the existing sewerage system is overloaded and there is a demand for new houses, with planning permission granted, we will get storm overflow systems. We have a real problem. If we do not discharge it into rivers or the sea, what will we do with it until we get a better system? The answer is that it will be put on to our streets and cause far worse pollution. We need to look at this much more holistically and stop the problem in all areas as well as giving the water companies the incentive and drive to produce answers at their end on a much quicker timetable.

My final point, looking at this holistically, is on our aquifers. Much of the problem we have in our rivers is due to them being so low, particularly our chalk streams. This is because the aquifers are being depleted. Until we can start refurbishing our aquifers to get

them back to where they should be, we will always have a problem in our rivers. With less flow, you have more sedimentation and get smaller fish, less biodiversity in the river and more stormwater problems. One of the effects of climate change is that we will have many more localised storms: one area of the river might be perfectly fine, but if the river is at a low level, if you get a massive storm in another area, downstream you will have a stormwater problem.

We need to get our river flows up; that will be a huge task for my noble friend but I hope that, as part of the environment plan, the Government will look at this and take action so that we take less out of the aquifers and more out of the river as it gets towards the sea. In that way, we will benefit nature and the environment throughout the river and stop some of this quite unnecessary disposal of sewage into the water and seas.

12.49 pm

Lord Sikka (Lab): My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Oates, for this vital debate. It is a pleasure to follow so many other knowledgeable speakers.

The water industry has been a serial offender for far too long. On 1 March 2018, the then Environment Secretary, Michael Gove, said that

“water companies ... have not been acting ... in the public interest”
and

“have been playing the system for the benefit of wealthy managers and owners, at the expense of consumers and the environment.”

He added that the water companies have,

“shielded themselves from scrutiny, hidden behind complex financial structures, avoided paying taxes, have rewarded the already well-off, kept charges higher than they needed to be and allowed leaks, pollution and other failures to persist for far too long.”

The privatisation of water has been a disaster. It is now a monopoly owned mostly by organisations from overseas, including the super-rich, banks, hedge funds, private equity, foreign Governments and businesses based in tax havens who have little or no experience of the daily hazards inflicted by the industry upon the people in this country.

The water companies have collected over £60 billion in dividends since 1989. In addition, untold billions have been sucked out through intra-group transactions and interest payments on loans from affiliates. Hopefully, the Minister will be able to tell us exactly how much has been taken out by the water companies. As an accountant, I struggle to understand their accounts—I hope the Minister has advisers who can help him to unravel these things. If the industry was in public ownership, all the money that has been extracted could have been used to build better infrastructure, but the Government's fetish about privatisation has landed us with all these problems.

Since 1989, water bills have increased by 40% above the rate of inflation. People have to pay them because there is no alternative. You cannot switch to an alternative supplier of these services, and the regulators simply wring their hands—they are very ineffective. As Michael Gove reminded us, since privatisation there has been no investment in new nationally significant supply infrastructure, such as major reservoirs. That is how bad privatisation has been. London and big

cities now face a threat to their drinking water supply, as has been documented in the newspapers this week. Around 3 billion litres are lost every day due to leaks, which is further evidence that the companies are out of control and do not take their public duties very seriously.

Last year, water companies discharged raw sewage into English rivers 372,533 times, while the water companies covering England released untreated sewage for a combined total of 2.7 million hours. The Government's storm overflows discharge reduction plan will seek to eliminate 40% of raw sewage overflows into rivers by 2040—that is not good enough. It is complacent and will wilfully inflict health hazards on people. In January 2022, the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee Report said that,

“A ‘chemical cocktail’ of sewage, agricultural waste, and plastic is polluting the waters of many of the country's rivers. Water companies appear to be dumping untreated or partially treated sewage in rivers on a regular basis, often breaching the terms of permits that on paper only allow them to do this in exceptional circumstances.”

Water companies, regulators and Ministers have defended the practice of allowing leaks into rivers and seas by claiming that it is better to allow the sewage to leak into waterways because otherwise it would back up into streets and homes. This is an indictment of the lack of investment and the way in which the Government and regulators indulge the water companies. Water companies have pocketed billions of pounds from sewage charges levied on customers but have not delivered the required service. This is organised fraud on a gigantic scale for which no corporate executive is called to account. The discharges kill fish and threaten biodiversity and marine life. The pollution may eventually find its way into the food chain—polio has already returned to the UK.

There are widespread illegal sewage discharges from treatment plants. On 12 May 2022, the Environment Agency said that

“Our initial analysis of the information collected to date has confirmed that there may have been widespread and serious non-compliance with the relevant regulations.”

Still, no executive is prosecuted, and there is no clawback of any executive bonus or pay. The Government continue to be complacent. Water companies face no action. There is a lack of any pressure points. Even when companies admit that they have not complied with the rules and regulations, they are still permitted to extract monopoly rents because people have nowhere else to go—they have to pay. We have no alternative infrastructure anywhere. The fines levied are puny and, so far, they have failed to bring about a desirable positive change. In a monopoly, they are simply passed on to the customers and that is why we end up paying higher and higher charges.

Profits form a key part of the executive key performance indicators in companies, and executive pay is linked to these indicators, which include profits. It is very easy for water companies to increase their profits by letting the leaks continue, which means they spend less on repair and maintenance, or by dumping raw sewage into rivers—that increases profits too. The Government continue to tell us that water companies are making huge profits, but they are doing so because

they are not carrying out their obligations. Looking at profits alone does not tell us anything about the quality of their performance.

Last year, nine water industry CEOs received more than £15 million in pay and bonuses—bonuses for what? Polluting rivers? In the past, Ministers have said that shareholders can constrain these things. Well, their shareholders are abroad; are they really bothered about what goes on in this country? Many are just subsidiaries and affiliates of giant investment funds and other corporations; they have no incentive whatever to reduce these bonuses. So, the executives get fat cat pay while the public get health hazards, leaks and higher bills.

The Government can create pressure points to force companies to deliver, and I invite the Minister to consider at least the following five modest reforms. First, the directors of companies engaging in unlawful practices need to be made personally liable for the consequences. The spectre of personal liability should check predatory practices. At the very least, their bonuses and salaries should be clawed back because they have obtained them in fraudulent way.

Secondly, no dividends should be paid until the regulator certifies that water companies have met their statutory and regulatory duties.

Thirdly, customers should have direct representation on water company boards and a statutory right to vote on executive pay. With such arrangements, it is extremely unlikely that customers facing escalating charges, leaking pipes and polluted rivers would vote for a bonus or even a salary increase for any executive. Governments often talk about democracy in society. This is democratising these monopolies. Let them face the democracy of the customers.

Fourthly, the regulator itself should have direct representation of customers on its board. I am not talking about some toothless customer panels, but people actually sitting on the board and questioning the executives of the regulatory bodies about their failure to act.

Fifthly, the general public should be permitted to take legal action against negligent companies. After all, these companies are wilfully neglecting their public duty. Therefore, the public should have a right to take legal action against these companies and the regulators.

These are just some proposals for starters. As we are getting a new occupant at No. 10, maybe they will resonate with the new leader of the Conservative Party.

I pm

Lord Stoneham of Droxford (LD): My Lords, I declare my interest as a warden of the St Clair's Meadow Nature Reserve for the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, a land trust beside the River Meon, between Winchester and Portsmouth. Like the Minister, I have the privilege of living beside a chalk stream in the South Downs National Park.

Before I start, I thank two interns who have been working with me this week: Molly Waite from Itchen College in Southampton and Ben Frankland from Peter Symonds College in Winchester and now at Exeter University. I also thank two local campaigners

[LORD STONEHAM OF DROXFORD]

in the Winchester area: Councillor Margot Power and Danny Chambers, who have helped me with some of the research that I have been doing in that area. It is not a day to thank or congratulate Ministers, but I would like to say to the Minister how much I appreciate his interest in rivers and the fact that he has a particular interest in the heritage and wildlife of chalk streams. It is good to have him replying to the debate today and we look forward to his remarks. I did not start by thanking my noble friend Lord Oates for organising this debate, because I had a part in arranging it. I apologise to the noble Earl, Lord Caithness, if we got our timing wrong, but I do not think we have. There are a number of working groups in this area at the moment and it is important to have this debate.

One reason I quoted the names of some of the local people who helped me with the remarks I will be making is that, although the water companies are obviously very important, I certainly agree with the noble Earl, Lord Caithness, that the local approach to this very important as well and I will say why. I am a social democrat and very different from the noble Lord, Lord Sikka, in my approach: I believe in private enterprise co-operating with Government and agencies to get effective progress in this area.

I start with a number of important principles. First, we need a long-term strategy. Every Government always think they can deliver things in the period of one Parliament. It is always impossible and never delivered. Therefore, we have to have considerable investment as part of a long-term strategy. I believe it has to be a bottom-up strategy, combined with a firm handle from the Government and the regulatory agencies. The statutory framework and a strong watchdog and regulator are clearly very important in this area. When I started living in my part of Hampshire, the Portsmouth water company was locally owned, locally run and all the people on the board were local. It was felt that they had a genuine commitment to the area. I do not disparage the work of Portsmouth Water now, but I feel that local commitment is missing, given what it was. That has been very common throughout the country. I accept that privatisation was important, to a degree, in bringing in new investment resources, but we have lost something. That local connection and commitment are important.

I ask the Minister: are the Government sufficiently concerned? I am very concerned that a lot of our utilities are owned overseas now—a lot of the water companies are. I would like to be reassured that the Government, if they felt it was necessary, would be prepared to use the competition rules to prevent overseas companies taking over some of these water companies. A degree of local ownership, local knowledge and local commitment is very important.

As I was saying, the local angle is important. I believe partnerships—the combining of councils, conservation groups and local pressure groups—in the catchment area of the rivers is very important if we want progress. I also mention the local press here. My local paper, the *Hampshire Chronicle*, has been running a campaign on river pollution in our chalk streams. That is very important and if it is galvanised by local voluntary groups and local people, it improves information

and puts pressure on all the agencies to take the vital action required. I support the catchment area focus, and I will deal with that in a moment because that is very important to keep the pressure on for change and improvements.

Information is absolutely critical. We cannot monitor things and cannot get change unless we see what these companies are doing, what their performance is in individual rivers and how they are trying to improve them. We do not just need information on sewerage bills, we also want it on extraction. I find it very difficult: I would love to know what the extraction figures are for the river that goes past my property. I know roughly where they are taking it from, but I never seem able to get my hands on the figures. It would be very good if each catchment area tried to bring all this information together. It would help public knowledge and it would help public pressure, which is probably one of the reasons that it does not happen. We need the measurement of nitrates and phosphates in our water and the public need to be aware of it. Too many of our treatment works do not have upper limits on the nitrate levels that they are creating. That sort of information is very important.

I will give a couple of examples from the Winchester area where I live. It was interesting to have the information from St Albans, but in my area—the Winchester district—in 2021, there were 250 spillages, totalling 3,500 hours of sewage going into chalk streams. That is effectively a third of a year. It is an improvement on the year before, when there was something like 7,000 hours of sewage leakage, but then the weather was better in 2021.

I have looked at 15 treatment plants in this area. Looking at the detailed figures published for the last two years, most of the problems are at two treatment works: Durley on the Hamble and Wickham on the Meon. Wickham is, fortunately, quite low down on the river. There were 1,708 hours of spillages in Durley and 846 hours in Wickham. The year before it was 1,386 hours. Over half the problem in our area is at those two treatment works. I am very suspicious of people saying that we cannot tackle this because it will cost £300 billion or whatever it is. If I was involved in this business, I would concentrate on where the main problems are. Clearly, the treatment works in Durley and Wickham in my area are the places I would start. I would put that on the agenda, which is why today's debate is timely. Please put it on the agenda for the government task force looking at this when it reports on 1 September.

Sewage is important but it is not totally overriding. We have already had, in the debate, the issue of extractions and lowering water levels; I think we need much more information on that. We need more measuring of nitrates and phosphates in the water. Currently, there is a campaign in Alresford in my area, on a tributary of the Itchen, where there is a problem with phosphates. It is the centre of the watercress industry and it has been discovered that no limits are being set by the Environment Agency on the treatment plants in Alresford. What is happening in the local rivers just leads to a growth of algae and weeds. The amount of silt in the rivers increases, and you get a clogging up of river

flows as well as a restriction of light, which affects the invertebrate wildlife in the rivers. That all contributes to a diminution of the natural life of those river areas.

I believe in the catchment area strategy, because that focusing on individual rivers raises public awareness. We need to do far more of this in schools, local media and local communities. In my own area, I sometimes wonder whether people appreciate the great heritage they have in their midst. I am appalled at the litter that is left on the roads and left by people walking along the river, which can do great damage to the wildlife if it is not picked up. Fortunately, there are people like me who go around doing that, but it is extraordinary that local people are so selfish in leaving that debris, which can only diminish the wildlife in our rivers.

Work needs to be focused locally. There are lots of bodies that want to be involved, whether it is conservation groups, fishing groups, farmers or the local authorities. We need to bring together information on the local catchment areas, which will raise public awareness and hold the bodies responsible to account. We need the commitment of farmers, fishing groups and others, even householders with cesspits in the river valleys. They all need to be co-operating and making sure they are contributing to the improvement of our environment. I would like to see our chalk stream areas declared environmental heritage areas—slightly selfishly, because I live in one—as they are that important.

In the last debate we had on chalk streams, in November, both the Minister and I combined to create the association of Viscount Grey, who was the Foreign Secretary during the First World War and had a cottage on the Itchen, and ex-President Theodore Roosevelt, who joined him on a walk along the River Itchen in about 1911. Those two individuals made a record of the wildlife they saw when they went on that walk. Your Lordships would be shocked if you compared the list with what you find today. They were just looking at the bird life, but if you looked at the invertebrates in the river and saw the lack of flies and insects along the riverbanks, you would be quite shocked. That is why the debate is timely and why we need a strategy for all rivers, but particularly chalk streams, which deals with these problems, and it should have the highest priority.

1.13 pm

Baroness McIntosh of Pickering (Con): I am delighted to follow the noble Lord, who we do not hear from very often. I add my congratulations to the noble Lord, Lord Oates, on calling the debate today, and join with him in a heartfelt tribute to the late Lord Chidgey. I remember not just his work on chalk streams but his knowledge of and work on international development in South Africa and other areas. I also declare my interests as on the register. I am vice-president of the Association of Drainage Authorities and I will be taking up the chairmanship of the project advisory board of a study of bioresources in England, which I will come on to in a moment.

In responding to some of the points raised in what has been an excellent debate covering many of the issues, it is important to note that of course, the current sewage disposal rates into rivers are unacceptable. However, they are unacceptable for a number of reasons,

and there is a range of people with responsibilities. In particular, I want to highlight the responsibilities that the Government and developers have. I welcome my noble friend the Minister to his place—we are fortunate that he has his current responsibilities; long may that continue.

My concern is that the Government are wedded to a programme of building 300,000 houses a year, often in inappropriate places such as areas prone to flooding or that take excess surface water. That water, in turn, is then displaced into existing developments or rivers, as we have heard in the debate.

Then, we have the issue of combined sewers. Surface water flooding is a relatively recent problem, alongside the much older problem of fluvial, pluvial, coastal and more regular forms of flooding. It was first identified by Sir Michael Pitt in his review following the dreadful floods in 2007, the damage resulting from which I am very familiar with, as the then MP for Vale of York. His recommendations were spot on but sadly, many of them have still not been implemented. He called for more natural forms of flood prevention such as Slowing the Flow—the Pickering pilot scheme which is preventing the flooding of the town of Pickering and downstream communities. He was in favour of creating more sustainable drains and ensuring that they were maintained, and he insisted that we should stop connecting surface water to public sewers—probably the single most disgusting practice, which is still perpetrated. He also recommended ending the automatic right to connect the wastewater—that is, sewage—coming out of these new houses to pipes that are certainly not fit for purpose. I add that water companies should be made statutory consultees on all future major developments, and as noble Lords have said, we must stop unflushables such as wet wipes, fat, oil and grease blocking sewerage systems.

The problem with building 300,000 houses a year is that the wastewater—the sewage coming out of those houses—simply cannot connect to antiquated, ill-fitting pipes built in Victorian and Edwardian times, which means that raw sewage is spilling into combined sewer overflows that then run into rivers, on to roads and even into people's homes, causing public health issues.

Will my noble friend use his good offices after today to ensure that finally, Schedule 3 to the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 will enter into force, end the automatic right to connect from these houses and set up a proper sustainable drainage system? It is unbelievable that 12 years on from passing that legislation, it has still not been brought into effect. Will my noble friend also allow the next price review that is currently being considered, which will take effect from 2024-29, enabling water companies to raise money and invest in and introduce the necessary innovation measures, which I will set out in a moment?

I would like to share with your Lordships what is happening and the work being undertaken by the Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management, which is looking to develop a long-term strategy for bioresources in England. Essentially, without putting too fine a point on it, this is treating the sludge—the solids after the liquids have been taken out of the sewage. I will be chairing a project advisory board, so no doubt, I will become quite an expert in

[BARONESS McINTOSH OF PICKERING]

this area. I am delighted to say that among those who will be involved are Defra, BEIS, Energy UK, the Environment Agency, the Institute of Air Quality Management, the National Farmers' Union, the Country Land and Business Association, the CLA, the British Retail Consortium, the Anaerobic Digestion and Bioresources Association, the Rivers Trust, the renewable energy association, water companies as individuals, Water UK and a host of others. I am delighted to be associated with that project.

I make a plea to my noble friend today: we need input from Defra at not just a technical level but a more senior management level, working alongside the Environment Agency and Ofwat to deliver this strategy in order to ensure that finally, we are aligning the investment being made with the regulatory framework. To date, that has not been achieved.

I am working with a number of Members next door, including Philip Dunne, on a cross-party basis, through Westminster Sustainable Business Forum, on Bricks and Water 3—the third report looking to reduce all forms of flooding. I hope that that will help to inform how the planning regime can be amended through the forthcoming levelling-up Bill. Much can be achieved through building regulations, but it is extremely important that we look at the planning regime as well. I look forward to engaging with that Bill in due course.

To conclude, I urge my noble friend to take away from the House today a number of actions that could immediately be taken: modernising and updating the drainage legislation; increasing nature-based solutions such as Slowing the Flow, which works so successfully; ending the automatic right to connect; stopping enabling housing developers to allow surface water to connect into the public sewers; and creating sustainable drainage systems and making one body responsible for maintaining them. We need to educate water customers to change their behaviour on unflushables, including wet wipes, and to reduce their use of fats, oils and grease that create fat balls, or fatbergs, which cause sewage blockages. Even a simple label on a package saying “Not fit to flush” would work. As I have said, I hope that this could be achieved through amendments to the levelling-up Bill in due course.

Will my noble friend look favourably on removing the automatic right for housing developers to connect surface water to public sewers and eliminate from the system in homes the unflushables I have mentioned? These two single measures alone would reduce the ability for blockages to form and reduce surface water which leads to storm overflow spills such as the ones we have heard about from, among others, the noble Baroness, Lady Ludford. I fully supported the amendment brought forward by the noble Duke, the Duke of Wellington, in this place and my honourable friend Philip Dunne in the other place, but that on its own in the Environment Act is not sufficient. I put to your Lordships today that we cannot continue to have inadequate pipes allowing sewage overflows to immediately go into the rivers upstream and causing tremendous environmental damage—often coming on to public highways but also causing a public health issue by entering existing developments.

I am delighted to have had the opportunity to debate these issues today, but I think there will be opportunities in the forthcoming legislation to bring forward real change in this regard.

1.22 pm

Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb (GP): My Lords, it has been a good debate, with some divergent views. I congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Oates, and apparently the noble Lord, Lord Stoneham, for bringing this here. I disagree with the noble Earl, Lord Caithness, who thinks that this is the wrong time to have this debate. We should have this debate every single week, all the time that we are sitting, until the Government actually respond to the fact that we have given a devastating analysis of what is happening. They have to respond to this. They should do what we say—that is what I think. Perhaps the next Government will understand a little better the expertise that your Lordships' House brings to debates like this. However, I liked the noble Earl's idea about sewage being an asset. I genuinely had not thought of that before, but other countries use sewage—sometimes raw sewage—as an asset. Perhaps we should think along those lines too.

What irritates me is that we have a Victorian sewage system but do not have a Victorian road system, though both were developed at a similar time. That is because the road system is updated every year: when a new development is built, a new road network is built to go with it. However, there is no such event for the sewage system when we have new developments. There has been continuous investment in roads, but there has been very spasmodic investment in sewage treatment. Obviously, road and rail tend to grow with population, but not as much as they would if we had Green voices in government—I stress that to the other political parties here.

It is now households that are expected to pay for our sewage system, and I do not see how that is workable. I cannot remember which noble Lord it was, but somebody talked about greed, and that is at the root of the problem we have. I disagree completely that privatisation is ever a good thing; I just cannot see it. Again and again, we see that rapacious companies and shareholders damage the companies they are running, so why on earth would we privatise any more? They make big profits and do not plough them back, which is why we have the problems we do at the moment. So I am definitely in the society of admirers of the noble Lord, Lord Sikka. I loved his solutions, and I hope that they have gone properly into *Hansard* so that the Government can take them up at the next opportunity, whenever that is. Perhaps it will be after the next election.

There are two overall solutions to this: either we take the water companies back into public ownership, or the Government use some of these ideas—for example, about not paying out shareholders until investment plans have delivered the changes that are needed. As I am sure everybody in your Lordships' House does, I want clean rivers and clear water flowing and encouraging the fragile and very precious ecology of all our chalk streams. I want water that is healthy enough for children, adults, local wildlife and even dogs to be able to paddle or swim in. I want to be able to swim in the Thames without getting gastroenteritis, which is what happened to me last time. I do not think that these are

big expectations. We think of clean water as a basic human right, just as clean air ought to be. If our water system is in a bad state, the rest of the environment is in a bad state as well.

I want to focus on one aspect of the potential side-effects on human health. The noble Baroness, Lady Altmann, mentioned this, and I think somebody else did as well. Apart from the obvious health threats from raw sewage in our waterways, it also encourages the spread of antibiotic-resistant organisms and antibiotic pollution, which is incredibly serious. When they release this sewage, the water companies are not only increasing the amount of resistant bacteria in our environment but guaranteeing that they will stay there, because the untreated sewage is laden with antibiotics that allow bacteria to survive.

We need clean water as a human right, just as we need clean air. I have wanted this, along with many others, for the last 30 years, and I am shocked that the Environment Agency has only just realised what a state our rivers are in. I do not understand where it suddenly got this idea from. But if you think about the amount of public outcry there has been about the raw sewage dumped all over our landscapes, you might begin to understand that perhaps the Environment Agency is waking up. I would argue that the monitoring system has completely failed to deliver clean water and clean air because the Environment Agency is not fit for purpose, and neither is Defra. They all need to be scrapped and replaced with something more robust—something that actually holds these organisations and companies to account.

As for Ofwat, it has prioritised short-term consumer interests while losing sight of the longer-term and much bigger picture. I am glad that Ofwat and the Minister have new enforcement powers. The Ministers' power of direction makes it their personal responsibility for setting the pace of change, and any delays are really down to the Government not driving things forward. Your Lordships' House has done our best here. We can be very proud of pushing this agenda—for example, the amendments from the noble Duke, the Duke of Wellington, which were huge fun to be associated with. Even when he watered them down, I was still very happy to give my support to them.

Without systematic change and rigorous monitoring, the investment programme will not deliver change. It will continue to be a screen behind which senior managers get larger bonuses, as ever, for delivering larger profits. This is a really bad system. Is the Minister happy with water companies raising water bills, or borrowing large amounts of money that will be loaded on to future water bills, while shareholders get their usual dividend payments? Essentially, is he happy that these organisations keep paying out when they are not actually spending money on investing in the infrastructure? Do the Government think it is fair that ordinary people pay extra while the shareholders get their usual cut of the profits? I just do not understand how this makes economic sense. Will the Government consider delivering a moratorium on shareholder payments until long-term investment is delivered? This has been a devastating analysis. I do not understand how anybody could listen to this debate and not feel that we have got things drastically wrong.

1.30 pm

Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville (LD):

My Lords, I congratulate my noble friend Lord Oates on securing this debate and on his excellent and informative introduction. I share his tribute to the work of our late noble friend Lord Chidgey.

The problems of wastewater and sewage are well known, as are a number of the remedies available, all of which cost money and are likely to cause inconvenience. My noble friend Lord Oates gave us some frightening statistics. Last week, we debated the inadequacies of the government paper on the five environmental principles. All these principles in some way or another can be applied to the problem of sewage discharge into our waterways and coastal areas.

Local authorities and water companies have a part to play, along with developers, farmers, householders and the Environment Agency. Environment Agency data indicates that the water industry is responsible for 24% of rivers not achieving good ecological status. Some 4% can be attributed to sewage spills from storm overflows. Agriculture is responsible for 36% of failures. Urban development and transport are responsible for 11%, and other sectors are culpable for the remaining 29%; this includes local and national government, and mining and quarrying.

When developers put in their planning applications for housing it should be an integral part of the application that SUDS—sustainable drainage systems—are implemented and form part of the planning application requirements. The Environment Agency must contribute but it often remains silent.

Since the 1960s, modern sewer installations have required two pipes to keep sewage and rainwater collected from homes and businesses in built-up areas separate. However, as most sewer systems are combined, this has meant that the separated rainwater pipe is still connected to the combined sewage system. There are around 100,000 kilometres of combined sewers in England. My noble friend Lady Ludford is correct that it is illegal to discharge raw sewage into waterways, but it still happens.

The automatic right for housing developers to connect surface water to the public sewer should be removed immediately. This is archaic, and surface water should never, in this day and age, be connected to foul sewers.

Every year, 11 billion wet wipes are wrongly flushed into sewers, where they congeal into fatbergs, reducing sewer capacity and increasing the likelihood of sewage discharges from storm overflows. The public have a part to play, along with the manufacturers of plastic unflushable products. Plastic in wet wipes should be banned and the labelling on these products should indicate in very large letters that they contain plastic and cannot be flushed. Currently, the labelling on flushability is very small and often consists of a tiny representation of a toilet with a line through it. One has to look very hard to find this symbol.

Water companies spend £100 million every year on finding, removing and cleaning up pollution caused by unflushables. An ambitious package of measures to

[BARONESS BAKEWELL OF HARDINGTON MANDEVILLE] reduce plastic pollution caused by unflushables is needed quickly. The noble Baronesses, Lady Altmann and Lady McIntosh, referred to this.

There is, of course, the issue of farming effluent being discharged into waterways. The well-publicised case of poultry manure being discharged into the River Wye is well known and remains totally unacceptable. There will be other, less well-publicised cases of slurry entering smaller local watercourses, causing unpleasant smells and unwanted pollution, often resulting in the death of fish and other wildlife. The farming community has its part to play in ensuring that our watercourses are clean, healthy and free from pollutants.

In many cases, the presence of nitrates and phosphates in the water has caused the Government to issue an edict that no new homes may be built until the issue of nutrients has been effectively dealt with. This is a particular concern in Somerset, where the land on the Levels is blighted by this issue. At a time when the Government are seeking to build desperately needed new homes, putting a blanket ban on housebuilding is particularly onerous for the local authorities affected, which are unable to build the homes their communities need. They lose income through the loss of the new homes bonus, at a time when budgets are stretched to their limits.

The Environment Agency grants overflow discharge permits to water companies, which should be monitored and managed. The EA can issue enforcement orders if conditions are breached. There is also the threat of Ofwat imposing financial penalties up to 10% of the turnover in a relevant year for the culprit authority. Southern Water had a hefty fine to pay as a result of its illegal discharges; the noble Lord, Lord Campbell-Savours, referred to this. Both Ofwat and the Environment Agency are clearly not using their enforcement powers to the full. The right reverend Prelate the Bishop of St Albans referred to this.

The 25-year environment plan introduced in 2018 clearly set out five environmental principles, with the goal of achieving clean and plentiful water within a generation. Four years have passed since 2018. Significant steps therefore need to be taken to achieve that goal.

The Government have stipulated that water companies will invest £7.1 billion in environmental improvements between 2020 and 2025, including £3.1 billion on storm overflow improvements. This is a significant sum of money, and we are already two years into this five-year timeframe. Can the Minister say how much progress has been made and how much of the money has so far been spent on improvements?

The Storm Overflows Taskforce has been set up, as the noble Earl, Lord Caithness, said. It produced a report in November 2021 calling for the complete separation of wastewater and stormwater systems nationally. This would allegedly cost between £350 billion and £600 billion, and would be highly disruptive and complex. Some of these costs could be met by reducing bonuses for water company CEOs and shareholders.

Separation of wastewater and surface water was proposed in the 1960s, and here we are today, with huge sums of money attached to something that should have been completed years ago. Of course, it will be

highly disruptive, but so is flooding of surface water, bringing with it raw sewage into the homes of those affected. It will cost money, but that must be found.

During the passage of the Environment Bill, the noble Duke, the Duke of Wellington, worked tirelessly to ensure that it had sufficient measures to tackle discharges from storm overflows. Significant clauses and assurances were removed in the other place, and a new clause introducing a duty for companies to secure a progressive reduction in harms caused by discharges and giving the Secretary of State and Ofwat enforcement powers was substituted. Can the Minister say whether Ofwat has so far used any of its enforcement powers since the Environment Act passed into law?

The water industry has done much to improve chemical levels, such as cutting phosphorus from sewage treatment works by 66% between 1995 and 2020. By 2027 it will have cut that by nearly 90%. This investment cost the water companies £1 billion—that is a drop in the ocean.

Water UK, which represents all water and sewage companies in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, is calling for a new rivers Act. I support it. Such an Act would increase the rollout of nature-based solutions, end the automatic right to connect, and enable consumer behaviour on unflushables to change. I would also add a limit to water company CEOs' bonuses.

The new Act would introduce a move towards a more outcomes-based approach to environmental regulation, as outlined in the White Paper *Water 2050*, enabling the adoption of a much longer-term approach. The *Water Industry National Environment Programme* is one of the sources of private sector finance in environmental improvement, totalling £5.2 billion between 2020 and 2025. This must be reformed to move away from concrete, end-of-pipe solutions targeting traces of specific chemicals, which may not be causing real problems in rivers. We instead need to see fuller assessments of river catchments which include carbon and biodiversity.

Every river should have a single investment plan backed by government and regulators, local authorities, farmers, water companies and local communities, as my noble friend Lord Stoneham said. Only then by working together will the problem be tackled. All partners need to be brought together, with funding, to work towards the same goals.

As I mentioned, the planning system has a part to play, by removing the automatic right for housing developers to connect surface water to the public sewer in lieu of more sustainable drainage systems. This should be a mandatory requirement, not something that can be ignored. No further connections of surface water to sewers should take place. Powers should be given to water and sewerage companies to remove misconnected surface water drains from the foul sewer. Only if these measures are implemented will we see an improvement in the quality of the water in our rivers, streams and coastal areas. As can be seen from comments made today, everybody is extremely worried about this issue. The law is there but it is not being implemented. It is time that this was taken seriously and that all involved played their part. This includes the vastly overpaid CEOs of water companies, who should be held to account, not for the level of their profits but for the harm that they have caused.

1.42 pm

Baroness Hayman of Ullock (Lab): My Lords, this has been a really good debate. I congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Oates, on securing it. I also join him in paying tribute to Feargal Sharkey, who has done so much to raise this issue. I also pay tribute to Lord Chidgey, who is greatly missed in this House.

While we have been enjoying rather dry weather recently, and water companies' attention may be on supply issues, that should not diminish the importance of continuing to talk about how we deal with challenges around storm overflows and other forms of sewage release. The right reverend Prelate the Bishop of St Albans, who is not in his place, gave an appalling example of sewage releases into the River Ver. That kind of behaviour from water companies is not acceptable.

How we treat sewage was also brought into focus recently by the extremely worrying news that traces of the polio virus were found in an east London sewage works. Any release of sewage has potential public health implications, but this incident is particularly concerning. The noble Baroness, Lady Jones, and others, talked about antibiotics being in water and the serious health concerns around that. As she said, this is about having good, clean, healthy water.

I want to think about the progress on tackling this issue. It was four years ago this month that the Environment Bill was first announced. This weekend will mark eight months since the final version of that legislation achieved Royal Assent. As other noble Lords have mentioned, during the passage of the Environment Act, concerned Members of Parliament and Peers of all political persuasions pushed the Government to take clear, decisive action to reduce sewage pollution and improve the UK's water quality. This is a cross-party issue.

I again pay tribute, as others have done, to the noble Duke, the Duke of Wellington, for his persistence during the Environment Bill, and to other colleagues who supported him. It was due to that that the Government made concessions in this area. As the noble Baroness, Lady Altmann, said, it was good to see that changes were made to that legislation to improve what is happening with sewage discharges and our water quality, but Ministers' ambition was not high enough—not for us or for a number of other organisations. We have been told by Ministers that eradicating storm overflows entirely—this is one of the things that the noble Duke got so frustrated about—was simply too expensive and that any further attempts to force the water companies' hands would produce little by way of result but would ultimately penalise bill payers. Of course that is not what we want to see.

While we clearly do not deny the right of private companies to make a profit, it is hard for water companies to plead poverty. The noble Lord, Lord Oates, mentioned the salaries and bonuses given to people at the top of water companies, and my noble friend Lord Sikka talked about the huge sums of money involved. When we think about the huge sums of money going to people heading water companies, we also need to think about what is happening with dividends to shareholders. The University of Greenwich has done some analysis which showed that between 2010 and

2021 dividends worth £19 billion were paid to shareholders in water and sewerage businesses operating in England. Is that the best use of water companies' money?

At the same time, if you compare current investment in wastewater management with the level seen in the 1990s, all but two companies are spending less, with the net impact being a reduction of £526 million every single year. The same is true of capital investment in long-term solutions. The noble Lord, Lord Stoneham, said that it is important that we have long-term solutions and I agree. Companies were investing £1 billion a year less in 2021, compared to 1991. Perhaps we could accept these trends if the underlying problems were being resolved but the sheer volume of dumped sewage—as we have heard, there were more than 370,000 incidents last year—is almost beyond comprehension and, as the noble Lord, Lord Oates, said, every water company does this.

The current system is not working so we have to consider why. The answer seems to lie in what can be described only as the half-hearted efforts of Defra Ministers and key figures at Ofwat and the Environment Agency. I am sure the Minister would not include himself in that, so can he explain why it is taking so long to sort this out properly? Despite the Environment Bill dating back to 2018, it was not until 31 March this year that Defra launched a consultation on the subject and now, as others have said, we must wait until 2050 to reach an 80% reduction in discharges.

My noble friend Lord Campbell-Savours talked about the impact of pollution on rivers and lakes in Cumbria, which I have also seen first-hand. I thoroughly support him when he says, "For goodness' sake, can't the Government speed up on this?" I draw attention to the remarks of the noble Baroness, Lady McIntosh of Pickering, about flooding and the impact of new developments. This is important. We have to work across government. Planning is an integral part of solving this problem. The noble Baroness, Lady Bakewell, talked about SUDS and foul sewers and connections to new developments. What work is being done across government to look at exactly how this can be solved, particularly around planning and new developments?

Farming has been mentioned by a number of noble Lords; the noble Earl, Lord Caithness, in particular made some pertinent points around this. I would be interested to hear the Minister report on what work is being done with farmers and the Environment Agency to reduce river pollution on farms.

However, with the current events in Westminster, I suspect that tackling sewage pollution is not the Government's number one priority—although there is clearly a bit of a clean-up taking place at the moment. Whoever ends up running the country needs to get a grip on these issues because there are huge costs not only to local communities but to our wildlife and increasingly fragile natural environment.

This debate has provided an important opportunity to take stock. I will listen carefully to the Minister's response but he should perhaps think about taking forward the suggestion from the noble Earl, Lord Caithness, that this issue should also be debated in the autumn. Then might be a good time to look at whether any of the promised progress has been made—because progress is what we need.

1.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Lord Benyon) (Con): My Lords, I refer noble Lords to my entry in the register. I congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Oates, on securing this debate and thank noble Lords for their contributions.

The noble Lord, Lord Oates, was absolutely right to mention the late Lord Chidgey. I remember having a very good debate about chalk streams with him in this Chamber just before he died. He saw my passion for them and raised me his. He was a great fighter for river health in this place.

My wife refers to my local river as my mid-life crisis; I suppose it is better than a fast car or soaring political ambition. I share noble Lords' indignation and frustration that our rivers are not of the quality they should be and not in the state they should be in. That 14% figure is shaming. It is a high bar to reach. One wonders how many rivers there were in the past. One fact we must always remember is that we have been putting sewage, in one form or another, into our rivers for decades—centuries, even—but it has gotten out of hand and must stop.

The noble Baroness, Lady Ludford, talked about her eponymous sewer: "Sarah's sewer". In my former life as the Water Minister, I remember being shown "Prescott's sluice" in the East End of London. I am not sure that I want to have a sluice named after me; the noble Lord, Lord Prescott, who was here earlier, may be able to tell me whether it was named after him. I am trying to think of alliteration; perhaps my sewer should have been called "Dick's drain" because, when I arrived as Water Minister in 2010, everyone was opposed to it. The chairman of Ofwat took me on to Westminster Bridge, pointed to the river and said, "It won't be a different colour if you spend billions on a new sewer. It will look just the same but will have cost water customers an enormous amount of money". It was opposed right across politics. The noble Baroness is right that her former colleague, Simon Hughes—the former MP for Bermondsey—fiercely opposed it. The noble Lord, Lord Berkeley, and many others used to come and see me about it. Indeed, like a student going in front of a don, I had to go right to the top of the Government to tell Oliver Letwin why his fears were not to be realised. I am glad that I now see it under construction and that this iconic river, in one of the great cities of the world, will be cleaner as a result.

A healthy water environment is fundamental to a thriving economy, to abundant biodiversity and of course to public enjoyment of our beautiful rivers, lakes and bathing waters. The noble Lord, Lord Stoneham, made the very good point that this is not subject to the four-year or five-year electoral horizons that most politicians look to; we want to see generational and multidecadal change. The Government's 25-year environmental plan includes a commitment to restore three-quarters of our water bodies to close to their natural state, but we know that we need to do more to meet this rightly high bar. That is why we are going further and faster than any Government in protecting and enhancing the health of our rivers and seas. This has included ground-breaking action to massively reduce the harm caused by storm overflows.

The noble Lord mentioned the importance of civic society. Politicians can hold Governments to account but the public can too. A huge breadth of civil society groups stand up for their rivers, and I remember from when we ran a campaign called Love your River how important it is to give people their sense of place.

Like the noble Baroness, Lady Jones, I can admire the noble Lord, Lord Sikka, but I can disagree with his points. He talked about privatised ownership being some sort of fetish. Actually, I would say that £150 billion of investment in our water sector would not have been reached by any degree if it had still been in public ownership. The owners of those companies would have had to get in the queue behind the health service, pensions, the police, hospitals and so on. Renationalisation would require a future Government to buy out the pension funds that pay perhaps his and perhaps my pension, and perhaps the pensions of many people on low incomes. The cost of buying Thames Water was estimated a year or two ago—my figures might be out of date—at £12 billion. To buy out the entire water sector would be a terrible shame. It would be the wrong thing for investment.

Lord Sikka (Lab): The numbers that the Minister quotes have little or no substance. If water companies had to meet their statutory obligations, the chances are that their income streams would actually be negative. They would be begging the Government to buy them out; we would not have to pay them anything.

Lord Benyon (Con): I do not agree with that. I also believe it is good that international sovereign wealth funds want to invest in our regulated utility sector, but it has to be a regulated sector that cracks the whip when it needs to—that is, when those companies do not do what they are required to.

The noble Lord, Lord Oates, asked the House to take note of the impacts of current sewage disposal rates in UK rivers, and further noted the responsibility of water companies to alleviate these impacts. There are two main types of sewage discharges into the water environment by water companies: treated and untreated. Discharges of treated wastewater into our waterways are one of the most significant pressures on the water environment. Treated sewage is the biggest source of phosphorus within the water environment, and excess phosphorus is the most common reason a water body fails to meet good status. Water companies are required to reduce phosphorus loads into the water environment from treated sewage by 50% by 2027. We have recently consulted on a proposal for an Environment Act target to deliver even more progress and deliver an 80% reduction by 2037.

However, it is the untreated discharges that are understandably generating the most public interest. Discharges from storm overflows not only impact the ecology of the receiving water body but can also impact public health where water bodies are used for recreational activities. We have been clear that the current use of overflows is completely unacceptable. They were only ever meant to be an emergency measure but now they are seemingly part of doing business; anecdotally, it seems that only centimetres of rain can trigger them, and that is simply not good enough. We have made it crystal clear to water companies that they

must massively reduce sewage discharges from storm overflows as a priority. If we do not see the change we expect, we will not hesitate to take further action.

Baroness Ludford (LD): I am grateful to the Minister and sorry that I missed the first minute of his response. Following the theme of my speech, can I ask that another term be used instead of “storm overflows”? It is the biggest excuse that the water companies rely on. It sounds like, “It’s an act of God; it’s a storm; we couldn’t have anticipated this”. If another term could be found it would help to shift the debate.

Lord Benyon (Con): The noble Baroness may well be right. I agree that there probably needs to be a change. Just behind us, the River Thames is subject to storm overflows that we are hoping to relieve with the Thames Tideway tunnel. With just a few millimetres of rain that one could not call a storm, many other towns, cities and rivers are similarly affected. We have made it clear that the companies must massively reduce sewage discharges from storm overflows as a priority.

My noble friend Lady McIntosh raised a number of good points. I applaud the Slowing The Flow project that she mentioned in the constituency that she used to represent. Importantly, she went on to talk about flooding. There is an easy line that campaigners and politicians use: “We should never build in flood plains”. We are in a flood plain here, in York and in most of our cities. Are we honestly saying that we should never build in those communities? We need to build flood-resistant buildings and to remember the impact that buildings can have on a creaking—sometimes Edwardian or Victorian—sewage system. That is why it is vital to link the pieces together.

We are the first Government to instruct water companies in legislation to massively reduce the use of storm overflows. Earlier this year, the Government published a new set of strategic priorities for the industry’s financial regulator, Ofwat. This set out for the first time the direction from government that water companies must take steps to

“significantly reduce the frequency and volume of sewage discharges from storm overflows”,

and that the regulator should ensure funding should be approved for them to do so. The Government have also committed to undertake a review of the case for implementing Schedule 3 to the Flood and Water Management Act 2010—a case close to my noble friend’s heart. Schedule 3 was designed to set standards for the construction of sustainable drainage systems on new developments, and to make any surface water drainage connections to foul sewers of those developments conditional on the approval of the sustainable drainage systems. This, therefore, can also seek to address the right to connect, which has been of concern to many colleagues here and elsewhere who have mentioned it.

A number of noble Lords mentioned wet wipes. The Storm Overflows Taskforce is considering wet wipes as a contributing factor to overflows and treatment works. The noble Baroness, Lady Bakewell, talked about the importance of stopping wet wipes getting into our sewage system. We have a call for evidence that will explore a possible ban on all wet wipes

containing plastic. We continue to encourage water companies and wet wipe manufacturers to raise concerns with the consumers and try to get this situation changed.

The review of sustainable drainage systems in planning policy and other developments towards reducing new burdens on the sewage system from surface water drainage from new developments really matter. My noble friend Lady Altmann mentioned nature-based solutions. These need to be understood. When I first raised them with Ofwat a decade ago, it did not like them because they could not be measured. There has been a sea-change and now nature-based solutions are much more palatable to the regulator and all concerned.

In addition to the actions that the Government are taking, we are setting out clear requirements on water companies to put in place the mechanisms to hold them to account for delivering reductions in the use of storm overflows. Last year, our Environment Act brought in a raft of new duties on water companies, which are now legally required to secure a progressive reduction in the adverse impact of discharges from storm overflows. The Act also included a duty on the Government to produce a statutory plan by September this year to reduce discharges from storm overflows and report to Parliament on progress.

On 31 March, we published a consultation on the storm overflows discharge reduction plan, which will revolutionise how water companies tackle the number of discharges of untreated sewage. Water companies will face strict limits on when they can use storm overflows and must completely eliminate the harm that any sewage discharge causes to the environment. This will be the largest programme to tackle storm sewage discharges in history.

In the consultation, the Government proposed several specific targets for water companies to achieve. One example that addresses some of the points raised is that, by 2035, the environmental impacts of 75% of overflows affecting our most important protected sites will have been eliminated. These are the most important protected sites; they are used for bathing and are valuable ecosystems that are deteriorating and need to be addressed. By 2035, there will be 70% fewer discharges into bathing waters.

The Government will also publish a report setting out the actions that would be needed to eliminate discharges from storm overflows in England. We will be very clear about the costs that this would place on consumers and their bills. Under the Environment Act, water companies are now required to produce comprehensive statutory drainage and sewerage management plans, which will set out how they will manage and develop their drainage and sewerage systems over a minimum 25-year planning horizon. They must include how storm overflows will be addressed.

The right reverend Prelate the Bishop of St Albans asked some pertinent questions. The water industry was privatised in 1989, with the aim of attracting much-needed investment into the sector through private capital markets, rather than by relying on core government funding. Since privatisation, water companies have delivered £160 billion of investment, including £30 billion invested in the environment. This is equivalent to around £5 billion of investment annually. The privatised

[LORD BENYON]

model continues to attract investment, and, for the period from 2020 to 2025, water companies have invested £51 billion, including over £7 billion of investment in the environment. This will reduce pollution incidents by 30% and deliver improvements to more than 12,000 kilometres of rivers.

The right reverend Prelate talked about the importance of joining up the pollution in our rivers with our farming policy, and he is absolutely right. I was in his diocese recently at the Groundswell event, which showed how farmers can weaponise their soil to protect rivers and the environment. He will be pleased to see the Government's riparian tree-planting proposals, which will protect river systems by planting more trees on the edge of water.

My noble friend Lord Caithness was absolutely right to raise catchments; we need to think about this landscape to protect water bodies and, of course, aquifers. I am such a geek that I check the Pang Valley Flood Forum's data whenever it rains to see the impact on my local river. I refer noble Lords to the evidence given to the EFRA Select Committee by the Government's preferred candidate to take over the Environment Agency, Alan Lovell, who comes from a farming family and understands the impact, both beneficial and damaging, that farming can have on waterways and rivers. We hope that noble Lords will appreciate this appointment and the other work that we are doing with public bodies to make sure that this remains a priority.

The Environment Act also includes a power for the Government to direct water companies in relation to the actions in these drainage and sewerage management plans. The Act includes duties to massively improve the monitoring and transparency of the use of storm overflows. Water companies will be required to publish spill data in near real time and monitor the water quality impacts, upstream and downstream, of all storm overflows. Water companies and the Environment Agency will be required to publish summary data on storm overflow operation on an annual basis.

The Government have been clear to water companies that we will not hesitate to take enforcement action if they are failing to meet their obligations. I say to the noble Lord, Lord Sikka, that the fines get unloaded not on customers but on shareholders. The noble Lord is shaking his head, but this is true: it is a rule that we have imposed.

Since 2015 the EA has brought 49 prosecutions against water companies, securing fines of over £137 million. On 9 July last year, Southern Water was handed a record £90 million fine after pleading guilty to thousands of illegal discharges of sewage which polluted rivers and coastal waters in Kent, Hampshire and Sussex. The fine has been paid solely from the company's operating profits, rather than added to customer bills.

We are holding the industry to account on a scale never done before. Ofwat and the Environment Agency have launched the largest investigations into all water and wastewater companies in England and Wales in the light of information suggesting that water companies

in England may not be complying with their permits, resulting in excess sewage spills into the environment, even in dry periods.

Before coming to this role I was on the board of River Action, which seeks to address the issues around the River Wye, and across many other rivers. These combine the problems of sewage in the rivers and phosphates from farming and make sure that we are holding relevant people to account, so I have some form on this.

In conclusion, the frequency of discharges from storm overflows is wholly unacceptable. I have set out the Government's ambitious agenda to deliver huge reductions in the use of storm overflows for the first time ever. This includes: reviewing the case for implementing Schedule 3 to the Flood and Water Management Act; a direction from government to Ofwat in the strategic policy statement setting out that water companies must take steps to

"significantly reduce the frequency and volume of sewage discharges from storm overflows",

and that the regulator should ensure funding be approved for them to do so. Further measures include: statutory drainage and sewerage management plans, with powers of direction; a storm overflows discharge reduction plan, with clear, specific and ambitious targets; and statutory requirements for improved monitoring of sewage discharges.

It is time for water companies to step up and deliver on their promises. We have all set out our expectations that they must do better, as have the public. The Government recognise that healthy and well-managed waters are a cornerstone of our economy and our well-being. We are committed to collectively addressing all of these issues alongside our action on storm overflows to deliver on our pledge to hand over our planet to the next generation in a better condition than when we inherited it.

2.12 pm

Lord Oates (LD): My Lords, I thank all noble Lords who have taken part in this very informative debate, and I thank the Minister for his response and his evident passion for this issue. Personally, I think this debate came at a good time, but for those who disagree, such as the noble Earl, Lord Caithness, I unreservedly lay the blame for the timing at the feet of my Chief Whip.

I also want to pay tribute to the noble Duke, the Duke of Wellington. I was very pleased, to be one of the signatories to his amendment to the Environment Bill. I fully recognise that there are many factors beyond the responsibilities of the water companies, but they are central to this.

As a liberal, I have a firm belief in markets and competition driving innovation and public benefit, and I come at these issues from a different point of view from that of the noble Lord, Lord Sikka. But in the water industry there is no market and no competition, there is monopoly, and as a liberal I am totally against those who exploit monopolies to gouge the public and enrich themselves, particularly when they are doing so at the expense of our precious natural environment.

Ownership is a bit of a distraction. The issue is appropriate and tough regulation, a sewage bonus ban on the water companies, and, if necessary, a cap on excessive CEO pay until their statutory duties are met. I ask the Minister to revisit this issue of bonuses and remuneration and to get all the water companies to start taking their responsibilities seriously so that we can end this sewage scandal.

Motion agreed.

Functioning of Government

Commons Urgent Question

2.14 pm

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Lord True) (Con): My Lords, with the leave of the House and as I am required to do, I shall repeat as a Statement the Answer given by the Minister for the Cabinet Office to an Urgent Question in the other place. The Answer is as follows:

“Mr Speaker, as the House will be aware, it is widely reported that the Prime Minister is about to make an important statement shortly. I can confirm that it is correct that the Prime Minister will speak shortly. I cannot pre-empt the Prime Minister’s statement, and the House and the nation will hear more imminently. In the meantime, the business of government continues, supported in the usual way by our excellent Civil Service. There will continue to be Ministers of the Crown in place, including in all great offices of state. We must continue to serve our country, constituents and the general public first and foremost. It is our duty now to make sure the people of this country have a functioning Government. This is true now more than ever.

The Civil Service is the foundation on which all Governments function. The Civil Service continues to support all government departments, and the country can be assured that this will always remain the case—I have spoken this morning to the Cabinet Secretary to that effect. Any transitional arrangements have always been made to allow for the business of government to continue. There are constitutional mechanisms in place to make sure that can happen.

We await the Prime Minister’s statement, but the House should be reassured that the Government continue to function in the meantime. Any necessary ministerial vacancies can and will be filled; other Secretaries of State can make decisions if necessary. There is a rich reserve of people who are both dedicated and talented, and who remain dedicated to serving our country and their constituents. Calmness and professionalism are now required. Our focus now is fully on the stability and continuity of government. Now is the time to serve in the interests of our country, as it always is, and of our constituents during the period ahead.”

Of course, my Lords, since that Statement was delivered in the other place, the Prime Minister has now made his statement on his intention to stand down as leader of the Conservative Party. Noble Lords will also have seen that Cabinet appointments have been made.

2.17 pm

Baroness Smith of Basildon (Lab): My Lords, I thank the Minister for doing that. He is quite right that the Prime Minister, in his extraordinary statement, has stood down as the leader of the Conservative Party, but what people across the country just do not understand is how his MPs can be absolutely clear that he is unfit to lead the Conservative Party yet they are prepared to allow him to remain in Downing Street for at least another three months, where he is appointing a new Cabinet and new Ministers and that Cabinet is meeting this afternoon. Boris Johnson has not changed one bit. The qualities that his MPs are now saying make him unfit to govern were there when they voted for him to be Prime Minister.

Does the Minister agree with John Major, who has just written to Sir Graham Brady to say:

“For the overall wellbeing of the country, Mr Johnson should not remain in Downing Street”?

Anyone who listened to the statement in Downing Street would have been quite surprised that the Prime Minister has no concept that he has done anything wrong. He described the decision to remove him as “eccentric”.

With so many of these new Ministers—some of them are old, recycled Ministers—being put into the Cabinet and into ministerial jobs having already described the Prime Minister as untrustworthy and incompetent and having stated that they have no confidence in him, how can such a dysfunctional Government even attempt to govern?

The Minister will be aware that in the other House Bill committees have been cancelled, and in this House, as seen in the Schools Bill, the Procurement Bill and the Delegated Powers Committee report on the protocol Bill—I do not know whether he has yet seen it, but it is devastating—the Government already do not have a grip on legislation. With these new Secretaries of State appointed by the lame duck Prime Minister, what will the impact be on legislation planned for this House—or is it the case that, with the Prime Minister still in Downing Street, and as so many of us fear, there is no real change at all?

Lord True (Con): My Lords, there is a good old tradition of decency in our country that one does not dance on the grave even of a fallen enemy. The Prime Minister has announced his resignation as leader of the Conservative Party, and appropriate arrangements will be put in place. When the Labour Party forced out Tony Blair without an election, Mr Blair remained while his successor was being put in place. The noble Baroness opposite should know that it is a perfectly normal and proper constitutional arrangement for the Queen’s government to be carried on and for the outgoing Prime Minister to remain until such time as he or she is in a position to recommend a successor to Her Majesty the Queen. Not to proceed in that way would involve Her Majesty the Queen in invidious decisions in relation to who might succeed, which is not something that should happen in this country. The constitutional arrangements which are in place, and have been in place, will be followed. As the Prime Minister said today, as soon as the leadership is determined and the chosen successor is clear, he will resign.

Lord Wallace of Saltaire (LD): My Lords, of course Her Majesty's Government need to go on during this moment of very considerable external economic and political difficulty, but does the Minister accept that a great deal now needs to change? I see that the *Daily Mail* is still attacking any alternative to this Government as a "coalition of chaos". However, the chaos that this Government have succeeded in creating with a single party seems to make that a very difficult case to put forward.

The relationship between government and Parliament needs to change. The attitude of government to the conventions and constraints of our unwritten constitution needs to change sharply. The relationship between government and the civil servants needs to change. If the noble Lord continues in office—with perhaps a new Minister in the Commons responsible for the constitution—will he insist that constitutional behaviour must absolutely be part of what the next Government do and that some constitutional change is essential to bring back confidence in public life?

Lord True (Con): My Lords, the Government will continue their work to deliver the programme on which they were elected. We set out our programme for this Session in the gracious Speech. The Government remain in action, and the Leader of the House of Commons has announced a forward programme for business in the other place. The usual channels have announced the programme for this place, and I look forward to day three of the Procurement Bill on Monday in Grand Committee.

Lord Howell of Guildford (Con): My Lords, we are entering an incredibly dangerous period internationally—in fact, we are in it already. In the next two or three months, the threats to our national security and prosperity will be on the verge of existential, so we need steadier government. I agree that there is an obvious need for all politicians and political parties to calm down a bit and allow procedures to fall into place. However, I am genuinely interested in how filling the ministries is going to work. Will the Secretaries of State who resigned get their seals back? Did I get that hint in the Statement? How are details of that kind going to be managed? Will the dismissed Ministers be reinstated, or will there be a new list to replace those who were dismissed? We would like to know, because we need calm government for the next three months of incredible danger.

Lord True (Con): I do not agree with the tenor of the remarks of my noble friend. The announcements on Cabinet appointments were made this morning, and the list is available. It is not the case that all who were in office before will be returning to office—some may and some may not; this is a matter for the Prime Minister. But the Cabinet posts have been filled already.

Lord Fowler (CB): My Lords, following up the question of the noble Lord, Lord Howell, surely the transitional process can be quickened up; it is not written in stone that it should last for three months. It must be possible to allow the constituencies to have their say much more quickly—it is very important that they have their say. It is much better to do that than to

try to find some substitute figure to come in as an alternative Prime Minister. In any event, we have far too many people playing in this game. Why do we not just quicken up the process?

Lord True (Con): I think many of us would agree with my noble friend's sentiments. I have set out the constitutional position which always applies when a Prime Minister resigns—it applied when Mr Cameron went, when Mr Blair went and when Mrs May went. The Prime Minister will continue until a successor is in place. I agree that that should not take too long, and I also agree that the would-be candidates should be examined to some degree. The position in the parliamentary party is a matter for the 1922 Committee, not for me. I believe an announcement will be made shortly. Ditto, as far as the Conservative Party is concerned; I am sure the announcement will be made. In so far as I as an individual have a view, I agree with my noble friend's sentiments.

Lord Dubs (Lab): My Lords, it is not normal—in fact, it is quite unusual—for a Prime Minister to resign on the back of 50 ministerial resignations that pushed him out. What happens to those Ministers, some of whom have been in office for a day or two only, or have been reappointed? Do they get their full redundancy money?

Lord True (Con): My Lords, obviously that is covered by statute. So far as I understand it, if the Prime Minister, or a Prime Minister, chose to reappoint a Minister within three weeks, they would not receive a severance payment. In the case of someone who has been there briefly, I believe there is a statutory requirement, but I understand that in the case of the individual concerned—I will correct the record if this is not correct—she has indicated that if she were given money, she would give it to charity.

Lord Purvis of Tweed (LD): My Lords, apparently, for weeks, if not months, we will have a half-time Government on full-time pay. Further to the question from the noble Lord, Lord Dubs, these resignations were not by virtue of the performance of the Ministers concerned, and nor were they removed from office because of performance. They chose to resign because of the choice of leader of the Conservative Party. Is it therefore not outrageous that taxpayers will be paying, according to the BBC, up to £420,000 in severance pay? Surely, there is discretion within the regulations to allow this to be offset, simply because it is to do with Conservative Party management and not the performance of government. The taxpayer should not be paying this.

Lord True (Con): My Lords, there is not a part-time Government; there is a full-time Government, and the work of the Queen's Government will carry on. Regarding the position on severance pay, some of these Ministers may come back to public office, some may not. There is a statutory position which has applied under successive Governments, and that will be applied according to the law and under the guidance of the Cabinet Secretary.

The Deputy Speaker (Lord Duncan of Springbank) (Con): My Lords, the time allowed for this Question has now elapsed.

Prime Minister's Meeting with Alexander Lebedev

Commons Urgent Question

2.28 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon) (Con): My Lords, with the leave of the House, I shall now repeat an Answer given to an Urgent Question in the other place by my honourable friend the Minister for Africa.

“Alexander Lebedev is a well-known former KGB officer and a former owner of the London *Evening Standard* newspaper. Yesterday, the Prime Minister told the Liaison Committee, in response to questions from the right honourable Member for Kingston upon Hull North, that he had met Mr Lebedev ‘on a very few occasions’.”

I understand that the Prime Minister confirmed that where he had met Mr Lebedev without officials present, he had subsequently reported those meetings to officials as required. I do not have any information about the content of any discussions that may or may not have been held with Mr Lebedev.

I understand that the Prime Minister has committed to write to the Liaison Committee with further details.

2.29 pm

Lord Collins of Highbury (Lab): My Lords, the truth about this meeting must come out. This person has been sanctioned by our allies for enabling the invasion of Ukraine and been described by the Russian intelligence agency FSB as a “useful asset”. In the other place, Vicky Ford was unable to offer any clarity; I hope the Minister will do so now. When she was asked whether Boris Johnson informed officials, she could not really answer. She corrected the Statement, which the Minister has just read out, saying that Boris Johnson could not remember whether he told officials. We need to know the truth.

First, did the Foreign Office, the Home Office and the Security Service know about this meeting in advance and did they try to stop it? Secondly, the record of Ministers' interests says that the then Foreign Secretary accepted hospitality in Italy for himself and a guest, but he travelled home alone. Who was the guest? Finally, it was reported that Alexander Lebedev was trying to arrange a phone call from Italy between the then Foreign Secretary and the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Did that call take place? I note what the Minister said about Boris Johnson writing to the committee, but we need more than that letter—we need a thorough investigation to be held by the Cabinet Secretary. We need to know the truth.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): My Lords, the noble Lord has asked a number of questions. As he will have seen, in the Liaison Committee session my right honourable friend the Prime Minister promised to write to the committee on those very questions and

similar specific ones asked of him. I think it is best that we wait for that letter. I note the noble Lord's last point; one thing I absolutely believe in is the importance—I hope noble Lords will regard and respect this—of any Prime Minister or Minister acting with integrity. Of course there are occasions where someone seeks to meet one on one; as a Minister, you would immediately and diligently report that back and record those issues, because it is important that all parts of a conversation are recorded fully. However, as I said, it is best that we wait for that letter. I am sure there will be other occasions on which the noble Lord may return to this subject.

Lord Purvis of Tweed (LD): My Lords, as the Minister knows, when we debated a tranche of Russia sanctions, I raised the fact that Alexander Lebedev is now sanctioned by the Canadian Government, as referred to by the noble Lord, Lord Collins. As part of those sanctions, it is a criminal offence in Canada to help him refinance, reconstitute or restructure his affairs. Did the Prime Minister bring this meeting with Alexander Lebedev to the notice of the Minister or any officials, when one of our Five Eyes allies was putting sanctions in place which meant that any interaction with him would be an offence in that country? Given that we are now getting more information regarding the former Prime Minister, it is now not only time to publish the information from the Intelligence and Security Committee on Russian interference but appropriate to publish the information and advice provided to the Prime Minister before he nominated Alexander Lebedev's son to this House. These are very serious issues that concern our key allies' criminal law. The Government need full disclosure.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): My Lords, on the noble Lord's earlier point, I revert to what I said to the noble Lord, Lord Collins: it is important to wait for the response the Prime Minister assured the Liaison Committee that he would provide, and whatever details are contained in it. The noble Lord is right to talk about sanctions; without going into the specific nature of particular sanctions, I assure him that we act in co-ordination with our allies. I am happy to update him with additional information if he so requires. We act in a co-ordinated fashion, and the application of a sanction imposes particular limitations on the individual or organisation concerned. As I have said previously and written in response to various questions raised by the noble Lord, Lord Collins, in a letter, if there is further detail that can be shared on the ISC report, I will write to him, but I believe the Government have responded to the issues raised in it.

The Lord Bishop of Leeds: My Lords, if I am right, the visit to Alexander Lebedev came in the wake of the Skripal poisoning in Salisbury, which involved two Russian agents bringing, effectively, a chemical weapon through Heathrow, a commercial airport. Can the Minister give any assurance it could not happen again, and what assessment have the Government made of that episode and the dangers it caused for potentially thousands of people?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): I am sure the right reverend Prelate will appreciate that I cannot talk in detail about national security matters, but I

[LORD AHMAD OF WIMBLEDON]

assure the right reverend Prelate and all noble Lords that there is a very robust approach across government, with all the key departments concerned, to ensure any threats to our nation and our citizens are fully identified and mitigated. In an ultimate sense, we want to prevent all of this, so any information and lessons learned from previous occasions are fully applied. I assure the right reverend Prelate that agencies as well as government departments work together on ensuring that we keep our citizens safe.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem (LD): My Lords, do the exchanges of the last moment or two simply confirm the fact that the now Prime Minister should leave now?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): There is a set procedure. My right honourable friend has taken the decision to leave office; there will now be a process that will be followed to allow for a transition to a new Prime Minister in an orderly fashion, and we are following exactly what has happened previously.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen (Lab): My Lords, there are profound national security issues involved in what has now been disclosed almost by accident in the Liaison Committee yesterday: that the current, temporary Prime Minister, while Foreign Secretary, had these meetings without officials being present. What attempts are now being made to check out how many other meetings he had when he was Foreign Secretary, or as Prime Minister, with people who might well affect the national security of our country?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): As the noble Lord will know from his own detailed experience and insights on national security matters, all agencies take a very robust attitude in terms of ensuring full scrutiny. As I have already said, the Prime Minister will write to the Liaison Committee on the broader issues that the noble Lord has raised. I am sure the noble Lord will also realise from his own experience of being a very senior Minister that, yes, there are rules and obligations that we as Ministers have to adhere to. I mentioned previously the issue of integrity, and it is for all of us, whether we are Ministers, or in your Lordships' House or in the other place, to uphold them—and equally, where there are meetings which take place, that they are minuted or documented to allow for an assessment of records. Let us await the response from my right honourable friend, and I am sure there will be details provided in that.

Viscount Waverley (CB): My Lords, does this call into account the whole question of the use of private phones by Ministers in meetings, and in other matters of official import? Could it be assured that the questions asked today are added to the questions put to the Liaison Committee, and the appropriate people are encouraged to respond accordingly?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): On the noble Lord's second point, of course there were questions asked directly of the Prime Minister, and I am sure *Hansard* will be read, and officials will feed back also

on the discussions we have had. On the point on the use of devices, be they personal or official, I can speak from experience that, whenever you travel to particular parts of the world, in terms of the IT you carry there are quite robust procedures deployed by officials at the FCDO, which ensure that whatever checks and balances need to be done for security and protecting the integrity of what is contained within the equipment, it is also safeguarded.

Malaria and Neglected Tropical Diseases

Question for Short Debate

2.40 pm

Asked by Lord Trees

To ask Her Majesty's Government, further to the Kigali Summit on Malaria and Neglected Tropical Diseases on 23 June, what assessment they have made of the effect of current reductions in Official Development Assistance on the global control of (1) malaria, and (2) neglected tropical diseases.

Lord Trees (CB): My Lords, I draw attention to my interests in the register and thank those who have committed to speak today. I am very grateful. The Kigali Summit on Malaria and NTDs on 23 June, running alongside the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Rwanda, reaffirmed international commitment to control and eliminate malaria and neglected tropical diseases in the Kigali Declaration, to which I will return later.

The fact that these diseases were singled out emphasises their importance to the health of the populations in Commonwealth countries and globally. Malaria, as many will know, is a protozoal infection transmitted by mosquitoes and is of huge importance in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, but it is controllable. I can travel and work in malaria-endemic countries safely, as I have done many times, provided I have access to certain safeguards, namely prophylactic drugs, bed nets and, if necessary, curative treatment. However, millions of people in endemic countries do not have such access, so malaria has been, and still is, one of the globe's biggest killer diseases. International efforts have reduced mortality from nearly 1 million per year before 2000 to about 500,000 by 2015, but that welcome reduction in mortality has stalled since 2015, and I note that was before the Covid epidemic.

This is profoundly worrying because malaria and NTDs are endemic infections which, without interventions, cause morbidity and mortality year after year. It is imperative, if we are to avoid 500,000 deaths a year from malaria in future—some 80% of which are of children under the age of five—that we redouble our efforts to mend damaged health systems and to continue to deliver malaria interventions.

Turning to NTDs, they are a group of 20 health challenges affecting the most disadvantaged and impoverished communities in the world. In a vicious circle, they are a cause of poverty but also caused by poverty. Individually neglected, a brilliant initiative was to bring these disparate conditions together under the title of neglected tropical diseases, which thereby highlighted their huge collective impact. They share

many features. In most cases they cause chronic, disabling and stigmatising illnesses such as leprosy; elephantiasis—otherwise called lymphatic filariasis—which causes swollen limbs and genitals; major facial and other disfigurement caused by leishmaniasis; female genital disease and predisposition to HIV as a result of schistosomiasis; and blindness through river blindness and trachoma, to name but a few. Collectively, the NTDs place a huge health burden on the societies affected, while reducing the ability of the afflicted to contribute fully to their societies. Some NTDs, such as rabies and snake bite, kill.

NTDs are a key barrier to the attainment of the sustainable development goals, not only SDG 3 on health but those on poverty eradication, hunger, education, gender equality, work and economic growth, and reducing inequalities. Yet we already have the means to prevent or control many of these horrific diseases, partly with drugs—in many cases donated free by the pharmaceutical industry or recently developed by product development partnerships—or, for rabies, by vaccination of dogs, which are the major cause, through bites, of nearly 60,000 estimated deaths per year from rabies, of which nearly half are in children. What is needed is to deliver these interventions, which may cost as little as 50 cents per treatment.

A major positive, historic initiative was the London declaration of 2012, which identified 10 NTDs for which mass drug administration provided a practical and effective intervention. Substantial progress has been made since 2012: 12 billion treatments have since been donated to prevent or treat NTDs; 600 million people now do not require interventions, which they did in 2010; 43 countries have eliminated at least one NTD; 10 countries have now eliminated lymphatic filariasis as a public health problem; five countries have eliminated trachoma; river blindness has been eliminated in nearly all the Americas; Guinea worm disease is now on the brink of eradication; and there has been a 96% reduction in sleeping sickness cases since 2000.

I reel off these figures to emphasise the great progress made quite recently in controlling diseases that have plagued the endemic populations for centuries. NTDs, however, continue to affect more than 1 billion people worldwide. We must keep the foot on the pedal to sustain these gains. The UK has been a leading supporter of NTD control and research but the recent gains, for which we can take much credit, have been imperilled by the official development assistance cuts. It is difficult to ascertain exactly how much of the £4 billion reduction in the total ODA budget announced in November 2020 fell on health sector support, but the savings are small in comparison with total UK public expenditure, which in 2020-21 was £1,000 billion pounds.

We do know that cuts for NTD control have been disproportionately huge in their effect. The UK's flagship Ascend programme, essentially our entire operational contribution to NTD control, had its £220 million original budget slashed. These cuts were immediately applied to ongoing programmes. The result was that millions of already donated medicines have been unused, and millions of at-risk people have been left exposed to horrible preventable diseases. Moreover, support

for health system strengthening and capacity-building within the NTD programmes was lost. In its two years, however, Ascend consistently scored “exceeds expectations” in evaluations.

We know that the control of NTDs is one of the most cost-effective health interventions, with an average economic benefit of at least \$25 dollars for every \$1 spent. The Government themselves, in their recent international development strategy, have emphasised that success for that strategy means

“unleashing the potential of people in low- and middle-income countries to improve their lives”,

and that they want women and children to have “the freedom they need to succeed”.

Yet malaria and NTDs disproportionately affect the health, well-being and life chances of women and children, who bear the brunt of morbidity, mortality, and the stigmatising effects of these diseases. Moreover, tackling these diseases can improve and strengthen health systems, surveillance systems and healthcare delivery methods that align totally with the Government's priorities for ODA and pandemic preparedness, as well as with the sustainable development goals.

The Kigali Declaration on NTDs seeks to galvanise further commitments to end NTDs by reducing by 90% the number of people requiring interventions for NTDs by 2030. It was backed by high-level participants, including the Minister, the noble Lord, Lord Ahmad, who, on behalf of Her Majesty's Government, endorsed the agreement.

Returning to malaria, the UK has made major contributions to its control, mainly through the Global Fund, for which the UK was a founding member and has been the second-biggest donor. The fund can command huge economies of scale and has been A-rated by quality assessments. Most importantly, the seventh replenishment goal of \$18 billion dollars—to be discussed in September—has already received a pledge from US President Biden for \$6 billion dollars but is conditional on the balance of \$12 billion dollars being raised from other sources. Failure to reach the target will reduce the US commitment, so potentially every \$2 the UK commits will help ensure \$1 from the US.

In conclusion, health underpins every attempt to improve social, educational and economic development, which we espouse to support. Without health, endemic communities are handicapped in their ability to help themselves. We need to emphasise that support for health—closely integrated in partnership with endemic communities and Governments—not only is an altruistic and humanitarian good thing to do but is in our own interest.

A huge challenge facing the affluent global North is migration—yes, much of it is driven by conflict, but also by the desire for a better life. With relatively modest investment, returning to our legal commitment to devote 0.7% of our GNI to ODA, and by prioritising health, we can improve the life chances of disadvantaged communities, and through health create wealth: stabilising those communities, promoting social and educational equality, enabling economic development and aiding detection and control of potential pandemics at source, all of which will benefit us in the UK.

[LORD TREES]

Finally, I ask the Minister: how will the UK Government deliver their commitment in the Kigali Declaration to support NTD elimination programmes? Secondly, will Her Majesty's Government support malaria control by increasing their commitment to the Global Fund at the next replenishment in line with the US Government's increased commitment?

2.51 pm

The Lord Bishop of St Albans: My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Trees, for obtaining this important debate on a subject that really needs to be before your Lordships' House more frequently and deserves a much higher profile. This is a topic of some interest to me because one of my colleagues, the Bishop of Hertford—last week, he became the Bishop of Bath and Wells—is a professional epidemiologist. I hope that he will be in this House in a few years, because he has spent a lot of his time—even though he has been a bishop—in Africa working on a variety of things such as malaria and Ebola. Thanks to him, I have become increasingly aware of just how important this area is and, as we come out of Covid, how vital it is that we grow human capital in these regions.

It was said to me that rather than calling them “neglected tropical diseases” it would be more apt to call them “tropical diseases of neglected peoples”, given the global economic status of their victims. While I am conscious that malaria is specifically referenced in this debate and that NTDs include a host of serious bacterial and viral infections, I want to focus my brief comments on the parasitological infections within the NTD umbrella, as these are really diseases of poverty. Parasitological infections such as worms are in many cases caught because of the social context in which people are living—poor sanitary conditions, lack of clean water and the inability to store or consume food safely. It is therefore no surprise that deworming programmes are a huge part of the global effort to combat NTDs.

Typically, the victims are school-age children, which is why the standard way of delivering these treatments is very often through schools. This is why the millennium development goals and the specific provision to achieve universal primary education are so crucial, because, as well as giving education, these are the places where parasitological infections can be treated. However, as we experienced during the Covid lockdowns and the gradual emergence from them, children in areas of the world where NTDs are prevalent were unable to attend their schools and were locked out of the treatment that they desperately needed. This created a backlog in the delivery of these treatments. It is important to emphasise that the delivery systems and infrastructure are equally important as any medication if we are going to sort this out. To be fair to some of our pharmaceutical companies, very often that medication is donated.

It is deeply regretful, therefore, to see the very sizeable cuts in foreign aid. Parents in this country would be rightly outraged if children were being infected with parasites which could be treated for as little as 50p—I think the noble Lord, Lord Trees, said 50 cents, but I thought it was 50p. The currency does not matter; it is pennies we are talking about. This is a minor amount of money yet, in some respects, by

reducing our foreign aid funding, we are allowing these diseases to occur in the developing world. The real danger, as people face starvation, shortages and famine—and these NTDs—is that we potentially face mass migrations. It really makes sense for us to think about how we can make improvements in these other parts of the world.

The point about treating NTDs, especially parasites, is that by building the delivery infrastructure, such as schools, as well as better sanitary facilities to prevent infection in the first place, we are investing in the human capital of these nations. In rich countries, human populations constitute between 70% and 80% of the nation's wealth. In low-income countries it is around 30% to 40%. The implication is that the majority of people in these countries fail to achieve their full potential. That is a tragedy for them as people and for the well-being of their nation. Therefore, when we talk about treating NTDs, it has to be within a wider framework of boosting human capital within nations. This occurs through direct treatment, which is extraordinarily cheap per child; supporting universal primary education, especially where women are concerned, since they are more likely to be locked out of primary education; and continuing to improve public health infrastructure in these areas.

All these things will improve treatment and human capital, which in itself will lift people out of poverty and prevent infection. Therefore, when we consider cuts in aid to the tune of £150 million for the elimination and eradication of NTDs, this is only one section of the funding required to address this problem, as it fails to account for the cuts in funding to help build the human capital that is so vital to combatting these diseases in the long run.

Many charities are doing their best to address these issues. Within the Anglican Church we have the Anglican Alliance, which is a major fundraiser trying to do that. Just this morning I chaired an online meeting with people from Mozambique, because my diocese is seeking to make a serious input into the north of that country to see whether we can give it a serious boost. The problem is that, despite all our voluntary efforts, it will not be enough without government help. I believe that is what we need urgently.

I finish by reiterating that foreign aid is an undeniable moral good, especially when we consider our good fortune in not being plagued by these diseases. That is not to say that we do not currently have problems at home, but it is about being mindful of our privilege and material well-being. The Covid pandemic has set back efforts to tackle NTDs, which makes it more important than ever to see what we can do to help these countries, which will also benefit us as being the right thing to do.

2.58 pm

Baroness Hayman (CB): My Lords, I declare my interests as set out in the register and apologise for not doing so when I intervened in a Question earlier. I hope the House will forgive me.

I have been involved in these issues for a long time. I remember the excitement around the London Declaration on NTDs. I very much welcome the speech that the

noble Lord, Lord Trees, made, which I thought set out comprehensively the implications of these diseases for some of the poorest people in the world—some of the most neglected people in the world, as the right reverend Prelate said.

The London declaration aimed to enable more than a billion people suffering from NTDs to lead healthier and more productive lives. The link between good health and development is very well understood. We have made a great deal of progress, but we are at a very dangerous point for NTDs and malaria. There is a double challenge. There is the challenge of the post-Covid environment. Covid had a tremendous effect in the poorest countries in the world in diverting resources away from the absolutely basic services given for malaria and NTDs, and we have seen the consequent rises in death, as far as malaria is concerned, and in disability and disfigurement that come from NTDs.

However, as well as the effects of Covid, we have had the effects mentioned by both speakers already of the reduction in ODA, which have been devastating as far as NTDs are concerned. The flagship Ascend programme was cut off completely and in a totally irresponsible way, which ended up with donated medications being thrown away on a horrific scale. If we are to end programmes, there is a way to end them which is sensible and minimises disruption and damage, and we did not do that with the Ascend programme. There are other examples across the board. The RISE leprosy programme in Bangladesh just went, in exactly the same way.

Not to be completely negative, I say that I hope that the Kigali Declaration can bring us back to some focus on NTDs. The Minister, who I know has always been very concerned about these issues and committed to tackling them, endorsed the Kigali Declaration during the summit last month and committed to supporting NTD elimination programmes, recognising that tackling NTDs also helps to reduce poverty, address inequality, strengthen health systems, increase human capital, and build resilient communities. However, I would be very grateful if, when he winds up, he can give us a little of the detail on how the UK intends to act on its CHOGM and Kigali Declaration commitments, and what technical and financial resources it will deploy in support of countries to achieve the WHO 2030 NTD road map, and to partner and collaborate with endemic countries to support action to achieve disease-specific goals while building resilient health systems.

Turning to malaria, I think that the most important message that we can give to the Minister today is on the need for this country's strong support of the Global Fund. The US has shown the way. We have always been the joint leader on donations to the Global Fund. I hope that this continues. Any reduction in that funding would have long-term consequences. Not only would it imbed and continue the reduction in the progress that we have made in reducing deaths from malaria, it could also have very different consequences. There was a fascinating meeting yesterday with the Medicines for Malaria Venture. One consequence of reducing funding to the Global Fund would be on endemic countries' access to quality medicines. The shortfalls in the funding of quality medicines might

oblige countries to source lower-quality medicines, which are not as effective, and which could have potentially devastating effects. I hope that the Government will look at that potential negative consequence and at the potential positive consequence in supporting the local manufacturing of malaria and NTD medicines, particularly malaria drug production. There are some examples of local manufacturing, but they need support and investment to meet international regulatory standards and WHO prequalification.

I hope that if the Minister cannot reply today he will write to me on whether the Government are considering the positive role they can play in knowledge transfer and supporting capacity-building in-country so that endemic countries can move towards self-sufficiency in the production of these medicines. The UK has been a long-standing leader in the fight against malaria, supporting ground-breaking R&D and the large-scale deployment of tools to tackle the disease. That has been done particularly through generous contributions to the Global Fund.

I shall make one last point. When we were discussing Nigeria the other day, the Minister reassured the House about the priority that the Government give to programmes for women and girls. I hope he will recognise today that those programmes are not just about violence against women and girls. Those who suffer from these diseases most acutely are women and girls. Support for the Global Fund means support for 60% of a programme specifically directed to women and girls. Deaths occur in children under five and pregnant women. NTD infections contribute to maternal mortality and morbidity, poor foetal development, maternal anaemia, maternal mortality, pregnancy complications, infant mortality and low birth weight. They also heavily impact on education and employment opportunities for women and girls. These are important areas, and I hope the Minister will be able to respond positively.

3.07 pm

Lord Purvis of Tweed (LD): My Lords, this is a short debate on a hugely important topic. The three speakers who preceded me have outstanding experience and knowledge on this issue and I commend them on their remarks. I particularly commend the noble Lord, Lord Trees, on securing this debate, so relevant after the Kigali announcements and incredibly prescient since the Government will be making decisions about the Global Fund replenishment that has been made. The timing could not be better, and I hope and expect that the noble Lord, Lord Ahmad, will respond positively—but I look forward to hearing the extent of that positive nature.

The right reverend Prelate is right that this topic is not solely a health topic but is primarily a life chances topic. The eradication of these diseases has a low financial value but a high value in enabling and liberating girls and young women in particular, as the noble Baroness, Lady Hayman, indicated. She stressed that 11.5 million pregnant young women, the focus of the Global Fund, will be impacted by this, which draws into sharp focus why we believe so passionately that the UK should repeat its full complement to the Global Fund replenishment, as it did last time. I will return to that in a moment.

[LORD PURVIS OF TWEED]

Just two weeks ago when the Minister—along with the Prince of Wales, who was representing Her Majesty—was in attendance at CHOGM on behalf of the UK Government, I was fortunate to join the all-party group on malaria, of which the noble Lord, Lord Trees, is chair, which visited a health centre on the outskirts of Kigali. I met pregnant women who are directly benefiting from this work on greater education and awareness of how to receive medication and use nets and to communicate to the wider community about their effective use and the positive impact that makes.

We also visited a community health centre, where we met one of the networks, made up primarily of women, which provide vaccination services after the identification of potential malaria. These people are volunteers in their community. They are paired up, a man and a woman, in each community. I saw at first hand the materials they use from USAID, the equipment they have been provided with via the Global Fund from the UK contribution, and their impact on the wider community. I am sure that the Minister is aware of this but, if the UK does not replenish, we will see to the same extent we have seen before an immediate reversal in some of the progress we have heard about. It will not be a gradual decline, in the same way as we have seen a gradual improvement; it will be an immediate reversal, which is why the UK needs to replenish in full.

I welcome the Kigali Declaration on reducing NTDs by 90%. In the Commonwealth, there was a restatement of the ambitions with regard to malaria. However, we have been informed through our briefings that the 2018 Commonwealth declaration on the reduction of malaria, with the UK as chair-in-office, is now off track. I would be grateful if the Minister could give an update on where we are in the Commonwealth after the commitment on malaria made at the 2018 CHOGM. I remind the House that the commitment was to halve malaria across the Commonwealth by 2023. I would be grateful to know where we are on that.

The noble Baroness, Lady Hayman, is absolutely right that we are at a dangerous tipping point. The good intentions of the summit and the Kigali Declaration were very positive. They included commitments totalling more than \$4 billion from Governments, international organisations and philanthropists; commitments of more than \$2.2 billion in partner countries' domestic resources; and 18 billion tablets being donated by nine pharmaceutical companies. However, they will go only so far in maintaining this level of progress if the Global Fund replenishment, which supports the distribution of many donated medicines, does not happen, as this will reduce the capacity of partner countries to deliver them to their people. From the point of view of value for money, leveraging in support from other partner countries and the private sector for full replenishment should be seen as one of the best things we can do.

The tragedy of the cuts we have seen in UK ODA has been twofold. The first is something that is often under-debated: research and development. In many respects, the UK has led in the fight against malaria and NTDs because of UK research and what the UK has brought about through science and innovation,

working with our universities, health partnerships and partner countries in particular. All that has come through UK leadership. Therefore, the cut in UK R&D as a result of the funding cuts will cause long-term damage.

Following the announcement of the ODA spend for 2021-22, UK Research and Innovation announced a £120 million research gap. Think about the partnerships with Imperial College, the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, the University of York and the University of Lancaster—these are world-leading partnerships that have been starved of the kind of capacity that is necessary for the next generation.

I am not an expert on these areas. I defer to the noble Lord, Lord Trees, all the time. In fact, I have in front of me the names of the conditions that he so easily pronounced, and I look down at my notes with foreboding because I cannot even pronounce them. However, getting to the next level of improvement will require even greater levels of innovation because by definition these people are harder to reach.

With the cuts to NTDs, with the matter—which we have debated and had Questions about over the period—of the disgrace of the incineration of medicines that could have been provided, and with the distribution of vaccines whose lives were just short of their effective use, we could potentially see 24 million people with lymphatic filariasis, 21 million people with river blindness, 21 million people with schistosomiasis and 4 million children with intestinal worms. That is the scale of the human impact.

Given the life chances that this measure is going to remove for those nearly 100 million people, I hope the Government will think again, lever in UK support and deliver the replenishment to the Global Fund in full.

3.16 pm

Lord Collins of Highbury (Lab): My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Trees, for initiating this short debate on a vital subject. I too want to start on a positive note, because the Kigali summit displayed something unique and important that we should stress: it included Governments, coinciding with CHOGM, but also civil society and the private sector.

We heard clear government commitments to support the fight against malaria and NTDs, which included domestic resources, co-financing and support for innovation, from all the countries committed to that declaration. Like the noble Baroness, Lady Hayman, I would like to know what that commitment means in terms of action by this Government, so I hope the Minister can translate those words into specific actions.

We also had clear commitments from the private sector, which we should welcome, including the donation of drugs, as the right reverend Prelate referred to. Again, that is action that we should encourage and support; it is not all about government action. We also had support from trust funds and philanthropists such as Bill and Melinda Gates, who also make important contributions.

Just as important are civil society organisations and NGOs, which have made a significant commitment in the fight against malaria and NTDs. It is those sorts of

commitments and programmes that we should also hear about from the Minister regarding how our Government's commitments can translate into support for those civil society organisations.

However, as we have heard in this debate, such collective action will not deliver without the support of overseas development assistance—from all countries but, more importantly, from this country. As we have heard, progress in combating malaria has stalled in recent years despite the gains of the past two decades. In 2019 there were 229 million cases of malaria and 409,000 deaths, and it continues to take a heavy toll on pregnant women and children, particularly in Africa. The noble Baroness, Lady Hayman, is right: if this Government are going to make women and girls a priority, they need to focus on these policies. It is not just about conflict prevention.

As all noble Lords mentioned, the cuts in the UK's ODA budget, to which I shall return, have had serious impacts. I will not repeat what the noble Baroness, Lady Hayman said but I was going to refer to the issue in more explicit detail. It was not just a question of the amount of those cuts but the speed at which they occurred. We have had repeated debates on the unnecessary harm caused by the speed of those cuts. They were not planned. I am not advocating cuts but damage was caused by immediately stopping programmes. I cannot imagine the consequences.

It is important to acknowledge the role of this country because we have been in the lead. The London declaration was an important initiative, supported by philanthropists and others. I must thank the noble Baroness, Lady Hayman, who, when I first came into this House, initiated a series of debates on the declaration. We had a sort of annual anniversary debate to monitor the progress of the commitments made.

As we have heard, however, one of the impacts of Covid has been a coming together on all NTDs to look at how collective action and cross-sectoral collaboration can help rebuild programmes—particularly on WASH and NTDs. The NTD road map, which has been referred to, set vital global targets. I want to say a few words about the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration. Through co-ordinated investment, we can have an impact across the range of NTDs as well as in terms of priorities for women and girls.

I declare an interest as co-chair of the APPG on Nutrition for Growth. Nutrition is a vital foundation activity for safeguarding women and girls and ending some of the worst diseases. Nutrition relies primarily on education and primary healthcare. Universal healthcare is a priority that this Government have led the way on but where the ODA cuts have impacted hugely. They are not programmes that one can set up one year and then take away; they need long-term investment. A lot of the activities that we have been talking about are precisely that—five, 10 or 15-year programmes. We are talking about sustainability and employing nurses and community nursing activity to go out and build sustainable development. That is vital and I hope that the noble Lord can reassure us on how we will support the road map highlighted by NTDs.

We have focused heavily not just on the physical means to deliver progress against these diseases but on the need to stress the importance of research and

innovation. That is true of Malaria and many NTDs. We need to hear from the Minister about how we will continue to support that innovation through the Kigali Declaration. The Global Fund is a vital instrument for change and for pushing back these diseases. The US Government have led the way. I have asked the Minister questions on this and the noble Lord, Lord Trees referred to it. That leadership by the US needs UK support. If we do not support it, the overall amount given to the Global Fund will reduce, which is why it is vital that we continue with that commitment.

I hope, therefore, that the Minister will reassure us. I know he will say that the decision on the amount has not been made yet. We do not know who is responsible for that—things could change in days, hours or minutes. But this is such an important subject, so I hope he will take back the message that we need to support the United States to ensure that the Global Fund replenishment can continue to deliver on the targets that we agreed in 2015, with the SDGs. I hope the Minister will respond positively.

3.25 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon) (Con):

My Lords, I thank all noble Lords for their, once again, detailed and expert insights in this short but very informed debate. In particular, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Trees, for tabling it and for his long-standing commitment to combating malaria and neglected tropical diseases. I pay tribute to the noble Baroness, Lady Hayman, for her continued focus; her expertise and insight were valuable to me, as they were to the noble Lord, Lord Collins. He and I joined your Lordships' House at more or less the same time.

As the noble Lord, Lord Trees, reminded us, this debate comes hot on the heels of the successful Kigali Summit on Malaria and Neglected Tropical Diseases, alongside the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. I was pleased to see members of the APPG, including the noble Lord, Lord Purvis, in Kigali and to exchange views with them directly. As he mentioned, the Commonwealth is undoubtedly disproportionately affected by these diseases, and the political will demonstrated at the summit and in the leaders' communiqué will be key to ending these epidemics.

I agree with the noble Lord, Lord Collins, about the importance of civil society and its role. A few other events were keeping people occupied, but over the last 48 hours I was focused on the delivery of the freedom of religion or belief conference at the QEII, which has just concluded. Civil society representatives were intrinsic and central to the ministerial conference, rather than a separate part of it, and the same needs to apply in every respect of our work.

As noble Lords noted, Commonwealth leaders reaffirmed their commitment to halving cases of malaria in the Commonwealth, and countries affected by malaria made \$2.2 billion of commitments to tackle the disease. As noble Lords acknowledged, I was proud to sign on behalf of the UK the Kigali Declaration on NTDs, which will continue the global momentum generated by the UK-led London declaration 10 years ago. The Kigali Declaration commits countries to supporting

[LORD AHMAD OF WIMBLEDON]

the delivery of the World Health Organization's road map on NTDs, a pivotal instrument in our fight to end this epidemic by 2030. I was glad to see the commitments made by Governments, pharmaceutical companies—which the noble Lord, Lord Collins, alluded to—donors and others.

The noble Lord, Lord Purvis, asked about the Commonwealth being off track on the commitment to halve malaria by 2023. There is no hiding from this; it is off track. A large part of this is a result of the impact of Covid; many Commonwealth countries that were on track were impacted. The noble Lord is aware of the challenges of Covid and vaccine distribution, particularly for the most vulnerable. Countries currently on track include Bangladesh, Belize, Malaysia and South Africa. Off-track countries include Nigeria, Mozambique, Uganda and Tanzania, for example. Although overall we are off track as a Commonwealth of 56, the commitment to end the malaria epidemic by 2030 was restated. When I see the focus, uniformity and universality of the commitments, I believe that, rather than pushing targets back, we will see what progress can be made when the Commonwealth meets again. I would be keen to talk to all noble Lords to see what more can be done to meet this commitment.

There is no doubt about the challenges that these epidemics pose: diseases such as Covid-19 place a terrible burden, and the issue of NTDs and malaria add to that. They were there before Covid, are still very much present and affect the poorest, especially women and children.

I assure the noble Baroness, Lady Hayman, that when I alluded to the issue of women and girls, it was not just in the context of issues of sexual violence. I totally agree with the noble Baroness that it is about how we invest, which is why the Government remain committed, for example, to the important issue of girls' education around the world. In 2020, more than 11 million pregnant women in African countries were exposed to malaria, contributing to more than 800,000 cases of low birth weight, and eight in 10 of those who died of malaria were children aged under five.

Even before Covid, the issue of being off track, which I have just alluded to, was a key challenge for everyone. The pandemic has set us back, but we have rallied to avert the worst-case scenarios, including the World Health Organization recommending the world's first malaria vaccine, as well as advances on other vaccine candidates. The Gambia was declared trachoma free last year, and Rwanda and Uganda heralded the elimination of specific strains of sleeping sickness this year.

On the issue of specific deliverables raised by the noble Lords, Lord Trees and Lord Collins, and the noble Baroness, Lady Hayman, I agree that we need to be specific in what we can do. One of the important elements, to put a bit of detail on this, is that the UK will invest quite specifically in research and innovation in new drugs and diagnostics, through world-leading product development partnerships. These will include specific research on NTDs and other diseases of poverty.

Several noble Lords raised the issue of drugs being thrown away by programmes, and I will look into this in more detail. From a general perspective, while there were no reported cases of donated drugs being destroyed or thrown away, figures are being used in media reports, so I will follow this up. If noble Lords know of any specific countries or issues that can be traced back to particular programmes, it would be helpful to have that information.

Picking up several of the points raised by the right reverend Prelate, we remain very much committed to global health, and our recently published international development strategy focuses on this. Saving lives, particularly those of mothers, newborns and under-fives, while making essential health services available to all, is a top priority for the UK. We have detailed our commitments and plans in our new IDS, as well as in position papers last year on health systems strengthening and ending preventable deaths.

Strong, resilient and inclusive health systems are of course crucial here and we will continue to invest in programmes to strengthen these, to help ensure that tools for preventing and treating malaria and NTDs are readily available to all who need them. I agree again with the noble Baroness that, by investing early in R&D and prevention, we can save money but, most importantly, we can save lives.

The focus on stronger health systems is the bedrock of our efforts to improve global health, and in this respect I agree with the noble Lord, Lord Trees, that it really is the basis for continued wellbeing. It is a strategic decision to focus on the sustainable systems and essential services required to address all causes of ill-health—a point made by the noble Lord, Lord Collins.

In some cases, this focus has also meant reducing our investments in directly delivering services, but here we have worked with national programmes and partners to prioritise and complete programme activities where possible, and to co-ordinate the handover of activities to others. We continue to invest in key multilaterals and research, alongside helping to build strong health systems overall.

All noble Lords referred to the Global Fund. This year also marks the seventh replenishment of the Global Fund, which remains an essential partner in the fight against HIV, TB and malaria, as well as in strengthening health systems and supporting pandemic preparedness. As all noble Lords acknowledged, the UK is a co-founder and long-standing contributor to the Global Fund, having provided more than £4 billion in funding to date, and we are reviewing the investment case for the seventh replenishment in line with our new strategy and global health position papers. I reassure noble Lords that we will make a significant financial and leadership contribution to the Global Fund.

The noble Lord, Lord Collins, talked about needing to make sure we get the commitment. What more should I say? I am still here. In all seriousness, this is important to me; it is something I have focused on. There is nothing on which I disagree with noble Lords in relation to the importance of this fund and its contribution. We are focused on making sure that our leadership is sustained. The noble Lord spoke about

supporting others, including the United States. If we can continue to focus on this, we can look ultimately again at saving lives.

Along with other institutions, we have funded Gavi and UNITAID. The Global Fund has also played a critical role in piloting the malaria vaccine. We will continue to support the Global Fund and Gavi to maximise the vaccine's impact by helping countries plan their rollouts, alongside other proven malaria interventions. That is an important point about logistics on the ground.

On R&D, the UK continues to invest. I can assure the noble Baroness, Lady Hayman, and the noble Lord, Lord Collins, of our recognition of the importance of technology transfer. We will continue to put our scientific expertise to work for global health and development challenges in this respect, focused on NTDs. Our investments have led to the world's first child-friendly antimalarial drug, which is estimated to have saved over a million lives. We have also funded trials, with the result published in the *Lancet*, of a novel type of bed net that kills mosquitoes resistant to traditional insecticides. This net reduced the prevalence of malaria by 43% in the first year of use.

The point on ODA is well made. I have always been candid and clear: when you cut funding on ODA, which we have done, that will have an impact, but ensuring prevention is a key focus. The Government's commitment to 0.7% remains.

I am grateful to all noble Lords who have contributed. Our long-standing commitment endures. As the noble Lord, Lord Trees, said, health ultimately creates wealth. Our objective should be ensuring that countries improve not only their health services but their livelihoods. The collective will demonstrated in Kigali should be the impetus to do so much more.

NATO Accession: Sweden and Finland

Statement

The following Statement was made in the House of Commons on Wednesday 6 July.

"With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on our support for Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO. I am making this statement on behalf of my right honourable friend the Foreign Secretary, who is attending a meeting of the G20 in Indonesia.

Finland and Sweden submitted their formal applications to join NATO on 18 May this year. Less than 50 days later, accession talks have been completed, and yesterday allies signed the accession protocols for both countries. The UK played a significant role in securing agreement from all NATO allies to this important move, with my right honourable friends the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary holding numerous discussions with their counterparts. The accession protocols have now been passed to all NATO countries for ratification, and they are being laid in Parliament today under Command Papers CP 730 and CP 731.

Finland and Sweden are NATO's closest partners. They share our principles and values, including liberty, human rights, democracy and the rule of law. They share the alliance's unwavering commitment to international security. They both have years of experience

in training and operating with allies and have made significant contributions to NATO-led operations and missions. We work together in the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force. We value their role in the region and applaud their support for Ukraine.

Their decision to seek NATO membership follows extensive democratic consultations in those countries. It is a mark of the threat that Russia poses to these two countries, who have tried so diligently to remain neutral for so many decades, that they are now applying to join the alliance. We must ensure that they are integrated into NATO as swiftly as possible.

We should aim to complete the ratification process before the Summer Recess. As things stand, we do not have the 21 sitting days of parliamentary time needed to use Section 20 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 to ratify. Therefore, in accordance with Section 22 of the Act, we believe that the accession protocols for Sweden and Finland should be ratified without the 21-day requirement having been met. This will allow us to demonstrate the importance we attach to our relationship with these two close partners and our wholehearted support for their decision to join NATO.

In May we provided Sweden and Finland with bilateral security guarantees. It is vital that we now bring them under NATO's Article 5 umbrella as swiftly as possible. Their decision to join puts both countries at risk of a potentially aggressive Russian response. Russia has already made numerous threats about the possibility of Swedish and Finnish membership of NATO. Using the process I have set out will enable us to ensure that UK ratification is concluded swiftly and to set a positive example for other NATO members to follow. All 30 allies need to ratify the protocols before Finland and Sweden can join the alliance. My right honourable friend the Foreign Secretary has been pushing allied colleagues to complete ratification as soon as possible.

We believe that there is broad cross-party support for Sweden and Finland joining NATO. The Government are committed to both the principle and practice of parliamentary scrutiny of the UK treaties. However, due to the unprecedented circumstances in which Finland and Sweden have made their decision to apply for NATO membership, it is important that we do all we can to expedite their accession.

A strong NATO is at the heart of our ability to deter and defend against adversaries. We showed the strength of the alliance once again at the NATO summit in Madrid last week. NATO is not involved directly in the Ukraine conflict, but we know that Ukraine's ultimate victory is vital for our security. Russia's illegal and barbaric war cannot succeed. That is why my right honourable friend the Prime Minister announced last week that the UK is providing a further £1 billion of military support for Ukraine, and other allies are stepping up their support as well.

At the summit, leaders also agreed a new NATO strategic concept, which responds to the new security environment. It rightly identifies Russia as the most significant and direct threat to our security, and it signals a decisive change in our approach to defending the eastern flank, through scaling up capabilities and force readiness to achieve deterrence by denial. For the first time the strategic concept also addresses China

and the systemic challenges to our collective security that it poses. It is right that NATO takes an increasingly global perspective of the threats and challenges we face. The alliance should act as a bulwark to the authoritarianism and aggression that we see rising across the world.

Given this more dangerous and competitive landscape, we are calling on all allies to meet, and to be prepared to exceed, the target we set ourselves a decade ago of spending 2% of GDP on defence. That goal was set for a very different era, and we need to be ready to go further. That is why my right honourable friend the Prime Minister announced that the UK is likely to be spending 2.5% of GDP on defence by the end of the decade.

We are determined to strengthen NATO as the No. 1 guarantor of Euro-Atlantic security and, through the alliance, to stand up for freedom, sovereignty and self-determination around the world. The accession of Finland and Sweden will further strengthen NATO and bolster our security. By ratifying the accession protocols without delay we will send a message of unity against Russian aggression and a message of support to Finland and Sweden. We look forward to welcoming these two long-standing friends to NATO. We will continue to stand side by side with all allies in defence of our shared values and our collective security. Therefore, I commend this statement to the House."

3.37 pm

Lord Collins of Highbury (Lab): My Lords, on these Benches, we strongly welcome the accession to NATO of Finland and Sweden, both of which will be valuable members of the alliance, representing established democracies which share our values of freedom and the rule of law.

Putin's inexcusable invasion of Ukraine has had ramifications around the world, and the reversal of Finland's and Sweden's long-held policies of non-alignment is testament to that. Above all, this decision shows that Russia's attack on Ukraine has had the opposite effect from that intended—strengthening rather than weakening NATO, unifying rather than dividing the alliance.

However, it is also a reminder that the Government should reboot our own defences, halt cuts to the Army and deepen our security co-operation with our European allies and the EU. Last week, NATO agreed plans to increase high-readiness forces from 40,000 to 300,000, but Ministers are still pushing ahead with further cuts to the Army of 10,000 troops. Will the Government halt these planned cuts immediately so that the UK can fulfil our NATO obligations?

Labour welcomed the announcements late last week to bolster NATO nations. Ministers announced the allocation of a combat brigade, to be held at high readiness for rapid reinforcement across Estonia and the Baltic region. But how many of these troops will be based in the UK, and how many reservists will make up this brigade?

On the ratification of today's announcement, while the House would ordinarily expect greater scrutiny, these are extraordinary circumstances—these Benches accept this—so the Government are right to accelerate

the process. However, I hope that the Minister can update the House on when he expects the ratification of Sweden and Finland to be completed by all our allies, so that both countries are protected by the Article 5 guarantee.

Lord Purvis of Tweed (LD): My Lords, these Benches also welcome the agreement to sign Sweden and Finland's NATO accession protocols. There will now be a NATO border of 800 miles, so an acknowledgement is needed that the NATO border with Russia is now of particular importance. There was also the conclusion of the trilateral memorandum between Turkey, Finland and Sweden, which has paved the way for the signing of the accession protocols. Can the Minister say a little more about the UK's view on the trilateral relationship, given the security interests involved in our relationship with Turkey?

It was interesting to note that, at the Madrid summit of NATO partners, there were, as the communiqué said, "valuable exchanges" between those present and "the Heads of State and Government of Australia", in addition to Finland and Sweden, alongside "Georgia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand ... and Ukraine, as well as the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission."

I agree with the noble Lord, Lord Collins, that Putin's aggression has not only had the reverse impact of what he expected—a weakening of NATO and its resolve—but that there has been a strengthening of NATO partners and of NATO's relationship with countries around the world with which it is dealing. This brings to light the UK's relationship with our European NATO allies and the presidents of the European Council and the European Commission. We have previously debated the desire to revisit the Government's strategic defence review and to strengthen our relationship with European allies, particularly Germany, given the significant change in the German position.

The communiqué clearly stresses another impact of Putin's aggression, and I agree with it strongly:

"Russia has also intentionally exacerbated a food and energy crisis, affecting billions of people around the world".

NATO not only has a defensive position through which it has adapted its strategic concept and posture; it is now a relevant organisation in resolving the collateral issues of energy and food. The Minister knows my desire for the UK to use its convening power more assertively regarding the humanitarian impact. Given the track record of both Sweden and Finland in the development area, this is an opportunity for us to expand some of the discussions within NATO.

We know that Sweden and Finland have faced internal terrorism, but the communiqué raises the issue of the current growth of terrorism. As we know, Daesh is recruiting and other actors such as the Wagner Group are playing their own role. The response to the aggression against Ukraine is hybrid and includes cyber capability. This is an ongoing threat.

As the communiqué also indicated, we see "systemic competition from ... the People's Republic of China". This draws into sharp focus the question of how we are dealing with allies—in particular, India, Sri Lanka and other Commonwealth countries—which are not dissociating themselves from Russia.

Finally, the new, sharper posture that NATO agreed at the Madrid summit raises the question of what the UK capacity is going to be. What is the status of the previous agreement that the UK signed with Sweden and Finland? What commitment has the UK indicated to providing capacity and personnel support in Finland and Sweden? Are the Government finally going to review their decisions, as the noble Lord indicated, on the size and capacity of the Army? All these factors, including the accession of Sweden and Finland, draw into sharp focus the need for the UK to review its capability and to increase it.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): My Lords, I first record my thanks to the noble Lords, Lord Collins and Lord Purvis, and through them to the respective parties and membership of both Houses, for our united stand and our support. Indeed, as the noble Lord, Lord Collins, rightly articulated, it is ironic that the challenge was on Ukraine, and Russia's aggression and war on Ukraine has resulted in two countries, Sweden and Finland, which for so long took the view not to join the defensive alliance, doing exactly the opposite. We welcome this, of course, and it was welcomed by all Nordic NATO partners. I also thank both noble Lords for supporting the ratification, which has been taken forward under the normal process. We have the CRaG process, but on this occasion, it was right that, because of the number of sitting days left, we expedited this process.

The noble Lord, Lord Collins, asked about ratification across all of NATO. If I may, I will write to him about a specific date. I am not aware of the exact timetable in each country but I will certainly write to him and put a copy in the Library. He also raised the issue of UK support in terms of defence spending and our own commitments. At the summit, the Prime Minister announced a further £1 billion of military support for Ukraine, taking our total military support to £2.3 billion—more than any other country with the exception of the United States. Through this new spend, UK defence spending is projected to reach 2.3% of GDP this year, meaning that we will continue to show leadership in defence spending, having met the 2% NATO target every year since its inception. Additional investment in these areas means we are on track to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence by the end of the decade. The noble Lord asked for particular details of this, including troop numbers. I am sure my colleagues in the MoD will follow this up, but the exact shape of the increase will be very much for the next spending review. The point has been made by the noble Lord, Lord Collins, and others in your Lordships' House about the importance of our own troops and contribution.

Both noble Lords asked about the new way of operating and supporting NATO, and the commitments made in this respect. On the UK military offer, the UK is providing military support and reassurance to its allies. UK Typhoons and F35s will continue to contribute to NATO air policing. We have deployed four additional Typhoons to Cyprus to patrol NATO's eastern borders, and sent equipment and an additional 800 troops in support. Regarding the exact details of how many are deployed where, I am sure the noble Lord, Lord Collins, will accept that I am not going into any further details, but we are supporting all NATO planning accordingly.

The noble Lord, Lord Purvis, talked about the food and security crisis. I agree with him, and we need to look at innovative ways of providing support, and the knock-on effects. During recent visits to north Africa through the Kigali summit, it was clear that the Ukraine war is being felt most in terms of not just energy but food. Yet, there is a glimmer to the grey cloud. About 65% of non-farmed yet arable-ready land is in Africa, and there is an opportunity to provide technical support to see how that land can be irrigated. Certainly, that is part of the bilateral discussions I have been having recently, particularly in north Africa, seeing how that could form part of a more regional offer when we get to COP 27 in Egypt.

On the humanitarian impact and the expertise of Finland and Sweden, again I agree with the noble Lord, Lord Purvis: we already value it, but we will need it. Having them within our defence alliance means that we will have much broader discussions, as well as with countries across Europe. He alluded to our different bilaterals, but we are on a very strong footing. The Prime Minister visited both countries as they sought to apply to give a real sense of solidarity and support.

The noble Lord, Lord Purvis, also touched on Turkey. As was well reported, it had additional discussions; we recognise, as I am sure all noble Lords do, that it was raising the issue of the continuing threat of terror. Nevertheless, Turkey is very much part of the NATO alliance and has re-stated its enduring commitments to it.

As we evolve and take our partnerships forward, I stress that NATO is a defensive alliance. We make this point repeatedly to Russia when it challenges us. Two non-aligned countries such as Sweden and Finland having to join makes the case to Russia to pull back and stop the war.

3.51 pm

Baroness Blackstone (Ind Lab): My Lords, will the Government give more attention, following the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, to the department of NATO policies on the Arctic? Both countries border the Arctic and some commentators suggest that, in recent years, NATO has neglected this really important subject. Its security matters.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): The UK has looked towards the polar regions and had specific engagement in that respect. However, the noble Baroness makes a very valid point; with the accession of both these countries, we can look again and see how we can strengthen our focus on particular areas. She is right to raise this; during the challenges we have been facing due to the Ukrainian war, other countries—including the likes of China—have had their own intentions. While we have been focused on Ukraine, China's activity, particularly in the Pacific islands—to draw the attention of noble Lords to other parts of the world—has been noticeable. For example, the visits by its Foreign Minister to eight Pacific islands over two weeks or so was pretty noticeable in terms of what is being planned.

Lord Campbell of Pittenweem (LD): My Lords, I too welcome the accession of Sweden and Finland and the accelerated ratification. I suggest that Finland would repay close analysis; it has a system of defence

[LORD CAMPBELL OF PITTENWEEM]

quite unlike other members of the alliance, in which defence is a universal obligation on the population as a whole and is based on the service of all citizens for that purpose. I draw attention yet again to the commitment to which the Minister referred:

“my right honourable friend the Prime Minister announced that the UK is likely to be spending 2.5% of GDP on defence by the end of the decade.”

That is lukewarm, imprecise and inadequate. Do the Government accept that neither the ambitions in the integrated review or the obligations, some of them fresh, we are taking towards NATO will be met by 2.5%?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): My Lords, just for clarity, I should say that I said that we were on track to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence by the end of the decade. I agree with the noble Lord: one of the points emphasised during the meetings with our NATO partners was to ensure that other countries do not just talk about it but put their money behind their commitments. The UK has continued to commit itself fully and will continue to meet its obligations under NATO.

The Lord Bishop of Manchester: My Lords, Manchester, and specifically my diocese, has a long and close relationship with the Tampere diocese in central Finland. My friends there leave me in no doubt about how much it meant to Finland to gain its independence from Russia a century ago. Tampere itself has even more recent experience of Russian aggression: it was on the receiving end of considerable bombing in 1939. In welcoming from these Benches the decisions of Finland and Sweden to join NATO, it is noteworthy that they both do so from previous positions of neutrality. Could I invite the Minister to tell us what wisdom, experience and skills, building on that historically neutral perspective, he believes Finland and Sweden will bring to strengthen our vital defensive alliance?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): The noble Baroness, Lady Blackstone, referred earlier to these countries' expertise and insights on the Arctic, which is demilitarised, and that has been a key objective. We need that insight to make sure that is sustained, for example. Our mutual security declarations also mean that the added security and the collective security of the alliance will be sustained and now extended to both countries. Frankly speaking, let us not forget when Russia, and indeed Mr Lavrov, stated repeatedly, “We have no intentions to invade Ukraine”. The reality is very different.

Viscount Stansgate (Lab): My Lords, I welcome the Minister's Statement, and I agree with my noble friends and others that the President of Russia's one success has been to strengthen and expand NATO. But I ask the Minister whether he might consider the wider effects around the world of the accession of these two countries, especially in view of the fact that there are other areas at risk in the Indo-Pacific region, to which he has already referred—Ukraine is not the only country that might be at risk of invasion—and whether this

development in NATO might have a wider effect on other parts of the world and encourage further defensive alliances.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I think our approach is a global one, and from a NATO perspective, it is a defensive alliance, and that was the reason the two countries joined. There is broader issue about where our focus is, and when we talk about the Indo-Pacific and our focus in that particular area, it is strategic, and we are looking at a range of partnerships. The AUKUS agreement reflects how we work with our key allies on a range of issues, covering maritime and safe navigation when it comes to commercial routes, but also looks at the whole issue of the seas in terms of protection and co-ordination, and security within the Asia-Pacific region. The noble Lord, Lord West, knows that far better than I do.

Beyond that, we play an important role along with our partners, not just when we look at defensive or military partnerships, but also looking at the economy and economic development. That again is an important lead on how we work consistently and in a collaborative fashion with key allies. In looking at the economic empowering of countries, there are other international players, and we are seeing, with repeated interventions from the IMF, how countries are being disabled in terms of their economies—not just failing to grow but failing to operate altogether. We need to step in to provide alternatives.

Lord Powell of Bayswater (CB): My Lords, as probably the only Finnish-speaking Member of this House, could I remind the Minister that Finland, with its 800-mile border with Russia, will be right in the front line of NATO, but also has the bitter experience of having sacrificed a lot of its territory to Russia after the Second World War, most of which was never given back? That means that, in the light of recent Russian behaviour towards its neighbours with whom it has long borders, the contingency of the NATO guarantee being called must be quite high, and it is crucial that this be taken into account in our strategic planning.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): First, I thank the noble Lord for not addressing me in Finnish; I may not have been able to respond effectively to him. I did not know he had that language; it is a quality that adds to the diversity and talent of your Lordships' House. I agree with him about the 800-mile border. I know that, prior to this formal application, it was a real focus. Both countries, particularly Finland, have conducted themselves in a manner which in no way could have shown any aggression towards any neighbour, and that includes Russia. However, as I said earlier to the right reverend Prelate, unfortunately the point is not what Russia has been saying in recent years; it is what it has been doing. It said that it would not go into the Donbass region; it has. It said that it would be some kind of limited, so-called liberation, in the words of Mr Putin; it has not been. Russia's continued aggression and war on Ukraine concerns countries, and it is right that we agree and support the expedited accession of both countries.

Lord West of Spithead (Lab): I think we should welcome the accession of both Finland and Sweden to NATO; they are amazingly capable military countries with most impressive armed forces. The point that the noble Lord, Lord Powell, makes about the border issue is important. Finland's border goes right up to the Kola and it would put a major, highly sensitive area at risk, and so there is a problem there. My question relates to our expenditure, which was touched upon by the noble Lord, Lord Campbell. The 2.5% by 2030 is a nod, but it is nowhere near enough, nor is it being spent rapidly enough. For the next four years, there is to be no increase to defence spending at all, yet we are having to produce all sorts of equipment for the Ukrainians and to replenish our stocks. I am afraid that dictators look at what a country does, and Putin will be looking at what we do. If we are not bringing our Armed Forces up to a state where they can face a peer competitor, if they have to, as part of an alliance, then that is very dangerous. We should be spending money now and I cannot understand why the Government have not done that.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): My Lords, I agree with the noble Lord on his first point on the border issue. Any country bordering Russia has concerns at the moment—I visited Estonia, which is part and parcel of NATO but, notwithstanding that, it has concerns. Indeed, to broaden that point, there are other countries, and the noble Lord will know of the key votes taken at the UN when this war was first initiated. We saw strong support—a vote of 141—but also a series of abstentions. However, some of those abstentions were what I would term qualified abstentions. There are many countries on the borders of Russia that are concerned, and they have their own Russian-speaking minorities. On the issue of defence spending, I hear the insight and expertise that the noble Lord provides in this regard and I will certainly share that with my colleagues at the Ministry of Defence. I agree with him on the principle that we need our defence forces to be fully aligned to the challenges of 2022 and also to play a bolstered leadership role within the alliances that we are part of—NATO is a central one.

Viscount Waverley (CB): My Lords, it is right that we start referring to the Arctic and relating matters. The accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO draws into stark reality the whole situation regarding the Arctic, but also brings in the question of China, which has a vested interest in what goes on in that part of the world. The Statement went beyond just Finland and Sweden; is the Minister able to shed light on the rationale behind the leaders also agreeing NATO's strategic concept, which addresses China and its systematic challenges to collective security? Is it to suggest that, for the very same reasons that Finland and Sweden are in accession mode, Taiwan might eventually apply? That would then secure and provide scope for a collective defence, should China opt to invade the island. This would of course also bring into play the relationship with AUKUS.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): My Lords, the issue of Taiwan is slightly different in the sense of its geographical location, but the Government's position

on Taiwan has not changed: whatever approach is taken, it is a matter for both sides on the Taiwan Strait. The noble Lord talked about the mention within the Statement of the strategic concept and how it "addresses China"—for the first time—

"and the systemic challenges to our collective security that it poses."

I have already alluded to the work that China does to strengthen not just its military presence but its economic presence. This results in, and eventually leads to, economic dependency, which we are seeing around the world. We are also increasingly seeing evolving threats. As much as technology is an opportunity, it is an evolving threat as well. Therefore, through organisations such as NATO, but also through the United Kingdom working with other key strategic partners, including those in the Asia-Pacific, we need to look at enhanced protection, for example, when it comes to cyber security. Within the context of the Commonwealth, for example, we are working with key partners, such as Singapore.

Lord West of Spithead (Lab): My Lords—

Baroness Penn (Con): My Lords, the noble Lord was not here at the beginning of the Statement. He has already asked one question; two would be pushing his luck.

Health Improvement and Food Production

Motion to Take Note

4.05 pm

Moved by Baroness Walmsley

To move that this House takes note of the relationship between improving the overall health of the nation and food production.

Baroness Walmsley (LD): My Lords, it is a pleasure to introduce this debate about three things very close to my heart: food, the health of our population and the planet. I do not need to explain the very strong link between these three.

We produce some excellent food in this country, but our farmers and fishermen have had a tough time over the last few years, especially if their markets are abroad and if they rely on foreign workers to harvest their crops. Therefore my first question to the Minister is: what are the Government planning to do about that?

Despite the quality of our food, our national food system is broken. We eat too much of the wrong things and it is making us ill, limiting our years of healthy life and costing the NHS millions. The Government are resisting some of the levers that could help put it right. As in other countries, the resilience of our food security is under pressure because of the illegal invasion of Ukraine, which is one of the world's biggest wheat and vegetable oil producers; the cost of fertilisers for our domestic farmers is also badly affected. This is one of the factors causing the rise in the price of food. However, the recent national food plan published by Henry Dimbleby set out four objectives for improving our broken food system. They were:

[BARONESS WALMSLEY]

“Make us well instead of sick ... Be resilient enough to withstand global shocks ... Help to restore nature and halt climate change ... Meet the standards the public expect, on health, environment, and animal welfare”.

Those are four very good objectives.

The first questions are: what is a healthy diet and is it available to everyone? Experts agree that it must contain a balance of all the major nutrients, vitamins and minerals in adequate quantities for our age and other physical factors. However, the evidence of obesity in our country and the rise of diseases connected to it, such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, musculoskeletal problems and stroke, shows that a healthy diet is not acceptable to many, particularly in the poorest demographic groups. Two out of five children are above a healthy weight by the time they leave primary school and a quarter are obese. Children in deprived areas are twice as likely to be overweight. Some 28% of adults are overweight and 36% obese; again, the risk is higher in the lower demographic groups and certain ethnic communities. This is not because these people are greedy, but mainly because they are poor and are eating the cheapest food they can get hold of. Many in fact do not have enough food and are forced to use food banks to feed the family. It is a disgrace that, in a rich country such as ours, some children would go hungry but for charities such as the Trussell Trust.

Sadly, the cheapest calories are often high in sugar, salt and fat and are the ones that contribute most to being overweight. Fruit and vegetables, and good-quality meat and fish cost more than fast food but highly processed food, manufactured in massive amounts, is sold cheaply on every high street. Henry Dimbleby explained it this way:

“Because there is a bigger market for unhealthy food, companies invest more into developing and marketing it. This in turn expands the market further still. The bigger the market, the greater the economies of scale. Highly processed foods—high in salt, refined carbohydrates, sugar and fats, and low in fibre—are on average three times cheaper per calorie than healthier foods.”

So, what can we do? Dimbleby suggested that we must escape this junk food cycle to protect the NHS and reduce diet-related inequality by reducing the consumption of HFSS foods by 25% and increasing fibre by 50% and fruit and veg by 30% to reach healthy levels. To reach the carbon budget, we need to reduce our meat consumption by 30%, because 85% of our farmland is used to grow feed or grass for farm animals. If we could make these changes, we could promote a healthy gut—one of the most important organs in the body—save the NHS millions and put some less productive farmland to other, desirable uses. There are various ways in which the Government could contribute.

I agree with Dimbleby’s conclusion that we must get healthy food directly to our children and at the same time save their parents money by expanding eligibility for healthy free school meals. This has now twice been recommended by Dimbleby but twice refused by the Government—can the Minister say why? The Government set up the Healthy Start scheme and the holiday food scheme, on which they should be congratulated, but have not accepted Dimbleby’s latest

proposition to expand those schemes, despite their success. The Lords Committee report in 2020, *Hungry for Change*, also recommended this. Can the Minister explain why it is not being done?

I turn to food production. We are not self-sufficient and probably never will be, but 54% to 60% of our food is grown by our own domestic farmers. We must protect them, but that is not to say that they might not need to change what they do. Only last week the Climate Change Committee issued serious warnings about agricultural policy, but farmers are currently under pressure from many quarters. We ask them to grow more food and, at the same time, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, use less fertiliser, stop polluting watercourses, increase biodiversity, plant more trees, improve their soil, protect carbon sinks such as peatlands, grow biofuels, site wind and solar farms, provide leisure opportunities—and on it goes. The pressure on land use is enormous, and they are not making it any more. I welcome the Government’s recent announcement that they will produce a land use strategy next year. Can the Minister give us any insights into how health and food production will be balanced with all the other pressures on land in the forthcoming strategy, and what levers the Government are considering using to achieve it?

Farmers have to plan now, and they need help with the environmental land management scheme payments, which are to replace the former support system. It certainly makes sense that farmers should not be paid for how much land they have but for the public goods they provide. However, every farm, and every soil, is different, and there are many schemes to which farmers can apply for support. The large landscape section of ELMS has had 51 applicants for 15 initial schemes—some from large estates, but some from groups of farmers who want to work together to improve the landscape. That is encouraging, so I hope the Minister can assure me that some of the successful schemes will include small farms working together. I know he has received a note about this from Defra, because I asked the department to send it to him, so I hope it is not unfair to ask him these questions.

The local nature recovery scheme criteria will be available at the end of the year. This strikes me as rather slow, because farmers have to plan now how to respond to all these pressures. Can the Minister say how soon the funds for that part of the scheme will become available? The sustainable farming initiative applications opened last week. Farmers can apply online, and new software can help them identify what might be appropriate for them. However, we still have the overlapping countryside stewardship scheme, environmental stewardship scheme and others. I hope your Lordships see where I am coming from: we currently have maximum complexity of schemes—some beginning, some ending—and an alphabet soup of acronyms.

In its recent report on nature-based solutions to achieving net zero, the Science and Technology Select Committee recommended that an independent advisory service—human beings rather than software—should be provided to help farmers increase food production sustainably while also making a living. Can the Minister

say what progress has been made in this respect? Many farmers will have to change their business model. That is risky, so they need good advice.

One of the problems we face is the large number of tenant farmers in the UK. Tenants might be reluctant to make improvements to the land if it is their landlord who will benefit in the long term. Soil improvement does not happen overnight—I know that from my own garden—so a farmer with a short tenancy might be reluctant to do it. I know that the noble Baroness, Lady Rock, is looking into this for the Government. I hope the Minister might be able to give us an insight into her interim recommendations; otherwise, I will have to ask her.

Our farmers have very high standards, so the last thing we must do is offshore our food production to countries that might produce higher emissions. We cannot police their standards of animal welfare or pesticide use. Then, of course, there are food miles. Since Brexit, there has been a reduced ability to check the quality of food coming in, according to a recent report by the Food Standards Agency. In addition, countries such as Australia and New Zealand have economies of scale in meat production with their enormous farms, which could put our livestock farmers at a great disadvantage. Can the Minister say how the Government will avoid putting farmers out of business or offshoring food production when negotiating trade deals? Will the Government set up a trade and agriculture commission, as proposed by Dimbleby?

The Government have indicated that they will provide more support for horticulture. This is good news, as we produce only 35% of our current supply of fruit and veg, but this will need to increase by nearly 90% if we are to increase our consumption, as advised by Dimbleby. Will the Minister say whether projects that make use of rainwater and renewable energy capture, technology and innovation will attract government support?

In north Wales a couple of years ago, a proposal to use the heat from a sewage works through heat exchangers to heat glasshouses to produce half the tomatoes and cucumbers needed by Wales was turned down by the local planning authority—all that locally produced food, all those jobs, all that energy and water saving lost because of a lack of vision. I hope the Minister can tell me that the Government have more vision than my local authority.

I turn to highly processed food. Not all our food comes straight out of the ground or the water; a great deal of it comes out of a factory. As we have heard, it is cheap and often contains too much salt, sugar and fat. There have been voluntary reductions, but they do not go far enough. Yet the Government resist mandatory measures, such as an extended sugar and salt tax. Can the Minister justify the claim that a small tax on sugar and salt in HFSS foods for manufacture and catering will increase the cost of food for poor people?

The advertising restrictions on HFSS foods before the watershed and online have been postponed. Can the Minister confirm that there will be no further postponement, despite today's events?

Labelling can help people choose healthier food, but it can be difficult to identify what is really a healthy food. It is not hard for a piece of broccoli, an

apple or a piece of fish, but it is a different matter for products with multiple ingredients. The Minister might remember our discussions, led by the noble Lord, Lord Moylan, during the passage of the Health and Care Bill about high-protein bars. The noble Lord, Lord Krebs, helpfully pointed out that the bar in question was high in salt and sugar and low in fibre, so not very healthy at all.

Since then, the noble Lord, Lord Krebs, and I have received material from a group of young people called Bite Back. Its report, *Don't Hide What's Inside*, explored the eating habits of 1,000 13 to 18 year-olds and examined the impact that packaging claims have on their perceptions of health. It found that three-quarters of young people think that their diet is healthy, despite the fact that their intake of sugar, fruit and veg, and fibre is nowhere near the Government's daily recommendations. Almost nine in 10 think that smoothies are healthy, but 76% of juices and smoothies would get a red traffic light label for sugar. Eight in 10 believe that cereal bars are healthy, but 81% of those would get a red traffic light label for sugar. The report gives other examples.

Half of those surveyed agreed that health and nutrition messaging makes them more likely to buy a product. This makes the rules about labelling important but it is too often misleading. To demonstrate this, a fake snack bar was invented. It was made entirely from mud but branded as 100% natural, high in fibre, a great source of minerals and low in fat, which was true but also completely outrageous, since there was nothing in it but mud. It was done to call out big food brands on their manipulative marketing tactics and to make them step up with clear and honest packaging. The Government are being asked to introduce a clear, mandatory labelling policy, including declarations of free sugars, traffic-light labels, a review of where the thresholds should be lowered, regulation to end the use of health and nutrition claims on an unhealthy product and consistent portion sizes across categories. Will the Minister consider the young people's proposals? If not, I suspect they might send him a mud bar.

4.21 pm

Baroness Jenkin of Kennington (Con): My Lords, I am grateful to the noble Baroness for procuring today's debate. She and I have long been two of a handful of parliamentarians who have taken an interest in obesity, concerned not only for those struggling with it but with the cost to the taxpayer and the NHS of the consequences of the unstoppable increases in adults and children, exacerbated as a result of lockdown.

During the pandemic, I wrote an article, "Hunk, Chunk or Drunk?" Unfortunately, many more people became the second or the third, rather than taking the opportunity to get fit. Today's debate gives me the opportunity to raise concerns about the increased prevalence of UPF—ultra-processed food—to expand on what the noble Baroness has said and to discuss the effect on the nation's health.

UPF has a long, formal scientific definition but it boils down to this: if it is wrapped in plastic and contains stuff that you do not typically find in a domestic kitchen, it is UPF. Flavours, flavour enhancers, colours, emulsifiers, artificial sweeteners, thickeners,

[BARONESS JENKIN OF KENNINGTON]

foaming agents, bulking, carbonating, gelling and glazing agents—these additives are not the only ways that the food harms us but they are all harmful. Let us be clear: what we are talking about is not actually food. It is a set of substances reconstituted from commodity crops, processed and marketed to be addictive. Its sole purpose is financialised growth by transnational corporations that have repeatedly proven that they are unable to self-regulate. The entire food system is now built around UPF.

In our drift towards a diet based on these edible food-like substances and away from real food grown in the soil or reared in the fields, we risk losing the connection between soil, plants, animals and people for the health of our food and our planet. I reiterate that what characterises ultra-processed foods is that they are so altered that it is hard to recognise the underlying ingredients. These are concoctions of concoctions, engineered from ingredients that are already highly refined, such as cheap vegetable oils, flours, whey proteins and sugars, which are then whipped up into something more appetising with the help of industrial additives such as emulsifiers.

UPFs now account for more than half of all the calories eaten in the UK and US, and other countries are fast catching up. These foods, now simply part of the flavour of modern life, are convenient, affordable, highly profitable, strongly flavoured, aggressively marketed and on sale in supermarkets everywhere. Over half the energy from food eaten in the UK now comes from these products. They lead people to eat more and to put on weight at a time when already one in four adults and one in five children aged 10 to 11 in the UK are estimated to be obese.

Last year, to conduct research about the effects of UPF, Dr Chris van Tulleken did an experiment on his own body. He wanted to find out what would happen if he followed a diet high in ultra-processed food, and how it would interact with his body. He increased his usual intake of 30% UPF to 80% for four weeks, a diet which one in five people in the UK eat every day. We should be grateful to him for sharing what happened. It should be a wake-up call to us all.

After the month was over, Chris reported poor sleep, heartburn, unhappy feelings, anxiety, sluggishness and a low libido. He also had piles from constipation. “I felt 10 years older”, he said, “but I didn’t realise it was all about food until I stopped following the diet.”

Chris gained almost 7 kilos in the four weeks and moved from a healthy weight to being overweight. “If the weight gain continued at that rate for six months, I would have gained six stone,” he said. It did not stop there. Brain activity scans showed that the areas of his brain responsible for reward had linked up with the areas that drive repetitive, automatic behaviour. “Eating ultra-processed food became something my brain simply told me to do, without me even wanting it,” he said, adding that this is a similar brain response to taking substances we consider classically addictive, such as cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. The changes in brain activity were not permanent, but if UPF can do that much damage in four weeks to his 42 year-old brain, what is it doing to the fragile developing brains of our children?

We do not know exactly why ultra-processed foods have these effects, but most hypotheses come down to a combination of the physical act of processing and their nutrient make-up. Dr Kevin Hall of the National Institutes of Health tested two diets matched in terms of fat, sugar, salt and fibre content, but one was made up of unprocessed foods and the other of around 80% ultra-processed foods. The participants were able to eat the foods on offer until they wanted to stop.

His study found that those eating the ultra-processed diet ended up eating more than 500 calories per day more and gained almost one kilo of body weight over two weeks. Blood tests showed an increase in the hormone responsible for hunger and a decrease in the hormone that makes us feel full among the participants eating the diet high in UPF. These results were consistent with Chris’s experience. His hunger hormone increased by 30% during his experiment, which may have encouraged overconsumption. Dr Hall also found that participants on the UPF diet ate much more quickly than those on the minimally processed diet, which may also have contributed to the consumption of more calories. Chris experienced this too, as many of the foods are so easy to chew and swallow. Previous studies have suggested that eating slowly decreases hunger.

Chris found himself craving food much more often. Research has previously found that some foods, including ultra-processed pizzas, chocolate, crisps and cakes, can elicit cravings, loss of control and inability to cut back. There is evidence that foods high in carbohydrates and fat, as many ultra-processed foods are, can trigger the centres of the brain responsible for reward, emotion and motivation. A brain-imaging study suggests that the more often you experience reward from foods, the more you have to consume to sustain the same enjoyment. Many UPFs have also gone through focus groups to make them perfect. The taste, level of saltiness, mouthfeel, how much they need to be chewed and even the sound they make when eaten will have been fine-tuned.

Foods can be categorised as minimally processed or unprocessed, such as fresh tomatoes; processed, such as tinned tomatoes; and ultra-processed, such as store-bought tomato pasta sauce. Some ultra-processed foods are healthier than others. Wholegrain breakfast cereals, wholemeal sliced bread, tinned baked beans and unsweetened soy or plant-based drinks are all ultra-processed but have some nutritional benefits. Similarly, ready-made pasta sauces, ready meals, spreads and sliced meats can be reasonably healthy. Some pre-prepared foods are not ultra-processed, but any that include additives and chemicals not used in home cooking probably are. The availability, convenience and marketing of ultra-processed food makes it almost impossible to eliminate.

Chris’s experiment has been backed up with clinical studies and lots of laboratory work. The clinical study undertaken by Kevin Hall confirmed that the epidemiological findings were true: you can have those two diets matched for salt, sugar, fat, carbs and fibre and the UPF one will drive weight gain whereas the wholefood one will not. The problem is that it is now very normal for children and young people to eat 80% of their calories from UPF for the first two decades of their life. UPF now comprises 60% of what we eat in the UK and the US.

To sum it up, this is how UPF works. It is dry, which prolongs shelf life but also increases calorie density. It is soft, which increases speed of consumption, which is itself closely related to obesity. Flavour enhancers signal protein that never arrives. Artificial sweeteners prepare the body for sugars that do not arrive, and all the gums signal fat that never arrives. It contains additives that affect the microbiome and inflammation, as well having direct effects on the brain. It has addictive properties and is designed in a way so that the products that are most readily consumed and desired are the ones that succeed in the marketplace.

UPF is the cause of the childhood obesity pandemic. It is one of the leading causes of environmental destruction and climate change. I hope that I have persuaded noble Lords of the dangers of these so-called foods. What are they doing to our population? We need to act now, with urgency, before it is too late for the next generation.

4.30 pm

Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle (GP): My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, for securing this debate and her excellent introduction. I particularly thank her for focusing on the work of Bite Back, which is a powerful demonstration of how the whole process of governance needs to listen much more to young people, who are getting more engaged in politics and political campaigning. We need to think about how we can get that to have more influence on decision-making.

It is a great pleasure to follow the noble Baroness, Lady Jenkin of Kennington. Your Lordships' House will probably think she and I are entirely co-ordinating this because my speech focuses on exactly the same theme as hers—ultra-processed food—but, in practice, we have not exchanged a word in any form.

The practical reality is that there is a reason for this and a reason why we can see two opposite sides of the House arriving at the same point: this Government are failing to catch up with the science and the reality of what is increasingly happening around the world. The focus on foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt is simply not adequate to capture the reality of ultra-processed foods, as identified by what is known as the NOVA classification system.

Of course, the Government often like to talk about how they are world-leading. Well, they have some catching up to do with the Welsh and Brazilian Governments and other Governments around the world. Indeed, in researching this speech, I noted that the next set of dietary guidelines for Americans, for 2025 to 2030—they are now being drawn up—are expected to contain a new emphasis on the damage done to health by ultra-processed foods. So the Government have a small window here at least to catch up with the Americans; they could be doing so.

The extra theme that I want to introduce into my speech, in addition to what the noble Baroness, Lady Jenkin, said, is the impact of economic and regional inequality. This should be feeding into the Government's levelling-up agenda. The disparities in our deeply unequal society, where levels of inequality are speeding past the Edwardian and heading back

towards the Victorian—another time when we were very concerned about the impact of food on the health of the nation—are really having an impact. If we look at some of the people who are the most deprived, according to research by the Social Market Foundation and Kellogg's from 2018, 1.2 million people live in food deserts. Research by Dr Megan Blake, from the geography department at the University of Sheffield, points out that living in a food desert

“can mean having to carry ... food shopping a long distance, a struggle that many older people living in food deserts experience.”

I would go further than that. If we think about people with disabilities, who are one in five of the working-age population, or people caring for young children, carrying food long distances will tend to bias them towards ultra-processed food, which is lighter because it contains less liquid than fresh food. In that study, 41% of respondents did not have a car, but there is also the problem of financial barriers—something that we know is becoming more of an issue with the cost of living crisis. The latest ONS data from March 2022 showed that nearly a quarter of adults reported that it is difficult or very difficult to pay their household bills.

It is also worth thinking about the fact that people debating this issue often talk about choice. However, the type of food that we have access to and eat affects us in many ways, both obviously and subtly. When people have access to fresh produce, they can readily select the ingredients for the meals they want to prepare, whereas people relying on ultra-processed food, ready meals and takeaways are under the manufacturers' control. Those who talk about choice need to look at who is in control in this relationship.

There have been detailed studies on this issue. A recent Japanese study showed that children who frequently eat instant food have significantly higher rates of inadequate nutrient intake and excess nutrient intake, while children who eat more take-out food had significantly higher levels of inadequate nutrient intake. Another study from Luxembourg showed that:

“On controlling for age, sex, socio-economic status and lifestyle factors, daily consumption of ready-made meals was found to be associated with higher energy intake and with poor compliance with national nutritional”

standards. A study by the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* in the past month showed that children aged three to five who ate more ultra-processed foods had lower locomotive skills, while children aged 12 to 15, again eating more ultra-processed foods, had higher levels of obesity.

Beyond the macronutrient considerations, it is worth thinking about what impact the consumption of ultra-processed food has on the human microbiome—something that we are increasingly coming to understand is crucial for physical and mental health. As Dr Rodney Dietert points out in his book *The Human Super-Organism*, many additives that are now common in our foods have been shown to dramatically alter the human gut microbiome, often leading to inflammation and disease. One example that he cites is the emulsifiers polysorbate 80 and carboxymethylcellulose, which show effects such as thinning the mucus layer and increasing inflammation, eventually leading to inflammation-driven disease in mice. A US National Institutes of Health

[BARONESS BENNETT OF MANOR CASTLE] report in 2015 shows that common food emulsifiers disrupt the gut microbiome and provide pathways to non-communicable disease, including inflammation-driven obesity.

These are issues that the Government have been told about, and of course they have to cite the excellent Dimpleby review of the national food strategy. This picks up the point from the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, that we are talking about not just human health but the health of nature. An agricultural system focused on producing commodities to put into this ultra-processed food has terrible impacts. As the Dasgupta review—another government report—said, “the agricultural system has completely wiped out the natural system”.

So the food that we are producing causes enormous damage to both the environment and human health. Mr Dimpleby referred to “the junk food cycle”, saying:

“We will not be able to educate our way out of that feedback loop. It needs strong government intervention on commercial interests.”

Because the Motion focuses on food production, I want to pick up and focus on the point that farmers produce what the system has forced them to produce. We know that farmers are getting only about 8p in the pound of the cost of food. This is a situation where the Government urgently need to act to provide different options and different kinds of food system that provide a good living for farmers while ensuring healthy food for people.

The noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, referred to the crucial and final government decision to introduce a land-use strategy. I propose, as I proposed during the passage of the Agriculture Act a couple of years ago, that it needs to focus on how we use land for food production for the best possible nutrient production per hectare, which without a doubt would mean huge amounts more vegetable and fruit production and much less grain and oil—which, incidentally, is what is recommended in the recent Sustainable Food Trust report, *Feeding Britain*. I urge the Minister to speak to his colleague, the noble Lord, Lord Benyon, who I know was at the launch of that report, which looks at the intersection of food production and health. I know that may not seem to fall within the remit of the Minister’s department, but it is something that he really should take a look at.

Of course, not all food has to be produced by farmers and growers—people operating commercially. We are seeing the NHS increasingly focus on green prescribing and looking at how people can be given access to healthy food but, even better, how people can grow healthy food for themselves. I will focus here on the work of the excellent Incredible Edible, founded in Todmorden but now a movement around the world. Let us see our green spaces producing food that is accessible and free to all. That is one way in which we can grow a much healthier diet.

When the Government talk about innovation in the food system, they like to focus on things such as gene editing—people in labs with test tubes. Some of the finest, most important and leading innovation is the kind of social, economic innovation that looks at how to produce food in different ways. When thinking about how we help farmers, growers and communities

to produce that healthy food—we have been working on the infrastructure Bill—what could be a better addition to the UK’s infrastructure than an excellent system of research, support and advice, working with farmers and growers to produce a healthier food system? It would also need to focus on distribution systems—the ways in which food reaches people.

My final thought is on how often this debate drifts back into, “We can’t have a nanny state; people make choices for themselves.” Marie Antoinette was castigated for saying, “Let them eat cake.” What we have is far worse. The supermarkets, the multinational food companies, seed and chemical manufacturing, and fast food companies control what we eat, saying, “Let them eat extruded, moulded, milled, additive-rich food with added sugars, starches, fats and artificial colours, flavours and stabilisers. Let them eat this ultra-processed pap.” Indeed, people are not being given any choice but to eat this ultra-processed pap.

4.42 pm

Lord Kirkham (Con): Few subjects arouse stronger passions than the food that we consume. This should be no surprise given the well-attested evidence that we really are what we eat. In my home town of Doncaster—now, happily my home city—more than a decade ago, as some noble Lords may recall, a group of parents attained notoriety by defying Jamie Oliver’s well-intentioned efforts to improve the nutritional quality of school meals. They famously pushed and levered burgers, pies, chips and fizzy pop through the school railings into the hands of their offspring to save them from the dreaded fate of a healthy salad or, God forbid, fresh fruit. To this day, there is a whole cohort of millennials who will never forgive Jamie for depriving them of the turkey twizzlers they loved so much.

Interviewed by the *Daily Mirror* five years after her intervention, one mother leading the Doncaster protest conceded that her children were indeed “technically” overweight but were healthy and, most important to her, happy. Happiness is a key performance indicator that is nowhere to be found in the extensive briefing notes prepared for this debate. Those notes offered a diet of almost unremitting gloom: war, climate change, labour shortages, soaring prices, growing obesity, ill-health and premature death.

I know from personal experience that eating more healthily over time has led to a substantial reduction in my own weight and produced a significant and sustained improvement in my sense of well-being and consequently my happiness. But I am conscious that I am in the fortunate position of being able to afford to buy the finest, freshest, locally produced food at all times. Life will, without doubt, look very different for my fellow Doncastrians and others if they inhabit the minimum-wage economy, maybe rely on benefits, and perhaps are struggling to feed the whole family on £25 a week or less. For them, only budget supermarkets or food banks are the realistic options, and they will quite naturally tend to favour foodstuffs that keep hunger at bay and are cheap and easy to prepare.

It is a shocking fact of contemporary life that, in many cases, food banks struggle to give away potatoes and other fresh vegetables because their clients simply cannot afford the gas or electricity to boil them. In this

very real cost of living crisis, the last thing that struggling families need is people such as us lecturing them on how they ought to eat more healthily to relieve the pressure on the NHS—they do not want to hear that.

I am regularly in contact with farmers and was for several years a major investor in a well-known budget supermarket chain. I can state with absolute confidence, from first-hand, personal knowledge, that no farmer or food retailer in this country that I have ever encountered wants to produce or sell anything other than good food—not only food that is high-quality and nutritious but food that is affordable and allows them to make a living from growing or selling it. Supermarkets do not develop products to make their customers fatter or sicker, but they do respond to market demands and provide what people like to eat and want to buy. In recent years, they have all significantly expanded their plant-based ranges, as flexitarian lifestyles have grown in popularity. That is good news for public health, of course, and for our planet, in terms of the reduction in carbon emissions.

The challenge for legislators is that the great British public do not like being lectured about what is good for them. If they did, they would have voted remain by an overwhelming majority in 2016. This is why I have considerable sympathy with the Government's alleged dilution of Henry Dimbleby's undoubtedly well-intended recommendations in the national food strategy. We can nudge people, as has been successfully achieved via the reformulation of many products after the introduction of a sugar tax, and the new rules on the display of foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar will gently play their part too. We can tell people what is good for them and their families, but we must not tell them off if they feel that they cannot afford to take official advice or are simply disinclined to. In the long run, as Keynes famously remarked, we are all dead, whether we eat healthily and sparingly or gorge ourselves on fatty and sugary treats.

In my view, food is of such elemental concern to every single one of us that a wise Government will adopt the posture that Walter Bagehot saw as the proper role of the monarchy in the Victorian constitution; that is

“the right to encourage, and the right to warn”.

As the noble Lord, Lord McColl of Dulwich, passionately stated in this Chamber in his 2018 debate on obesity, do not tell people what to do but

“tell them the truth—not in a patronising way”.—[*Official Report*, 18/7/18; col. 1263.]

Step beyond this and attempt to dictate what people should eat and feed to their children for their own good and we compromise the vital principle of the pursuit of happiness so fatally that we would swiftly find ourselves back in the realm of people pushing metaphorical pies and burgers through the railings of official guidance.

4.48 pm

Baroness Brinton (LD) [V]: My Lords, I declare my interest as a vice-president of the Local Government Association. I thank my noble friend Lady Walmsley for securing and excellently introducing this important debate. This is a truly cross-departmental debate, but

it rarely seems to go beyond any one of the core elements of health or food production. I also thank the Library for its excellent briefing, which covers so much. It rightly starts with the House of Lords Food, Poverty, Health and Environment Committee, which published its report, *Hungry for Change: Fixing the Failures in Food*, on 6 July 2020, almost exactly two years ago. This makes very significant recommendations.

The UK imports 48% of the food that we consume, and that proportion is rising. At the same time, many of our farmers, fishing and food-processing interests have lost a major part of their export markets following Brexit. For the last few months, Ministers have answered questions on the numbers of pigs slaughtered because our UK abattoirs and food processors cannot bring staff into the UK to do the necessary food processing. Fruit and vegetables are rotting in the fields because of a lack of staff.

At the same time, following Putin's invasion of Ukraine, fertiliser and energy costs have rocketed. Farmers and fishermen are going out of business at exactly the moment when we need to be able to grow more food, not less.

The Government are keen to set trade deals that will encourage a further flood of cheaper food, often grown with lower welfare and other standards than we use here in the UK, and often much more full of UPF, as so helpfully outlined by other speakers.

The Government's response to the Lords Select Committee is best summarised in its UK food strategy, published last month, which followed Henry Dimbleby's independent review of the UK food sector, referred to by a number of noble Lords. I do not know if they felt this, but I found the Government's response weak. Mr Dimbleby's review was a bold approach to tackle a range of issues, but was also supported by experts in child poverty, food production and agriculture. As my noble friend Lady Walmsley outlined, the recommendation headlines are simple and clear, and worth repeating. They are to:

“Make us well instead of sick

Be resilient enough to withstand global shocks

Help to restore nature and halt climate change so that we hand on a healthier planet to our children

Meet the standards the public expect, on health, environment, and animal welfare”.

It was disappointing therefore to see a government food strategy that proposed not much more than business as usual.

The review's focus on the holiday activities and food programme and the Community Eatwell programme is absolutely vital in helping those children and families who are struggling—even more at the moment—and have slipped into real food poverty that was unimaginable 20 years ago. I echo my noble friend Lady Walmsley's question on why Dimbleby's recommendations have not been fully accepted and implemented.

There are reports in the press this week that inflation is forcing schools to reduce healthier meals. A third of school caterers say they will serve more processed food in the coming months, and many have already changed their menus. In fact, 78% of school caterers say that higher prices have forced them to change their options for pupils as a result of rising prices, and 40% say they

[BARONESS BRINTON]

fear they will not be able to meet the Government's school food standards if prices continue to rise. We have heard in this debate that those standards need to be raised. Most worryingly, 20% have said they have switched from British to imported meat because it is cheaper. This particularly matters because lunch, especially for those whose families are struggling financially, whether or not they are on free school meals, may be the principal meal of the day.

The noble Baroness, Lady Jenkin, referred to UPF and how these processed, nutritionally poor and addictive foods are growing in use. She argued very powerfully that our children's diets have already been severely impacted by UPF, and why childhood obesity continues to grow in the UK at such a dangerous rate. The noble Baroness, Lady Bennett, echoed those comments, but also made the important point about science and agriculture not necessarily working towards the same objectives. She was also right to be concerned about the impact of processed foods from the US in the UK. The noble Baroness, Lady Jenkin, was also right in saying that we are losing the link between good food grown in our countryside.

In France, all children at primary school are given a free three-course lunch of healthy and—compared to our school catering—sophisticated foods. The French have always understood, which we still do not, that eating together is part of children's social and emotional development, and staff sit and eat with the children rather than just monitoring them. In my mother-in-law's village in rural south-west France, the elderly people who used to receive meals on wheels now join the children for lunch, which is not just enjoyable for all but strengthens the bonds in the community. There is no mass catering organisation purchasing, pre-cooking and sending frozen goods to schools; local cooks buy what is in season, and cook and serve it.

The OECD's obesity update shows that in 2017 the UK adult obesity rate was 26.2%. In France it is 17%, despite its diet being high in fat. Its incidence of cardiovascular and other diseases is low; it is called the French paradox. Partly, it is to do with the right type of fat, but the broader French food culture is very different from ours: there is not a culture of snacking, and sitting down to eat as a family and as a class at school is regarded as very important. The quality of food is thought about not just by the person preparing the meal; it is considered carefully and commented on by everyone. A French friend of ours says that the English talk constantly about the weather and the French talk about food. Food is undoubtedly part of their cultural identity. In Japan, the obesity rate is just 4.2%. That is because almost all Japanese food tends to be low in calories and very low in fat. It is important to understand that it will take us time to change. France is worried that its rates have been going up, but we should all aspire to lowering our rates—perhaps it will take 20 or 30 years—towards where Japan is.

The noble Baroness, Lady Bennett, referred to the Dasgupta review, which echoes the many other reports that have been referenced by noble Lords. For me, his key comment is:

“Our unsustainable engagement with Nature is endangering the prosperity of current and future generations.”

The NFU's *The Future of Food 2040* report sets out the vital role of agriculture and horticulture in the UK and makes powerful reading. It too sees the importance of health becoming a key ingredient, requiring a change in what is grown as well as eaten. It recognises that our approach to diets needs to change, even talking about the use of insects in our diets. It highlights the socialisation of eating. Fewer families eat together in the UK than at any time. Eating together will help to change the cost and nature of how people eat. Will the Minister work with the NFU and some of the bodies mentioned in this debate in developing the Government's land strategy? I also echo my noble friend Lady Walmsley's concern about the overlapping and clashing schemes that cause real problems for farmers to make progress.

I turn to Henry Dimbleby and Jamie Oliver, and thank the noble Lord, Lord Kirkham, for referring to the latter and the Doncaster protests. The noble Lord was right to highlight that happiness does not resolve obesity or change dietary habits. He also made the vital point about the ability of people to pay for good, healthy food. The extraordinary @BootstrapCook, Jack Monroe, tried to help by putting cheap, nutritious meals on Twitter, but was misunderstood by others who assumed that this was patronising, whereas Jack was trying to help people who were really struggling. Jack says:

“If it's inaccessible to the poorest amongst us, then it's neither radical nor revolutionary.”

I ask the Minister: are this Government prepared to be revolutionary?

The NFU advocates for a food re-think. It is right that we need a new approach to food, moving away from high-fat, high-carb, very cheap food, which, as we have heard from noble Lords, often contains the wrong sorts of fat, to a position where we grow much more of our food for our own needs, where our young people learn from their earliest experiences to love food and be curious about it, and where the public realm ensures that the poorest in our community are not priced out of eating good, nutritious local food.

Above all, good health and good food production is a joint venture which needs to be led by government. It is a joint venture of the people, of food producers, of cooks and others involved in food processing and of our welfare state to help protect the poorest people from food poverty. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

4.59 pm

Baroness Merron (Lab): My Lords, I start by congratulating the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, on securing this debate on the relationship between improving the overall health of the nation and food production, because the two things are inextricably linked for all the reasons the noble Baroness set out so clearly for us in the introduction. We are having this debate in the context of two crises in particular, although I am sure we could add others: the cost of living crisis and the obesity crisis. The noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, rightly made the great claim that, despite our so-called greater affluence, we are nevertheless all the poorer in terms of our health and our access to, and provision of, good food.

From this debate, no one could be in any doubt that the food system is continuing to break. This is affecting childhood obesity, our health, farming and biodiversity, and now there is an inability to get three decent meals a day to some 10 million people in this country. If this does not say to the Government that we require a competent cross-cutting strategy, I do not know what would.

I will refer to the 2020 report by the House of Lords Food, Poverty, Health and Environment Committee, which contended:

“The UK’s food system ... is failing”.

In response, the national food strategy very clearly said that

“the damage being done to our health and our planet by the food system demands urgent action.”

It would be very helpful to hear from the Minister how much he agrees with these assessments.

I will focus on the Government’s food strategy, because I am sure that the Minister will make great reference to this in his response. Of course, there were high hopes for the food strategy, following the review by Henry Dimbleby. Very sadly, however, we find that it provoked the kind of united response that we would not have wanted—namely, it was roundly criticised by Mr Dimbleby himself and by farmers, food campaigners and environmentalists. Why? Because it turned out to be vague and unambitious, the mirror opposite of what we hoped for. It would be fair to say that the proposals in the Government’s food strategy do something of a disservice to a very well-researched and well-evidenced report by Henry Dimbleby, who took a completely holistic approach to the journey of our food, the impact on our health and the connections between the two.

The review highlighted the terrible damage that poor farming practices would do to our planet. It also called out the complicity of food manufacturers, whose drive for profits is pushing highly processed junk foods on to the nation, as referred to by the noble Baroness, Lady Jenkin. This is being done in full knowledge of the ill health that we are likely to suffer as a result and the obesity crisis that will overwhelm our health service if urgent action is not taken.

This country is now the third fattest in the G7, with almost three in 10 adults being obese, while many children are going hungry because our school food system fails so many of them in need. Henry Dimbleby’s report was challenging. It said, “Change is never easy”, which is true, and went on to say that

“we cannot build a sustainable, healthy and fair food system by doing business as usual.”

I believe that this debate challenges “doing business as usual”, yet that seems to be the exact approach the Government are taking.

Can the Minister tell your Lordships’ House why the response from the Government barely covered 10% of the Dimbleby review; why it did not respond to the 14 very well-argued recommendations in the report; and why we still do not have a blueprint to tackle the major food issues facing this country?

Where are the policies that would address the situation of 7.3 million people who live in poverty, including 2.6 million children? I ask the Minister: where are the

policies to make food banks a thing of the past? That includes food banks which, shockingly, are being set up by hospital trusts to meet the demand from their staff. Where are the policies to tackle the rise in adult obesity, which is putting our health service and individuals under such strain? Why have the Dimbleby plans to improve child nutrition been ignored. Why have the proposals to extend entitlement to free school meals been rejected?

We know that food prices are rocketing and the food system is under strain, but the food strategy fails to address the root causes. Costs are rising dramatically for farmers and food producers, which is putting further pressure on the price of food. As we have heard from noble Lords during this debate, however, crops are rotting in the fields and over 40,000 pigs have already been culled because of labour shortages.

Perhaps the Minister could tell your Lordships’ House about plans to support British business and ensure that British food is affordable. How do we support our farmers and prevent them being undercut by imports with lower animal welfare and environmental standards? Why was the commitment to tackle low-quality imports taken out of the paper at the last minute? We need a plan to ensure that what we buy, sell and grow is more of our British food, to entrench Britain’s reputation as a beacon for quality food, high standards and the ethical treatment of animals. Does the Minister recognise that we ended up with a food strategy that pleases nobody, lacks ambition and represents a missed opportunity? It would be helpful to hear his response on these points.

I should like to pick up the point about the efforts the Government should be making to encourage the food industry to reformulate its products to reduce high-fat, high-sugar, high-salt foods. Perhaps the Minister can help us with this. Can he confirm, in the context of contrary media reports, whether the Government are committed to removing unhealthier foods from checkouts?

It would be remiss if I did not comment on the backtracking on the restrictions on advertising unhealthy food. There was much debate on this matter in the course of the Health and Care Act. Yet, we saw backtracking not driven by evidence but, sadly, by the Government’s wish to calm what might be called somewhat choppy political waters. They were certainly choppy at the time; nobody knew at that point how much choppier they would get. Now that we find ourselves in a new world, perhaps the Minister could commit to reviewing the introduction of those restrictions, because the evidence says that it makes an impact on childhood obesity and we cannot wait.

The Government also said in the course of the food strategy that they were committed to using public sector food procurement policy to improve the quality of food and catering services in the public sector. This would be very welcome. This becomes especially pertinent when we look at the challenges that inflation poses to school and hospital food. Can the Minister advise the House on how the Government intend to do this and whether the Procurement Bill will be one such means to address this directly?

[BARONESS MERRON]

The national food strategy also has a target of halving childhood obesity by 2030. Perhaps the Minister could comment on where we are in terms of being on track to meet this. If he considers that we are not on track, what measures will be taken to get us back on track?

I refer to the helpful briefing by the Food Foundation, which addresses the consumption and production of fruit and vegetables. Is there an intent to use the food strategy to join up the efforts to increase fruit and vegetable production and consumption and to reform the Government's buying standards to include portions of veg in every main meal, to increase demand? It would be helpful to hear from the Minister a consideration of the amount of fruit and veg that should be consumed and the messages that are conveyed. The five-a-day message has been widely communicated as the recommended quantity but, as indicated in the *Eatwell Guide*, the recommendation should be closer to seven a day. On the basis that it is accepted that we should be eating more, can the Minister advise us what might be done on this?

It seems that we have a challenge, as the noble Baronesses, Lady Jenkin and Lady Bennett, mentioned, with the onslaught of ultra-processed foods. We are in danger of increasing the distance between the origin of food and the actual intake. What is the plan to guide us towards healthier foods that we can afford, source, prepare and enjoy? Unless all those aspects are dealt with, we will not find ourselves in the situation of encouraging people into a healthier zone—as the noble Lord, Lord Kirkham, referred to—without further direction.

A number of very important questions are raised by this debate. I look forward to the response of the Minister, who I hope will acknowledge the inextricable link between food production and healthier eating but will also have some answers about how we will get there.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Lord Kamall) (Con): My Lords, I also congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, on securing this debate. I am also grateful to all noble Lords for their considered and thoughtful contributions. It is a self-evident truth that we all need food to survive. However, as with many things in life, it is not enough simply to restate this. As noble Lords have rightly said, there are many factors to be considered. How is the food produced? Is it done sustainably? How affordable is it, and what is its impact on our health?

We know that access to good-quality, healthy food is essential to achieving our ambition to halve childhood obesity by 2030, to reduce the gap in healthy life expectancy and to reduce the number of people living with diet and weight-related illnesses. The Government are committed to supporting the production and availability of good food to help improve the nation's health.

As noble Lords have referred to, our recently published food strategy puts food security at the heart of our vision for the food sector. Our aim is to maintain broadly the current level of food that we produce

domestically and to boost production in sectors where there are the largest opportunities. It sets out our ambitions to create a sustainable and accessible food system, with quality products that support healthier and homegrown diets for all. Our farming reforms are designed to support farmers to produce food sustainably and productively and in a more environmentally friendly way, from which we will all benefit. I am sure we all want to see a sustainable and healthy food system, from farm to fork and catch to plate, seizing the opportunities before us and levelling up every part of the country so that everyone, wherever they live and whatever their background, has access to nutritious and healthier food.

We all know that the food we consume plays a role in our overall health. Covid-19 highlights the risks of poor diet and obesity, driving home the importance of better diets and maintaining a healthy weight. As noble Lords have referred to, the *Eatwell Guide* outlines the Government's advice on a healthy, balanced diet. It shows the proportions in which different types of food are needed to have a well-balanced and healthy diet, to help meet nutrient requirements and reduce the risk of chronic disease. We know that too many of us are eating too many calories, too much salt and saturated fat and too many large portions, and are snacking too frequently.

While some parts of the food and drink industry are leading the way, by reformulating products or reducing portion sizes, and I think we should pay credit to those parts of the industry that have done so and sometimes met targets in advance of target dates, the challenge to go further remains.

We know that obesity does not develop overnight. When you look at the behavioural contributions, it builds over time through frequent excessive calorie consumption and insufficient physical activity. It is not the stereotype of Billy Bunter stuffing his face with 75 cream cakes. Even eating small amounts of excess calories over time can add up for both adults and children. It catches up with many people over time.

As noble Lords have rightly said, obesity is associated with reduced healthy life expectancy. It is a leading cause of serious non-communicable diseases, such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease, and it is often associated with poorer mental health. We also know now that it increases the risk of serious illness and death from Covid-19.

Helping people to achieve and maintain a healthy weight and a healthier diet is one of the most important things we can do to improve our nation's health. We all have a role to play in meeting this challenge: government, industry, the health service and many other partners across the country. As a government, we can play our role in enabling healthier food choices by making a greater range of healthier food more accessible; by empowering people with more information to make informed decisions about the foods that they eat; and by incentivising healthier behaviours.

As noble Lords have acknowledged, the food industry supplies most of the food and drink that we consume. Therefore, it plays a critical role in supporting the aims that we want to see, such as selling healthier food and drink. Through our reduction and reformulation

programmes, we are working with the food industry to encourage it to make everyday food and drink lower in sugar, salt and calories. The programme applies across all sectors of the food industry: retailers, manufacturers, restaurants, cafés, pubs, takeaways and delivered food. We have seen some progress since the publication of chapter one of the childhood obesity plan in 2016, with the average sugar content of breakfast cereals and yoghurts decreasing by 13%, and drinks subject to the soft drinks levy decreasing by 44% between 2015 and 2019. These statistics are very welcome, but we know there is more to be done.

However, we also need to be careful about the unintended consequences. As an example, when the sugar content of Irn-Bru was reduced, customers complained about the taste. How did the company respond? By claiming to rediscover an old recipe from 1901, which contained even more sugar. It was a huge hit with Irn-Bru drinkers. How do we address these unintended consequences?

Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle (GP): I thank the Minister for giving way. He referred to “everyday food and drink” and the formulation thereof. Will he acknowledge that, if we are talking about everyday foods, we should not be talking about formulation? You do not talk in that way about fruit and vegetables, and unprocessed food.

Lord Kamall (Con): The noble Baroness makes an important point, but we have to recognise the reality: not where we want to get to, but where we are at the moment. People do eat food that will need to be reformulated if we want to make it healthier. Of course, we know that fruit and vegetables are healthy, but not everyone, as we help them transition, will eat fruit and vegetables, or make stuff from the raw products. They will buy products in supermarkets, and therefore if they are buying them, we have to make sure that they are healthier and reformulated. We do not yet live in that ideal world where everyone buys fruit and vegetables, and cooks everything for themselves.

Given that, we also need new regulations on out-of-home calorie labelling. As we know, many people go to restaurants, buy takeaways or have their food delivered. It is important that we have calorie labelling for food sold in large businesses, including restaurants, cafés and takeaways, which came into force on 6 April 2022. As noble Lords are aware, there will be further legislation, on restricting the promotion and advertising of products high in fat, salt and sugar, which will come into effect in the next few years. I know that many noble Lords disagreed with the Government’s views on delaying some of those measures. We will continue to have the end-of-aisle promotion on the target date, but others, such as “buy one, get one free”, are delayed because of the trade-off with the cost of living crisis, but will come. It is delayed, but we have set target dates.

Once again, we have to be open—

Baroness Merron (Lab): I thank the Minister for referring to the delay, which I accept is a delay, to the restrictions on advertising. Can he explain what that has to do with the cost of living crisis, because I have heard that before?

Lord Kamall (Con): The delay on “buy one get one free” was a cost of living delay. The delay on advertising was because the Act did not come in as originally intended. There was a delay in getting it on to the statute book and with the statutory consultation period. The industry has asked for some time. I know there was a debate among noble Lords about whether we should give in to industry requests, but in the end we will get there. It is important that we have as many people as we can on side. As the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, indicated in a previous debate, some companies actually met those targets in advance of the new target. That is to be welcomed and encouraged.

Once again, we also have to be open to potential unintended consequences. Mental health charities and experts—and some noble Lords who have worked in this area—have expressed concerns about the potential effect of anti-obesity measures on those with eating disorders. We must be careful and make sure that we learn and address those unintended consequences. We know that we have imperfect knowledge as humans and should not fall for the fatal conceit of knowledge. We have to rely on the discovery process. Not all pilots will work, but some evidence-led pilots will. We have seen some of the reductions but think, for example, about the minimum alcohol price in Scotland, which has been recently reviewed. The study found that there was “a marked increase in the prices paid for alcohol by people with alcohol dependence”

and those drinking at harmful levels, but no clear evidence of any change in consumption or severity of dependence. Although such an effect cannot be ruled out, it demonstrates that we cannot assume that every intervention will work. Future interventions will need to be evidence-based. It is important not just to think that something will work; we have to see that it works.

To help ensure that all children have access to healthy diets, the Government provide a nutritional safety net to those who need it the most through the healthy food schemes. These are: Healthy Start, the nursery milk scheme and the school fruit and vegetable scheme. Together, these schemes help more than 3 million children. The schemes also help to support women through pregnancy, and babies and children when they are at home, in childcare and in early years at school. The schemes contribute to our priorities on obesity and levelling up.

Let us talk about some of the partnerships that we need to see if we are all to play a role in this. Schools have an important role to play. The school food standards are designed to restrict foods high in fat, salt or sugar, as well as low-quality, reformed or reconstituted foods. I have heard many noble Lords refer to ultra-processed or very highly processed foods. These standards are meant to ensure that pupils always have healthy options for their school lunch. They state that schools must provide fruit and vegetables every day—at least three different types each week—and no more than two portions of deep-fried food a week. There are also standards on the amount of salt, fruit juice and food cooked in oil. We hope these standards will play an important role in helping children get healthy options and the energy and nutrition they need throughout the school day.

[LORD KAMALL]

One thing I feel very strongly about, as noble Lords will know, are the grave disparities we see across this country. Others have expressed concerns about this. One of the gravest inequalities faced by our most disadvantaged communities is poor health. The Covid-19 pandemic powerfully underlined the disparities in health across this country. As part of our wider ambition to level up health across the UK, we announced that the Department of Health and Social Care will publish a health disparities White Paper. This will set out a series of impactful measures, including legislation if required, to address health disparities at each stage when they arise. In addition, the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities is looking at many areas of disparity and making recommendations. The review will look at the biggest preventable killers, such as obesity, as well as the wider causes of ill health and access to the services needed to diagnose and treat ill health in a timely and accessible way.

I remind noble Lords that we also have to show some humility. I think my noble friend Lord Kirkham referred to this. As someone who comes from an immigrant working-class community, I say to noble Lords there is a limit to what any Government can achieve with the attitude of Westminster or Whitehall knows best, or by Soviet-style, top-down central planning. I am sure many noble Lords have seen television programmes about how we can eat well for less. The challenge is in how we get those messages from the living room—or the TV room—into people's kitchens. The noble Baroness, Lady Bennett, talked about the empowerment of local communities and local people. I completely agree: we need to empower local communities through non-state civil society organisations, local community centres, local mosques, temples, gurdwaras, synagogues and churches, which are trusted by some of the hard-to-reach communities, to help them cook and eat more healthily.

I was talking to an official in my department the other day who comes from a Bengali background. She said, "One of the problems I see in my community is that we all love ghee—we think it's delicious but we know it's unhealthy." I said, "How do we in the Department of Health and others encourage people to eat healthily?" She answered, "You're not going to do it—it has to be from the grass roots up." We have to work with local civil society organisations. Maybe there could be a national programme across the country, but it is about the local civil society people who are trusted in those local communities. We can call for it and ask for it here, but how do we get that message into people's homes and kitchens?

I am slightly concerned by some of the anti-import sentiment that noble Lords expressed in this debate. As a development economist once said to me, "You either take our goods or you take our people." I know that many noble Lords prefer white Europe to non-white, non-Europe, but on this particular issue we have to be quite clear about that. We will not produce everything we need and will have to import some food, and some of it will be healthy. We should not be against food just because it comes from overseas.

I hope to be able to address some of the other specific points made. I am afraid that I do not have all the details on some of the programmes, and I

will ask my noble friend the Defra Minister to respond to some of the points that I am unable to at the moment.

Some specific questions were asked about seasonal labour shortages. Seasonal labour plays an important role in the agricultural sector each year. Since 2019, the Government have provided a seasonal worker visa route for horticultural workers in recognition of the highly seasonal nature of that work. To address the near-term need, we will release the additional provision of 10,000 visas under the seasonal worker visa route, including 2,000 for the poultry sector. That means that in total, 40,000 visas will be available for seasonal workers in 2022, providing labour for food businesses across the UK. We will also work with industry to support the upcoming Migration Advisory Committee review of the shortage occupation list. In addition, we will commission an independent review to ensure the quantity and quality of the food sector workforce; it will encompass the worlds of automation, domestic employment and migration routes.

The noble Baroness, Lady Bennett, asked about the agriculture sector growing more fruit and veg. We will bring forward a horticultural strategy for England which will examine the diverse worlds of small, large and emerging growing models and drive high-tech, controlled environmental horticulture to increase domestic production. We will work with growers during development of this strategy, and there will be an opportunity for those in the industry to feed into this, including potentially through a call for evidence, later this year.

A number of noble Lords asked about free school meals. The view from Defra is that a threshold has to be set somewhere. There will always be a debate about the level that you select, but the right one enables more children to benefit while remaining affordable and deliverable for schools. From 24 March this year, the Government have extended free school meals eligibility to include some children who have no recourse to public funds, subject to specified income thresholds; this permanent extension has been in place since the start of the summer term. We also have the school fruit and vegetable scheme, which is designed to benefit children at a vital stage of their development, providing a wide range of fruit and vegetables to children. The food strategy sets out our aim broadly to maintain domestic food production at current levels, in line with our environmental and climate goals. However, we are not asking anyone to choose between food and the environment; our view is that food production, farm businesses and the environment must work together hand in hand.

The noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, asked about the Future Farming Resilience Fund, which provides free business support to farmers and land managers during the early years of agricultural transition. It does this by awarding grants to organisations, and it helps farmers and land managers to understand the changes that are happening and to identify how and what they may need to adapt their business models, and it gives tailored support to adapt. In July 2021 we awarded grants to 19 organisations so that they can deliver the interim phase of this resilience support.

The organisations are listed on the GOV.UK website but I am sure that my noble friend the relevant Defra Minister will want to write about this.

Noble Lords also asked about food labelling. When I was in the European Parliament, we had constant debates about GDA labels versus traffic lights, and how sometimes food that may appear healthy under certain criteria shows a red light. We also debated the pros and cons of both systems. No system is perfect, but we agree that there has to be a system, and it is being consulted on.

I apologise to noble Lords if I have not addressed all the questions that were thrown at me. I know that I, my officials and Defra officials will look through *Hansard* and respond accordingly. I end by once again thanking the noble Baroness, Lady Walmsley, and all noble Lords who spoke on this important topic. Even though we may not always agree on the merits of different approaches, I hope that we have shown anyone watching today that noble Lords share a commitment to improving the health of our nation, wherever people come from, wherever they live and whatever their background. This is a shared goal that the Government cannot achieve alone. We all have a role to play in this important mission, and I look forward to working with noble Lords, national, devolved and local government, industry and local civil society groups to improve the health of our great nation.

5.30 pm

Baroness Walmsley (LD): My Lords, I thank the Minister and everybody who has taken part in this small but perfectly formed debate. It has been cross-departmental, which is why I asked Defra to send the Minister some notes. If the Defra Minister had been responding, I think the noble Lord would have had to send him some notes, and vice versa. It was quite a difficult challenge for the Minister to have such a cross-departmental topic.

I am very grateful to noble Lords who elaborated things that I had time to mention only briefly in my initial remarks. In fact, some mentioned things that I did not have time to mention at all. I am grateful that the Minister mentioned the link between mental health and being overweight, and the noble Baroness, Lady Merron, mentioned the difficulties of the Procurement Bill and the possible contradiction between that Bill and the Health and Care Act. None of us had the chance to talk about the importance of teaching children to cook, for example, but I am so grateful that everybody

mentioned food and health inequality, because it is a very big issue. Although the Government are doing some things to help address that, I think most contributors to today's debate have suggested more things that we would like to have seen them do.

I want to take the Minister up on one point: he said that there appears to have been some sort of opposition to importing food. In fact, I think both the noble Baroness, Lady Merron, and I acknowledged the fact that we are not self-sufficient in food and are not going to be. What is important is that, first, we make sure that the standard of food that comes in is what the public expect and, secondly, as even the Government are now saying, in order for our food system to be resilient we need to produce as much as possible in this country in a sustainable way, while acknowledging all the other things that farmers have to do.

The noble Lord, Lord Kirkham, talked about happiness, and I could not agree with him more. My noble friend Lady Brinton talked about the socialisation of food, and somebody mentioned that the slower you eat, the less you probably eat, and that you relax while you do it and it does you good. I certainly agree on that point, but I do not agree with the noble Lord, Lord Kirkham, that anybody is trying to lecture people. What people are trying to do is to help and encourage others, to make recommendations and to make good food accessible to everybody in the country. Of course, that is what the Government are trying to do, but we would like to see more. Henry Dimbleby was certainly not lecturing anybody; he based his recommendations on the science and good advice from experts. We should all listen to what he had to say.

I was a bit concerned about what my noble friend Lady Brinton said about the danger of reducing the quality of school meals, and I hope the Minister will keep an eye on that as the price of food increases. We do not want to see that, because I know that the Government are trying to get good food directly to children.

With those few words, I thank everybody who has taken part. I know more people would have liked to speak, but the time of day and day of the week meant that some of the great experts on this topic in the House were not able to join us—and we miss them, of course.

Motion agreed.

House adjourned at 5.35 pm.

Grand Committee

Thursday 7 July 2022

Musicians and Creative Professionals: Working in the European Union *Question for Short Debate*

1.01 pm

Asked by **The Earl of Clancarty**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to improve the ability of musicians and other creative professionals from the United Kingdom to work and tour in the European Union.

The Earl of Clancarty (CB): My Lords, I am grateful for this opportunity to raise the concerns of creative professionals on touring and working in Europe. I thank the Government for extending this debate to an hour and a half. I am grateful for the briefings from the Incorporated Society of Musicians, UK Music, Carry on Touring, LIVE, the Association of British Orchestras, T&S Immigration Services, the Contemporary Visual Arts Network and the House of Lords Library. I am pleased that we will have contributions to this debate from across the Committee.

In practical terms, as the Incorporated Society of Musicians and others have been at pains to point out, this is, above all, about trade. As such, it is something we should all be concerned with. In pre-pandemic 2019, music alone was worth £5.8 billion, almost five times as much as the fishing industry at £1.4 billion—which is also, one has to say, now sadly suffering the effects of Brexit. Live music is a key aspect of music, making bands' reputations abroad and stimulating sales. According to the Featured Artists Coalition, in 2019 UK acts played four times as many gigs in the EU as in the US.

It is great to have live music and the arts more generally back and largely up and running on our own shores, with Glastonbury, the Stones, Adele, the Proms this month and much more to look forward to. While I suspect that most of the focus today will be on music, concerns about working in Europe are being felt across the creative industries. I will touch on the visual arts, which is my own background. I ask therefore that the Minister looks carefully at the new Arts Council-funded report, *International Connections*, produced by a-n and the Contemporary Visual Arts Network, which makes some important recommendations. I ask him to look carefully as well at the forthcoming All-Party Parliamentary Group on Music report, *Let the Music Move*, addressing similar concerns for the music industry. It would be excellent if the Minister could attend its launch in Parliament, on 19 July.

The trade and co-operation agreement was a no-deal for services, including the arts and creative industries. It has been imperative from the outset that the Government take mitigating action to drastically improve the situation for the arts in the face of this no deal, but the reality is that 18 months have passed and little of substance has been achieved.

Moreover, the Government have tried to paint a picture that is far better than reality. LIVE says it remains

“deeply concerned about the impact of Brexit on the UK's live music industry.”

We are already now hearing the practical problems musicians are having, such as that of the band White Lies, which in April had to cancel a booking in Paris because its equipment was still waiting to clear customs in the UK. The Government must stop harking back to whatever they say was offered to the EU; that is history. Through whatever mechanisms are available, and I know that other noble Lords will talk about that in more detail, the UK needs to reapproach the EU to effect those changes that are urgently required. As TCA negotiator, the noble Lord, Lord Frost, himself has admitted that the Government have been too purist in their approach. We need a rethink and a reset. It is, after all, the future of our performing arts and more that is at stake.

Cabotage remains one of the most significant problems. The industry is grateful for the dual registration fix, but it is only a partial fix and does not address operation under an own account. Furthermore, it shifts this specialist haulage industry to Europe, which, as UK Music points out, will in the longer term cost this country business and jobs.

Most immediately, there remains a massive problem for those unable to use the dual registration services. The Association of British Orchestras says the situation is disastrous for orchestras, many of which run their own purpose-built vehicles. To give one example, the truck owned by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, costing £250,000, purchased partly through an Arts Council grant, will be a total waste of money if we do not negotiate a cabotage exemption with the EU. This is urgent. The ABO proposed that a solution for own-account operators might be presented at a forthcoming UK-EU Specialised Committee on Road Transport meeting. Will the Government act?

It is urgent too that we negotiate a visa waiver agreement, which a cabotage agreement could also be part of. Visa and work permit regulations within Europe are complicated. We have not agreed a single bilateral agreement with the EU, although two countries, Spain and Greece, have relaxed their visa rules for the UK, which I understand merely brings the UK in line with US acts who have toured those countries visa-free for decades.

ISM last year proposed a bespoke visa waiver agreement, which was shown to government officials. Legal advice confirmed that such a proposal was legally workable without being incompatible with the UK's ability to take back control of its borders; none of this was questioned by the Government. But the Government, for reasons known only to themselves, have not followed up this constructive proposal, which is backed across the board by the music industry. Again, urgent action is required.

The problems presented by carnets and CITES are likewise problems of both cost and red tape. There are two groups who will be most affected here: on the one hand, orchestras, for which costs may spiral; on the other, those starting out, including bands and individual musicians, who will not have the resources of artists

[THE EARL OF CLANCARTY]

such as Elton John and Ed Sheeran to carry these extra significant burdens. Again, we have to negotiate with the EU a cultural exemption to the cost of ATA carnets and CITES as well. On the question of CITES, I ask the Minister what news he has over whether St Pancras will become a CITES designated point of exit. Eurostar is a hugely important route. Again, a sense of urgency is required.

ISM has also drawn my attention to a couple of recent developments around CITES that will emerge at CITES COP 19, which I hope the Minister is also aware of. ISM supports the new proposals from the US music industry to ease and provide exemptions from CITES permits. Will the Government support those proposals? Will the Government oppose the proposals from Brazil for a new designation of Pernambuco, the wood used in making bows, which, while well-intentioned, would significantly and detrimentally interfere in the legal trade in bows? This is important.

In the debate on dual registration in Grand Committee on 13 June, the noble Baroness, Lady Randerson, rightly raised concerns about merchandise, the importance of which can be too easily underestimated. UK Music notes that the band Squid cancelled dates in Spain because of the costs both of carnets and of the movement of merchandise between the UK and the EU. Another band has stated that such costs, including the requirement to VAT register, meant that it missed out on £2,500-worth of merchandise on its last tour of France. These are significant losses. Will the Minister look at what is yet another make-or-break worry for musicians?

I will mention briefly traffic in the other direction. A concern that Steve Richard of T&S Immigration Services raises is that of the mishandling of incoming bands by UK border staff, including, for example, them being given wrong information about passport stamps and being sent through e-gates, making the tour technically illegal. These are common occurrences. There are now concerns about adequate staffing levels, but the better training of UK border and other airport staff to deal with musicians and crew is required.

The concerns of visual artists exhibiting work in Europe post Brexit has, up to now, been relatively overlooked, yet there exists the same confusion and paucity of information as afflicts others in the creative industries. Shipping and other costs, red tape and the sheer complexities now involved have already this year been responsible for artists cancelling their participation in exhibitions in Europe, as I heard this week at a Zoom event organised by Arts Infopoint. *International Connections* recommends better representation for the visual arts, including on the TCA domestic advisory group, of which LIVE and UK Music are already members. The report also recommends the appointment of a freelance commissioner, which would allow further representation for arts and creative workers.

I have not by any means covered all the many concerns that the music sector is raising, let alone those of other creative industries. But perhaps the most disturbing is the extent to which the pipeline of talent will be affected by the curtailment not just of opportunities for young artists touring but opportunities

for jobs, such as for opera singers, dancers and many others who are now shut out of work in Europe because they do not possess an EU passport.

As the pandemic, we hope, recedes, we have reached a point at which we are taking greater stock of the effects of Brexit. Nevertheless, the good sense of what the industry is now asking for speaks for itself. What is needed now from the Government is a much greater urgency in addressing these concerns and ultimately finding solutions.

1.11 pm

Lord Cormack (Con): My Lords, I am delighted to follow the noble Earl. I am sure that I speak on behalf of everyone in the Moses Room when I thank him for presenting this case so clearly and firmly and for straying beyond music, because this is not a problem that is limited to music and musicians.

When I am travelling and I am asked what my nationality is, that is easy: it is British. What is my identity? It is English. But what is my civilization? It is European. We are all part of the great continent of Europe and nothing that was said or done on 23 June 2016 alters that fact. I am not going to make a long, rambling speech saying that we should put the clock back to 22 June, tempting as that would be, but we have to have a constructive and proper relationship with the other nations of the European Union and with those nations of Europe that are not members of the EU.

This is a challenge to the new Government. We have been going through a turbulent time in recent months and particularly in recent days. It is important that we grasp the opportunity of a new beginning and try very hard indeed to urge whoever has responsibility in the new Government to do so. I will be entirely delighted if the Minister for the Arts remains in his present position, but this morning when I asked another Minister in the Chamber about a caretaker Prime Minister and all the rest of it, I was told that that was above his pay grade. The fact is that we are moving towards a new Government. There is an opportunity to restore integrity in public life—that absolutely essential quality that has been more notable by its absence than its presence at the highest level in recent months and years.

I hope that we will try to have a constructive and productive relationship with our friends—and they should always be our friends—and allies in the European Union and the rest of the continent. We have had the most terrible reminder in the past five months of how fragile peace is and how important and fragile democracy is. Every day that the Ukraine war carries on should indicate to all of us what is at risk.

There is no more civilising influence than music. I have to confess that I am not a Glastonbury fan—it is not quite my scene—but I love listening to the Berlin Philharmonic. We have to realise that we are dealing with the international language here. Whatever the barrier between someone who speaks German and someone who does not, music transcends and overcomes it. It makes us feel at one.

I often think of those glorious days in the 18th century when Handel was resident in London—an internationalist if ever there was one—when Haydn came here, as one

of the greatest musicians of his time, and when Mozart played here. They were inspired when they were here and we have had those who have gone elsewhere and continue to go. It is a source of grief to me to think that people such as my dear friend Tasmin Little, who has now put down her bow as a professional soloist, pleaded with me from 2016 onwards, saying, “This is going to be very damaging to those of us who are musicians and internationalists.”

Therefore, my message to the Minister today is to please do what you can to persuade your colleagues in government to grasp the opportunity that a new beginning brings. Talk, as equals and as friends, with those who control the levers of power throughout the European continent. There should be no impediment to a musician, orchestra or band going to play in any European country or coming from any European country to play here. I am grateful to the noble Earl and I hope that this can be part of a new beginning.

1.17 pm

Viscount Stansgate (Lab): My Lords, I thank the noble Earl and congratulate him on securing the debate. It is very timely, for a reason that I will come on to. It is a pleasure to follow the noble Lord, Lord Cormack—I am almost tempted to say that it is always a pleasure to follow the noble Lord, Lord Cormack, because it has occurred once or twice so far. When I heard the reference to Handel, I thought, “Well, Handel did not need a visa to come here.”

I also ought to say what a pleasure it is to see a Minister still at the Dispatch Box. In fact, there are two Ministers here today. The subject of today’s debate is music and it is the second time in two hours—I will be honest about this—that the consequential damage of the vote in 2016 is being brought to your Lordships’ attention. Less than two hours ago, a Question was raised in the House about Horizon Europe, the co-operation between scientists here and around Europe, and the damage being done. Here we are talking about the damage to musicians of not being able to tour in Europe as easily as was the case. Whatever else noble Lords may feel, I do not think that anybody voted on 23 June 2016 to inflict the type of damage that is being inflicted on British science or music, which are being sacrificed on the altar of the Northern Ireland protocol. Of course, music in particular is truly international.

I am indebted to the ISM and the Library for their briefings, which all noble Lords will have received. I always find the Library briefings helpful. As the noble Earl said, we are talking about an industry that is worth nearly £6 billion in economic terms.

I should declare an interest, which is what propelled me to take part in today’s debate. I am grateful to the government side for increasing the length of the debate, because I saw that I would have only two minutes—well, my two minutes are already up. I am grateful for a little more time. The point I want to bring to your Lordships’ attention in this debate—I hope the Minister will feel able to say something about it in reply—is the hugely damaging effect on young musicians. The interest I have to declare is that I have two children. As they grew up, from the age of five they learned to play musical instruments—my daughter Emily the violin and my son Daniel the cello. I do not think they can

remember life without playing musical instruments. In the course of growing up, they were members of colleges of music but also a youth orchestra, which I hope I am allowed to name: the Stoneleigh Youth Orchestra, conducted by Adrian Brown with such distinction for so many years. Growing up, they went on tours to Poland, Germany, Italy, Spain, Slovenia and Belgium. A lot of work goes into organising such tours. These are not professional orchestras, and people have to do it voluntarily. Money and time are spent going out to reconnoitre the best place to go. You can imagine all the work involved in enabling a youth orchestra to go on tour, including a huge great bus and space for the instruments.

I understand from one of our briefings that on one occasion two musicians were fined because there was no proof, said the French, that their instruments belonged to them, and they said that they might be importing their instruments into another country, possibly for resale. It is absurd. As I said, the plight of youth orchestras should be taken very seriously.

I hope I am allowed to say this, but the other day I saw the noble Baroness the Minister at the entrance. If I am right, she had her own child with her. I thought here is someone who, as he grows up—if it is he—

Baroness Penn (Con): She.

Viscount Stansgate (Lab): As she grows up, I hope she will learn to play music and get the benefit of that. There are incalculable benefits from going on tour in Europe.

My time is up now. Many of the other things I planned to say have already been covered, and no doubt will be by others, but this is about the future. I think the noble Earl referred to the pipeline of the future, and that is the point I want to bring to your Lordships’ attention today. It matters just as much for the future of music and musicians touring as for established orchestras today.

1.22 pm

Lord German (LD): My Lords, I follow on from the noble Viscount, who talked about youth music. First, I declare my interest: I am the chair of trustees of the Parliament Choir, which will be touring in Europe in the next year, along with professional musicians and the outstanding Southbank Sinfonia, one of the primary postgraduate training orchestras in the world, based around the corner here in St John’s Smith Square. So there is an interest in this Parliament in getting this issue correct, and it is very important for us all.

I am grateful to the noble Earl, Lord Clancarty, for introducing the debate. We heard from him that this is a major industry for this country, worth £5.8 billion and employing more than 200,000 people. It is worth more than fisheries and steel combined and now faces issues on the right to travel and work across the European Union. Of course, it is cabotage, work permits, carnets and whatever else that are the difficulties. These permit difficulties are the main source of problems, which are costly and lengthy and can differ from country to country. The Incorporated Society of Musicians has given an example of a five-piece act. The performers were unable to carry their instruments

[LORD GERMAN]

with them, and to play a concert in Greece would have meant an additional £700 per person to perform. To recover that from a performance is obviously a major deterrent to the music business.

I understand about the cabotage limits causing us problems and the dual registration of vehicles. If I were to put it to anybody looking at this from the outside, I would simply say that the new regulation, which is a UK regulation alone and therefore has no convergence with EU rules, is that a company or body can register a vehicle inside the European Union, house it, drive it over here, change the number plates, get the load on board, change the number plates back and drive it across to Europe. But for many people that is not how instruments are moved across borders. It impacts greatly on the source of income of the music industry.

This solution, as the Government have called it, is not really a solution. It is a sticking plaster that just helps to make life less difficult than it was before. For many, it is not a solution because, as the noble Earl, Lord Clancarty, says, many orchestras own their vehicles, which are single vehicles, so the effect of having dual registration would be very costly indeed. The Government have also suggested splitting loads as another way. Again, as with the other, that is only a partial and temporary solution. It is interesting that the CEO of the Featured Artists Coalition has said that there has been a lack of engagement from government. The small steps toward solutions to address the problems are, in his words,

“driven by the industry, same for touring with splitter vans. The government keep claiming victories for things they’ve done no work on”.

I put it to the Minister today that there are solutions that are simple and shared by the creative arts community at large: for example, financial support, similar to that given to the fishery industry, would be needed to help the creative arts industry as a whole. If it is suitable for one, why not the other, which is a much bigger industry? Another is providing better negotiation and cohesion for the groups affected, working with the music industry, perhaps to provide a single help point for advice and guidance. But fundamentally, the UK needs to negotiate with the EU member states or the EU itself.

There is a mutual understanding of these issues—the Spanish example is one—but I understand that the issue facing the UK Government is that they have to build a better and more collaborative approach with our friends in the European Union. This is being hugely affected by the approach taken on the Northern Ireland protocol. The UK is blocked from joining the Horizon research programme, affecting many of our universities. I would hazard a guess that this, linked to an unwillingness from the UK to enter negotiations, is the fundamental reason for this blockage.

I know that the Minister cannot reply on behalf of the new world, but we do not know what the relationship with the EU will be in the new world. However, we have to rebuild our relationship and make it better, so that these problems will no longer apply to a very critical industry for the United Kingdom.

1.27 pm

Baroness Bull (CB): My Lords, I join other noble Lords in congratulating my noble friend Lord Clancarty, not just on securing today’s debate but on his energy and resilience in keeping these matters so firmly on the agenda. The nature of this QSD means that this debate is inevitably structured in the form of a theme and variations, which is probably fitting giving its relationship to music. My noble friend has comprehensively set out so many of the themes in his excellent speech; all we have to do is extemporise on one or more of them in our allotted time. But I will attempt to do a little more, suggesting ways in which the current dissonance might shift towards consonance and even resolution.

The extent of the challenges resulting from the omission of any provision for the touring of creative professionals and their support staff has been masked to date by the pandemic. But, as touring starts up again, we are seeing tangible evidence of impacts across four key areas.

First, the absence of a universal visa waiver agreement means that different EU members can treat UK artists and their staff in different ways, creating a complex and costly regulatory landscape, particularly in the case of multi-country tours. Secondly, the costs associated with an ATA carnet are proving to be prohibitive, especially for larger operations such as orchestras, whose instruments and equipment can be valued at millions of pounds. Thirdly, cabotage restrictions, as we have heard, permit only three internal movements in the EU for UK hauliers over 3.5 tonnes—disastrous when tours cover multiple countries over weeks and months. Dual registration does not provide a solution for ensembles with a single, purpose-built touring vehicle which cannot create the required EU base. Finally, CITES requirements for musical instruments containing protected materials can prevent last-minute bookings, which are often the things which provide vital career breaks.

The creative sector has been working hard to propose solutions to these challenges. It has put forward a cultural exemption, applied reciprocally, to cover cabotage, CITES and carnets, and suggested a bespoke visa-waiver agreement to allow visa-free working for 90 in 180 days across the whole of the EU and UK—something many countries already offer. Some small steps have been made—I am sure that the Minister will refer to them in winding—but progress has been lamentably slow over the two and half years since the TCA was signed.

Here is where I move from the minor to the major key. When it became clear that touring had indeed been omitted from the TCA, each side claimed that it had offered a deal on touring that the other had rejected. At this point in time, the important part of this sorry story is not that we failed to agree a deal or that we could not agree on who was to blame; it is that we wanted the same thing. If we could now agree to focus not on the past but on the future, that common aim—our shared ambition to enable creative touring—means that we could make rapid progress on resolving this issue, unlike some of the more contentious issues currently on the table. There is a structure in place through which such progress can be made: the Partnership

Council has the power to adopt amendments to the TCA and so could achieve what the original negotiators, on both sides, say that they wanted but failed to agree.

The history of art is one of finding inspiration from each other's cultures, of building ideas and of innovating practice, as artists travel from city to city, state to state. In Europe, this has been the case for hundreds of years and it has enriched our shared and distinctive heritages. Not only that, but when artists and musicians tour, they bring with them direct and indirect economic benefits. They contribute to healthy societies, they promote intercultural understanding and they foster positive relations between nations.

There is much to be gained for both sides in resolving the question of touring. Failure to find resolution will leave us all the poorer and it will be disproportionately hard on emerging and early-career artists, for whom touring is a vital element of professional development. We need to move now to avoid disadvantaging the next generation. I hope that the Minister will do everything that he can to persuade colleagues that working together with the EU to resolve this relatively uncontroversial issue would demonstrate our shared desire to make a success of our future relationship with our closest neighbours, with whom we share such a rich and productive history of cultural exchange.

1.32 pm

The Lord Bishop of Manchester: My Lords, like others, I thank the noble Earl for bringing us this debate. Noble Lords would expect a Bishop of Manchester to be passionate about music. Our vibrant popular and contemporary music scene is central to our local economy. The Royal Northern College of Music is one of our universities and we also have the leading music school for the north of England in Chetham's, whose campus is next door to my cathedral and provides many of our choristers. We recently dedicated a brand-new, £2 million cathedral organ. It was the donation of a single—as it happens, Jewish—businessman, Sir Norman Stoller. Our music matters to us in Manchester. We invest in it and in the diverse young people developing their skills in it. It is a great force for levelling up.

However, the issues that the noble Earl has brought to our attention are affecting the Church considerably, including our cathedral choirs, parish churches and school choirs. I am not the first Bishop to raise these matters. The right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Bristol and, before her, the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Chichester have been raising them since at least 2018. They were promised much, but we have seen little by way of change.

On behalf of the nation, the Church maintains a unique tradition of English choral music. We host hundreds of concerts, music, theatre and arts events in 16,000 parishes and 42 cathedrals. The Church is part of Britain's shared cultural heritage and supports thousands of professional and amateur performers, who bring shared cultural experiences to local communities. It has been levelling up the arts for centuries and providing opportunities for hundreds of young artists in our schools, churches and cathedral choirs to gain musical training. These choirs and organists often tour across Europe in the summer.

It plays a significant and vital role in fundraising and supports a continuation of the musical foundation within the Church and our ability to offer scholarships and opportunities to children and young people, not least in rural and deprived communities. My cathedral is at the heart of a very deprived part of Manchester.

In the Church, we want to continue to invest in supporting our nation's young people and our cultural life. What will the Government do to back the work that we and others are doing to invest in that? I believe that the Government should see this as a key export opportunity and should use the soft power of the arts to build an economic return for the UK.

Music is not only an economic asset. I would argue that when our choirs tour Europe and beyond, they are singing not only psalms but British values. Diverse voices raised in harmony are a powerful symbol of what our nation, at its best, stands for. It has been a great privilege to lead your Lordships' House each morning this week in reciting a psalm—how much more wonderful it would have been had we been able to sing them.

There is already significant demand in the EU and worldwide for our choirs and orchestras to perform, but red tape prevents professional and amateur musicians from travelling. We need the Government to open doors and simplify the visa processes, not just for the big players such as the LSO or the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra but for our smaller but talented professional and amateur choirs and orchestras, such as my Manchester Cathedral Choir and the world-famous choir of my old college, King's, Cambridge—I had to get them in.

In the brief time left to me, I would like to ask the Minister three things. First, what steps are the Government taking to simplify the administration of the current visa system so that the complexity and volume of paperwork are no longer hampering groups travelling? Secondly, what support will the Government make available for the regional arts and culture sector to bounce back after Covid? Thirdly, will the Minister commit to meeting the Church to discuss the current challenges that we have and the opportunities that we can, with support, now grasp? I look forward to the response from the Minister and hope to speak further on this matter.

1.36 pm

Baroness Fleet (Con): My Lords, I thank the noble Earl for securing this debate. His determination over a long 18 months to improve the ability of UK musicians to work and travel in the EU is much appreciated by all of us here today, on both sides. I also thank the Minister for his commitment to music and his belief in the value of music education and the importance that it plays in creating a pipeline of talent for the creative industries.

I declare my interest as chair of the advisory panel for the new national plan for music education, as a council member of the Arts Council and as governor of Shoreditch Park academy, which has a wonderful music tradition.

I am delighted that the talent pipeline has been raised today. That is what I would like to talk about. It gives me an opportunity to say a few words about the

[BARONESS FLEET]

music education plan, which I hope some noble Lords will have read—for anyone who has not read it yet, I hope that they will now. It has just been published and it has been described as ambitious. Yes, it is. I think that we should be ambitious for our young people, particularly with regard to music education. We must ensure that all children, irrespective of background and circumstance, have access to high-quality music education.

We set out in detail in the plan how we can enable all pupils to learn to sing, to play an instrument, to create music together and to have the opportunity to progress their musical interests and talents, including professionally. Every parent must now be absolutely clear, from the plan, that music is a statutory subject in the curriculum and should be taught as robustly as any other subject. Music is not just a nice-to-have extra; it is an essential part of every child's education.

Every head teacher in primary and secondary has the power to put music at the heart of their school. Thousands already do, working within their budgets and using, sometimes, the pupil premium. Every child should receive an absolute minimum of one hour per week of music education in the classroom. Every school should have a music lead or head of music. Every school should have a music development plan for every pupil and a progression plan for those children with passion and commitment to realise their potential.

There is the most wonderful music happening in many schools right across the country, in spite of all the difficulties, because some heads, governors and senior leadership teams recognise music's value. Those in areas of disadvantage discover that music is transformative. The plan is called "The Power of Music to Change Lives" for a very good reason. In Bradford, for example, an area of great disadvantage, Feversham Primary Academy was in special measures some years ago. It is now rated outstanding, because music is at the heart of the school. At Dersingham VA Primary in Norfolk, where 25% of the children have special needs, nearly half of all pupils continue with instrumental tuition after whole-class ensemble teaching. At Churchfields Junior School in Redbridge, where 32 languages are spoken, 60% of pupils learn two musical instruments. At Green Dragon Primary School in Hounslow, where 79% are of ethnic-minority backgrounds, all pupils learn to play the violin or a brass or woodwind instrument. There is wonderful music out there and schools are making it happen. It has to start in school. Many of them use the pupil premium to help deliver this inclusive music education.

Music hubs across the country are there to support schools. They have now secured three-year funding, which is really important for them to form the necessary partnerships. They will help ensure that the plan is implemented. Inspirational hub leaders from Blackpool and Bradford to Hounslow and Hackney are doing magnificent work with schools, forming partnerships to ensure that every child can progress their interest and talents. It can be done. The money is there and so are the instruments, thanks to a new investment of £25 million from the Department for Education, for which we are most grateful. To help ensure that more children from disadvantaged backgrounds will have

the opportunity that we all want them to have, there will be a new progression fund. This could be a game-changer and it is really important. I am delighted to take part in this debate and I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

1.42 pm

Lord Strasburger (LD) [V]: My Lords, I thank the noble Earl for giving us the opportunity to debate this important subject. I am not in the habit of beating around the bush or avoiding the difficult topics, so I have no hesitation in speaking truth to power by saying that there is just one reason why British musicians, dancers and actors, our fashion industry, and all the people who support them, are condemned to climbing a new mountain of red tape, enduring months of stress and diverting earning time to chase around for paperwork, just for one gig in Europe. There is only one reason why all our creative arts industries are going to plunge from their genuinely world-leading position. There is only one reason why many of the millions of skilled workers who worked in the arts are finding other jobs and probably will not return to the industry. There is one reason why a whole generation of talented young performers and back-up staff will be lost for ever. There is one reason why the economy of this country is suffering yet another major blow through the self-inflicted damage being done to its second-largest sector. There is one reason why one of the main instruments of our country's soft power—our highly respected creative arts—has been casually tossed away by this shambles of a Government.

That one reason is not inflation, although runaway costs are a serious problem for the arts, as they are in all sectors of the economy, with some haulage costs quadrupling; nor is it Covid, which devastated the performance industries for two years but which they have somehow survived through a combination of hardship, hard work, ingenuity and government support. The hard truth is that it all comes down to Brexit; to the complete omission of the creative industries from the trade and co-operation agreement and to this Government's gleeful destruction of freedom of movement—a wonderful freedom for all our citizens, and which used to enable our performers to go and work in Europe without a hint of hassle.

The trite notion of taking back control is the only excuse the Government give for rejecting the EU's generous offer of a cultural exemption from all the new impediments to our creative arts doing business in Europe. The Government would have us believe that allowing European performers to enter the UK for a few days or weeks to do some shows and then leave again presents a threat of untrammelled immigration. No doubt we will hear this nonsense again when the Minister responds, if he has not belatedly resigned before we finish this debate.

If I had time, I could provide countless examples of how the masses of new red tape that the Government have inflicted on individual musicians, bands and orchestras is suffocating the industry and its economically essential work in Europe. I will mention just one: a couple who have travelled to work in opera, in Denmark, every summer for the last 20 years. This year they only just managed to retain this vital engagement, but not

without two months of huge stress and chasing around this country to get all the paperwork ducks in a row. They even produced a manual to help others thinking of trying to do the same thing, but it would probably deter people from even considering going through what must be heaven for officials but red tape hell for anyone trying to earn a living in the arts.

DCMS's attempts to mitigate the many new and unnecessary obstacles to touring and working in Europe are having only a marginal effect. There is consensus in the industry that the only real solution is for the Government to negotiate the cultural exemptions on visas, work permits, cabotage, CITES and carnets that were on the table during the bungled negotiations on the trade deal and wantonly rejected by the Government. Whether this crumbling Administration, or whatever follows them, will have the gumption to recognise these massive problems and fix them remains to be seen. We will need to see an end to the current confrontational approach towards the EU exhibited by this Government.

1.46 pm

Lord Moynihan (Con): My Lords, I also thank the noble Earl, Lord Clancarty, particularly because he added the phrase "and other creative professionals". He will know that this immediately gives me the opportunity to speak on a subject with which he has become familiar every time he introduces debates on this, namely the vital importance of the work of the snowsport community in the Alps. They are among the most creative of professionals.

As my noble friend Lord Cormack knows, gone are the days when you can win a snowboard title with a cork. Slopestyle, superpipe, big air and freestyle are all highly artistic forms of winter sport, and the professionals who work in this area need access to coach in the European Union. This debate gives me an excellent opportunity to seek reassurances from my noble friend the Minister about the work being undertaken to improve the ability of our snowsport professionals to work in the European Union. I do not expect answers to all the questions I will raise, but I ask the Minister to write to me after the debate with an update that I can pass on to everybody interested in the sector.

As my noble friend the Minister knows, the Government have been lobbying effectively, in partnership with the Alpine Sports Group, to ensure that support is provided to governing bodies, regulators, associations and professionals in this sector as they work through the process of securing qualification recognition in various EU member states. This time last year, representatives of the Alpine Sports Group met government representatives, as well as the FCDO attaché to the British embassy in Switzerland, to discuss how to minimise the negative consequences of Brexit on UK alpine sports. All these representatives have been focused on negotiations with the EU on the recognition of professional qualifications, the mobility of UK nationals within and across the EU, and the UK's policy towards the EU on these topics.

I would be grateful if the Government could confirm that they have now formed a new recognition arrangements team to provide winter sport professionals with support as we continue to negotiate agreements with our counterparts in EU member states. The ASG was

left in no doubt that it now has the support of the Government, for which I thank the Government, irrespective of whether they pursue bilateral agreements with the individual states or a master recognition agreement.

The situation is still exceptionally difficult. Working in France as a snowsports professional, whether for coaching club teams or athletes, or for instructing purposes, remains a tightly controlled activity. The UK's exit from the EU means we no longer benefit from the right of establishment as snowsports instructors or coaches under the delegated Act. This very much leads to a case-by-case approach, depending on individual resorts and the attitude taken by the ski schools in them. That process is opaque to this day. There is a requirement for a *carte pro*, but how you get it differs in different parts of the Alps. We need to work with our friends in Europe to overcome the difficulties faced by many instructors and coaches seeking eligibility for a *carte pro*.

Even when you have a *carte pro*, there is uncertainty over the issuing of visas. If you are a British citizen, do not hold any other EU passports and have not benefited from the terms of the withdrawal agreement, you need a visa, but there is no certainty that British nationals will receive one. That again is a concern to people whose livelihoods are based, as winter sport professionals' are, in the mountains.

Finally, I will give the example of working in Switzerland. Switzerland comes into this context because it has an arrangement with the European Union on the recognition of snowsports instructors. There are significant variations here between federal law and its regional application. Swiss cantons are allowed to interpret certain pieces of federal legislation, notably the Foreign Nationals and Integration Act and the legislation relating to admission, stay and the exercise of gainful activity, especially where local snowsports tuition and services are offered and the activity in question is a regulated profession. It varies substantially from one ski resort or one canton to another.

I conclude by at least welcoming one canton, Bern, which recently stated that

"we recognize the long tradition of snowsports in the United Kingdom and also understand the interest of the Swiss ski schools in securing access to ski instructors from the UK, who make a valuable contribution to the Alpine economy in particular in our Canton."

I urge all noble Lords to go to resorts in Bern this winter.

1.52 pm

Lord Jones of Cheltenham (LD) [V]: My Lords, I thank the noble Earl for securing this important debate on this slow news day. My brother is a rock musician who has worked with some of the industry's finest, including Joe Brown, Michael Schenker, and the great Russ Ballard and Bob Henrit, who were in Adam Faith's *Roulettes* in the 1960s, before moving on to *Unit 4+2*, *Argent* and, in Bob's case, *The Kinks*.

I asked Russell, one of our most successful songwriters, for his views on the new challenges of touring Europe. He said this:

"I worked extensively around Europe in the sixties and suffered all the bureaucracy of border controls. Carnets were the bane of our lives. These were lists of instruments in the truck, guitars, keyboards, drums, amplifiers and mixers which often had to be

[LORD JONES OF CHELTENHAM]

unloaded, taken out of their cases and checked against the carnet, to make sure these long-haired, unwashed, hooligan types were not smuggling alcohol, cigarettes or some other substance that the border officer could give in evidence for his promotion.

Obviously, every musician wasn't unwashed or a hooligan, and every border guard wasn't always looking for promotion. However, being stopped at borders was a pain. Unloading a lorry, sometimes in the snow, was time-consuming. When, in the early seventies, we became part of the EU, it was like discovering a new planet. It looked the same, with the same officials at the borders, but it was a new, wonderful experience, enabling us to get to gigs on time. We thought we'd died and gone to heaven.

Most MPs are too young to know what it was like back then and how things improved when we joined the European Union. I am planning a tour to Germany in October—but complying with the new regulations reminds me of the bad old days. It is manageable for people like me, but for performers on the margin of financial viability, Europe is now off limits."

They are the words of Russ Ballard.

Failure to take concrete action will cede a live music market where UK artists have historically been dominant. UK Music's latest report, *This Is Music*, showed that 2020 was very difficult for the music sector, and it is hardly any better now.

Before the pandemic, music was a driver of growth across the UK, being worth £5.8 billion in gross value added and employing almost 200,000 people. The GVA of the sector grew by 11% in 2019, employment grew by 3% and the value of exports by 9%, far above the economy as a whole. EU member states are a vital market for the UK's £2.3 billion-worth of music exports, particularly live music, and the European Commission admitted in 2019 that UK acts dominate the European panorama.

Another problem, as we have heard, is merchandise. Many acts are finding that they are falling foul of customs rules when they attempt to sell merchandise in the EU alongside their live tours. Additional duties and the requirement to VAT register can obliterate margins for the sale of merchandise. Tankus the Henge has said that the additional costs meant it missed out on £2,500-worth of merchandise sales on its last tour of France. A range of artists, including The Anchoress, have stated that postage costs for small businesses like theirs looking to make individual item sales to EU-based customers have spiralled, often making individual sales uneconomic and hitting another revenue stream for emerging artists.

A carnet waiver agreement between the UK and the EU is absolutely vital. Can the Minister give us any hope on this? Let us not forget that this filipendulous Prime Minister—if he still is Prime Minister—promised to work flat out to resolve these issues, but nothing has improved. It was the usual bluster. The Government must sort out this European touring catastrophe so that our musicians can regain the ability to learn from musicians there, who can also learn from musicians here, enhancing all our lives.

1.57 pm

Lord Hannay of Chiswick (CB): My Lords, my noble friend Lord Clancarty is to be warmly congratulated on the skill, determination and perseverance with which he has brought to the Committee's attention the damage that has been done to the work of Britain's creative professionals by both Covid and, more durably, Brexit,

as well as the inadequacy of the Government's response so far on the latter point. This issue has also been taken up by your Lordships' European Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, in a chain of correspondence which is perhaps best characterised as a dialogue of the deaf.

Britain's creative professionals make up an important sector of our economy, as a number of noble Lords have emphasised, but they are much more than that. They make a major contribution to wider European culture, of which we remain a crucial part. That damage really matters and remedying it is really important.

The failure of the UK's trade and co-operation agreement with the EU to make any, let alone adequate, provision for the detailed and complex work of these professionals was clear from the outset. The negotiator of that agreement, the noble Lord, Lord Frost, said in a lecture he gave in Zurich a couple of months ago that he believed the Government had been "too purist" in their approach to the sector and that they should now "try harder". Does the Minister agree with that analysis and if not, why not?

I am sure that the Minister will tell us a good deal about the Government's efforts to negotiate bilaterally over access for our creative professionals with the 27 members of the EU, all of which apart from four are, I believe, now covered. But these bilateral arrangements are far from all that is needed to facilitate their work, which often takes them to more than one member state and involves complex issues such as visa waivers, work permits, cabotage and carnets for the instruments carrying vehicles. All these things fall within the scope of the EU as such. What is needed, therefore, are not only those bilateral arrangements, welcome though they are, but action at EU level through the TCA and its pyramid of joint sectoral bodies. Can the Minister say what, if any, action has been and is being taken by the Government to make use of that joint machinery to raise, and if possible to remedy, the problems with which these professionals are faced following Brexit? If the answer is that no such action has been taken or is contemplated, why not?

Two weeks ago, when the Minister of State at the FCDO responsible for our relations with the EU, James Cleverly—now promoted—was giving evidence to the European Affairs Committee, he was asked specifically about these matters. It was suggested that, rather than resting on the outcome of the TCA negotiations when the EU rejected our preferred solution and we rejected its preferred solution, it might be better to explore with the EU other methods of addressing the problems in this sector in the way that the noble Lord, Lord Frost, has suggested. At the end of that exchange, the Minister replied:

"That certainly should not be taken as an unwillingness to revisit it. It is something we can look at."

Will the Minister say what is being done to look at these matters?

I have one final thought: it would be a tragedy if the problems in this sector were linked in any way with the wider issues that have arisen over Brexit and its implementation. They surely need to be addressed on their own merits. This is a field of activity where those

on both sides of the channel have much to gain from freer access for creative professionals and nothing to lose from it. Let us hope that, over time, that can be achieved.

2.01 pm

Lord Clement-Jones (LD): My Lords, the noble Earl, Lord Clancarty, aided and abetted by many of those who have taken part in today's debate, has been raising these issues for well over two years now. I congratulate him on his tenacity in securing this debate and his comprehensive introduction today. I certainly hope that the Minister has now got the picture—or should I say the mood music, with all the variations, perhaps, that the noble Baroness, Lady Bull, described in her speech.

As we have continuously emphasised in the last two years, we are talking about not only touring by the music industry—one of the most successful and fastest growing sectors, where real jobs and livelihoods now risk being lost—but by a number of other important parts of the creative sector as well: museums, theatre and the wider visual arts sector, as described by the Contemporary Visual Arts Network, and indeed the sports sector, as described by the noble Lord, Lord Moynihan. The ramifications are very broad. The right reverend Prelate reminded us that this impacts on levelling up and on values. We heard from the noble Baroness, Lady Fleet, about the impact on the talent pipeline and the potential to impact on communities through music education.

The dual registration deal on cabotage, which we have debated previously, falls short of satisfying the greater number of smaller specialist hauliers and own-account operators—it was described as a sticking plaster by my noble friend Lord German, and he is correct. On these Benches, we pointed out that the issues on cabotage were just one part of a huge cloud now hanging over the creative sector as a result of Brexit. The noble Viscount, Lord Stansgate, my noble friend Lord Strasburger and the noble Lord, Lord Hannay, all described that, including the requirement for work permits or visa exemptions in many EU countries, CITES certificates for musical instruments, ATA carnets for all instruments and equipment, and proof of origin requirements for merchandise. It is a real return to the past, as described by my noble friend Lord Jones.

The failure to secure a reciprocal exemption to permit freedom of movement for creatives on tour or short-term paid engagements and their support staff when we left the EU has been catastrophic for UK and EU touring creatives. The sheer disparity of treatment was described by my noble friend Lord German. As the noble Lord, Lord Hannay, said, it was very clear from the outset that that would be the impact.

The reason we are in this mess is that the Home Office refused to grant particular categories of EU citizens, including sportspersons or artists performing an activity on an ad hoc basis, the right to 90 days permitted paid engagement, and so the EU would not reciprocate. We are still pursuing freedom of information requests to find out exactly what the UK Government put forward. The problems with merchandise, carnets and CITES are, if anything, worse, as described by a number of noble Lords. As the noble Baroness, Lady Bull, confirmed, the ISM says:

“In fact, almost nothing has changed since the TCA came into effect, as recent accounts from musicians resuming EU tours have demonstrated.”

As the Classical Music APPG, LIVE, UK Music, the ISM and many others have advocated, what is urgently needed are permanent solutions which will secure the kind of future that the noble Viscount, Lord Stansgate, referred to.

Some require bilateral negotiation and some can be done unilaterally through greater engagement, but the key to this is multilateral action. As a number of noble Lords have said, we need more productive, collaborative relationships. This was mentioned by the noble Lords, Lord Hannay and Lord Cormack, my noble friend Lord German and the noble Baroness, Lady Bull. The noble Baroness made some very constructive, detailed suggestions about how we can get to that point on those multilateral negotiations. We need comprehensive negotiation on road haulage for cultural purposes, a cultural waiver in relation to ATA carnets and CITES, and a visa waiver agreement.

There is a very depressing letter from former Minister Lopez to my colleague in the Commons Jamie Stone, which sets out very few constructive proposals. I hope the Minister here today does rather better. Will we get the kind of new beginning that the noble Lord, Lord Cormack, mentioned? We need something simple and effective.

2.06 pm

Baroness Merron (Lab): My Lords, I am also very grateful to the noble Earl, Lord Clancarty, for securing this debate. I thank him not just for today but for all the work he has done to shine a very helpful and practical spotlight on the difficulties encountered by those in the creative industries, whether music, fashion, dance, the visual arts or the many other aspects that our country can offer. As always, the noble Earl brings us all together. I hope that the Minister will have some comfort for us today about action that will be taken.

As we have heard, this is not just about the very important role of the creative sector in the economy—an economy which so desperately needs growth and improvements in productivity, and we can look to the creative sector for a major contribution there. It is also about flying our flag, which the right reverend Prelate spoke about. It is about entertaining and enriching us, as the noble Lord, Lord Cormack, said. It is about our heritage and culture. As the noble Lord, Lord Hannay, said, this is being hampered by an artificial set of obstacles under the banner of Brexit. I am sure it is within our wit to sort this out, and I remain mystified as to why it has not been possible to do so.

The noble Baroness, Lady Fleet, spoke about a focus on young people and their development in schools. It is one thing to educate, but there has to be an outlet for young people who want to go further. I believe we owe it to them to do this.

As has been referenced a number of times, the noble Lord, Lord Frost, conceded that the UK Government could and should have secured a better deal in this area. From these Benches, we also believe that a better deal could be available but that negotiations in this area were not helped by the Government's ongoing approach to challenges around the Northern

[BARONESS MERRON]

Ireland protocol. With the prospect of new leadership and a new Government in sight, perhaps the Minister might comment on what opportunities may now be liberated in this regard.

When I looked back, in preparation for this debate, at the Questions and previous debates we have had in the Chamber, I saw repeated comments that those in the creative sector can refer to GOV.UK, where requirements listed by individual country are available. I do not doubt that for a moment, but I do not feel that that is the answer we are looking for today. As the noble Baroness, Lady Bull, said, there are mechanisms that can already be used to find a way forward, without even looking at a number of the new solutions that various organisations and noble Lords have put forward to assist the Minister. That is an important point, because it is not just in our interests in the UK to remove the unnecessary obstacles; it is also in the interests of our European friends and neighbours, who I believe would be all the poorer if they did not have access to what our British creative sector can offer them.

I pick up the point referred to by my noble friend Lord Stansgate and other noble Lords in the course of this debate. What effect does the Minister feel that the difficulties to which we have alluded today have had on emerging talent? What assessment has there been of whether there has been an exacerbation of pre-existing inequalities? If there has been such an assessment, what steps will there be to deal with these inequalities? It cannot be right that young, working-class, diverse artists find themselves more likely to be stopped and denied entry. They are also the group that will find it harder to meet upfront fees.

I hope the Minister will reflect on this debate, as I know he always does, and see in it not just criticism of where we are but a will to find a constructive way forward, which I hope we can get to.

2.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay) (Con): My Lords, I am very grateful to the noble Earl, Lord Clancarty, for raising the vital issue of touring, and I am glad that further time has been provided for the debate. I know that the noble Earl is a great champion of our musicians and creative professionals. I am grateful to him for the meetings we have had about it and for bringing people into the department to discuss these matters directly with me. I am also grateful to all noble Lords who have taken part in today's debate. I agree with the noble Baroness, Lady Bull, that there has been great harmony in what has been said, and with the final remarks by the noble Baroness, Lady Merron, about the constructive tone that noble Lords have rightly taken.

The UK's creative and cultural sectors are internationally renowned. They contribute a huge amount to our economy, but also to our culture and our lives more broadly. Touring is a significant part of their work, enabling us to share the best of the UK's talents with our friends in the European Union and on a wider international stage, as well as all the economic and cultural benefits that touring brings.

The UK has left the European Union, and we recognise that the way in which creative professionals work and tour in the European Union has changed. I know that this, exacerbated by the pandemic, has in recent years caused uncertainty for the sector, which can be particularly challenging for newer or emerging creative professionals, for whom touring is a key part of their development and professional lives. That is why the Government have been working hard to support the touring sectors to clarify arrangements, to help them to adapt where needed, and to explore what we can do, both bilaterally with EU member states and unilaterally, to make touring easier.

Throughout this period, we have remained in close contact with representatives of the sector. My former colleague Julia Lopez, who was Minister of State for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure, recently attended the eighth meeting of the touring working group and heard feedback directly from the sector on its experience of touring so far this summer, which is of course the first full summer of touring following the lifting of the Covid-19 restrictions. It is clear that some issues remain, but we should also note that, in many areas, arrangements are more workable than is sometimes reported.

Today, I want to discuss both the work that we have done so far and the areas where we can continue to work together to ensure that our excellent creative professionals continue to tour widely, growing their audiences, honing their craft and sharing the joy of the work they produce.

Touring can broadly be categorised by the movement of people, goods and vehicles, so I will address each of those in turn. I turn first to the movement of people. The Government have worked very hard to clarify arrangements across the member states of the EU that are principally responsible for deciding the rules governing what work UK visitors can undertake there. Our engagement so far has resulted in the confirmation that almost all EU member states offer visa-free and work permit-free routes for musicians and other creative professionals, many for up to 90 days, including major touring markets such as France, Germany and Italy.

Where visa-free and work permit-free routes were not initially available, we worked hard, in collaboration with the sector, to encourage easements, which I am pleased to say has resulted in a further two member states—Spain, and most recently Greece, as the noble Earl mentioned—taking unilateral action to enable UK creative professionals to perform and tour visa-free. This is a happy outcome and testament to the success that can be achieved when the Government and the industry combine their voices.

I recognise that the situation for touring has changed since we left the European Union and that this has required adaptation, but it is important to recognise that these visa-free and permit-free routes exist. As definitions can vary, travellers should check the specific requirements before travelling. We are aware that, in the period immediately following our departure from the EU, much of the information that was available from member states online led to confusion in the sector. That is why we engaged with those member states, and I am pleased to say that our engagement has resulted in a number of them amending their

online guidance to provide further clarity. We have also published enhanced guidance on the UK Government's website, GOV.UK, to support British nationals, including creative and cultural professionals, to navigate the new arrangements. We have worked closely with representatives of the sector through the touring working group, and have shared details with it directly as we receive new information from member states.

This means that there are now only three member states—Portugal, Malta and Cyprus—that do not offer visa-free and work permit-free touring. We have engaged with these remaining member states extensively, using the diplomatic means at our disposal. Most recently, the Minister for Europe, my right honourable friend James Cleverly—now the Education Secretary, as noted by the noble Lord, Lord Hannay—met the Portuguese ambassador to the United Kingdom and raised the importance of touring with him.

We should acknowledge that, ultimately, it is up to member states to align their requirements more closely with the UK's generous rules to enable them to enjoy the cultural and economic benefits of visa-free and work permit-free touring. As the noble Baroness, Lady Merron, said, it is to their benefit as well.

On the movement of goods, there are new requirements related to ATA carnets, the movement of merchandise and the movement of instruments made from protected materials, as was raised by the noble Earl, Lord Clancarty. These again have required adaptation, and we have worked across government to provide the information and clarity needed. ATA carnets are not new to touring, and have previously been required when travelling beyond the European Union, such as through Switzerland. This is a case of adaptation. Where a carnet is required, it is a single document that can be used for multiple items, as many times as required, in approximately 80 countries around the world, over a 12-month period.

Most significantly, we have confirmed that portable musical instruments, accompanied by their owner, can be transported cost-free and should not require a carnet. I am aware that there have been some issues, such as inconsistent enforcement of these rules in certain member states and challenges regarding the commercial policies of transport operators. Where these issues have arisen, we have worked urgently with colleagues across government and the creative sector, as well as with transport operators and the relevant member states, to address them. If noble Lords are aware of issues, I am always happy to receive information, so that we can continue to follow them up swiftly. Similarly, the EU's rules state that each individual is able to take up to €1,000-worth of merchandise, with a total weight of 1,000 kilograms or less, into the European Union to sell on tour without paying EU customs duties.

The noble Earl asked about the designation of St Pancras as a CITES port. We have been engaging with the sector on this and I am grateful to the Musicians' Union, the Incorporated Society of Musicians and the Association of British Orchestras for providing some detailed information at the end of May to inform that work and those discussions. The number of CITES ports has already increased from 24 to 36. Thanks to the information provided by the sector, discussions are

taking place now between Defra and Border Force. We will continue to engage closely with the sector and keep it up to date on progress, as well as continuing to listen for whether there are clear steps we can take to support our musicians to tour, this summer and beyond.

The noble Earl also asked about the CITES COP meeting which takes place in Panama, in November. We are indeed preparing for that meeting and will consider any proposal put forward to extend the duration of musical instrument certificates. In principle, that would certainly seem sensible, but of course we will need time to look at the particulars of what is put forward, along with the other proposals advanced ahead of the COP meeting.

I know that much focus of recent discussion about touring understandably revolves around the challenges that new rules pose to the movement of vehicles and the impact on the UK's specialist haulage industry. It is worth reiterating that during negotiations on the trade and co-operation agreement we proposed specific market access rules for specialist hauliers carrying out tours for cultural events, but the EU did not agree to this. I agree with the noble Baroness, Lady Bull, that it is important that we focus on the future and on practical steps we can take to advance solutions.

To address these challenges, the Government have engaged extensively with the specialist haulage industry, including via a public consultation earlier this year on support for specialist events hauliers working on cross-border tours. As a result of this engagement, the Department for Transport is currently working on the implementation of dual registration to enable it to come into force this summer, with an interim measure in place in the meantime. Dual registration will enable operators who establish a UK and EU base temporarily to transfer their EU-registered vehicles to their GB operator's licence, enabling full UK and EU single market access rights, without swapping vehicles. I do not wish to suggest that this measure will address all the challenges faced by the specialist haulage industry, as noble Lords rightly point out, but it is again important to recognise that this step is being taken.

I mentioned earlier that we appreciate that some of the new requirements are a particular concern for newer and emerging artists, as the noble Viscount, Lord Stansgate, rightly stressed. I know that the sector was therefore pleased to get confirmation that splitter vans, carrying both equipment and up to nine passengers, do not fall in the scope of the trade and co-operation agreement market access rules regarding cabotage and cross trade, and instead are subject to member state law.

I turn to the range of wider support that Her Majesty's Government provide to our excellent creative and cultural industries. To help artists navigate the new requirements, we have developed creative sector-specific landing pages on the GOV.UK website, providing relevant guidance for people touring the European Union. We continue to support our music sector through a range of export support programmes, such as the music export growth scheme and the international showcase fund. Creative businesses in England can also access the internationalisation fund, which provides matching grants for export support, including attendance

[LORD PARKINSON OF WHITLEY BAY]

at trade shows. We also launched the export support service last year, through which UK businesses, including touring professionals, can get online and telephone support to answer practical questions about exporting to Europe. We want to do everything that we can to maintain and strengthen the international reach and reputation of our creative workers, who support us to be a truly global Britain.

The right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Manchester asked about support for regional arts organisations. My noble friend Lady Fleet referred to the national plan for music education, which reiterated our commitment to music hubs, with £79 million per annum to support them in their work around the country. The current national portfolio round of funding from the Arts Council reflects the Government's instruction to make sure that that taxpayer subsidy is spent more equitably and fairly around the country. Presently, £21 per capita of funding is spent in the capital compared to £6 per capita outside; we have asked that that gap be closed.

I would be very happy to meet the right reverend Prelate and other colleagues from the Church of England to talk about church music specifically. It would be remiss of me not to mention my visit to Lincoln Cathedral—particularly noting the presence of my noble friend Lord Cormack and the noble Baroness, Lady Merron—where I heard the joyful music at evensong. I would certainly be delighted to attend the launch of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Music's report on 19 July if my diary allows.

Lord Hannay of Chiswick (CB): The Minister may be drawing to a close since he has gone past his time, but he has managed, quite brilliantly, to fail to answer any of the questions that I put to him. I would be grateful to have responses. He has spoken about bilateral and unilateral action, but could he not just put a clove of garlic around his neck and tiptoe into the TCA machinery? This was raised by a large number of speakers. If that is coming, it will be very welcome.

Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay (Con): I was watching the clock, but my response to the noble Lord was on the very next page of my notes. I was just about to mention the comments of my noble friend Lord Moynihan in relation to winter sports. I will certainly write to him with an update after discussing that with my honourable friend Nigel Huddleston, his successor as Sports Minister.

The noble Lord, Lord Hannay, asked about the views of my noble friend Lord Frost in relation to the TCA. I did indeed read his comments in Zurich with interest. I know that my noble friend devotes many of his considerable talents to thoughts for the future—not always in relation to your Lordships' House. I look forward to hearing his further thoughts on this topic, particularly as he knows far more than anybody what was discussed and the way it was discussed in our negotiations with the EU.

It is important to note that, during the negotiations, the EU tabled text regarding the paid activities which can be conducted without a visa. The proposals would not have addressed the concerns from the sector: they were non-binding, they did not include touring or

technical staff, and they did not address work permits. However, as the noble Baroness, Lady Bull, invited me to, I want to keep my comments focused on the future and on practical steps.

We recognise that our departure from the EU has meant a change for touring professionals, as it has for people in other areas of the economy. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Government as a whole have worked very hard to support them and will continue to do so. The UK music industry is one of our great national assets and the Government will back it every step of the way.

I am very glad that my noble friend Lady Fleet was here to talk about the work we are doing through the national plan for music education, the £25 million we are providing for school instruments and equipment, and the progress fund which will enable more people from a diverse range of backgrounds to forge careers in our music sector.

Later today, I am meeting UK Music. I was pleased to meet the All-Party Parliamentary Jazz Appreciation Group and hand out awards at its annual awards ceremony, where I talked to people from the jazz music sector. I am always grateful for opportunities to meet representatives of the sector to hear what we can do to support it.

Across the movement of people, goods and vehicles, we have engaged consistently and extensively to clarify arrangements and help people adapt. We know that this summer is the first full summer of touring since the pandemic, and we will engage particularly to make sure that we are hearing from people who are on the ground and touring, so that we can follow up where issues remain. We want to do that and get it right for the sake of our economy, for the sake of our shared culture and for the far wider benefits that music brings in enriching our lives. I am very grateful to the noble Earl for the opportunity he has provided today to keep this issue rightly prominent.

Ukraine Refugees: Mothers and Dependent Children Arriving in the UK

Question for Short Debate

2.30 pm

Asked by Lord Loomba

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the needs of mothers and dependent children arriving from Ukraine as refugees, particularly regarding their (1) welfare, (2) subsistence, (3) safety, (3) health, (4) schooling, and (5) path towards self-reliance.

Lord Loomba (CB): My Lords, I declare my interests as chairman of the Loomba Foundation and vice-president of Barnardo's.

I have dedicated much of the last 20 years to raising the plight of widows internationally through the work of the Loomba Foundation. In the course of this work, we have built up considerable expertise on the issues faced by women who suddenly, through no fault of their own, find themselves alone in the world, responsible

for the welfare and upbringing of their children. We know that the problems facing these women are not only about money and material welfare but about trauma and isolation, not knowing where to turn, vulnerability and risk. We know how war and conflict magnify these problems by putting more people in that position, suddenly and in large numbers. This has happened again with Russia's violent and unwarranted invasion of its neighbour.

Not all the refugees who have settled here from Ukraine are widows, although around half are mothers who have managed to flee alone with their children and their dependants—these families make up the majority. We hope that many of them will one day be reunited with the husbands and fathers who have stayed behind to defend their country, but today these women are experiencing the same issues as conflict widows the world over.

I commend the Government on the progress made in the last three months and I welcome the arrangements that have been put in place, such as the national helpline and welcome pack. Now that some 87,000 refugees have arrived from Ukraine, it is right to ask the Government what assessment they have made of the needs of mothers and dependent children in a number of areas.

As regards the welfare of refugee families, Barnardo's reports that requests for food vouchers are increasing; it has given out 370 food vouchers in the last three months. It also reports poor access to technology such as phones and tablets, leading to digital exclusion. As far as subsistence is concerned, the recent ONS survey suggests that only one in four refugees has enough money to support themselves and their dependants for three months.

On the question of safety, Barnardo's is reporting about two safeguarding issues every week, mostly related to homelessness or being threatened or bullied by hosts. There are also issues arising from the Government's welcome decision to allow eligible children and minors under 18 to come to the UK without a parent or guardian. We know that local government leaders have expressed concerns about the potential for children to come and stay with adults they may not know well. This calls for appropriate vetting and the right range of support services, including ongoing checks of children's safety and well-being. What have the Government done to address this?

With regard to health, we know many families are affected by complex trauma requiring professional support. Families in hotels say the food they are offered is not meeting their diet and health needs, and health professionals have reported that children have lost weight.

On schooling, Barnardo's has seen instances of children's applications to school being rejected because of fear of disruption. Will the Minister look seriously at the call from Barnardo's for funding to support rolling out the ICAM programme to support children affected by migration?

Finally, with regard to the path to self-reliance, many Ukrainians are educated to degree or professional level but are struggling to find work because their qualifications are not recognised. Will the Government look at this as a matter of urgency?

Last month, on 23 June, which is celebrated every year as International Widows Day by the United Nations, the Loomba Foundation and Barnardo's announced a scheme to help 1,000 Ukrainian families in the UK with their immediate practical needs, by giving them vouchers that can be redeemed in Barnardo's shops to purchase such essentials as toys, nappies and clothes. So we are playing our part as best we can, but it is only the Government who can connect the dots and ensure that the inevitable gaps are plugged.

It is on this basis that I ask the Government to help identify where things could be better and to redouble their efforts with all concerned to make improvements. The central concern I raise is whether we are doing enough to look at problems that lie ahead. As the Government have frequently reminded us, this conflict may continue for years and we are in it for the long haul. Some of our host families are now one-third of the way into the hosting period to which they have committed, and an unknown number may not be able to continue beyond that. Cases of relationship breakdown between host and refugee families are likely to increase when the original commitment period comes to an end. The Liaison Committee in the other place heard yesterday that 660 Ukrainian households in this country are now homeless. Some host families are asked to make longer commitments of up to three years for refugee families with children, but the responsibility ceases when a child reaches the age of 18, and it is not clear what support is available for them at that point.

If families are moved on, whether at the end of the six-month commitment period or later, it is essential that continuity of childcare and schooling, employment and language support services is fully considered before they are relocated. We rely on local authorities to provide the safety net when things go wrong, but are the resources made available sufficient to address sudden rehousing needs when we already have Syrian and Afghan families accommodated in hotels?

In summary, the Government and local authorities are to be commended on the great efforts made to support Ukrainian refugee families, but we must be alert to the gaps and prepared for what comes next. I hope therefore that the Government will address our concerns in the areas I have outlined.

2.41 pm

Lord Cormack (Con): My Lords, I think we are all extremely grateful to the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, not just for introducing this debate in the way he has—with a sense of gentle urgency and uncritically but searchingly, if I can put it that way—but for much more than that. He has created a foundation and given practical help to many people over many years, and we are all, at least vicariously, in debt to him for what he has done. We wish him every possible success in his continued efforts.

It is now five months since the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, and there has scarcely been a day when our newspapers and television screens have not been defaced by terrible pictures of horrible suffering and appalling destruction. Like the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, I fear that we are in for a very long haul. What on earth will all this cost to rebuild? Although we have rightly emphasised people in our publicity, we have to

[LORD CORMACK]

remember that many of their iconic buildings have been destroyed; the civilisation of which they are an important part in Europe, particularly their Christian heritage, has been damaged, in some cases beyond repair; and the cost of this, in which we must all share—both with our personal generosity, in so far as we can, and nationally—will be a prodigious sum. We must not just delude ourselves by saying, “We will make the Russians pay”, because that is very easy to say but to translate it into action is another thing entirely.

I have been troubled by a number of items on “Look North”, the evening news that follows the 6 pm news in my part of the world. I do not want to overemphasise them, because there have been many accounts of people showing real bravery, genuine concern, true hospitality and generosity, but there have been stories of families who have gone into woefully inadequate houses—filthy and not welcoming. There was one particular graphic story some months ago of a young woman, with her two children, who was weeping on the television and had been able to take some film of the habitation. I greatly welcome, as he knows, the appointment of my noble friend as Minister for Refugees, but I would be grateful if he could say something about how untypical this is. I stress that it is untypical, and we must not get it out of perspective or proportion. Nevertheless, if one mother with her children, fleeing for safety, is confronted with squalor, it is one too many. I would like to know how the figures are stacking up at the moment.

The noble Lord, Lord Loomba, talked about people finding it difficult to make ends meet. We all know that we are going through a real cost of living crisis and that Ukraine is a contributory factor. Several times a week, there are references in the Chamber to the great quantities of grain that cannot be transported across the Black Sea and taken to people in some of the poorest countries in the world. However, if those who are coming to our country are not being adequately supplied with what they need, I hope my noble friend the Minister, who I know is a man of great sensitivity and understanding, will tell us what is being done to try to bridge those gaps—because gaps there clearly are.

The noble Lord, Lord Loomba, referred to some of the problems of safeguarding and of people who exploit the young and frail, particularly children. We all know—we have read the stories—about single, middle-aged men being anxious to take in young Ukrainian women. I do not ask for a precise figure, but I ask my noble friend how many examples there are of that and how typical it is. I hope it is very untypical.

We have had some very good stories about schools. I know that in my own county, Lincolnshire, and others, young Ukrainian children without a smattering of English are being absorbed into school communities and made very welcome and looked after, in a moving and proper way. How typical is this? Have there been many problems reported?

Although it strays slightly beyond the debate and the scope of the Question from the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, I declare a particular interest, in that my son is much involved in a project for twinning

universities. The Government have been extremely helpful on this. The noble Lord, Lord Loomba, referred to young people with qualifications being able to use them, so I want to know how my noble friend the Minister and the Government see this prospect. I know that it was referred to at the G7 and that there is much hope for it. It is so important that, at a time of destruction and desolation, those in the very fine Ukrainian universities feel more than adequately helped by our country and our universities. There are some remarkable examples of thoughtful generosity in that regard. This is so important if we are, as the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, mentioned—and he is right—in for a very long haul.

We have to be realistic about how this will end, and I am just a little concerned here. It is right that we should be supplying armaments and other things, but there have been disturbing reports of our own stock of arms being significantly reduced in consequence. It is important that we are realistic when we talk about aims. The borders that existed on 24 February must be maintained because, without them, in a sense we are all defeated. However, we have to be very cautious in talking about regaining the Crimea and so on. That is important, especially if this drags on for two, three or four years—I hope it does not, but it could.

I wind up by saying again that I am very grateful to the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, not just for introducing the debate in the calm and measured way he did but for what he and his foundation have done. It is an exemplary attitude on his part and one from which we can all derive proper inspiration. I hope that when my noble friend the Minister winds up, he will be able to give us some encouraging numbers and facts.

2.50 pm

Baroness Sheehan (LD): My Lords, it is a pleasure to follow the noble Lord, Lord Cormack. I frequently find myself in agreement with him and that is no less true today. I add my thanks to the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, for bringing this debate to Grand Committee. I also pay tribute to the fantastic work that the Loomba Foundation carries out on behalf of widows. I know the noble Lord has a very personal affinity with women who have been widowed. It is wonderful to see that care and practical knowledge of the hardships that widows and children in particular face addressed in such a practical way.

I am going to talk about Ukrainian family refugees from a very personal point of view. I have the privilege—I can honestly say that—of hosting two families, one of which arrived in April and the other just a few weeks ago. Their gratitude has been very touching. In a practical way, they are very grateful for the help they have received and they do not ask for anything, but it is clear to me that they have needs that the Homes for Ukraine scheme, generous as it is, does not meet. Maybe we could do things differently and improve on them a bit.

I will start by talking about the application process, which the Minister and I have exchanged views on before—very amicably. I wonder whether the application process is now a little easier. We know that the application forms for people who are still in Ukraine or those who

have left and are in Poland and other countries are quite a challenge to fill in, not least because they are in English. I think there was some misunderstanding about this. The guidance notes have a drop-down option for Ukrainian and Russian. However, when you click on the pages for the application forms, they remain solely in English—and it is quite technical English. Having to navigate those pages with Google Translate, with two small children and a dog to look after, and an intermittent or failing internet connection in a hotel room, is really unacceptable, especially as, if you are in the middle of a page and the internet fails, you lose the page and have to start all over again.

The application has to be carried out for each individual; you cannot do a group or family application. I know that we have had some questions about that because the Minister and I have exchanged some views on it. One of my families had application forms and they were split; the child was granted an application and the mother was not. There is no way that a mother is going to be able to take advantage of a visa for her children unless she can accompany them. The girl in question is aged two at the moment—three next week.

In response to a question on 31 March, the Minister apologised and said that when he had claimed that the forms were in Ukrainian, in fact that was not the case. It may be easiest if I quote from *Hansard*. He said:

“If that is not the case, I apologise to the noble Baroness. That is certainly in train and she is absolutely right to ask that question.”

What was in train was making sure the application forms could be accessed in Ukrainian or Russian. He finished by saying:

“I am very happy to contact her separately with a progress report on that.”—[*Official Report*, 31/3/22; col. 1775.]

So far, there has not been a progress report. It is really important that we get this right. The noble Lords, Lord Cormack and Lord Loomba, both talked about us being in this now for the long term. The people needing help, refuge and sanctuary will become only a greater imperative, so I hope that we can make this part of the process a little easier and less stressful.

The option saying that the English sponsor can take on this role, and that you can fill out the forms in English on the part of your guest, is just not acceptable. I did not know my family beforehand; the hosts and the family often do not know each other. You are asking for an exchange of personal details with strangers. It is one thing once they arrive and you meet them face to face. Immediately, a social worker is in contact and that is a very different situation. But to expect such an exchange of intimate details at such an early stage is just not acceptable. Anyway, for a lot of the English sponsors the form is quite difficult to fill in. To upload the documents, et cetera, is really quite a process; I hope we can do something about that.

I am going to move on quickly and talk about the money at the start. While £200 per individual is really welcome, it is just not enough. As I understand it, it is for “immediate costs”, which implies for the first week or two, or maybe even the first month. The fact is that even three months down the line, claims for universal credit still have not happened and that is the next

source of their own income. The last thing they want to do when they are so full of gratitude is to admit that they need help with immediate costs such as food.

I took the family straight to a supermarket—I said, “Lidl or Tesco?”. They are professional people. She is a qualified accountant in Ukraine and I think they really felt they could stand on their own feet. But on the first visit to Tesco, when they looked at the prices in the shop they were horrified. They left without buying anything; it broke my heart. They actually bought just one essential carton of lactose-free milk for the son. They knew that they had to make their money last and stretch, and they needed to find out what other options were available before they could do that.

Regarding the £200, can we look at whether we can get that universal credit and access to jobs in place sooner? It would be really helpful. They want to work, in spite of all the stresses involved in not having any back-up support for childcare without the family and friends network that they are used to in Ukraine. They are really willing to work, but that would really help.

Before you can apply to the jobcentre you need a national insurance number, and before you can have that you need a bank account. Before you can have a bank account, you need a UK telephone number. These are significant steps, each requiring quite a lot of process and application, with waiting periods in between. The way the system is set up, they cannot stand on their own two feet as soon as they would like to.

Food banks have been a lifeline for them. They do not like to ask me for things. They had a full fridge and some basic items when they arrived, but they have found food banks a lifeline and I have to say that food banks have really stepped up to the mark. I hope the Government are providing help and support there, particularly for food banks that are getting waste food from supermarkets delivered to them so that there is fresh food and not just tins of beans and bottles of ketchup. They can get real food from food banks and those food banks need support.

On jobs, I have already mentioned the care duties. Signing on at the jobcentre is becoming quite a big thing among the Ukrainian refugee families, because their experience has been that jobcentres want too much, too quickly. They want them available for work all the time, yet they have children to look after and grandma to look after. They have children in school, which is great, but they are under stress, things are going wrong all the time—hospital visits, doctors’ visits, et cetera. She cannot hold down a job, much as she would like to, yet they also have financial pressures. My family, with the best will in the world, has not yet been able to access universal credit.

3.01 pm

Lord Moynihan (Con): My Lords, I too thank the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, for his absolutely outstanding work and, as part of that, for communicating and engaging with us today by securing this debate. It is hugely appreciated and I am glad that noble Lords from both sides have paid tribute to the work he has done. It is also humbling to speak in this debate when

[LORD MOYNIHAN]

one has just heard from the noble Baroness, Lady Sheehan, about her experiences. I hope she will forgive me if I echo some of the comments she made and the reflections she has given us to consider today, because they are important and I hope the Minister responds to them.

In speaking in this debate, I should declare my interest. I am chair of the board of governors of the Haberdashers' Monmouth Schools, and we welcomed a boy recently to Monmouth School for Boys and are caring for him as the male members of his family continue fighting in Ukraine. Similarly, we look forward to welcoming a young Ukrainian student at Monmouth School for Girls this September. Both have appropriate bursaries. But it is a case study.

I turn to a case study of a family I know well: the head of the family is a colleague who is an outstanding energy expert. In conversation with her, she has come forward with a number of reflections that I think are worthy of consideration by the Government, some of which have been made already, more eloquently than I will, by the noble Baroness, Lady Sheehan.

To set the scene, the host family offered to sponsor a family of four: a grandmother aged 60, a mother aged 37, a son aged seven and a son aged 15. They left Sumy via one of the humanitarian corridors two weeks after the conflict started and were picked up from Warsaw station by a Polish family who gave them accommodation in their home around the middle of March. Russian troops continue to terrorise the Sumy region, and the family's concern about family and friends there continues to this day. My colleague found the family through a Polish contact at PA Consulting, where she is a partner.

For background, the Ukrainian family attended the British visa office in Warsaw on 27 March, with the host family's sponsorship forms completed—not without difficulty, as was noted by the noble Baroness, Lady Sheehan. A month later, on 25 April, the host family contacted their MP via email to ask for assistance. I have to tell the Minister that the Home Office contact number given for assistance is more or less useless, as those answering are unable to advise on specific cases.

The family received an acknowledgement and update from their MP on the same day, advising that the grandmother's application was approved on 25 April and the mother's on 13 April, but that the children's application would take longer as they were travelling independently of their parents. That comes to the critical point of recognising the importance of a family as a unit in this process.

The host family clarified the situation with the mother—understandably, this caused her a great deal of distress—and responded to their MP on 26 April, confirming that the children were her biological children. Once again, the Home Office helpline was unable to take any information and/or discuss any particulars, so the Ukrainian family had to attend the visa office in Warsaw and resubmit their information. The Home Office took some 14 days to respond to the MP's subsequent inquiry on their behalf.

Another month passed. On or around 25 May, the Ukrainian family was called to the embassy to get their visas. The host family booked their flights and

they arrived at Luton on 31 May, more than 60 days after their application process was started. The initial entry visa is for six months, and a subsequent visit to the Home Office is required to gain a British residency permit. They had used their savings to live in Poland and arrived in the UK with no financial means. Since arrival, they have attended the Croydon Home Office department to gain their British residency permit. One for the grandmother has been received so far, allowing her to remain until 31 December 2024. Again, they have not been treated as a family.

Let us look at the support on arrival in the UK. The host family is resident in East Sussex, which has thus far provided a free laptop and found places for both children relatively quickly at local schools, on which it should be congratulated; it is an essential step, and the family is very grateful. But it has not yet received the £200 initial payment, or the host family its £350.

As the noble Baroness just said, to apply for universal credit the family needs bank accounts; this is the guidance provided by East Sussex County Council. The host family applied to NatWest on 7 June to open two accounts, one in the name of the mother and one in the name of the grandmother. All relevant forms were completed in the NatWest branch in Tunbridge Wells, which advised that the bank account would be opened in five to 10 working days.

On 21 June the host family contacted the NatWest customer service centre to ask NatWest to contact them, because they had not yet received confirmation that the bank accounts were opened. The manager returned their call on the following day, advising that she had not been in the branch and would make inquiries and come back. No response was received. After several chasing emails, the host family spoke to their own premier banking lead, who chased his colleague, who then rang to say that the account approval had not gone through as they had pages missing from the application or had not provided passport information. In such circumstances, it is perfectly possible that the passports were not internationally recognised, but they were sufficient to enter the UK. In this case the banking system was not capable of addressing or dealing with that, so the host family provided the passport information again on 30 June.

There is no way of making contact with the bank directly other than via email, and to this day the host family has not had a response save to hear that staff are too busy dealing with branch matters. These customers should surely be a priority, and the host family is at a loss as to who to speak to next. This reflects very badly on NatWest. Surely, along with so many other organisations and businesses, it should recognise the priority that needs to be attached to Ukrainian refugees.

The family arrived on 31 May but has not had one penny of financial support to date. Under current rules, universal credit will not be backdated. There is an important point about UK sponsoring families needing to use substantial personal means to support Ukrainian refugees for at least three months after arrival if the experience of the host family is typical. I ask the Minister to look at this. It is very important to reflect on how the Government can provide the substantial means to support those Ukrainian families and to consider doing so for, say, three months.

Finally, I want to mention the experience of some other local families who have taken in Ukrainian refugees. Families who have successfully received universal credit are required to attend jobcentres in the local area, at least once a month, to be available for work. East Sussex is a rural and geographically spread area. Single mothers have been asked to attend jobcentres in Bexhill and/or Haywards Heath, some 30 or so miles from where they live, noting that the nearest available jobcentres are, in fact, in Kent. With no financial means, beginning to learn some English only gradually and with only a rural bus service, this is nearly impossible for them to do independently. This is causing much stress and anxiety, and in some cases has deterred families from seeking universal credit. I ask the Minister whether consideration could be given to staying the requirement for up to three months to allow them to gain some independence and financial collateral.

I always try to finish on a positive, and they have received free bus passes from Brighton and Hove for one month, but they have to get to Brighton in person to receive them. They also have free use of Freedom leisure centres for three months, which is a very good thing from my perspective on life.

I hope my noble friend the Minister takes this speech as constructive. Perhaps he will allow me to add names to this case study, in writing to him. I ask him to respond positively and swiftly on some of the key policy issues that I have touched on and are behind this. In doing so, I thank my noble friends and colleagues from both sides of this Committee for listening. It has been a privilege and pleasure to hear the three speakers so far. I am sad that I have not been able to match their knowledge and experience or the outstanding work they have all done in this sector.

3.11 pm

Lord Paddick (LD): My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, and I join the noble Lord, Lord Cormack, and others in paying tribute to the work of his foundation's global campaign to eradicate discrimination against widows, following the way his mother was treated after the tragic death of his father.

I also pay tribute to my noble friend Lady Sheehan for hosting Ukrainian families. The fact is that the majority of those arriving in the UK from Ukraine have been women, as men have stayed behind in Ukraine to fight. Many of these women are mothers with dependent children.

My primary concern is with these refugees being made homeless, which will affect their welfare, safety, schooling and path towards self-reliance. Although the majority of these refugees came to the UK hoping that their stay would be only temporary, the war shows no sign of ending and the conditions that would enable them to safely return to Ukraine show no sign of coming about in the foreseeable future, as other noble Lords have said.

Concerns about homelessness are twofold. The first is where the relationship with the sponsoring household, which initially agreed to provide shelter to Ukrainian refugees, has broken down, whether they are family members or those with no previous relationship with

the refugees. I have seen stories in the media of relatives who have agreed to host Ukrainian refugees, but even that relationship has broken down.

The second is what will happen when the six-month commitment for sponsoring households under the Homes for Ukraine scheme comes to an end. No doubt the Minister will say that many refugees, if not the majority, are happily integrated with their sponsor families, as we heard from my noble friend Lady Sheehan, and that these sponsoring families have been vetted and can claim universal credit. But, as we heard from the noble Lord, Lord Moynihan, there is a problem with universal credit: it has to be paid into a bank account. To get a bank account, you need a national insurance number and to prove that you are in the UK lawfully. You can see how difficult it must be for people to get to the point where they are paid universal credit. Yes, they have access to the NHS and to local schools. The noble Lord, Lord Cormack, paid tribute to his local authority for placing refugee children in local schools.

In going to claim universal credit, they are being given help into work, but we have again heard about the difficulties around that, including difficulty getting to the jobcentre. Many of these refugees have degrees or postgraduate qualifications, yet some of their experience is that the jobcentres just want to put them into whatever job is available, including perhaps jobs on extremely low pay that nobody else wants to do, which is very difficult for them.

In addition to the concerns that other noble Lords have expressed, on 27 June CNN reported that 660 Ukrainian households had sought homelessness assistance from local authorities between 24 February and 3 June, although a quarter of local authorities have yet to provide any data. A translator working for a local authority called one single woman and said, "You have nowhere to live; they are evicting you tonight". She turned down a place at a homeless hostel because of fears for her safety. After fleeing war, arriving in a foreign country as a woman on your own and then being offered a place in a homeless hostel is not ideal.

Although councils have access to a rematching system allowing people in situations where the relationship has broken down to be matched with another sponsoring family, charities claim that the facility came late and remains inconsistent and difficult to access. Half of those who sought homelessness assistance are now in temporary accommodation. These refugees are already traumatised and fearful. Another refugee who suffered days of bombardment and a terrifying close encounter with a group of armed Russian soldiers in her home said that her experience in the UK was worse. She is reported as saying:

"It upset me so much that I felt I was going through more stress right now, when I understood I had to pack my bags, than I did in my basement in [Ukraine]."

Can the Minister explain what support local authorities have been provided with to help those suffering such trauma? Why is no coherent rematching scheme in operation?

UK hosts were asked to commit to hosting Ukrainian refugees for only six months. What arrangements do the Government have in place for September when

[LORD PADDICK]

that initial commitment ends? *Byline Times* on 5 July reported concerns that there is little understanding of the trauma that families have been through or the worries about relatives left behind. What arrangements are the Government putting in place for when the £350-per-month payments to hosting families end after 12 months?

What plans do they have to take account of the increase to the cost of living, predicted to be in excess of 10%, on host families and refugees, particularly those unable to access universal credit? My understanding is that the £200 that my noble friend Lady Sheehan referred to is an initial payment that each refugee receives on arrival to tide them over and enable them to get essential items before universal credit kicks in. Are there any plans to increase that in line with inflation? Can the Minister also confirm that benefit recipients will benefit from the increase in line with inflation that is rumoured to happen later this year?

Many refugees are apparently concerned that the Government will not take responsibility if increasing numbers of Ukrainians become homeless either because a rift develops between them and their host family or because the host can no longer afford to keep them. What can the Minister say to reassure Ukrainian refugees, particularly mothers with dependent children?

3.19 pm

Lord Khan of Burnley (Lab): My Lords, first, I pay tribute to the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, for asking this question and for his work with the Loomba Foundation supporting widows. We have heard some very powerful contributions this afternoon. The invasion of Ukraine is an unprovoked and unjustifiable attack, which is having tragic consequences around the world, none more so than for the people of Ukraine. As a result, mothers and their children have resorted to fleeing their homes and, inside and outside Ukraine, there are now millions who need urgent help to reach a place of safety. In addition to safe passage, mothers and their children need support, in the immediate sense and in the long term, to resettle.

Families across Britain have been offering space in their homes to many of those fleeing Ukraine, reflecting the UK's tradition of giving sanctuary to those fleeing war in Europe, but many are being held back by an inefficient Government who have failed to get a grip of this crisis and speed up the process. This is why the Government must urgently address the bureaucracy and provide greater guidance for councils and charities, so that Ukrainian mothers and their children can find sanctuary.

Unfortunately, we are now beginning to see the effects of the Government's mismanagement, with reports emerging that Ukrainians are presenting as homeless due to their sponsorship arrangement breaking down or because they arrived through other routes. We are all frustrated but not surprised to see placements start to break down. Expecting vulnerable, traumatised refugees to rely on the good will of strangers they have met on Facebook, TikTok or Twitter was always a risk. The noble Lord, Lord Cormack, commented on their experience of unwelcoming attitudes and inadequate housing.

Hundreds of Ukrainian families have been left homeless in England after arriving on visas designed to secure them a place to live, official figures reveal. The noble Lord, Lord Loomba, commented, as did the noble Lord, Lord Paddick, on the 660 Ukrainian families with children who have applied to councils for help with homelessness.

Despite the Government insisting that the Homes for Ukraine scheme and family visa scheme would ensure that refugees had housing, both are leaving people struggling when arrangements break down. Many local authorities are treating Ukrainian families as homeless rather than attempting to rematch them with new hosts, leaving them in hostels and hotels, just as happened with Afghan refugees. Of the 145 failed Homes for Ukraine placements, only 20 were rematched with a new host. One refugee recently commented:

"We lost our home in Ukraine and when we came here we thought that we were safe, but actually we weren't and we lost our home for a second time."

The British people have shown amazing generosity in stepping up in their thousands to provide the care and sanctuary that these people, many of them families with young children, needed and deserved in such awful circumstances but the Government have failed miserably to play their part. Ministers were warned about the risk of refugees becoming homeless on the day they launched their sponsorship scheme, but they were more interested in grandstanding in television studios than in doing their jobs to protect vulnerable people. The Government must urgently set out a plan to support councils to find safe homes for these families. Currently, councils receive no data on, or funding for, people who are coming under the family visa scheme. Some of those families present as homeless once they have arrived, but we are asking that they should be all rematched with a sponsor under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Urgent work is needed on how councils can work with government and the community, faith and voluntary sectors so that those offering their homes can be quickly matched with a family in need.

We have had some really powerful interventions, as I mentioned, none more so than the experience of the noble Baroness, Lady Sheehan, in hosting two families. We also heard from the noble Lord, Lord Moynihan, about the process issues in relation to getting universal credit.

I have a few questions of my own in relation to data collection and communication when it comes to liaising with councils and how they are adopting and approaching this issue. I want to ask the Minister about the current state of affairs, about a functioning Government and the new Secretary of State for Levelling Up. What are the plans in relation to the transition to support these vulnerable people who are facing daily issues right now—not in a few weeks, a few months, or in October? In relation to councils' funding and training, how are they supported? It is an unprecedented situation to see them dealing with this, with people arriving in panic and in emergency situations.

The noble Baroness, Lady Sheehan, talked about the challenges of the application process. What feedback are we getting from users of the application process

about how they are experiencing it? How are the Government attempting to make that process better and more efficient?

My final question is on PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder. As we are seeing families witnessing some horrific scenes because of the conflict, how are we supporting the well-being and mental health of the refugees? I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

3.25 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Home Office (Lord Harrington of Watford) (Con): My Lords, I thank everybody for their contributions, particularly the noble Lord, Lord Loomba. To put this in perspective for me—this is a personal statement, in a way—I started this job at the beginning of March. I agreed to do it for a limited period of time, the definition of “limited” being when the job is done. The noble Lord, Lord Paddick, has a smile on his face because I think he knows, as I do, that things tend to go on. I want to leave this job when it is generally felt that I have done what I can do.

I have spent four months with colleagues putting together a delivery team to do precisely that: to turn the Prime Minister’s promise of an uncapped refugee scheme into a delivery mechanism. I formally record my thanks to Michael Gove, now no longer the Secretary of State, for having the faith in me to do this job and for starting the whole sponsorship idea, which was loosely based on my experiences of dealing with Syrian refugees. It was done in a very limited way for Syrian refugees.

I state formally on the record that for personal reasons I have had the temptation to resign many times over the last few weeks, owing to well-documented activities culminating in what has happened over the last few days. I did not, however, because I believe the refugee job, with its responsibility for tens of thousands of people’s lives, is above all that.

What have we achieved? Please do not misunderstand me and think I mean all the comments in a positive way. I get concerned about everything I hear, but I go to bed at night thinking, “At least 90,000 people from Ukraine are safe in the UK, with a steady flow adding to that”. I do not say that in arrogance or to make out that any of the points made were wrong.

I met the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, for the first time only just before this debate; I am sorry that has not happened before. I offered to meet him next week, irrespective of what happened in the debate, but following his contribution I suggest that maybe we could have a meeting with Barnardo’s as well to discuss the points he specifically brought up. The organisation has not contacted me with those points, and I would be delighted to meet it formally. I am happy to meet the noble Lord informally, of course, as we arranged. The Pugin Room is fine for certain meetings, but we should sit down properly with Barnardo’s with our officials present.

I will go through some of the points the noble Lord brought up; they duplicate some of the other points, so I ask noble Lords to be patient with me. I am working closely with the DfE on qualifications. It has been brought to my attention, and I know there are ways

We are having to persuade professional bodies about qualifications in Ukraine, often in areas where we really need people—for example, nurses and professional people, as the noble Lord, Lord Paddick, said—so I am not oblivious to that, but I am afraid that efforts with professional bodies are rather slower than I would like them to be.

The noble Lord made quite a few points, and generally asked me to be alert to the different gaps in the system. It would perhaps help in my response to him and to some of the other comments made if I could go through the gaps that I perceive, remembering that we are all learning as we go.

The visa issue was mentioned by a few noble Lords, and the noble Lord, Lord Paddick, was very critical of the situation in his first interventions with me. I say that not critically; it is a question of fact. It was very difficult, as was said by various noble Lords, including my noble friends Lord Moynihan and Lord Cormack, that visas were taking far too long. I have made various undertakings to bring that down; I said I hoped to bring it down to 48 hours and within 14 days. I set that myself. We are not supposed to talk about targets because they are easy to shoot down if they are not achieved, but in my mind, and publicly, it was a target.

The visa system has changed. I do not know if any of your Lordships have seen it or tried it, but we now have an app-based system for visas, called AUK2; it is an automated system that eradicates the need to go to visa centres. For example, the biometric tests can now be done on phones. As to why it did not happen before, I am not a technical person but I can say that the system was not meant for this volume of people—it just was not. In the majority of cases now, people do not have to visit visa centres. I have tested this myself—I should say I have used people to test it—and, for non-complex cases, it takes sometimes two days, but certainly two to four days. That is far more acceptable than it was. Nevertheless, we can improve that.

I include my failure, despite my best intention, to comply with my undertakings to the noble Baroness, Lady Sheehan, on interpretation. It is very difficult, but we have improved the guidance on Russia and Ukraine. I accept her points, but I can only do what I can do. If the noble Baroness feels that I have let her down, I fully accept that criticism.

I would like to go on to positive things, but will address some of the negative things mentioned by noble Lords. Again, noble Lords should not misunderstand me; I take them in a positive way, and this is how we improve. Checks were mentioned by my noble friend Lord Cormack and others. What kinds of checks do we do? Why are families put into inadequate housing? He asked me for some numbers, and the number of unsuitable housing cases that have been reported to us is 55, on the question of sponsorship, and 280 in the case of family reunion. Our checks to find that out form part of what the local authority is paid for, at £10,500 per refugee. I am sorry; I keep looking at the clock—I will be as quick as I can, but I could go on about this kind of thing for hours. We have checks and balances within that system, but it sometimes fails. However, the scale of this is quite minor.

[LORD HARRINGTON OF WATFORD]

Homelessness is a big point that was brought up by many noble Lords, including the noble Lords, Lord Khan and Lord Paddick. I am very conscious of it. The actual number of cases is now comparatively small, but significant in my working: there are approximately 600, split 400 and 200 between the sponsorship and family schemes. The whole emphasis is to keep these people away from the homelessness register. Every week, I meet with local authorities. Councillor Georgia Gould, of the same party as the noble Lord, Lord Khan, and I have a very good relationship. She is one of a group I meet to discuss precisely the problem of how we stop people getting on the homelessness list.

One way is to improve the rematching process that was mentioned by the noble Lord, Lord Paddick, and others. It is quite new. At the moment, the local authorities are doing it themselves, with our guidance, but I hope to expand that as the six months come to an end. The noble Lord, Lord Paddick, and every Member who contributed to this debate asked what happens after six months. That is very important, and a big part of it is rematching. We are at three months now but soon, at the four-month stage, we will be writing to people to say, "Thank you very much for agreeing to do this for six months. Would you like to continue?" Otherwise, we will have to do rematching, and we will make it as quick as we can.

There are other ways of dealing with the problems that particularly the noble Lord, Lord Khan, mentioned. On what we are actually doing to help local authorities, they all have problems with homelessness and everything like that. It is true to say that we cannot create properties that do not exist. I think even the noble Lord, Lord Khan, would accept that the Government's many powers do not include those in the short term. The plan that we are working on is getting more people into the private rental sector. How do we do that? Quickly, we are looking at schemes to help them with the deposit so that they can do it and, moving on from that, with an advance of the rent, et cetera, to get them working. I am going as speedily as I can through all these different points.

Points were made about banking and were brought up again in quite a few of the contributions. I am pleased to say that a number of banks will accept Ukrainians without all the stuff they cannot do—the credit records, proof of address and all those things. Those are in the guidance provided to refugees. It is on the internet and they are given a physical, paper welcome pack. I am afraid I cannot remember what banks they are but a number of them will do this for Ukrainians.

On the question about universal credit and £200 not being enough, that is a problem and we are really trying to speed up on it. The lights are flashing but—

Baroness Scott of Bybrook (Con): No, you have two more minutes.

Lord Harrington of Watford (Con): Oh fine, thank you very much. I will try to use them properly.

Baroness Scott of Bybrook (Con): We were trying to turn them off.

Lord Harrington of Watford (Con): I shall keep my head down and get on with the rest of this speech.

Baroness Scott of Bybrook (Con): You have as much time as you like because it is an hour and a half.

Lord Harrington of Watford (Con): Thank you very much. Right, I have no excuse at all now. I am really not trying to get out of this at all; it is just that I have been going through things quickly to try to get it done in that time.

On jobs, if I could go back to the noble Baroness, Lady Sheehan, and her well-discussed point about process in the system, we are working on a system with DWP to get more trained people to help them. It is interesting that the first ONS survey of this cohort showed that more than 60% of those over 18 were already in work. I am meeting a lot of people who are in work—and so pleased to be, as we are so pleased to have them in work. There are problems with transport, however. The Brighton example was mentioned by my noble friend Lord Moynihan, but generally people have to get to the jobcentre for that.

I meet every week—well, I met Ministers every week to discuss this but I am afraid I cannot possibly tell your Lordships quite who it will be next week. Particularly, the department for employment has been very helpful on this.

Quickly going through the other matters, now that I have a bit of extra time, I am seeing what I have missed out in my canter through the whole thing. I probably skipped over the point made by the noble Lord, Lord Paddick, too much. It was, basically: what support are we giving to local authorities? He knows this very well but, to put it on the record again, it was a well-negotiated consensus view that £10,500 per refugee—not per family—would cover most of it. I meet so many local authorities now and some of the people cost hardly anything and some, of course, cost far more than £10,500. Basically, they are doing a pool system.

I have not had reports that it is not enough money. I have heard worries about our unaccompanied minors scheme and that it is not enough for them. Of course, we made provision for where children need extra care, be that through intense social services or, unfortunately, to be taken into care. A lot of extra money is available for that. I think we support the local authorities well. They are very articulate and vociferous in their weekly calls to me on that. Again, I hope everybody realises that there are no political points in this at all. Everyone is really trying to help collectively, particularly the local authorities.

Perhaps they were a bit tongue in cheek, but I will just respond to the final comments from the noble Lord, Lord Khan, about what difference the new Secretary of State for Levelling Up will make. He got the job only three or four hours ago, but I was very pleased that he did, for a number of reasons. Apart from the personal friendship between us, he was the Secretary of State when I did the Syrian programme and was excellent with it. The whole purpose for appointing me in the first place was so that I am ring-fenced to deal with this work, but I am very

optimistic that what Greg Clark, the new Secretary of State, does will do nothing to impair or impinge on it. In fact, I hope he will improve on it.

The noble Lord asked how the councils are supported. I have dealt with various points to do with that. I ask noble Lords for any feedback they have from any councils—I also ask all the MPs this in my weekly call—as we really do try to learn on the ground.

Lord Moynihan (Con): On that point, would my noble friend the Minister be happy for me to populate my case study with the names and write to him accordingly, so that he could follow that up? Also, since the Minister mentioned his engagement with the banks and their commitments, if NatWest is on that list, could he make sure that it is aware that it is not being as effective as it committed to publicly? If it is not on the list, why not?

Lord Harrington of Watford (Con): I wish I had that much influence with NatWest. I do not recall it being on the list, but TSB and Halifax are, for example. They are all quite well-known banks, but it is not just the big clearing ones. I would be delighted to hear any case studies, or indeed to meet personally with the refugees my noble friend knows, if he would like me to. Every week, I meet refugees and I find out a lot from it. I have found meeting MPs very helpful as well, because of course they meet constituents. I would be very happy to meet personally with my noble friend Lord Moynihan—I have not seen him since we were undergraduates together, but he will not remember that—or any of the refugees he mentioned. I would be very happy to bring them here to meet them and hear about their experiences.

Baroness Sheehan (LD): I just want to confirm that NatWest is definitely in the scheme. It is the bank that my families are using; it is definitely in the scheme, and we were told that it takes 28 days to process those forms. The Vodafone scheme that is supposed to be helping Ukrainian refugees leaves much to be desired. There is lots of noise about its generosity but in fact those SIM cards, which are essential to setting up bank accounts and everything that follows from them, are not readily forthcoming.

Lord Harrington of Watford (Con): I had heard of the Vodafone Foundation in the context the noble Baroness mentioned, with a lot of noise, et cetera. I am very happy to meet it. In fact, I had a meeting yesterday with someone who does a programme with Vodafone in other countries, but I will now ask to meet the Vodafone people directly, because its involvement is trumpeted—that is the correct word for *Hansard*.

I have missed the comments from the noble Lord, Lord Khan, on PTSD. At the moment, it has not become a problem. This could be because it is not being reported. It could be because people are keeping things inside, because they just got away from a traumatic situation. I suspect it is beneath the surface. At the refugee groups I talk to, you meet people who are beautifully spoken—perhaps a mother with young children. You could easily think on the surface that you were attending a kids' playgroup like those you go to up and down the country, but when you get talking, you can see what is just under the surface. I thank the noble Lord for flagging this. At the moment, it is not a problem, but we are on alert, via the local authorities.

I must conclude; I have probably gone well over my time.

Lord Cormack (Con): I mentioned universities' twinning schemes. Does the Minister have any comments on that area?

Lord Harrington of Watford (Con): I have nothing but encouragement, as my noble friend knows, but they have not proceeded to the extent that I want. I had extensive conversations with the DfE about it, as he knows—who will be there next week, I could not tell him—but he is always on at me about it in a very positive and proper way. I am not oblivious to it.

In summary, if I may, I know that things are not perfect, I really do. Some people say that people criticise me all the time. Well, I am pursued around the House of Lords, particularly—and to a lesser extent by the House of Commons—by people with experiences, and I want to learn about them. Sponsorship is very difficult because, by nature, it is full of well-meaning people. Who would put their name down if they were not well-meaning, except, as has been brought up, when there may be a few really bad eggs? But most of those that have not worked out were not because of bad eggs, but because people did not really consider quite what it involved.

However, this is evolving. My real hope is that when it is done, instead of wrapping it up and burying it in the annals of civil service and governmental history, as happened with the Syrian scheme—it was completed and then moved off—that this becomes the way that we can deal with flows of refugees from all over the world, from whatever terrible disaster, which unfortunately happens all the time in our history. That is my hope and it all keeps me going, but I thank noble Lords for their contributions to this debate, all of which are gratefully received.

Committee adjourned at 3.46 pm.

