

Vol. 844
No. 105



Thursday
6 March 2025

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
(HANSARD)

HOUSE OF LORDS

OFFICIAL REPORT

ORDER OF BUSINESS

Questions	
Museums and Galleries: Admission Charges for Non-UK Residents	347
Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation	350
Migrants: Indefinite Leave to Remain	353
Schools: Mobile Phones	357
Human Rights Committee	
Justice and Home Affairs Committee	
Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee	
Social Mobility Policy Committee	
UK Engagement with Space Committee	
<i>Membership Motions</i>	360
Hong Kong Democracy Activists	
<i>Commons Urgent Question</i>	361
Iranian State Threats	
<i>Statement</i>	364
International Women's Day: Science and Technology	
<i>Motion to Take Note</i>	376
Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill	
<i>First Reading</i>	438
India and Southeast Asia: Free Trade Agreements	
<i>Question for Short Debate</i>	438
<hr/>	
Grand Committee	
Ukraine (International Relations and Defence Committee Report)	
<i>Motion to Take Note</i>	GC 97

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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
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party

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House of Lords

Thursday 6 March 2025

11 am

Prayers—read by the Lord Bishop of Norwich.

Museums and Galleries: Admission Charges for Non-UK Residents Question

11.08 am

Asked by **Lord Wood of Anfield**

To ask His Majesty's Government what plans they have for introducing admission charges to museums and galleries for non-UK residents.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Baroness Twycross) (Lab): The introduction of universal free admission to national museums and galleries was a landmark policy of the previous Labour Government which we do not currently have any plans to change. These museums attract huge numbers of national and international visitors, and they support jobs and investment across the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. We continue to support these museums in their efforts to broaden access to national collections. That is why the DCMS Secretary of State announced a 5% increase to their funding and £120 million for critical estates maintenance in 2025-26.

Lord Wood of Anfield (Lab): I thank the Minister for that Answer and warmly welcome the £270 million announced by the Culture Secretary in her Jennie Lee lecture, including £20 million for renewal of museums across the country. I am glad to hear that there are no plans to change the free admissions policy, a landmark policy of the previous Labour Government. I wonder what the Minister can say about the approach to individual museums which, like the Louvre, the Acropolis and the Met, want to pursue the possibility of charging non-UK residents. Would they be allowed to do it? If so, has the DCMS looked at how they would check for the identities of UK citizens? Would they be checked at the door?

Baroness Twycross (Lab): I am unclear whether I can respond as to how the Louvre is going to do this in practice. I understand that it has a way of checking eligibility. The decision in respect to the Louvre is clearly a decision for it, as it is for other museums—my apologies if I have misunderstood the question. As I said in my initial Answer, we remain proud of the landmark Labour policy, which means that everyone is able to enter our national museums free of charge.

The Earl of Clancarty (CB): My Lords, I welcome the Answer given by the Minister, but the question I want to ask concerns the £270 million announced to help the arts most in crisis, including our civic museums. How will that money be allotted and distributed? A

test case is surely Cannock Chase's Museum and Prince of Wales Theatre, which from next year will receive no funding at all from the local district council. Will these institutions and others in similar positions be saved from closure, and how will this be done?

Baroness Twycross (Lab): DCMS is committed to working in partnership with councils and local leaders so that residents' needs are met, but we are also reviewing wider funding structures and addressing challenges across the entire sector. This includes through the review of Arts Council England and the Government's commitment to restoring stability to local government finances. We really do understand the issues that a number of cultural institutions are facing.

Lord Addington (LD): My Lords, does the Minister agree that if you start to exclude people from museums, you start to remove their spending in museums' cafés and gift shops? Can this be an official part of any review of charging structures for entrance to those institutions?

Baroness Twycross (Lab): As I said in my initial Answer, we currently have no plans to charge for entry to national museums, but the noble Lord is right about what happens when people visit those museums, particularly those which would potentially see lower visitor numbers if they were not free to enter. I am not going to do a league table of which ones I think that might be. There has currently been no impact assessment or any sort of feasibility study on this, because we do not currently have such plans. However, I entirely anticipate that the huge benefit to museums and galleries of visitors' spend on retail and hospitality when they go to these museums would be considered.

Lord Grayling (Con): My Lords, I declare an interest as a trustee of the National Portrait Gallery. I welcome the Minister's caution. To me, the biggest challenge, quite apart from the rights and wrongs of a charge in the first place, would be the logistical challenge of separating visitors as they came into the gallery. How on earth do you decide who has to pay and who does not? I suspect that the cost would outweigh any benefits, so I welcome the cautionary notes. However desirable it might be in theory, I do not think it would be realistic in practice.

Baroness Twycross (Lab): I agree with the caution that the noble Lord expressed. We would have to consider a whole range of issues. This is not to say that we are not always looking at how we can bring more funding into the sector, but anything we do needs to be measured against the disbenefit of any action we might propose.

The Lord Bishop of Norwich: My Lords, this nation's cathedrals, while not museums, are among the gems of our heritage—treasure troves of memory, architectural masterpieces, and places where prayer has been valid for centuries. The majority do not charge anyone for entry, because they believe in a theological principle that places of prayer should be free for all. Will the Minister confirm that, when cathedrals that do not charge an entry fee apply for grants from public money, His Majesty's Government will not penalise them?

Baroness Twycross (Lab): I am happy to write to the right reverend Prelate with the specifics. It is really welcome that people can go into places of worship for quiet reflection as well as to see the most magnificent structures in the country. I do not have a specific answer to his question, and I will endeavour to write to him.

Lord Blunkett (Lab): Across the world, charges are made on audio-described and in-person tours. If we were to think about major museums and art galleries charging visitors from outside this country, we would be able to pull together the plethora of existing different identifiers into a proper identity system.

Baroness Twycross (Lab): There are an awful lot of hypotheticals in this debate. I go back to my initial point that this Government do not currently have any plans to charge for entry to museums and galleries that are currently classed as the 50 national museums covered by the Labour Government scheme from 2001.

Baroness Bull (CB): The UK's cultural and heritage assets are indeed a massive driver of inbound tourism. As the noble Lord, Lord Addington, pointed out, there is spillover spend not just in the museums but in the accommodation and hospitality that these tourists need. However, we know, and a DCMS Select Committee report from the other place in 2022 revealed, that a lot of that tourism is focused on London, whereas the entire UK has an enormous amount of cultural heritage that could be shared. What are the Government doing to work with VisitBritain and others to raise awareness of and promote venues and opportunities around the UK?

Baroness Twycross (Lab): Funding for national museums supports museums and sites across London. The noble Baroness is correct that a large number of these museums are in London, but we do have national museum sites in Liverpool, Manchester, Bradford, York and St Ives. The Government have announced a new £20 million museum renewal fund, in addition to the more than £44 million a year that Arts Council England currently invests in museums. As the noble Baroness is aware, there is an ongoing review of Arts Council England, led by my noble friend Lady Hodge.

Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay (Con): My Lords, I welcome the answers that Minister has given, although a few ears will have picked up the word "currently" in her first response. But there are many downsides to reversing the legacy of the noble Lord, Lord Smith of Finsbury. It cuts against the excellent work that the sector has done to widen access, and it erects new barriers. Like other noble Lords, I do not want to see people turned away because they do not have their ID, or people from ethnic minorities challenged about their citizenship. Most of all, it lets politicians, local and national—of all parties—off the hook, when they should value and fund our museums. So might the Minister look at the VAT 33A scheme that her department runs and perhaps give it a more user-friendly name to help promote it? Might she even look at the 1964 Act,

which gives local authorities a duty to deliver comprehensive and efficient library services, and widen that to museums as well?

Baroness Twycross (Lab): I find myself having to defend giving good news to your Lordships' House. I will have to write to the noble Lord on the specific VAT rule that he referred to.

Lord Polak (Con): The previous Government committed to giving free entry to the national Holocaust memorial next door in Victoria Tower Gardens. Will the Minister commit to the same?

Baroness Twycross (Lab): As the noble Lord is aware, this Government are very supportive of the memorial. It is an MHCLG scheme, and I will have to write to the noble Lord following Questions. He will note that this Government are currently taking the legislation through this House.

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation *Question*

11.18 am

Asked by Lord Black of Brentwood

To ask His Majesty's Government what plans they have to introduce legislation to address 'strategic lawsuits against public participation'.

Lord Black of Brentwood (Con): My Lords, in begging leave to ask the Question standing in my name on the Order Paper, I declare my interest as deputy chairman of the Telegraph Media Group and note my other interests in the register.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Justice (Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede) (Lab): My Lords, the Government are committed to tackling SLAPPs. Our immediate focus is on implementing the anti-SLAPP provisions in the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023, and their operation will inform any future action. We are determined to take the necessary time to consider this complex issue carefully and ensure that we do not risk upsetting the delicate balance between access to justice and free speech.

Lord Black of Brentwood (Con): My Lords, SLAPPs are an unacceptable infringement on free speech; their sole purpose is to empower the powerful and corrupt to silence journalists and bloggers and to shut down legitimate scrutiny. In opposition, the Prime Minister and the Government strongly backed legislation to end their continuing abuse, but now they have gone back on that commitment and said that changes to civil procedure rules will be enough. Is the Minister aware that free speech campaigners such as Article 19 and Transparency International, backed by studies from the universities of Birmingham and Leeds, have said that these rules will be wholly ineffective in stopping pernicious lawsuits and that what is needed is full-throated legislation? Rather than hiding behind piecemeal legal

tweaks, will the Government look at this again, stick to their unequivocal promises and set out a timeline for the development of a robust anti-SLAPP Bill?

Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede (Lab): My Lords, the statutory definition of an economic crime SLAPP was within the previous Act, and the Civil Procedure Rule Committee has introduced rules. My honourable friend Minister Sackman signed the rules to come into law in January this year, and those measures will be implemented later this spring. The Government want to see how those measures will work before deciding on more legislation.

Lord Thomas of Gresford (LD): My Lords, in 2023 the Conservative Government formed a task force to deal with SLAPPs under the direction of DCMS, with a wide representation of government officials, solicitors, barristers and journalists, and with terms of reference requiring bi-monthly meetings. Four reports were produced, the last in March 2024; there has been nothing since. Have the current Government abolished the task force? If not, what is it doing, and how and when will we hear from it?

Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede (Lab): I do not know the answer to the noble Lord's question, so I will write to him.

Lord Cromwell (CB): I had quite a lot to do with getting a SLAPPs element into the economic crime Act as a beachhead, but it was always seen as just that: a beachhead. A far more comprehensive law was to follow, covering all the other sectors beyond economic crime. Why have we not seen anything further? Will we see something further during this Parliament to cover the other areas? I am sure the Minister will be aware that law firms that profit from this will be lobbying hard against it. I hope he will resist that.

Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede (Lab): I remember the interventions from the noble Lord, Lord Cromwell, in the debates on that Act, in which I took part as well. I am going to give the noble Lord the same answer as I have just given. We want to see how the changes to the rules will change the actions of the courts. SLAPPs are covert and they need to be identified. We want to enable the judges to identify them appropriately.

Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws (Lab): My Lords, I too am concerned that this is slipping down the legislative agenda, because this issue is serious. Whistleblowers in the Post Office scandal, for example, were silenced early on when they wanted to go public and received letters telling them that they would be sued for defamation if they pursued their claims. We have seen many journalists being silenced and intimidated with expensive lawsuits by the rich and the powerful. It is identifying those cases and having specific legislation that is effective.

I remind the Minister that a lot of these cases are directed against women, often exposing things to do with powerful men misbehaving and their conduct towards women being highly concerning. Those women are silenced. Given that the Government have committed

to protecting women and girls, are they going to do something to protect those who are most vulnerable in this area?

Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede (Lab): I absolutely recognise all the points my noble friend made in her question. We do not believe that this issue is slipping down the legislative agenda. We want to see how the 2023 Act will work in practice. That will be happening imminently. The new rules will become active later this spring. The point my noble friend makes about intimidation through this procedure is absolutely right. Women, journalists and women journalists are all victims of this, and it is something we will certainly keep an eagle eye on.

Lord Keen of Elie (Con): My Lords, does the Minister agree that we should not confuse the issues surrounding non-disclosure agreements, which can be pernicious in themselves, with the issue of strategic lawsuits against public participation? Does he also agree that because the public profile of SLAPPs has so increased recently, regulators have taken a far more positive approach to dealing with the matter, as recent evidence from the Solicitors Regulation Authority and the Bar Standards Board illustrates? It might be better to see how the civil rules implement the perception against SLAPPs and allow those regulators to discharge their functions with regard to the legal profession.

Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede (Lab): I thank the noble and learned Lord for that question, and I agree with the points he made. It is indeed true that non-disclosure agreements can be pernicious in themselves, and they are not to be confused with SLAPPs. The new regulations will come into place imminently, and we should see how they go before considering future legislation.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock (Lab Co-op): My Lords—

Baroness Stowell of Beeston (Con): My Lords—

Lord Fox (LD): My Lords—

Captain of the Honourable Corps of Gentlemen-at-Arms and Chief Whip (Lord Kennedy of Southwark) (Lab Co-op): My Lords, we have plenty of time. We will hear first from the noble Lord, Lord Foulkes, then from the noble Baroness, Lady Stowell, and then from the noble Lord, Lord Fox.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock (Lab Co-op): My Lords, I think the Minister is aware that the Council of Europe has done a great deal on this matter, particularly the parliamentary assembly committee on culture, media and sport. I think the Minister said in a previous exchange that he would look at the Council of Europe recommendations and take account of them in taking action on this. Has he had the opportunity to do this yet? If not, will he do so soon?

Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede (Lab): Yes, I remember our previous exchange on this matter, and I have looked at the work done within the Council of Europe, the parliamentary assembly and its culture, media and sport committee. This is a cross-Europe issue. There

[LORD PONSONBY OF SHULBREDE]
are groups measuring attempts at SLAPPs across European jurisdictions. We will continue to look at how legislation is developed across Europe. We will keep an eye on this within the UK. The point that my noble friend makes is a good one.

Baroness Stowell of Beeston (Con): My Lords, I refer the Minister to the letter from the SRA, which it sent me this week and I have published on X this morning, detailing why it has not taken action against the lawyers representing Yevgeny Prigozhin, who pursued the journalist Eliot Higgins for tweeting that he was a Russian mercenary and the leader of the Wagner Group. In that letter the SRA is clearer than it has ever been that, in its view, legislation is needed to prevent SLAPPs. Can the Minister please think again about the urgency of this matter? What with not moving on this, yesterday's complacency on the *Telegraph* and the Government's position on copyright, there needs to be a different kind of response from the Government on matters concerning the freedom of the press.

Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede (Lab): I thank the noble Baroness for sending me a copy of that letter yesterday. The first point to make is that it is for the courts to decide whether a case is indeed a SLAPP. The second is that the case referred to in the SRA letter preceded the legislation that is now in place. The focus of the Government is to see how the new regulations will bed down before we consider new legislation.

Lord Fox (LD): My Lords, the Minister may not be aware that the Georgian oligarchy is introducing SLAPPs laws into its own country now, justifying that by saying that they are British laws. Is the Minister not embarrassed that this is being used to suppress the press and protest in Georgia? Does he not understand that we need to take this out of our laws so that people are not using it as justification elsewhere?

Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede (Lab): I was not aware of the point that the noble Lord has just made, but of course there is a balance to be struck between Article 6 rights of access to justice and Article 10 rights of freedom of speech, and it is very important that we get that right.

Migrants: Indefinite Leave to Remain

Question

11.29 am

Asked by **Lord Strathcarron**

To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the number of migrants expected to apply for indefinite leave to remain over the course of the Parliament, and of the related cost.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Lord Hanson of Flint) (Lab): Some 162,000 migrants were granted settlement in the year ending December 2024. The Government intend to produce a White Paper later

this year on migration policy and will tackle high net migration by taking a different approach, linking migration and broader labour market policies together.

Lord Strathcarron (Con): I thank the Minister for the reply. Using ONS and OBR data, it is possible to project that over 800,000 recent migrants could apply for ILR over the course of this Parliament. Some 54% of those are on non-work visas, and those on work visas are predominantly non-net tax contributors. Furthermore, each ILR migrant will have full claim to all benefits, and the right to bring in more dependants on non-work family visas. Does the Minister agree that the coming societal and fiscal impacts are simply unsustainable? Will the Government consider revising the current five-year eligibility rules while there is still time to do so?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): The five-year eligibility rule is currently in place, as the noble Lord has mentioned. I have to say to him that I am a sort of hors d'oeuvre ahead of the main course, which will be the net migration White Paper, which will be published very shortly and will address what we need to do in this Parliament in respect of net migration, skills development, producing local skills here and tackling illegal migration. I hope that the noble Lord will bear with me: there will be examination of all those issues in the White Paper, which will be before this House in relatively short order.

Lord Hardie (CB): My son-in-law, Jair, came to this country more than 20 years ago. Since his arrival here and his obtaining right to remain, he has been permanently employed in various capacities, including as an assistant in a school for deaf children. Latterly, since he obtained UK citizenship 16 years ago, he has been serving as a police officer in Scotland. He has never been a financial burden on the state. Does the Minister agree that, in considering the cost mentioned in the Question, it is also essential to include the benefits that such migrants bring to our society in providing essential public services and giving us practical examples of the benefits of cultural diversity?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): I absolutely agree with the noble and learned Lord. We need to value those individuals who come here legally and via legal migration routes. They make a contribution to our society and fulfil many employment roles. They pay their taxes, put a range of cultural improvements into our society and help to improve the mix as a whole. However, I think that the noble and learned Lord will still recognise, to go back to the point made by the noble Lord, Lord Strathcarron, that that needs to be managed and examined. That is what the White Paper will do: examine the potential pressures and issues. But I want to emphasise that those who are here are welcome and contribute to our society positively.

Lord Sahota (Lab): My Lords, there are some 175,000 Ukrainian migrants in this country, who arrived more than three years ago and are running out of their three years' leave to stay. What is their status now?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): The Government have recently issued a statement revising and extending the Ukrainian scheme, and anybody who is here currently

under that Ukrainian scheme will have been notified of the requirements under that. Their status will be regularised as long as the illegal occupation and invasion of Ukraine by the Russian state pertains.

Lord Davies of Gower (Con): What progress has been made in closing asylum hotels, in line with the Government's manifesto commitment? How will the Government ensure that those granted indefinite leave to remain contribute to the economy, rather than becoming dependent on state support?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): The Government have closed a certain number of asylum hotels—it is in the low teens at the moment. The Government have a commitment to closing such hotels because they are a waste of taxpayers' resource, and there are better ways to manage what we inherited from the previous Government. Since July, we have removed 19,000 people with no legal right to remain in the United Kingdom. Of those, 5,100 were enforced returns and, since July, we have also tackled 5,400-plus visits on illegal working, and we are improving the situation with removal of foreign national offenders. There is a record that the noble Lord has to defend, and we are trying to unpick that record—and those hotels are his legacy. We will meet our manifesto commitment during this Parliament.

Baroness Hamwee (LD): My Lords, are the Government satisfied that UKVI is providing good or, at any rate, reasonable service to applicants for indefinite leave? If you are paying the standard fees rather than for priority or super-priority service, is that one of the services for which you have to provide your credit card details and pay to hold on the phone, listening to a robot—possibly telling you that “Your call is very important to us”—before getting a formulaic and uninformative reply about the progress of your application?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): I hope that that is not the experience—and if it is, I hope that the noble Baroness will send me details of the specifics of the experience that she relates. The Home Office does not make a profit from applications; where the fee is higher than the estimated unit cost, there is no profit element. The Home Office keeps all fees under review, and it is its principle to ensure that those who have a potential legal right to apply to stay in the United Kingdom have the facility to do so in a simple and effective way. I hope that the noble Baroness will supply me with the information if there is a specific case to which she wishes to refer.

Lord Blunkett (Lab): My Lords, might my noble friend talk with his boss, the Home Secretary—I ought to declare an interest, because I am still involved with higher education—on whether we could in the White Paper at least discuss the critical issue of not getting into the farcical position of trying desperately to recruit full-time higher education students from across the world and then counting them in the net migration figures?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): My noble friend tempts me to go into the main course rather than the hors d'oeuvre, which is today's Question. I cannot trail for him matters that may or may not be in the immigration/net migration White Paper that we will produce in the very near future. We are intending to look at the inheritance that we had from the previous Government but also at the economic needs and training needs of the United Kingdom and how we can upskill the UK workforce, as well as at the impact of net migration students on university places—and the points that the noble Lord, Lord Strathcarron, mentioned. I hope that my noble friend can have patience, as that will be before this House in relatively short order.

Lord Lilley (Con): My Lords—

Lord Alton of Liverpool (CB): My Lords—

Captain of the Honourable Corps of Gentlemen-at-Arms and Chief Whip (Lord Kennedy of Southwark) (Lab Co-op): It should be the noble Lord, Lord Alton, next.

Lord Alton of Liverpool (CB): The Minister will have seen the letter that the Joint Committee on Human Rights has sent to his right honourable friend the Home Secretary about the plight and fate of those children who went missing from asylum accommodation, overseen by the Home Office at the time. What can he tell us about the numbers still involved, their plight or fate, and what more is being done to identify their whereabouts?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): I am grateful to the noble Lord for his question. It is a priority for the Government to track down and provide safeguarding measures for those children who went missing under the regime of the previous Government. There are approximately 80 to 90 for whom we do not have records of where they are now. It is priority to understand where they are. The responsibility for that lies not just with the Home Office but with local authorities, such as Kent, which had initial responsibility and now has responsibility for safeguarding issues. It is a priority to find them, and I shall update the noble Lord in due course.

Lord Lilley (Con): My Lords, will the Government's White Paper abandon the doctrine proclaimed by Tony Blair, and to which subsequent Conservative Ministers, sadly, succumbed, that mass immigration is necessary to promote growth in this country, given that in the ensuing 20 years we have had the highest rate of immigration in our history and the lowest rate of growth? Will they go back and look at the record of Mrs Thatcher—

Noble Lords: Oh!

Lord Lilley (Con): During Mrs Thatcher's 12 years in office, net immigration was precisely net zero, but we moved from being the slowest-growing economy in Europe to the fastest-growing major economy in Europe.

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): As I spent most of the period from 1979 to 1990 trying to make sure that Mrs Thatcher was not in office, I cannot really give much comfort to the noble Lord on his request to endorse the policies she undertook. He will have to wait for the migration White Paper that will be coming shortly. Among its key aspects—I can give him a slight taster—will be the ability to develop homegrown skills, to look at skill shortages, and to look at how we upskill individuals to fill those vacancies. I very much value the people who, historically, over many years, before Mrs Thatcher and beyond, have come to the United Kingdom to work and to make their lives. They are valued members of our community, but we need also to look at how they can upskill to meet future challenges.

Schools: Mobile Phones Question

11.41 am

Asked by **Lord Young of Cookham**

To ask His Majesty's Government what is their position on the use of mobile phones in schools.

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Baroness Smith of Malvern) (Lab): My Lords, we know that using mobile phones in schools can lead to online bullying, distraction and classroom disruption, which can lead to lost learning time. The Government's *Mobile Phones in Schools* guidance supports schools on how to develop, implement and maintain a policy that prohibits the use of mobile phones throughout the school day, including during lessons, the time between lessons, break time and lunchtime. Head teachers are rightly responsible for the implementation of guidance within their schools.

Lord Young of Cookham (Con): My Lords, I am grateful for that reply. I understand the tension between a clear national policy on the one hand and an element of local discretion on the other, but I was struck by the reply of the noble Baroness's ministerial colleague, the noble Baroness, Lady Anderson, in a recent debate on this subject in your Lordships' House, in which she said that

"last year, around a third of pupils reported that most of their lessons were disrupted in some way by a mobile phone".—[*Official Report*, 28/11/24; col. 895.]

Is that not just unacceptable? Should the Government not consult on some stricter options, one of which would include a ban on mobile phones in primary schools and, in secondary schools, making them inaccessible during school hours, except where they are needed for medical reasons?

Baroness Smith of Malvern (Lab): First, it is clearly unacceptable if lessons are being disrupted. That is, in many ways, a broader issue than whether mobile phones are being used and goes to the behaviour policies that every school has a responsibility to have and to develop with their parents. I think it is important that we look at the way in which schools are already taking action to limit mobile phones. Actually, schools are moving towards developing many of the things that the noble

Lord has suggested should be in place. This comes back to the point he raised about whether we believe that, with clear national guidance, including examples of how phones should be controlled in schools, we should nevertheless allow a determination at school level by head teachers of how that is actually implemented. I think that the balance is broadly right at the moment, although it is of course important that we keep this under review and that we encourage schools to do what is necessary to enable all classrooms to be purposeful and calm and for every child to be able to learn.

Lord Storey (LD): My Lords, the Minister is right that there is a place, I suppose, for phones in schools in terms of learning. Equally, parents think that, if the child has a phone, they are far better safeguarded, particularly on long journeys home. However, there is the other side, where phones can lead to bullying, to pupils taking inappropriate photographs, to such photos being sent, as well as to well-being and mental health issues. It is not a clear-cut situation we face. It is also disruptive for classes when schools have to ask teachers to collect the phones, hand them out, et cetera. Technology might be the answer. For example, in Ireland they have spent €20 million on giving schools what is called a Yondr wallet, into which the phones go and they cannot be used during that period: it cuts off all the connections. The Minister said we must look at ways: how will we look at those ways and how will we come to a final conclusion?

Baroness Smith of Malvern (Lab): There are schools in the UK that are already using the Yondr wallets that the noble Lord refers to. On the whole, schools are not using the approach of making individual teachers collect phones at the beginning of classes. The most recent evidence suggests that the most commonly used way of controlling mobile phones is to collect the phone at the beginning of the day and give it back to the child at the end of the day. The broader point, however, that the noble Lord makes, relates not just to how mobile phones are used in schools but to broader issues of how children are using their phones, with high levels of screen time. Sometimes, we seem to think that what happens in schools solves all problems. Actually, I think we need to look more broadly than simply at a relatively blunt legislative proposal.

Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho (CB): My Lords, has the Minister had any discussions about the innovation that is going on in mobile phones? I am particularly struck by "smart dumbphones" that do not have access to social media and allow children only to text and to keep out of danger. I think that there is a huge opportunity here for the UK to increase the supply of a different kind of phone. Will the Minister explain some of those discussions?

Baroness Smith of Malvern (Lab): The noble Baroness makes a very important point. I have not had those discussions myself, but I have heard about some of the innovations. I would make a broader point about how parents, for example, who might be concerned about how their children are using phones, feel. That type of technological development may well help to provide some of the answers. With respect to schools, the

department provides technological advice for schools on such things as, for example, how to ensure that filtering provisions are appropriate. Sometimes, there is an opportunity to use good technology to counter the detrimental impacts of technology. That may well be something that is appropriate in this area.

Lord Bailey of Paddington (Con): My Lords, can the Minister tell the House whether any work has been done in speaking to young people about their use of phones in school? I have been a youth worker for over 38 years now and most of the best innovations in dealing with young people and their issues come from asking the young people. Many schools have discussions with their own young people and they give up their phones willingly. It creates a culture in the school that is much kinder. Has that kind of conversation been had with young people?

Baroness Smith of Malvern (Lab): My Lords, the noble Lord makes a really important point. I suspect that where schools are implementing this most effectively is where they have engaged not just parents but pupils in thinking about how mobile phones should be controlled, not only within the school but also to address concerns about what is happening to young people using phones outside school. I do not know whether the department has done that, but I will go back and check and perhaps follow that up with the noble Lord.

Lord Russell of Liverpool (CB): My Lords, to follow up on the point made by the noble Lord, Lord Young, about school classes being interrupted by telephones, I merely observe that all of us are aware that proceedings in your Lordships' House are occasionally interrupted by people furiously trying to control their devices. When it comes to mobile phones in schools, it is fine to give guidance to schools: we put so much burden on teachers and on head teachers to manage a whole variety of issues. In the experience that we have had of talking to schools, the issue they have is actually with parents. Will the Government try to ensure that part of the guidance they give to schools will be about how best to have a dialogue with parents, because it is often parents who are the most against their children not being able to take phones into school?

Baroness Smith of Malvern (Lab): The noble Lord makes an important point, but sometimes parents are right. Perhaps, for example, there are circumstances where there is a long journey to and from school and parents want to be able to be in touch with their children. I take the point that one of the things that we could do is support parents to understand how their children's use of screen time might impact on them, both positively and negatively, and to encourage them—particularly those with younger children—to engage with that screen time, to understand what their children are watching and doing. That is certainly something we are looking at in some of the early years and family support work that the department is doing.

Baroness Barran (Con): My Lords, we are not in a good place in relation to children and phones and social media. We heard from my noble friend Lord Young the evidence of disruption in classes. Parentkind has

just published evidence which confirms that and shows that only one in seven pupils have an effective ban in place. Yesterday, we saw the watering down of the honourable Member for Whitehaven's Private Member's Bill on the protection of under-16s from social media and smartphones. Surely, with our children, we should be pursuing the precautionary principle. There is so much evidence of a correlation between the rise in mental health problems among young people and the advent of smartphones and social media. Until we know that that is not causation, surely the Government should be acting and not delaying.

Baroness Smith of Malvern (Lab): We are of course in a place that reflects the guidance issued by the last Government—probably by the noble Baroness, actually—less than a year ago. On other occasions, quite rightly in this House, the Government are challenged on the approach that they take to the autonomy and decision-making of head teachers. With respect to schools, it is clearly important that we continue to monitor this issue. I know it is of concern to parents, but we also need to be in a position where we trust head teachers to make appropriate decisions within the guidance about what happens in their schools. Some of the points that the noble Baroness rightly identifies come back to the point I made earlier about the impact of phones and social media way beyond what happens in our schools. There, our cross-government approach, which focuses on the implementation of the Online Safety Act, for example, and other issues, is really important in helping us to address this issue of great concern, which I accept is complex and does not exist only in schools.

Human Rights Committee

Justice and Home Affairs Committee

Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee

Social Mobility Policy Committee

UK Engagement with Space Committee

Membership Motions

11.53 am

Moved by The Senior Deputy Speaker

Human Rights Committee

That Lord Sewell of Sanderstead be appointed a member of the Select Committee.

Justice and Home Affairs Committee

That Baroness Cash be appointed a member of the Select Committee.

Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee

That Lord Pack be appointed a member of the Select Committee.

Social Mobility Policy Committee

That Lord Young of Cookham be appointed a member of the Select Committee, in place of Baroness Shephard of Northwold.

UK Engagement with Space Committee

That Lord Lansley and Lord St John of Bletso be appointed members of the Select Committee, in place of Lord Cromwell and Lord Vaizey of Didcot.

Motions agreed.

Hong Kong Democracy Activists *Commons Urgent Question*

The following Answer to an Urgent Question was given in the House of Commons on Tuesday 4 March.

“I thank the right honourable gentleman for his Question on what I agree is a very serious matter.

Security is the first duty of government. As such, we are deeply concerned by the recent bounties placed on Hong Kong democracy activists resident here in the UK. As the right honourable gentleman will know, the Foreign Secretary issued a statement condemning those bounties. As he said at the time, the individuals were merely exercising their right to freedom of expression. As the Foreign Secretary has also said, we call on Beijing to repeal the national security law, including its extraterritorial reach. We also call on the Hong Kong authorities to end their targeting of individuals in the UK and elsewhere for seeking to exercise their basic rights. Ministers have raised those concerns with the authorities during recent visits to both Hong Kong and Beijing. The continued safety of Hong Kongers remains a priority for this Government. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on individual cases, but I want to be clear that we will not tolerate any attempts by foreign Governments to coerce, intimidate, harass or harm their critics overseas, especially here in the UK.

We have received assurances from counterterrorism policing that the appropriate measures are in place for the individuals in question, and we regularly assess potential threats to the UK and use all available levers to counter them. Where we identify individuals at heightened risk, we are front footed in deploying protective security guidance and other measures as appropriate. Anyone—anyone—acting to coerce individuals in the UK is liable to prosecution under the National Security Act 2023. To date, there have been six individuals charged under the new Act.

The Government’s position is clear: we will protect the rights and freedoms of all individuals in the UK. We will use every available power and tool to uphold the principles we hold dear”.

11.53 am

Lord Davies of Gower (Con): My Lords, this is a gross infringement of British sovereignty. The Chinese Communist Party and its repressive regime have arrested over 100 people in Hong Kong on politically motivated charges. In the other place, the Security Minister claimed that

“concerns have been raised at every opportunity”.—[*Official Report, Commons, 4/3/25; col. 184.*]

Can the Minister confirm whether this specifically has been raised with Chinese officials? Will he confirm whether the Government have made formal diplomatic representations to China regarding this blatant extraterritorial threat? Will he commit to placing China on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme?

The Minister of State, Home Office (Lord Hanson of Flint) (Lab): The answer to the noble Lord’s first two questions is yes. Representations have been made by my right honourable friend the Foreign Secretary at the highest level, and Ministers who have visited China have also made representations. We will continue to make representations on this matter because it is a serious issue, and the Government need to ensure that the Chinese know that there is widespread concern among the populace and the Government. On FIRS, the noble Lord will know that we announced yesterday that the state of Iran is being included in FIRS. The scheme will become live during the summer. We will keep all nations under review but at the moment our announcement has only been in relation to Iran.

Lord Purvis of Tweed (LD): My Lords, I have met someone who has a bounty on them. This is clear transnational repression because it not only seeks to intimidate the person who has the bounty placed on them, which is a clear breach of our law, but is designed to intimidate family members and the wider community back in Hong Kong. Transnational repression needs to be rooted out totally from the United Kingdom. Therefore, there should be no encouragement to any of the state bodies that currently could have preferential access to key parts of the British economy, especially financial services. Will the Home Office Minister make sure that those Ministers who will visit Beijing seeking wider trade and investment with China are fully aware that any state enterprises that have any involvement, especially in a potential new embassy in London, will be committing not only a domestic legislation offence but transnational repression, which is an international crime?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): I am grateful for the noble Lord’s comments. He will know that the UK Government will challenge the Chinese authorities where we think there are transgressions; this is one of those occasions. We will also co-operate with the Chinese authorities when we believe that we can work together and trade with them when we believe it is appropriate. However, his points are valid.

On the embassy, a planning application is in and will be determined under planning laws like any other planning application. It will be with my colleagues in the department for local government. The Home Office have already submitted a security note on it, as part of the planning application, and that will be considered in due course. I reassure the noble Lord that we take this matter extremely seriously and representations have been made, and will continue, at the highest level.

Lord Alton of Liverpool (CB): My Lords, I declare an interest in that I am patron of Hong Kong Watch and an officer of the All-Party Group on Hong Kong. The inconveniences and irritations experienced by the

seven sanctioned parliamentarians, including the noble Baroness, Lady Kennedy of the Shaws, and me, are nothing in comparison with the bounties placed on the heads of pro-democracy advocates such as the young woman Chloe Cheung. Letters delivered to their neighbours offer £100,000 for information on the pro-democracy activists or their delivery to the PRC embassy.

The Joint Committee on Human Rights is currently conducting an inquiry into transnational repression. We are interested to know from the Minister what laws will have been broken if a dissident, or someone sanctioned or targeted by the CCP, is dragged into a PRC embassy or consulate. That has already happened in Manchester so this is not simply academic. What action, if any, would be taken? Would it be illegal? Would the diplomats be immune? What powers would be used to recover those who were seized?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): I reiterate what I said to the Liberal Democrat and Opposition Front Bench: we condemn this action. We have also seen the reports of letters being delivered to neighbours. We are trying to verify the source of those reports and of that information, but the police are certainly looking into this matter and are liaising with those who are in receipt of the letters. The police will assess, independently of government, whether action needs to be taken under any legislation we have to date.

I hope to reassure the noble Lord that, in the event of the circumstances he has described, the police and the Home Office would investigate whether illegal acts have been undertaken. It would be for the police, not the Home Office, to investigate independently in that event. I hope that our representations have been made very forcefully, and that the Chinese authorities will recognise them. We will monitor that situation accordingly.

Lord Garnier (Con): My Lords, I fully understand the balance that there has to be between protecting British citizens under British law and the need for good diplomatic and trading relations with China. It is a difficult balance and sometimes it leads to uncomfortable conclusions. However, in the event that, as the noble Lord, Lord Alton, has indicated, Chinese diplomats break the law and then hide behind diplomatic immunity, will this Government, through either the Home Office or the Foreign Office, make it abundantly clear to the Chinese Government not only that their behaviour is wholly unacceptable but that they will be publicly condemned by our Government so that our citizens know how much we disapprove of it, and that the individual diplomats from the Chinese embassy who misbehave will be promptly expelled?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): The noble and learned Lord is tempting me to look at scenarios that may or may not occur. Any attempt by any foreign power to intimidate, harass and harm individuals or communities in the United Kingdom will not be tolerated. This Government will reflect on any actions like that, over and above the representations we have already made.

Lord Walney (CB): But is there not a tension between the robust words that the Minister rightly uses and that the Home Secretary delivered to the Chinese

nation and, for example, the Government's decision, on returning from Beijing, to relax planning restrictions on China's intended new embassy, which presumably houses and certainly plays a role in much of the malign activity that the Government are complaining about?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): The noble Lord will already know—but I will tell him anyway—that a final decision has yet to be made on the Chinese embassy. The Secretary of State for Local Government has an independent quasi-judicial role in making the final decision. The noble Lord will also know that the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary sent a joint letter to the Planning Inspectorate on 14 January, and the Home Office has considered the breadth of national security issues in relation to the planning application. I cannot determine that application, but I assure the noble Lord that the points he raised are being considered in that mechanism by government officials who have to make the decision.

Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws (Lab): My Lords, the Joint Committee on Human Rights has been receiving evidence in relation to transnational repression. Is the Minister aware—it is widely known—that the lawyers acting for Jimmy Lai on the international issues that arise out of that case are receiving the most incredible intimidation? They are receiving threats of rape and threats towards their children. Caoilfhionn Gallagher, the King's Counsel who acts for Jimmy Lai, has been exposed to the most appalling forms of intimidation. Is this something that the Government are aware of? If so, what are they going to do about the intimidation of legal representatives?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): I am concerned to hear what my noble friend has said. I reiterate to the House that any attempt by any foreign power to intimidate, harass or harm individuals or communities in the United Kingdom will not be tolerated. If my noble friend wishes to supply details, we will examine them.

Iranian State Threats

Statement

The following Statement was made in the House of Commons on Tuesday 4 March.

“With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a Statement on the growing threat to the UK from Iran, and the steps that the Government are taking to combat this threat.

The threat from Iran sits in the wider context of the growing, diversifying and evolving threat that the UK faces from malign activity by a number of states. The threat from states has become increasingly interconnected in nature; the lines are blurring between domestic and international, online and offline, and states and their proxies. In the last year, the number of state-threat investigations run by MI5 jumped by 48%. That statistic is a stark indication of the increased threat.

I turn to Iran. The regime has become increasingly emboldened, and is asserting itself more aggressively to advance its objectives and undermine ours. That is evidenced by the fact that direct action against UK

targets has substantially increased over recent years. The director-general of MI5 recently stated that since the start of 2022, the UK has responded to 20 Iran-backed plots presenting potentially lethal threats to British citizens and UK residents. The Iranian regime is targeting dissidents, and media organisations and journalists reporting on the regime's violent oppression. It is also no secret that there is a long-standing pattern of the Iranian intelligence services targeting Jewish and Israeli people internationally. It is clear that these plots are a conscious strategy of the Iranian regime to stifle criticism through intimidation and fear. These threats are unacceptable. They must and will be defended against at every turn.

It is testament to our world-leading law enforcement and intelligence services that, through their tireless commitment, so many plots have been thwarted. I am sure that the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the brave men and women of our law enforcement and intelligence agencies, who work day in, day out, to keep us safe.

To tackle this threat, we must understand it. The Iranian intelligence services, which include the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, direct this damaging activity, but often, rather than working directly on UK shores, they use criminal proxies to do their bidding. That helps to obfuscate their involvement, while they are safely ensconced in Tehran. We see that in intelligence, but we also saw it publicly in the 2023 conviction of the Chechen-born Austrian national who was imprisoned for conducting surveillance on Iran International's UK headquarters.

These threats are not only physical in nature. The National Cyber Security Centre has seen malicious cyber-activity, conducted by actors who are affiliated with the Iranian state, that targets a range of state sectors, including in the UK. The Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that our intelligence and law enforcement agencies have the tools that they need to disrupt and degrade the threats that we face from Iran, so I can announce today that we will place the whole of the Iranian state, including Iran's intelligence services, the IRGC and MOIS, on the enhanced tier of the new foreign influence registration scheme. The FIRS is a critical disruptive tool for the UK.

This action will mean that those who are directed by Iran to conduct activities in the UK, such as criminal proxies, must register that activity, whatever it is, or face five years in prison. They will face a choice: expose their actions to the Government or face jail. The Home Office will lay regulations before Parliament as soon as possible, with a view to having the scheme up and running by the summer.

On proscription, as honourable Members will know, we do not routinely comment on groups that are being considered for proscription, but I assure the House that we do and will continue to keep the list of groups considered under constant review. However, it has become increasingly clear that there are challenges inherent in applying our existing counterterror legislation to state and state-linked threats to our national security. That challenge was first raised by the Home Secretary in opposition. She warned of a lack of a comprehensive

strategic approach for state threats to mirror that adopted on terrorism, and the specific difficulties of using on state bodies a proscription mechanism that was designed for groups such as al-Qaeda.

We are progressing work at pace to address that challenge, so I can announce today that Jonathan Hall KC has been asked to review the parts of our counterterrorism framework that could be applied to modern-day state threats, such as those from Iran. That includes giving specific consideration to the design of a proscription mechanism for state and state-linked bodies, providing more flexibility than is offered under the existing powers. As the independent reviewer of both state threats legislation and terrorism legislation, Mr Hall is perfectly placed to undertake the review and we are grateful to him for agreeing to provide that advice.

Let there be no doubt: we are utterly determined to stay ahead of those who threaten our country, and any step that could aid us in that critical endeavour will be considered. The UK is not alone in facing such threats. States across the western world are threatened by Iran, so we will work with our allies to better understand, expose and condemn Iranian actions and bring Iranian-linked criminals to justice wherever in the world they may be.

We regularly collaborate with our Five Eyes and European partners to protect our democracies from hostile Iranian attack. Here at home we are going further too. The National Security Act 2023, which was supported on both sides of the House, has given the police new powers to target evolving activity. For example, the Act criminalises assisting a foreign intelligence service, such as the IRGC or MOIS. The maximum penalty for those offences is 14 years in prison, which is the same as the maximum for a proscription offence.

I can also announce that training and guidance on state threats activity is now being offered by counterterrorism policing to all 45 territorial police forces across the UK. That will mean that when any front-line officer encounters a suspected state threats incident, they will know what to do and what to look for to ensure that our communities are kept safe. Furthermore, we have recently issued guidance on the National Security Act and how it applies to the UK security profession, including private investigators. That ensures that they are aware of the law and understand where they might be criminally liable if they were working for any foreign power such as Iran.

We will also continue to go after the criminal networks and enablers that Iran uses to carry out its work. The leader of the Zindashti organised crime group—a group frequently used by the Iranian regime—has already been sanctioned. We will explore further sanctions against other Iranian-linked criminals, and the National Crime Agency will target those who assist the IRGC and others to launder their money.

Alongside the recently launched Border Security Command, which strengthens Britain's border security and disrupts criminal smuggling gangs, I have asked officials to consider new ways to enforce our robust Immigration Rules to specifically address threats from Iran. That work will focus on further protecting the UK from Iranian infiltration, including those who promote Iranian interference in the UK.

I am clear that our response must be a UK-wide effort, so I welcome the Charity Commission's statutory inquiries into both the Islamic Centre of England and the Al-Tawheed Charitable Trust. I have also asked officials to review where any Iranian interference is being conducted in the UK, and FIRS will shine more light on any undisclosed relationships between the Iranian state and UK-based institutions and individuals.

Finally, the National Protective Security Authority and counterterrorism policing will continue to provide protective security advice and support to individuals and organisations threatened by the Iranian regime and its criminal proxies, including Persian language media organisations and their employees. We will also continue to maintain funding for protective security measures to synagogues, Jewish community centres and schools, ensuring that we do all we can to keep our Jewish communities safe.

In a dangerous, volatile world, Britain must lead the way. That means proudly promoting our values and straining every sinew to keep our people safe. The measures I have set out today should reassure the House and the public about our unflinching commitment to those objectives. Under this Government, security will be the foundation on which everything else is built. We will resist attacks on our way of life as vigorously as we counter threats to life, whatever their source. We will work relentlessly to root out those intent on causing harm on our streets, and we will do whatever it takes to protect our country and our democracy. I commend this Statement to the House."

12.04 pm

Lord Davies of Gower (Con): My Lords, I thank the Minister for bringing the Statement to the House today and I welcome the Government's recognition of the growing threat posed by Iran to our national security. The escalation of Iranian state-backed plots against UK residents and the targeting of dissidents, Jewish communities and journalists is deeply concerning. I join Ministers in paying tribute to our intelligence services and law enforcement officers who work tirelessly to thwart these threats.

While we welcome the measures outlined today, I must ask whether they go far enough. The danger posed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the IRGC, is clear and escalating, as Iran has supported Putin's barbaric and illegal invasion of Ukraine. Are this Government acting decisively enough on proscription? The Foreign Secretary has ruled it out, despite overwhelming evidence of the IRGC's involvement in malign activities. Does the Minister now acknowledge that proscribing the IRGC is a necessary and overdue step? If not, can he explain how the measures announced today will be as effective in tackling this threat?

I welcome the decision to place the entire Iranian state on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme. However, given Iran's well-documented use of proxies, how do the Government intend to enforce these requirements effectively? Can the Minister provide assurances that those who fail to register will be swiftly identified and prosecuted?

The role of Iranian-linked organised crime networks is another crucial issue. The Government have pledged further sanctions and action against these networks, but we need clarity. Will the Minister commit to a specific timeline for additional sanctions and further crackdowns on the IRGC's financial networks in the United Kingdom?

Finally, while it is right that we strengthen our domestic resilience, we must work closely with our allies to counter Iran's destabilising activities internationally. Can the Minister outline what further steps the Government will take to enhance security co-operation with our Five Eyes partners and European allies in tackling Iranian aggression?

The threats we face from hostile states require more than just words—they require action. The Government must match their rhetoric with decisive steps to protect Britain from Iranian intimidation and ensure that those responsible for such threats face the full force of the law.

Lord Purvis of Tweed (LD): My Lords, just last week in the Chamber we debated the unacceptable practice of the Iranian regime holding joint nationals in detention. My noble friend Lady Brinton spoke powerfully in that debate. Therefore, these Benches support what the Government are doing and how they are doing it. We join others in giving thanks for the work of our intelligence services and our law and order community, the men and women who work every single day to keep us safe.

However, we need constant vigilance. We have seen the unacceptable practice of the intimidation of BBC journalists, and individuals within this country who have been targeted by the Iranian regime, as it continues to do. Placing Iran on the enhanced tier scheme is welcome.

We are all aware that, given the economic crisis and tense political situation in Iran, it is likely that the regime will seek to export further attempts to destabilise and disrupt neighbouring countries, and countries such as the United Kingdom. The persecution of individuals in Iran is heightening, especially that of women and girls. As the Minister taking the Statement is from the Home Office, I ask him not to have a closed mind with regard to potential safe and legal routes for those who are persecuted within Iran, for whom we can provide refuge in the United Kingdom. There is currently no safe and legal route, but it would be a very strong signal of support for the human rights of people within Iran.

Of course, however, the first duty of government is to protect those within the United Kingdom. We have seen the use of proxies: we have seen the use of agencies and we have seen the use of other countries' nationals. So I also wish to ask: when it comes to the implementation of the enhanced scheme, as well as the policing, how vigilant are we about those from other countries who are paid by the Iranian regime to carry out actions on its behalf? It is, of course, not the case that it will always be Iranian nationals who will be carrying out this work.

We have a country-wide Iranian sanctions regime, which is welcome, but the question I asked when we scrutinised that regime was about other bodies whom

[LORD PURVIS OF TWEED]

the Iranians are paying and who are nationals of other countries. That is a grey area when it comes to our legislation, so I would be grateful if the Minister could reassure us that nationals of other countries acting on behalf of the Iranian regime will also be covered by the enhanced tier element.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Lord Hanson of Flint) (Lab): My Lords, I am grateful for the questions from the noble Lords, Lord Davies and Lord Purvis of Tweed. I will try to answer them as best I can. First, it really sends a strong signal that His Majesty's Government, the Official Opposition and the Liberal Democrats all broadly support the actions taken today. That support means that, actually, Iran is the first country we placed into the FIRS scheme which, as I said in earlier answers to an earlier Statement, will be operational from the summer of this year. The signals that we have sent by placing Iran on the enhanced tier and announcing that yesterday, via my right honourable friend Dan Jarvis, and today is extremely important.

I can give comfort to the noble Lord that those who subsequently are proved not to have registered when the scheme goes live in the summer will face the potential penalty of a five-year jail sentence for the failure to register. That is a stiff sentence which, again, is outside my gift—it will be for the criminal justice system to pursue—but it is a very stiff sentence which, I hope, will send a very strong message to those who wish to do this country harm and who are sponsored by the Iranian regime.

I should also say to both noble Lords that there will be significant new training for all front-line police officers. We are going to explore further sanctions against criminal groups linked to Iran, and this goes to the point that the noble Lord, Lord Purvis of Tweed, mentioned. The Zindashti criminal gang has already been sanctioned, and that has therefore sent a strong signal, but we will look at further sanctions against criminal groups linked to Iran. That could include a number of other potential measures such as travel bans, which are key. We want to make sure that not just Iranian interference in the United Kingdom, in whatever form it takes—be it by the state or by proxies—is examined and clamped down on. We will certainly be taking those measures. The points that the noble Lord has mentioned are certainly ones of which we are cognisant.

The noble Lord also mentioned safe and legal routes. There are safe and legal routes which, again, are potentially operational, but, again, this country is a haven for asylum, and if individuals wish to claim asylum, that will be considered along with the position that government asylum policy has in place as a whole.

We are also looking at the issues with Jonathan Hall, the terrorism reviewer. We have asked him to look at both counterterrorism laws and the question of proscription, which, again, is an option we never rule out but on which I cannot comment in detail today. It is always an option for government in these areas.

I welcome the broad support and hope that we will monitor this. Obviously, as this scheme goes live in the summer, we will be able to monitor its impact on both

those who register and, in the event of anybody who does not register, those who do not. We can monitor the effectiveness of this, but it is put in place for the simple reason that we cannot accept the level of activity by the Iranian regime in the United Kingdom against both Iranian citizens here and British interests. That is why we introduced this measure yesterday and I am pleased it has the support of the two main Opposition parties in this House.

12.14 pm

Lord Beamish (Lab): My Lords, I welcome this Statement. I know that it will be particularly welcomed by my noble friend who, like me, was on the Intelligence and Security Committee when we produced our *Russia* report in 2020. The FIRS scheme was one of our major recommendations from that. My noble friend said he would work with local police forces to roll out information around the FIRS scheme, but what work is being done with the diaspora in the UK, which is based not only in London but throughout the UK, to make sure that they are aware of, and can be protected from, the Iranian influence that is out there?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): I am grateful to my noble friend. He is right that the genesis of the FIRS scheme came out of the investigations undertaken by the Intelligence and Security Committee, of which I was a proud member from 2015 to 2019. We are now developing at pace the implementation of the FIRS scheme, which requires significant infrastructure investment. It was delayed under the previous Government, but has now been given added energy by my right honourable friend Dan Jarvis, the Minister, and myself to make sure it is on stream for the summer of this year. It is, therefore, important that we send out two strong messages: first, that we are standing up to intimidation and criminal activity by the Iranian regime, and, secondly, that people in the diaspora need to know that the scheme is in place. We need to put some efforts behind ensuring that those who qualify for registration under the scheme are aware of it. That will be a major part of the communications strategy in the post-Easter period of this year.

Lord Polak (Con): My Lords, I declare an interest: the noble Lord, Lord Alton of Liverpool, and I are the two people proscribed by the Iranian regime, and have been for the past couple of years. I pay tribute to the authorities who have helped and advised us.

I welcome this important Statement. I do not speak on behalf of the Jewish community, but I want to thank the Government for their continued support for the protective security that the community needs.

The Statement says that the National Crime Agency will target those who assist the IRGC and others to launder their money. I fail to understand what more the IRGC needs to do to be proscribed. We have raised this many times: my noble friend on the Front Bench raised it today. I even voted with the Labour Party on the Trade Bill when the noble Lord, Lord Coaker, had an amendment to proscribe the IRGC, which he did in Opposition. I supported him, as did others. What does it have to do to be proscribed?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): I understand where the noble Lord is coming from. We keep proscription under review at all times. It is an option for the Government at any time, in relation not only to Iran but to other agencies and countries as well. It is not a silver bullet: the organisation does not disappear just because proscription has taken place. What we have done—I hope that the noble Lord will bear with us on this—is ask the independent reviewer of terrorism, Jonathan Hall, to look at the legislation generally and at issues to do with proscription in the wider context.

I welcome the noble Lord's comments on the Jewish community. One of the drivers for this is to ensure that members of the Jewish community have security from any state threats that are made to them. He would wish to know that around £18 million is being provided up to 2027-28 for security measures where members of the Jewish community feel they need them for places of worship. That is, again, a secondary, but very important, measure that the Government are putting in place to ensure that people feel safe in their communities.

Baroness Stuart of Edgbaston (CB): My Lords, it has been reported that President Putin has been making overtures to the Iranian regime to act as a broker in the relationship with President Trump. May I therefore urge him to talk to his colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to ensure that our Five Eyes partners and all those who work together to defend democracy do not ignore this new threat?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): I am grateful to my noble friend, with whom I shared time on the Intelligence and Security Committee. The situation with President Putin is one that the Government continue to keep under review. I will draw her comments to the attention of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary. It is extremely important not only that we understand the Iranian threat, but that we assess and understand the threat from Russia. Therefore, I take on board her comments and will feed them into the system.

Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws (Lab): My Lords, in asking a question of the Minister, I do so respectfully, and I commend the Government for the steps they are taking just now; it is a move forward. If we were to proscribe the revolutionary guard, would we not be able to maintain an embassy in Iran? Sweden, Canada, the United States and Bahrain—a whole set of countries—have proscribed the revolutionary guard. Is the reason linked to the presence of an embassy or to intelligence—the things Governments always have to think about? Secondly, if it is not possible for us, for all manner of very sensitive reasons, to proscribe—we may be the conduit for difficult conversations—can the leadership of the revolutionary guard not be placed on our targeted sanctions lists?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): I am grateful to my noble friend. I assure her that the decision to undertake any proscription, at any time, is a matter for the Government at that time, based on intelligence, security threats and a range of other matters that they will take into account. I am not in a position today to confirm or deny that proscription could happen; it is a matter for us to make a judgment on. We have already brought

charges against those conducting activity for, and on behalf of, foreign states acting within the UK. We are continually keeping this matter under review; it is not something we advertise ahead of proscription. I hope my noble friend can accept that point.

Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws (Lab): May I make another point? Am I not allowed to? Do the rules proscribe me from—

Noble Lords: Order!

Baroness Brinton (LD): My Lords, my noble friend raised the issue of safe and legal routes. One particularly pernicious act of the Iranian authorities is that they continue to go after the families of people they have executed. They are fleeing abroad as a result and now find themselves under extraterritorial reach. Can the Minister say whether people arriving after the execution of one of their family members will be given immediate support by the police and security services? It is clear that they are still being targeted.

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): We will keep that support under review. We will certainly ensure that any evidence of threats against individuals resident in the United Kingdom will be examined by police forces. Any attempt by any foreign power to intimidate, harass or harm individuals or communities in the United Kingdom will not be tolerated and will be thoroughly investigated. As the noble Baroness would expect, Home Office officials will work closely with other government departments to ensure that UK residents are safe and secure. Separately, we also have the Defending Democracy Taskforce, which is currently reviewing the UK's response to the issues of transnational repression to develop our understanding and ensure that we have strong system-wide responses. It is vital that people are allowed to live their lives in peace. Safe and legal routes, as with other issues, are determined on a case-by-case basis. The Government will look positively at the circumstances the noble Baroness mentioned.

Lord Arbuthnot of Edrom (Con): My Lords, in answer to the noble Baroness, Lady Kennedy, the Minister said that he cannot confirm or deny that proscription of the IRGC could take place. If he cannot confirm that it could be proscribed, what does “keeping it under review” mean?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): What I was trying to say to my noble friend—which I repeat now to the noble Lord—is that proscription is continually under review. It is possible to proscribe any organisation, and Governments have done that. If we do seek to proscribe, we bring orders before both Houses of Parliament to confirm that. The matter is under continual review. What I do not want to do is to give an indication to this House on whether or not the Government would take that step. However, with this Statement the Government have, for the very first time, sent a very strong signal to the Iranian regime that we will not tolerate its behaviour, by including it in the new FIRS scheme—the very first country to be included. When this scheme goes operational towards the end of the summer, there will be severe penalties for individuals who should register but do not. That is the general

[LORD HANSON OF FLINT]

thrust, which, as with everything else, is still kept under review, and which I hope sends a very strong signal about the behaviour of the Iranian regime in the United Kingdom and internationally.

Lord Alton of Liverpool (CB): My Lords, I welcome what the Minister said about the possible proscription of the IRGC, but can he give us any idea how long it will be before Jonathan Hall's report reaches the Home Office—is there a timeline for that? On transnational repression, the Minister knows that the Joint Committee on Human Rights is working with the Home Office on examining examples of Iranian transnational repression, and we have received evidence from BBC journalists and others who have been personally affected, including pro-democracy advocates. Last week, the Iranian regime's court rejected the appeal of Behrouz Ehsani and Mehdi Hassani, who were both at risk of imminent execution. Hassani is a father of three; he was arrested in 2022 and taken to Evin Prison ward 209, where he was subjected to severe torture. Following his death sentence, he sent a message to the people of Iran:

“This execution-driven regime knows nothing else. I will not bargain over my life. I am prepared to give my humble life for the freedom of the Iranian people”.

In combating this terrorist state, will the Minister liaise with his FCDO colleagues to ensure that we co-ordinate our efforts to raise those cases with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Human Rights Council and the UN special rapporteur, in order to challenge the grossly wrong, unfair verdicts that have been delivered?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): I am grateful to the noble Lord. I will draw his comments to the attention of my right honourable friend the Foreign Secretary. I am not aware of whether representations have been made in the specific cases he mentioned, but it is a matter I will look into after today. I will write to him with a response from the Foreign Office on those matters; I understand that they are of an urgent nature, so I will do that for him today.

On transnational repression, let me be clear, as I have said already, that it will not be tolerated and it will not be supported. We will take action on these issues. If anyone is concerned for their safety in the United Kingdom, in the first instance they should contact the police, who have had training to ensure that they are aware of the potential threats and dangers. As I have already said, the police are raising both the awareness and capability of front-line officers and staff across the United Kingdom to include an understanding of how threats from foreign powers are presented and how to respond to reports made by members of the public to police forces about potential areas of local concern. The National Security Act, which had cross-party support, strengthened UK legal powers to counter foreign interference, including actions on what would amount to transnational repression. I assure the noble Lord that it is a matter of concern for the Government that we keep citizens safe in this United Kingdom, whatever their nationality.

Lord Cryer (Lab): My Lords, I want to press my noble friend the Minister further on the question that has been raised repeatedly on the IRGC. It is clearly a

bunch of clerical fascists and homicidal maniacs who specialise particularly in the rape, torture and murder of women, among others. They will not stop perpetuating their poison and using proxies to do the same, whatever we do. Further to the question asked by the noble Lord, Lord Polak, I realise that the Minister cannot make a commitment today, but what does the IRGC have to do to lead to it being completely proscribed—not just the proscription of individuals but complete proscription?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): I am afraid that I may sound like a broken record, but the Government keep under review, at all times, the option of proscription. We will not publicly speculate in the House about the line that needs to be crossed to have proscription. However, I hope that my noble friend can be reassured that it remains an option that the Government can consider and can bring before both Houses.

Irrespective of proscription, the National Security Act, which this House passed in 2023, specifically bans assisting foreign intelligence services, such as the IRGC. The Act also criminalises receiving material benefit—such as payment—from these types of organisations. The maximum penalty for transgressing that Act is 14 years in prison, the same maximum as a proscription offence. Although proscription remains an issue for the Government to consider, there are now specific powers to ensure that individuals who find themselves on the wrong side of the National Security Act face severe penalties and jail.

Baroness O'Loan (CB): My Lords, I declare my interests in working for freedom and democracy in Iran. I welcome the Statement made in the Commons on Tuesday on increasing Government action against the Iranian regime. In that Statement, we received information about 20 identified potentially lethal Iran-backed threats to British citizens and UK residents, and its targeting of dissidents, of which we are all aware.

I listened carefully to the Minister respond repeatedly to the questions about the proscription of the IRGC. I had a Written Question about this issue in January. I am delighted to hear that Jonathan Hall is reviewing the situation. We ask him to make it an absolute priority, given the appalling situation in Iran, with 800 executions since last July. Action is definitely necessary.

Finally, I ask the Government to engage directly with Iranian pro-democracy groups and dissidents, so as not to legitimise the regime by refusing to engage with them, and to support Iranian civil society and opposition movements advocating for a democratic, secular republic. In particular, I ask the Government to permit Maryam Rajavi, the leader of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, to visit the United Kingdom? She currently lives in France.

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): On the first part, I will not repeat what I have already said on proscription, but it is helpful to say—as the Statement does—that Jonathan Hall KC was asked to review the parts of our counterterrorism framework which could be applied to modern-day state threats, such as those from Iran. This includes giving specific consideration to the design

of a proscription mechanism for state and, importantly—going back to what the noble Lord, Lord Purvis of Tweed, said earlier—state-linked bodies, providing more flexibility than is offered under the existing powers. I cannot give a timescale for that review but we are encouraging it to happen speedily. We have Bills before the Commons and Lords that it could be added to downstream if required. I noted what she said about civic society and leaders. I will take that away and reflect on it.

Baroness Foster of Oxtou (Con): My Lords, not only do we not proscribe the IRGC as a terrorist group, we allow Iran Air flights into London daily, which is astonishing. By all accounts, the Home Office has issued around 200 visas to Islamic clerics during the last 18 months, despite the regime's involvement in the 7 October attacks on Israel. Can the Minister confirm to the House whether this is accurate information?

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): The Statement said that we will strengthen the enforcement of our immigration laws and examine, on a case-by-case basis, the issues that the noble Baroness mentioned. For that very same reason, we need to examine who requires transport to the United Kingdom. We also need to look at people who we do not wish to enter the United Kingdom. That is why strengthening our immigration laws, irrespective of the other measures, is an important consideration.

Lord Walney (CB): The leadership being shown by the Government on this is highly welcome, but I noted the approving reference in the Statement to the investigations by the Charity Commission. Does the Minister share my concern that the Charity Commission, despite having a staff of 500 people and a budget of £32 million, has so far been unacceptably reactive and slow in looking at these issues? I think there are 130-odd live investigations—some of which are into Iranian-linked charities—that are not moving quickly, firmly or proactively enough.

Lord Hanson of Flint (Lab): I share the noble Lord's concerns around Iranian-aligned centres in the United Kingdom and the malign influence Iran might be projecting through them. I hope I can assure the House that that is on the Government's radar. We are examining them and will continue to assess the potential threats to the United Kingdom.

The Charity Commission is undertaking inquiries into both the Islamic Centre of England and the Al-Tawheed Charitable Trust. Ministers are closely tracking progress. My officials and others in the Home Office are now reviewing whether any Iranian interference is being conducted in the United Kingdom. Crucially, I hope that the specification in the Statement that Iran is in the enhanced tier of FIRS will, when it comes into place in summer, shine a considerable light on the Iranian state and the UK institutions and individuals involved in it. In my final comment, I remind the House that breach of the FIRS legislation for Iran, when it is introduced in summer, will result in a potential five-year prison sentence.

International Women's Day

Motion to Take Note

12.36 pm

Moved by Baroness Smith of Malvern

That this House takes note of International Women's Day and the steps being taken to promote women's participation and leadership in science and technology in the United Kingdom and internationally.

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Baroness Smith of Malvern) (Lab): My Lords, I first say how pleased I am to open this International Women's Day debate on my first full day as the Minister for Women and Equalities. In doing so, I take the opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, Anneliese Dodds, for the enormously important work that she did in this portfolio.

I also wish the House a very happy—almost—International Women's Day. The theme of International Women's Day this year is "Accelerate Action" because, right now, the pace of change just is not fast enough. In recent years—and, I am afraid, with recent Governments—we have seen far too many women left without the safety, security and opportunity they need. That is why the Government are determined to deliver for women through our plan for change, where women are central to all of the Government's missions: from halving violence against women and girls to kick-starting economic growth, fixing the NHS and breaking down the barriers to opportunity. Through our plan for change, we are making the changes needed to make sure women's equality becomes a reality. It will be an ambitious agenda for a decade of national renewal, and women will be at the heart of it. This International Women's Day, we want to celebrate the achievements that have been made towards advancing women's equality and redouble our commitment to deliver lasting change for women.

There is much that we—and I—could say about the achievements of previous Labour Governments and our plan for change. Today, we are focusing our debate on science and technology. We may not think of this place as a bastion of gender equality—we touched on that just yesterday in an Oral Question—but percentage wise there are more women in the House of Lords, a 1,000-year-old institution, than there are women in tech in the UK, a sector not much more than 100 years old. That gives us a sense of the size of the challenge. If our current trajectory continues, the world will not achieve gender parity until 2158. In the worlds of science and technology, those numbers could be gloomier still.

Our rate of progress will not see women making up an equal share of the tech workforce in the UK for another 283 years. That is an ocean of time—283 years ago, women in the UK could not vote, own land or property if we were married, go to university or enter most professions. Fortunately, we are not willing to let the current pace of change continue. This is a mission-led Government, squarely focused on creating a new era of opportunity and economic growth and a fairer society for all, and gender equality is imperative to that. So today I want to talk about how the Government are accelerating action in the UK and internationally.

[BARONESS SMITH OF MALVERN]

First, I will just give a reminder of why this is so important. We should care about all forms of equality in science and technology for their own sake, but we should also care because this drives the betterment of our society and the strengthening of our economy. When women and girls are equally involved in shaping science and tech, the world gets faster breakthroughs, products that work properly and better returns.

We get faster breakthroughs because experts have told us time and again that diverse teams pursue new questions in new ways, leading to better research.

We get products that work because there is a long history of technologies built without women that do not work properly for the whole population. These are set out brilliantly by Caroline Criado Perez in her book *Invisible Women*, which I am sure many noble Lords have read. Crash-test dummies based on male bodies do not adequately protect women in cars; life-saving drugs, mainly tested on male animals, have a question mark over how they will work for women; and when the first voice assistants were created, they found it harder to recognise female voices because they had been tested only on the all-male developer team who built them. For some of us, that might explain why our phones and speakers do not take any notice of us—or it might be for other reasons.

Finally, we get better returns because businesses and economies stand to gain hugely here. Research consistently finds that gender diversity and ethnic and cultural diversity are both good for business. Companies in the top quartile for gender diversity in their exec teams are 25% more likely to outperform their peers on profit than those in the bottom quartile. Looking at the bigger picture, if women were to start and scale businesses at the rate that men do, we would see a potential £250 billion boost to the UK economy. Without gender equality, our growth mission is stunted.

Let us turn from the why to the what: what this Government are doing to promote women's participation and leadership in science and technology. "Participation" takes in women as citizens of the digital world as well as creators of it, so we must think about digital exclusion, which disproportionately affects women, as well as online harms that women and girls are up against. My noble friend Lady Jones, closing this debate, may well go into those topics further. With the excellent range of speakers we have today, I am sure there will be plenty for her to respond to.

For now, I will focus on three pillars of improving diversity in science and technology. Skills: how do we make sure that women and girls have the know-how to participate in these sectors and pursue careers in them? Entrepreneurship: how do we support women to start and scale science and tech companies? Industry: how do we protect the rights of women employed by firms in this sector?

On skills, the Digital Poverty Alliance has estimated that if we help everybody currently in work to get essential digital skills, we could see a £17 billion increase in yearly earnings. But if we are to get that boost to the UK economy, we cannot afford to have such a big proportion of our population missing out. Globally, women and girls are 25% less likely than men to have enough digital skills to use technology.

As with everything we discuss today, we must recognise the experiences of the whole range of women in the UK. Women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are much more likely to lack digital skills, as are women with disabilities. The good news is that STEM education is growing. In the 2022-23 academic year, there were 35% more STEM A-level entries from women and girls than in 2010.

Breaking down opportunities is one of the core missions of this Government, so here is how we are making sure that this trend continues in the right direction. Across the board, the curriculum review is considering how to modernise education and qualifications to fit with work in the 21st century. Skills England is reviewing what courses can better fill the digital skills gap. Our new levy-funded growth and skills offer, with apprenticeships at the heart, will deliver greater flexibility for learners and employers in England, aligned with our industrial strategy, creating routes into good, skilled jobs in growing industries. We promote STEM apprenticeships to girls in schools through fantastic volunteers such as STEM ambassadors and apprenticeship ambassadors.

Women's participation in STEM has improved, but challenges remain. Women now make up 24% of the STEM workforce in the UK, surpassing 1 million for the first time. However, representation remains disproportionately low in certain fields, highlighting ongoing challenges. Higher education is playing a key role in driving change. Universities are implementing mentoring schemes, outreach programmes and gender-balanced research funding to support and retain female talent in STEM.

Early engagement is key to growing that pipeline of women into STEM. Government, employers and education providers are working together to inspire more girls to pursue STEM careers, including through the STEM ambassador programme and industry outreach initiatives. Here are just a couple of further skills programmes of which we are particularly proud. The CyberFirst Girls Competition invites girls aged 12 to 13 to crack codes and solve coding challenges, all to encourage them to pursue a career in cybersecurity. In 2024, 14,500 girls from more than 800 schools took part. On science, the CREST Awards, funded by UKRI, give young people the chance to run their own research projects aimed at solving real-world problems.

Another area where it is crucial that we build up skills is AI. The *AI Opportunities Action Plan*, launched by the Prime Minister in January, sets out how we will seize the enormous opportunity that AI presents to boost growth, raise living standards and transform our public services. But this opportunity must be open to all. Only 22% of those employed in AI right now are women. Women are also less likely to use AI in their day-to-day lives.

The Government will continue to back AI and data science conversion courses, allowing STEM graduates to gain an AI master's. It is wonderful to see that 72% of students on these courses so far have been women, far higher than for comparable STEM master's courses. With support from the DfE, DSIT will explore how to scale up extracurricular activities for girls in

schools to cover AI, building on the National Cyber Security Centre's successful work on cybersecurity skills.

The UK is also opening up opportunities for women and girls around the world. The Girls' Education Skills Partnership is an £8 million collaboration between the UK, UNICEF and companies such as Unilever, Vodafone and Microsoft. Giving women everywhere the right skills helps them to see new avenues that are open to them, from working as a code breaker to being part of the AI revolution or founding a business of their own.

That takes us to entrepreneurship. Here, let us take a moment to share the story of just one of the brilliant female-founded science and tech companies. Nu Quantum was started by Dr Carmen Palacios-Berraquero as a spin-out from Cambridge. Quantum computing could be our most powerful tool to fight climate change, design better medicines and transform every industry. But to do that, quantum computers need to be 1,000 times more powerful than they are today. That is the challenge the team is working on. It is a team with diversity at its heart. Almost half its employees are women. It has more than 20 nationalities represented and is an LGBT-friendly workplace. Companies such as Nu Quantum are essential for women to look up to, because women are still starting science and tech businesses far less than men do.

When we look at funding challenges, it is little wonder why. Overall, female-founded businesses got just a 1.8% share of total equity investment in the first half of 2024, and that number shrinks further still when we look at the experience of women of colour. In tech, the average deal capital raised by female-founded AI companies is six times lower than that by raised all-male teams.

This Government are supporting female founders across our economy to get the finance that they need. The Women in Innovation programme, run by Innovate UK, has awarded over £11 million to female entrepreneurs since it started, and women now make up one in three successful bids to Innovate UK, up from one in seven. We also back the Invest in Women Taskforce, whose Women Backing Women Fund connects female investors with female-led companies. Specifically in science, the Future Fund invests in R&D-heavy companies in life sciences and deep tech, many of which are headed up by female founders.

As well as helping entrepreneurs find funding, we are supporting the finance sector as a whole to reckon with its role in this. Over 280 companies, including most major retail banks, have now signed up to the Investing in Women code, committing to improve access to finance for women. It is not just a piece of paper. Companies that have signed up are shown to outperform the rest of the market in giving equity to female founders.

The proportion of female-founded businesses around the world has increased steadily in recent years, but we must continue to give them the environment they need to fly, to create new role models for the next generation.

Finally, I turn to industry. We will keep working with science and tech firms to boost gender equality at all levels, particularly in senior roles. The Employment Rights Bill will be a cornerstone here. The Bill will

make sure that women, no matter the workplace, are empowered, represented, protected and able to pursue meaningful careers, regardless of whether or not, for example, they plan to start a family. It expands gender pay gap reporting requirements, gives more rights to pregnant workers and new mothers and puts tougher duties on firms to prevent sexual harassment. It also introduces equality action plans, whereby large employers will have to set out what they are doing to improve gender equality. By making sure that science and tech firms foster inclusive working environments, we can make sure these are places where all kinds of people get to succeed.

I am delighted at how popular a debate this is to speak in today and that several Members of this House are about to make their maiden speeches, so I will make way now for them to share their perspectives, and look forward to my noble friend closing our debate, with invaluable insight from her joint roles as Minister with responsibility for science, innovation and tech, and for business and trade. Let me wrap up by reiterating that we do not just improve the participation of women and girls in science and technology because it feels like the right thing to do. We do it because we stand to unlock new realms of scientific advancement, technological innovation and economic growth—the key to everyone being better off—when more women and girls are at the table.

12.53 pm

Baroness Stedman-Scott (Con): My Lords, it is a great privilege to speak in our International Women's Day debate and to reflect on the steps being taken to promote women's participation and leadership, both here in the United Kingdom and internationally. I look forward to hearing the maiden speeches of the noble Baronesses, Lady Alexander of Clevedon, Lady Hunter of Auchenroch and Lady Boustead, and the noble Lord, Lord Jones of Penybont. On behalf of the Official Opposition, I warmly welcome them all to their places and look forward to working with them. I also congratulate the Minister on her new role; I hope she enjoys it as much as I did when I did it.

At the heart of our Conservative values lies the belief in opportunity, creating a society where talent and hard work determine success, not background or sex. I am particularly proud to be a member of my party on a day such as today. As a party, we have had four female leaders, including three female Prime Ministers. We are a party that recognises the immense contribution women make to society, and I am proud to say that I have never felt or experienced that being a woman ever held me back. The acceptance I have felt throughout my career is thanks to the contribution of women throughout history who stood up for themselves and fought for women's rights. It is thanks to them, quite literally, that we are here today. Women could not take their seats in your Lordships' House until 1958, some 40 years after the other place. Are not we grateful that we were not around then?

My first job was working for the Salvation Army. I am proud to have worked for an organisation which has done so much for women. In 1865, when William Booth started the Salvation Army, its foundational document affirmed that women have the same rights

[BARONESS STEDMAN-SCOTT]

to minister and preach as men, setting a trail that other Christian groups have chosen to follow. Today, the Salvation Army offers refuge for women and children fleeing or at risk of domestic abuse. From its inception to the present day, it has been fighting for women. General William Booth was ahead of his time—he was ahead of everybody. I am really sorry that we do not have any bishops with us today, because I had a great one-liner for them: “It’s taken you a long time to catch up.”

Like so many other noble Lords, becoming a member of your Lordships’ House was not something I ever expected in my earliest years; of course, women could not be Members when I was born. My earliest experiences of life were not that simple, and I owe a great deal to one great lady who set me on a path that has led me to a successful—I hope—and fulfilled life. I have to tell your Lordships that I was quite a handful when I was younger. I know noble Lords will say I am now, but believe me, things have only got better. I was doing something I should not have been doing, and she said to me, “You shouldn’t do that.” She took me to the Salvation Army; she took me to my technical college every day and picked me up. I did my homework, passed my exams and owe her everything to be where I am today.

When I had the honour of opening our International Women’s Day debate in your Lordships’ House in 2022, I had just returned from the 66th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. That year, the commission was focused on achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women in the context of climate change. Working with our international partners and reflecting on our role in the international community in pressing for women’s rights was one of my proudest moments as a Minister.

The United Kingdom has come so far on women’s rights in the last 150 years, and now we have to show ourselves as a role model for women everywhere who are struggling for their rights. We are a society they look up to as a model, where women can do any job: whether that be serving in the Armed Forces; running a FTSE 100 company, as my noble friend Lady Morrissey and others in this House have done; being an MP or Member of your Lordships’ House—or even Prime Minister.

Indeed, for most of our lives we had Her late Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, to look up to. She was a model to us all, both here and abroad, calmly and effectively steering our country through over 70 years of tumultuous change and progress. I know Her late Majesty was an inspiration to another great lady who was so close to her and has done so much for women, and I want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to the Duchess of Edinburgh. She has been absolutely outstanding in her focus on and championing of women, women in the workplace, equality, and action against sexual violence. I am pleased to see so many strong women contributing to our debate today. Women in public life bring different perspectives and speak up for the rights of us all. I am proud to be a Member of your Lordships’ House alongside so many noble Baronesses who have committed their lives to the service of others.

However, that public service sometimes comes at great cost. Women who are elected to another place or who serve in your Lordships’ House face the most appalling abuse and threats—abuse that is so hateful, simply because they are women. We must all stand together in calling it out. We must stand together against misogyny wherever it rears its ugly head.

It is on days such as this that I am reminded of Jo Cox, the former Member for Batley and Spennings in the other place. She gave her life, literally, to public service, and her life was tragically cut short while she was doing her duty as an elected politician. Her loss will be keenly felt by so many in this House and by those who had the privilege of working with her. We must continue to call out this terrible abuse.

The theme of our debate today is promoting women’s participation in science and technology. I am not denigrating teachers—please do not start me off; I am not—but I remember a young lady I spoke to who had filled in her forms to be an apprentice. She took them to her teacher and said, “Look miss, I want to do this”. The teacher put them in the bin, saying, “No, you’re going to university”. We cannot have that. I am committed to apprenticeships, and I know that the Minister is too. We want to make sure that we get the right advice and guidance to our women in particular, so that they can follow the right path. I understand that there are plans to merge Jobcentre Plus and the careers service. It would be good to know how the plans are going and whether there will be enough resource to provide educational and work advice to women.

Talent is equally distributed. Opportunity should be as well. It is our duty to ensure that every young girl who dreams of being a scientist, an engineer or a tech entrepreneur has the tools, encouragement and confidence to make that dream a reality. The late Lady Thatcher had a successful career in chemistry before turning to public service, and it is our hope that many more women can follow in her footsteps. By continuing to promote policies that empower women in STEM, we strengthen not only our workforce but our economy, our society and our global standing as a leader in science and technology. Let us mark International Women’s Day not just with words but with continued action, ensuring that the future of innovation is diverse, inclusive and driven by talent from all backgrounds. This is something that all noble Lords on all sides of the House can agree on.

1.02 pm

Baroness Brinton (LD): My Lords, it is a real pleasure to follow the noble Baroness, Lady Stedman-Scott, and I thank the Minister for her comprehensive introduction to this important issue. I am very much looking forward to hearing the maiden speeches today.

While the participation of young women in certain A-level STEM subjects is increasing steadily, physics and computer sciences remain slow compared with biology, chemistry and maths. Biology and maths, by the way, are the second and third top choices for females at A-level. Some 25% of candidates in physics are female, which is a considerable improvement. Unfortunately, for computer science it remains low, at only 15%. The expressive arts are still the top female

choices for A-levels. I wonder whether perhaps our education system is at fault—it is too easy when choosing A-levels to abandon the sciences and go for either arts or sciences.

I start by celebrating three extraordinary women I have had the privilege of knowing, who have made their mark over the last 100 years and were extraordinary leaders of women in STEM in their day, because we need to understand how the world has changed.

Dr Anna Bidder graduated from Cambridge in 1926 with a degree in zoology. She could not receive that degree or her PhD in 1934 from Cambridge University because she was a woman. Only after 1948 did Cambridge permit women to receive the degrees that they had qualified for. Despite that, Anna Bidder secured senior research and teaching roles from the moment she got her PhD and for the rest of her academic life, at Newnham College and the Department of Zoology, where she was teaching young men who got their degrees. Even more shockingly, it was not until 1998 that she and other female alumni from before 1948 were, believe it or not, finally allowed to receive the degrees that they had been awarded. By then, she had founded and been the first president of a college for mature women students in Cambridge, Lucy Cavendish College, which thrives today.

Dr Lucy Slater was a mathematician who worked on hypergeometric functions and was one of the very few women present at the birth of computing in the UK. Her stories, over cups of tea, about the size and slowness of EDSAC astonished my children when they were at school. She graduated in 1944, and, as a post-grad in the 1950s, developed the precursor of modern computer operating systems, later working on computer programmes for econometrics. Lucy, a friend and neighbour, was an invisible giant on whose shoulders many successive women have stood.

However, the places of excellence were sometimes not even open to women to start with. Despite exceptional female scientists applying in 1900 to join the Royal Society, it took the extraordinarily named Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act 1919 for it to become illegal not to consider women in STEM as members of the Royal Society. It was that same Act that enabled women to get their degrees—Cambridge University was not the only university that was a little slow to catch on. I say this as an alumnus of Cambridge University and a former bursar of Lucy Cavendish College, and I really support what Cambridge University does for women these days. It was not until 1943 that the Royal Society promoted two women, Kathleen Lonsdale and Marjory Stephenson, to be elected. Now, over 200 women have been elected as fellows, and the numbers are rising fast.

Dame Athene Donald, a fellow of the Royal Society, is a brilliant physicist and a champion for the future of girls and women in STEM. She said:

“As a young researcher I was judged on my science, but when I became a potential player in organisational strategy, that’s when I really noticed it”.

That is how hard it was for women to succeed a mere couple of decades ago. What has she done to change it? I really recommend her latest book, *Not Just for the Boys: Why We Need More Women in Science*. It does what it says on the front of the book; it really explains

the problem. She tells of her granddaughter’s description of the construction corner at primary school: “Oh, we have a construction corner, but the boys play there”. Athene has determined to change that. She roots this in our cultural assumptions from birth, the toys we give to our babies and small children, and what happens to children at nursery and even at primary school.

Even worse, I am afraid that there is still a perception that some parts of STEM are too hard for girls. Katharine Birbalsingh, the head teacher at the Michaela Community School, said two years ago:

“Just from my own knowledge of these things, physics isn’t something that girls tend to fancy ... There’s a lot of hard maths in there that I think that they would rather not do”.

She was criticised for saying that at the time; there may be some truth in what she said, but the evidence shows that it is wrong. The Institute of Physics said that the overall proportion of women studying physics at university has increased from 21% to 25% over the decade to 2021. Over the same period, the number of women professors in physics has more than doubled, from 55 to 140. To show that this is not just chance, we see that women academic staff members in physics increased by 52% and now make up 20% of academic contracts. Change is on the move. The Institute of Physics’s Project Juno provides grants to increase the representation of women among physics and astronomy undergraduates.

We need to reach girls in primary school too. I was lucky—my children went to primary school in Cambridge and, when my daughter was in the junior age group, every single class had female maths undergraduates coming to help at maths lessons. As a result, my daughter, a natural historian, went on to take chemistry and maths as part of her IB, and she uses both every day in her job.

I want to end on a practical, positive and brave note. The Mines Advisory Group, or MAG, highlights that women play a leading but overlooked role in tackling conflict and building peace. MAG has trained women—50% of them in Ukraine—and, in Angola, has the only all-women armed violence reduction team. As de-miners, they are trained in technology in one of the most dangerous roles on earth. Their skills also build relationships with farmers and local communities. De-mining means, of course, that farmers can sow crops once more. That is one of the main problems in Ukraine, where Russia has mined so many farmers’ fields.

These heroines across the world are saving lives and building for the future. No teacher says to them that there are things they cannot do. That is something we should hear—encouraging our young girls to find their love for STEM early by learning coding through Turing Tumble, as my eight year-old granddaughters do with my husband. They too might change their world for the future. The girls of today, the young women of tomorrow, are moving apace. May Athene Donald’s vision become reality.

1.11 pm

Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho (CB): My Lords, I too thank the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, for her masterful introduction to this important debate, but I have to say that I am angry. I am not a person prone to rage

[BARONESS LANE-FOX OF SOHO]

and fury, but I am angry. I am angry because this is an urgent and important question that I fear we are ignoring at our peril.

I have now worked in or around the technology sector for over 30 years, and I have seen no change in the relationship between the sector and women or in the numbers of women. In fact, I have seen a degradation, not just in culture but in the absolute numbers. It is very clear—many people have already spoken of it, and I am sure we will have many more numbers today. Only 26% of the global tech workforce are women. In leadership roles, the figure falls again, to around 15%. In the UK, there are varying numbers on this, but the last figure I saw showed that just 6% of leadership roles in the tech sector are filled by women. This matters because, as we know, software is eating the world. We know that it is not an optional to digitise; it is happening. These are the jobs of the future—the jobs that create the services of the future and the jobs that will be paid the most amount of money. It is about power, justice and fairness.

I am dismayed when I see the numbers, and I keep going back to the disconnect between what I see happening and the benefits and the bonus of employing diversity in your teams and putting it at the heart of a company strategy. I just cannot understand this disconnect. That is why I am angry.

We know that 85% of consumers care that their products come from diverse teams. We know that employees care about diverse teams. I am president of the British Chambers of Commerce, and we have seen numbers showing that upwards of 80% of future employees care about what the future workforce looks like in the companies they are in. Yet we see the numbers stalling and, worse than that, if you believe, as I do, that the sector is going to be eaten again by AI, Quantum and deep tech, the numbers fall off even more considerably.

We are in a perilous position, and it is extremely disappointing to see the enormous influence of the US technology sector being integrated into the culture of our own companies here. I cannot believe that there is a single person who looks like me, who has worked on the edges of the digital sector for so long, who did not feel like crying as they watched the inauguration and the six men who have completely and totally committed to a President who at the same time has degraded the role of women so substantially. It matters—culture matters, character matters, value of companies and leaders matter—and yet I do not see this being played out in an industry that is also so full of innovation and the wonderful history that the noble Baroness, Lady Brinton, so brilliantly described.

We have to take this issue seriously and make substantial change. I suggest two important areas to focus on. The first is around innovation and entrepreneurship. As the Minister has already said, and I am sure others will go into the numbers again as well but I am going to reinforce it, just 1.8% of venture capital funding goes to women. It is marginally better if you look at cofounding teams of men and women, such as I was in with my business, lastminute.com. That 1.8% is partly explained because just 9% of

venture capital partners are women—if you have teams of people who do not look like us giving out money, of course it will look more risky to give it to people who might talk about products for the menopause, babies and periods. The assumption is, “Who knows if it’s going to be successful when I cannot imagine that product myself?”

So, the funnel is clear. We have to shift it across the board, putting the onus not just on the entrepreneurs but on the finance structures around them. There are changes and brilliant things happening, such as the work of Debbie Roscoe, who I am proud to call my friend and who is raising funds for Women Supporting Women. But those funds are small: they are about £200 million, when they need to be closer to £2 billion, or £20 billion if we are really going to shift the dial. We must not give up the focus on finance—it is fundamental—and, within that, on entrepreneurship.

Secondarily, we have to keep a focus on culture—it is more difficult, more existential. I had never used the words diversity, equality and inclusion, or DEI, in my life until the last two months, yet I find myself defending the very notion of equality to journalists, people I work with and companions in the sector and outside it. Again, I cannot understand the disconnect between what seems like good business practice—as the *Harvard Business Review* said in 2015, if you have mixed and diverse teams it will lead to a 20% increase in your profit line—and what we now face, which is a fundamental row-back in the belief and priorities of substantial programmes. Just yesterday, I heard of Google’s edict from on high, rowing back on a huge number of projects that it works with here in the UK, in charities and the civic sector, that look at diversity, equality, inclusion—AI for Good.

This is a very significant issue, so I end by imploring you to feel the peril and urgency of this moment. I want to celebrate the amazing women in this Chamber. I am looking forward to the maiden speeches. But I am angry and nervous, and we have to keep fighting.

1.17 pm

Baroness Alexander of Clevedon (Lab) (Maiden Speech):

My Lords, I rise to make my maiden speech. I refer noble Lords to my register of interests. It is an honour to participate in this debate and to follow the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, and I look forward to my noble friends’ maiden speeches today. I thank noble Lords in all parts of the House for their warm welcome. I pay tribute to my sponsors, my noble friends Lady Kennedy of The Shaws and Lady Liddell of Coatdyke, and I thank the officers of the House and all the Palace of Westminster staff for their unerring kindness.

A maiden speech traditionally offers some personal insight. My early life moved between inner-city Glasgow and the isle of Iona. To reprise the ecclesiastical theme from earlier, my father was a Church of Scotland minister who worked for the Iona Community, an ecumenical organisation dedicated to social justice.

My Argyll connection cultivated one youthful STEM skill—the physics of coastal splash netting. I became an accomplished salmon poacher, which we debated this week. At school, I studied STEM subjects. I was planning to follow my maternal grandparents into the

medical mission field. It was an ambition that did not survive contact with the reality of rural medical clinics in Malawi.

By the mid-1990s I was working in international consultancy, but in May 1997 I joined the Blair Government to support the late Donald Dewar to deliver devolution. And the Holyrood Parliament, as we have heard, is an outstanding example of visionary leadership overcoming entrenched occupational segregation. My noble friends Lady Harman, Lady Liddell, Lady Armstrong and Lady Curran, with many others, delivered a parliamentary Labour group equally balanced between men and women—and once the dam was broken, Holyrood could never be a boys' club. The Benches opposite are graced by the noble Baronesses, Lady Goldie and Lady Davidson, who both led their party with distinction.

In 2008, after briefly leading Scottish Labour, I departed to spend more time with my children. And beyond that familiar cliché, like so many women I had totally underestimated the impact of toddlers and other caring responsibilities on my career. Today women still disproportionately exit STEM careers to manage family life.

I have spent the last 15 years in international education, including as a Scottish trade envoy and working alongside the UK's international education champion. Wherever we visited—Pakistan, Nigeria, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, Brazil—what most animated the Education Ministers we met were not lessons from the UK education system but how they might build effective skills systems. Hence I am delighted to see Skills England taking shape.

It is customary for a new Member to signal their areas of interest without exciting controversy. I confess to some discomfort because all those sermons that I imbibed as a child demanded that the listener engage with the dominating issue of the day, so I sought out the wisdom of the House in recent maiden speeches, all delivered BC—before Christmas. How seismic the changes are since then.

In his maiden speech, the noble and learned Lord, Lord Burnett of Maldon, the former Lord Chief Justice, eloquently eulogised the rule of law—a principle now seemingly questioned by leading voices in our closest ally. The noble and gallant Lord, Lord Peach, the former Chief of the Defence Staff, issued a rallying cry for the western alliance, arguably now in intensive care, and the noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Llanfaes, grappled with why so many have lost hope. That was before the transatlantic leaders embraced the narratives of the far right. Like all sides of the House, I admire the Prime Minister's masterful diplomatic stewardship, but these developments weigh heavily on my conscience, as they must for many noble Lords, as we look ahead. Populism thrives when citizens lose faith that politicians can bring about positive change in their lives, and yet this debate challenges that counsel of despair. All parents still aspire for their children to prosper.

I have the privilege to chair the body that certifies every electrician in the country. It is a vital STEM skill. There are too few women, and yet a high-quality apprenticeship is a route out of low wages, insecurity

and unstable work. It is a source of pride, hope and opportunity, so my first passion in this place will be ensuring that the power and prosperity that come from secure skills are available to all. My second passion will be tackling the regional inequalities that scar our country. Earlier this week, as a House we wrestled with our own size and shape. I hope that we find equal passion for passing power out from here back to the beating heart of Britain. My final passion is international. As vice-chair of the British Council, I assure noble Lords that we are engaging with the challenges of populism, strongman politics and escalating conflict. We are rethinking our place in the world and our support for democracy and equality. These are precious principles.

We live in extraordinary times, but as a child, listening to those sermons, I learned that life's purpose is not simply to critique the darkness but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly. So, as one of the newbies, I will endeavour to walk humbly and, in my case, to walk more slowly along these venerable corridors. I want to close by recalling here, on the threshold of International Women's Day, that each one of us stands on our mother's shoulders. If we dwell on that, we will be headed in the right direction.

1.24 pm

Baroness Hazarika (Lab): My Lords—and Ladies; come on, it is International Women's Day—it is my great pleasure to follow my noble friend Lady Alexander and welcome her to this House along with so many other great women, including the noble Baronesses, Lady Boustead, Lady Hunter and Lady Rafferty, who are also making their maiden speeches today. I do not want to forget the noble Lord, Lord Jones, even though he is a man. He is taking part in the International Women's Day debate, so he is now an honorary member of the sisterhood. In the rather alarming era of the global strong man, it is heartening to see the arrival of so many strong women to this Chamber, and I look forward to them all standing up, questing for change, causing a wee bit of trouble and speaking much sense.

As a fellow Scot, I am a long-time admirer of my noble friend Lady Alexander. She played a key role in the Scottish Parliament from its creation in 1999 until 2011, and she is a woman who gets things done. Her achievements include the first social justice report, tackling homelessness, fighting the pernicious Section 28 and announcing the first Scotland-wide fund to tackle violence against women. She also helped shape a more modern and more equal Scottish Labour Party when she was an adviser to Donald Dewar, and she was instrumental in making it more inclusive of women and less of a boys' club. It is fitting that she went on to become the party's first female leader in Scotland and paved the way for so many others. I look forward to the rich contributions she will make to this House and wish her well.

I also warmly congratulate my noble friend Lady Smith on her new role as Minister for Women and Equalities. Podcasting and Iain Dale's loss—he is still bereft—is very much our gain. I know that she cares deeply about these subjects and will do an excellent job for the many.

[BARONESS HAZARIKA]

This is such an important debate. Technology has shaped so many aspects of our lives for the better, but as the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, said, we have to be honest: there are winners and losers. The winners seem to be the very rich, powerful tech bros, now some of the most important people on the planet, and women often seem to be the losers. Women and girls are often at the mercy of a savage, rapacious thirst for online pornography, which is getting ever more violent, dark and dangerous. The online world is becoming a harder place and making our tech bro friends a lot of money, but I think we are all losing out. Young women are being told to just be cool with a bit of sexual violence such as strangulation or choking during sex. Young men are being taught that what they see on their phones is normal and necessary to be a man. It is not, and it is harming them too. We are numbing a generation. I pay great tribute to the noble Baroness, Lady Bertin, for her review into online pornography, and to the noble Baroness, Lady Owen, for her important work on deepfakes. I hope the Government can work with them to make the online space a wee bit safer for women and girls.

What happens online is not abstract; it shapes what happens in real life. Violence against women and girls is at a terrifying level. It is just four years since the murder of Sarah Everard. Do we honestly think that things have changed that much? The landmark Femicide report delves into the epidemic of violence against women. The latest report, just out, has found that it is not just young women who are the victims of male violence. One in eight women killed by men in the last 15 years was over the age of 70. Can the Minister update us on what is being done to better protect older women, often ignored in the media and wider society?

I used to feel very optimistic about International Women's Day. I used to look forward to all the celebrations, parties and gatherings, but like many women right now I feel pretty depressed about how things are going. Things are going backwards, with a rise in misogyny here and all around the world, the anti-abortion laws in America, women being erased in Afghanistan, and the effects of war on women and girls all over the world. It feels as if there is very little female representation in the room when these new global powers meet.

We have to be honest: the power structures in the world right now are once again very male, and technology is playing a huge role. So I make this plea to the Minister: we understand that technology and AI are here to stay, and that they are important to growth and the evolution of society. However, as we heard so eloquently from the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, this is a sector dominated by men, from the new global overlords who can make or break Presidents and leaders, right down to the engineers and the coders. So, yes, let us harness the power of this exciting technical revolution, but please let us not worship at the altar of the tech bros at the expense of women and girls. We must not be the sacrificial lambs at this pivotal moment.

1.30 pm

Baroness Stowell of Beeston (Con): My Lords, it is a pleasure to follow the noble Baroness, Lady Hazarika, and I pay tribute to all those doing their maiden speeches today. The first time I spoke in an International Women's Day debate, which was 14 years ago, I caused a bit of a frisson around the Chamber because I announced to the House that I had never actually heard of International Women's Day until I came to the House of Lords. I am conscious that, for a lot of women, International Women's Day still does not feel that relevant, and I am going to try and draw that theme together with the theme of the debate.

When I saw that this year's debate was on technology, I felt compelled to speak, having just finished chairing the Communications and Digital Select Committee and, while holding that role, spent quite a bit of time examining the tech industry. But, when I looked at the list of speakers today, I felt confident that other noble Baronesses—and, indeed, noble Lords who are joining us—who have distinguished careers in the tech and science sectors would be much better placed to talk about women leaders and innovators and to stress the importance of women having equal opportunities to succeed and having their talents properly rewarded and their achievements recognised. I pay tribute to the noble Baronesses in this House who have had distinguished careers in the tech sector. I pay particular tribute to the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox; I listened very carefully to what she had to say.

I was pleased the other week to be at a dinner with other female tech people and I was very inspired by listening to them around the room. However, today, using the time I have available, I want to pay tribute to the women who worked at the technology factory at the end of the street where I grew up. As children we knew it as Plessey but it had previously been Ericsson's and, before that, the National Telephone Company. It had stood on the same site in Beeston Rylands throughout the 20th century, and it designed and built telecommunications and electronics. As far back as World War I, the factory manufactured wireless technologies, and even in the 1930s there were reports of robots being made on site.

My mum started work at Ericsson's in the 1950s and, except for the years between her having me and my brother and us starting school, worked there until she was made redundant in the mid-1990s. At its height, Plessey employed about 8,000 people at the Beeston site. I do not know how many were women, but most of my mum's friends today, all in their 80s now, worked at the factory. To name a few, alongside my mum Margaret Stowell, I highlight Iris Herbert, Brenda Stone, who sadly recently died, Shirley White, Marg Smedley, Sheila Reece, Theresa Ward and many more.

I did not really understand what my mum did in the factory, but words like "transducers" and "printed circuit boards" got mentioned a lot. For those women, equal pay meant literally that—getting the same money for doing the same job on the line as the men, or getting the same opportunity as the men to do overtime, which was vital for my mum during the years she was alone. During the 1980s the factory was developing

digital technologies and thriving, but, by the late 1980s, competition from the Far East triggered its decline. Bits of it existed under different firms, but it eventually closed completely in 2008.

The demise of Plessey was a big blow for all of us who lived in Beeston Rylands, whether we worked there or not, because it was the heart of our community. That sense of loss is one felt by many of the towns that suffered from de-industrialisation, but I feel now, as I have become more interested in tech, that it is almost criminal that we lost such a massive tech firm from a provincial town. It is vital that the AI industry—or revolution, which I firmly believe AI represents—and other tech innovations create opportunities for new businesses in all parts of the country. Clearly there will be disruption, and sadly not all former industrial sites will be reversioned. Incidentally, I should add that the Plessey site is now a housing estate—a genuinely nice one. There is much more to be optimistic about if the Government can create the right conditions for inward investment and scaling of UK tech firms, including those firms led by the women entrepreneurs whom the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, spoke of.

So I pay tribute today to my mum and the Plessey women who are the technologists of the past, and I salute today's young female innovators and tech entrepreneurs who are vital for our nation's successful future.

1.36 pm

Baroness Moyo (Non-Afl): My Lords, I begin by cautioning the Chamber that I may sound slightly Pollyanna-ish, if not naive, in the remarks that I offer today. It strikes me as curious that, each year, across the world and here in your Lordships' Chamber, we meet to celebrate women, yet almost invariably we hear an extensive list of how women and girls continue to struggle, face harm, endure worsening inequity and economically recede. Of course, as policymakers we should not wish to see the lack of access and limited opportunities for women further entrenched, and we should be seeking and listening to lasting solutions. In this sense, clear and accurate articulation and problem identification have their part to play in achieving the best and highest policy outcomes.

However, we must also celebrate success and thus highlight some sectors where women continue to progress. In politics, the share of women in parliaments globally has increased from 24.3% in 2019 to 27.2% in 2025. In the United Kingdom, both in the other place and here in your Lordships' House, we now have the highest proportion of female representation ever recorded, at 40% and almost 30% respectively. Dare I say it? We are in the room where it is happening. We need to do more.

Around the world, several countries have achieved even higher levels of female representation in parliaments. In what is clearly a win for women in politics globally, at least 20 countries, including from Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, have a higher proportion and representation of women than the other place here in the United Kingdom. On that list are countries such as Cuba, Rwanda and the United Arab Emirates.

Meanwhile, in business and finance, the Cranfield University annual survey notes that women now make up 43% of directors on FTSE 100 boards, compared

with 5.8% in 2000. The number of women CEOs in the Fortune 500 has risen more than sixfold in the past two decades to reach a paltry, but nevertheless notable, 10.4%.

Yes, even in science and technology, the narrower fields picked to be highlighted in today's debate, we see some progress. It is sadly true that women remain underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and that women-led start-ups, as the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, mentioned, find it hard to secure venture capital for technology. Of course, there is a well-known concern that AI contains an intrinsic gender bias that continues to harm women. However, there is also good news worth stressing.

First, according to the Government's statistics, over 29% of STEM roles are now held by women. It is crucial for long-term economic growth that women form a greater proportion of the technological workforce. It is thus encouraging to see total numbers of women in STEM roles having reached 1.3 million in 2023, according to the WISE Campaign, up from estimates of 800,000 nearly a decade ago.

Secondly, there are visible improvements showing that the gender pay gap in wages and compensation is closing, albeit slowly. According to a 2024 report by Outsource UK, the tech pay gap has improved. It was at 15.6% in 2024, compared with 17.3% in 2021.

Thirdly, in terms of leadership, there is no doubt that there are prominent women making a mark, thereby inspiring a new generation of young women and girls. Here in the UK, we have standout examples in these important trends, such as Dame Emma Walmsley, the chief executive of the global pharmaceutical company GSK, which in the run-up to the 2020 pandemic was the largest vaccine producer in the world. She is also a member of the board of directors of Microsoft, one of the magnificent seven technological companies. Dame Kate Bingham, the prominent venture capitalist specialising in health, was instrumental in the rollout of the Covid-19 vaccine and was at the intersection of business and government efforts in the face of that pandemic. Here in the Chamber, the noble Baronesses, Baroness Gustafsson and Baroness Lane-Fox, count in the ranks of successful entrepreneurs in the fields of technology, which is why we must listen to them, but let us also celebrate them. Of course, there is also Hannah Fry, the Cambridge academic who has made maths fun again.

There is no doubt that significant and even unfair inequities between men and women remain and persist. However, we are policymakers—we are in the room—and if we are not the ones pushing to advance and scale progress in Britain and beyond, then who is? We need policies that can deliver more women working and leading on science and technology, together with greater pay and equity, which is why it is very interesting and helpful to participate in this debate. Clearly a lot more needs to be done, and at pace, but we must celebrate this year's International Women's Day by at least taking note of the progress being made in science and technology. After all, the more that we celebrate successes today, the more likely we are to have inspiring examples of success in the future.

1.42 pm

Baroness Hunter of Auchenreoch (Lab) (Maiden Speech): My Lords, I thank the Minister, my noble friend Lady Smith of Malvern, for introducing this debate. We were colleagues in government and I am delighted to be speaking today on a subject that matters so much to us both.

I thank those of you in this House for the warm welcome I have received. I am very grateful to the exceptional people who make this place work, from my first rather sobering moments with Garter and Lyon King of Arms, for Scotland, to the Clerk of the Parliaments and Black Rod and their excellent teams, especially, of course, the doorkeepers. As I was introduced only on Tuesday, I am afraid they will have their work cut out guiding me around for some time to come. I also thank the Prime Minister for conferring this great privilege on me.

I know it is customary to give a flavour of oneself in a maiden speech. It may surprise some people in this House that I am of Scottish stock: born in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to a second generation rubber plantation manager, Mac Hunter—a garrulous man and war hero—and to Joy Ferguson, who worked in the Force 136 cypher office during the war effort, in what was then Ceylon. They instilled simple values in me: to behave oneself, work hard and look after others. I hope they would be proud of their little girl today. My rather idyllic childhood was altered dramatically by the death of my mother in a car crash, when I was 11. My father then settled with my formidable grandmother at Auchenreoch, our family home in Angus, where they raised me and from where I take my title.

I am delighted to follow a fellow Scot and friend, my noble friend Lady Alexander of Clevedon, and I congratulate her on her excellent maiden speech. I am also looking forward to the other maiden speeches from my noble friends.

In 1987, I went to work for the then unknown Tony Blair in Westminster, at the very same time as my recently ennobled friend, my noble friend Lord Wilson, did in Sedgefield. I asked our boss what he wanted from me. He replied, “Alliance building”. This has been a large part of my life in politics and beyond, in business and academia, including with Members on all sides of your Lordships’ House.

On this celebration of International Women’s Day, I trust that your Lordships will not mind if, in the brief time I have left, I concentrate on my female influences. I thank my noble friend Lady Smith of Basildon, the Leader of the House, for her leadership and her warm welcome. She is in the great tradition of female leaders in this House, such as my dear and noble friends Lady Royall, Lady Ashton, Lady Amos and Lady Jay.

After my time in government, I went into industry at BP and Anglo American, both companies run by enlightened leaders. I worked on many programmes to increase the numbers of female scientists, technologists and engineers around the world. I welcome the Government’s commitment to encouraging more girls to study STEM subjects, thereby increasing the pipeline.

I am also delighted to be speaking in this debate with former political colleagues: my noble friends Lady Jones of Whitchurch and Lady Gale, the noble Baroness, Lady Casey, and many other remarkable women across this House. My noble friend Lady Donaghy and I are long-standing advisory board members of the University of Birmingham Business School, where we encourage research and teaching in women’s enterprise. I have declared this in the register of Members’ interests, as well as my shareholdings in BP and Anglo American.

At the Royal Academy of Engineering, I was the founding director of the Queen Elizabeth Prize for Engineering. I collaborated with the noble Baronesses, Lady Sugg and Lady Bertin, to ensure that all three party leaders—the noble Lord, Lord Cameron, Sir Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband—spoke at its launch. This year, we celebrated our second female joint winner, Fei-Fei Li, for the development of modern machine learning. Academy colleagues and I promoted participation in STEM by young people, especially girls, speaking in schools and working with the Science Museum. I look forward to learning from the many experts in this House.

I thank our Chief Whip, my noble friend Lord Kennedy, a fellow pupil of the Margaret McDonagh school of politics—as nice and firm now as he was then. I also thank my sponsor, the noble Lord, Lord Browne, my inspiring boss at BP, and then again when he was president of the Royal Academy of Engineering. I have been lucky to have him as my friend, mentor and guide—and a lifelong advocate of women in business, science and engineering. My other sponsor I have left to last. I thank my noble friend Lady Nye for being an utterly reliable friend and a constant political ally. I owe them both a lot. I look forward to building alliances with all noble Lords.

1.49 pm

Baroness Gale (Lab): My Lords and my Ladies, I am delighted to follow my noble friend Lady Hunter and to congratulate her on her excellent maiden speech. I think all of us who know her would expect nothing less than such a great speech, and I thank her. I got to know my noble friend during my time as general secretary of the Welsh Labour Party. By then, she was working for the leader of the Labour Party, Tony Blair. After the general election in 1997, she became director of government relations and has been described as

“the most influential non-elected person in Downing Street”.

I can believe that.

My experience of working with my noble friend was a very good one, and I believe that I can speak for other members of the Labour Party staff in saying that we all felt the same about her—there are some in the Chamber today who worked for the Labour Party when my noble friend was in No. 10. I can think of a number of occasions when, if I had a political problem, I could ring her up and discuss it with her. I know my noble friend will recall that, occasionally, there could be some difficulties in Wales. I knew I would always have good advice from her.

Whenever the Prime Minister visited Wales, we would have many conversations on the visits—all positive, I may add—and the visits were always successful. So

one thing I can say about my noble friend is that she was always approachable and cheerful, she would always have time for a chat and she was always reliable, and that made for some very good relationships. I always regarded her as a friend in No. 10, and I certainly look forward to working with her again in a new role in your Lordships' House, to which I know she will make a great contribution.

Today's debate focuses on how to promote women's participation and leadership in science and technology. The International Day of Women and Girls in Science was held on 11 February this year. To mark the day, the general secretary of UNESCO said:

"On this International Day of Women and Girls in Science, let's reiterate this fundamental message: women need science, and science needs women. Only by tapping into all sources of knowledge, all sources of talent, can we unlock the full potential of science, and rise to the challenges of our time".

I so much agree with that view.

But if we look around, we see the same problems that women encounter if they want to succeed in many walks of life. I see it in politics and public life, where women can be held back not because they are not good enough but because the barriers placed before them are very high. I know how difficult it is and what the barriers are—I think most of us here know. There are many: they talk about the glass ceiling, the brick wall, discrimination and the leaky pipeline, which is a new one to me and which has come about for women in STEM. There is also misogyny, which is a very difficult problem, especially these days. It seems to me that there is very little difference in what women in any area of public or professional life experience, and the barriers to overcome. There has been some progress, but it is very slow.

According to data from the World Economic Forum, it will take until 2158 at the current rate of progress to reach full gender parity, as my noble friend mentioned in her opening remarks at the Dispatch Box. That is an awful long time to wait, is it not? So what action can be taken to increase the rate of progress? Where positive action has been taken, there have been some great results, for example in politics. Following the general election of 2024, 263 of the 650 seats in the House of Commons are held by female MPs. This is the highest number of women ever to sit at the same time in the House of Commons.

Now this did not happen by accident. Over the years, much campaigning has been done to highlight the need for positive action. Positive action in any field can cause big discussions, disputes and arguments. I am so aware of this in politics, especially when all-women shortlists were introduced to address the underrepresentation of women in politics. Labour was the first to use all-women shortlists in 1997, and that did increase the number of women MPs. Later, other parties used positive measures to ensure that there was a good number of women candidates. So, gradually, the numbers have increased and there are now 263 women MPs, the largest number ever. By 2024, all-women shortlists were not used by the Labour Party, as this policy had been so successful that there was not any need for it. This is one example of where action was taken and worked.

Another piece of good news that I saw in the newspapers today is that there are now, for the first time, more women doctors than men. This is women in medicine. So I feel there are some hopes for women in science and technology. I was very pleased to learn that the Government have set out policies on how to encourage women to study STEM subjects. My noble friend Lady Smith of Malvern, the Minister for Skills and now the Minister for Women and Equalities, on which I congratulate her, said that the Government continue to support the take-up of STEM subjects in girls and women in higher education. She said that such skills

"are crucial for the delivery of the government's missions. This is why the department is building a coherent, flexible, high quality skills system to break down barriers to opportunity and drive economic growth, underpinned by a new Post-16 Education and Skills Strategy".

I believe that that strategy may be published soon. This positive approach by government is to be welcomed and I await the outcome, which should benefit all women and girls who want to progress into a career in STEM subjects. I look forward to the Minister's response.

1.57 pm

Baroness Bottomley of Nettlestone (Con): My Lords, I am delighted to speak today. There are two debates I always enjoy. One is the Archbishop of Canterbury's debate. Well, there are no bishops here today, so we cannot go any further with that. But there has been a lot of progress on female bishops since my time first in the House.

The other debate I always enjoy is this particular one and I am delighted to follow the noble Baroness: it is indeed true that there is a dramatic number of female MPs and Peers now. When I joined, I do not need to remind noble Lords that one MP in 25 was female. It was quite a tricky time. I commend the party opposite. I do not think it has been so successful on female Prime Ministers. We have had three. I will not comment on all of them—but I will comment on the first one.

What noble Lords need to know is that Margaret Thatcher used to say, "People turn round to me and say, 'You're the first woman Prime Minister at No. 10'. I turn round and say, 'I'm the first science Prime Minister at No. 10'". Of course, she was deeply influenced by Dame Janet Vaughan and Dorothy Hodgkin, most distinguished Fellows of the Royal Society, who, for a long time, were principals of Somerville College. A colleague just now challenged me and said that Lord Salisbury was a STEM man. He took maths, but I am not sure he should really be allowed to undermine Margaret Thatcher's claim.

While we have more women in the House, we still do not have anything like enough people who come from a science, engineering and medical background. I think it was 78 in the House of Commons at the last count, which is an improvement. The House of Lords has always been better for distinguished scientists and Fellows of the Royal Society. How thrilled we are to welcome the noble Lord, Lord Vallance, and how thrilled we are that his successor is the first female Chief Scientific Officer. In the Lords, we have the noble Baroness, Lady King, a fellow of the Royal

[BARONESS BOTTOMLEY OF NETTLESTONE]

Society, and many men. I pay tribute to my kinsman, and the kinsman of the noble Lord, Lord Hacking: Lord Julian Hunt, Fellow of the Royal Society, who is no longer with us but is a most distinguished scientist.

I am not entirely with the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, about rage and anger. I enjoy rage and anger, but I am quite celebratory today, because we have a great number of Cabinet Ministers who are women. I pay tribute to the Minister who is speaking and ask her to pass on best wishes to the delightful previous holder of her office. It is the bittersweet nature of political careers, but Anneliese Dodds is a lovely woman and was doing a very good job—and I am sure will do more.

I have been looking through the names of other extraordinary women scientists. There is Dame Ottoline Leyser, the first female head of UKRI, again a Fellow of the Royal Society and a plant scientist. We have Hayaatun Sillem, the CEO of the Royal Academy of Engineering, from Oxford and UCL and a biochemist. Then there is Irene Tracey, the first female scientist vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford, who is a neuroscientist and formerly head of Merton College. There is Dame Angela McLean, who has just taken over as Government Chief Scientific Adviser, and Dame June Raine, the first woman to run the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency—absolutely tremendous—and so many others. The Campaign for Science and Engineering, which does so much for us, now has a female chief executive.

I pay tribute to those women, but I share the desire that more needs to be done. I pay respect to those who have suffered so much and worked so hard in the past. We should read the biography of the first woman physician, in 1847, Dr Blackwell, and the persecution, poverty and prejudice that she faced.

In my professional life, I do a great deal to help women develop their careers in different sectors. The other day, I was in India, and I was reminded of a particularly remarkable woman who studied engineering then insisted on going to work at Tata, where they had a men-only policy. At Tata then there were no female lavatories, so she had to go home to go to the lavatory. That very remarkable woman is called Sudha Murty: she is the mother-in-law of the former Prime Minister. It is an extraordinary reminder of how recently people have led lives of sacrifice, discipline and determination.

I am sure that we need to do more to encourage STEM at an early stage. There are so many initiatives, with Teach Now bringing in science people, and with many of the policies that the Minister outlined following on, frankly, from the policies of the previous Government on how we can build that pipeline and avoid the leaky pipeline.

I want to pay tribute, finally, to the many maiden speeches. They are noble Baronesses, but a great number of them are my friends and I am absolutely delighted to see them there.

The Minister knows about the health service and education. The role of research in the National Health Service is critically important, and it is all too easily squeezed out. Dame Sally Davies, the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, who should be in this House, recently hosted a magnificent conference on life sciences

and health innovation and what we can do together by collaborating. I commend her findings to noble Lords for further study.

2.03 pm

Baroness Casey of Blackstock (CB): I am grateful to the noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Malvern, newly appointed Minister for Women and my former and very esteemed boss, for opening this debate on International Women's Day. I also thank, in anticipation, the noble Baroness, Lady Jones of Whitchurch, who is also a good friend. Both my noble friends have a lifelong commitment to tackling men's violence against women, for which they should be respected and thanked by the whole House.

I thoroughly enjoyed the maiden speeches of my noble friends Lady Alexander of Clevedon and Lady Hunter of—wait for it—Auchenreoch. I did it. Okay, good. I would just comment that I am very glad that I did my maiden speech a year ago, so I did not have to follow them, because I feel that the quality just went up quite significantly. I wish well the three maiden speeches to come, from the noble Baronesses, Lady Boustead and Lady Rafferty, and from a new member of the Labour sisterhood, I understand, the noble Lord, Lord Jones.

Each year in the other place, my dear friend and colleague the honourable Member for Birmingham Yardley names the women killed in the last 12 months where the principal suspect is a man. With your kind support and agreement, this year we in this House will also honour those women and their families.

I take this opportunity to read the names, collated by the Femicide Census, of the women and girls aged 14 and above, mentioned earlier by my dear friend, the noble Baroness, Lady Hazarika, and the four children included in that list this year, who have allegedly been killed by men in the past 12 months: Zhe Wang; Pauline Sweeney; Carol Matthews; Ursula Uhlemann; Tiffany Render; Francis Dwyer; Ruth Baker; Kennedy Westcarr-Sabaroche; Samantha Mickleburgh; Rachel McDaid; Dora Leese; Lisa Welford; Karen O'Leary; Sonia Parker; Tarnjeet Riaz; Anita Mukhey; Bhajan Kaur; Kathryn Parton; Emma Finch; Margaret Parker; Amie Gray; Maria Nugara; Patsy Aust; Veronica Chinyanga; Delia Haxworth; Joanne Ward; Lauren Evans; Maxine Clark; Scarlett Vickers; Sophie Evans; Joanne Samak; Carol Hunt; Louise Hunt; Hannah Hunt; Jenny Sharp; Alana Odysseos; Laura Robson; Kulsuma Akter; Rebecca Simkin; Olivia Wood; Courtney Mitchell; Nina Denisova; Alberta Obinim; Stephanie Marie; Sophie Watson; Vicki Thomas; Eve McIntyre; Montserrat Martorell; Cher Maximen; Brodie MacGregor; Zanele Sibanda; Bryonie Gawith, plus her two children, Oscar Birtle, aged five years, and Aubree Birtle, aged 22 months; Davinia Graham; Barbara Nomakhosi; Christine Everett-Hickson; Juliana Prosper, plus her two children, Giselle, aged 13, and Kyle, aged 16; Rachel Simpson; an unnamed woman who died on 29 September aged 70; Mary Ward; Christine Jefferies; another unnamed woman who died on 8 October, also in her 70s; Luka Bennett-Smith; Anita Rose; Mashal Ilyas; Rhiannon Slye Whyte; Catherine Flynn; Sandie Butler; Rita Fleming; Cheryl McKenna; Carol James; Phoenix Spencer-Horn; Harshita Brella; Alana Armstrong; Margaret Cunningham; Kristine Sparane;

Margaret Hanson; Karen Cummings; Astra Sirapina; Mariann Borocz; Gemma Devonish; Joanne Pearson; Teohna Grant; Heather Newton; June Henty; Leila Young; Julie Buckley; Jamelatu Tsiwah; Dianne Cleary; Claire Chick; Margaret Worby; Carmen Coulson; Rita Lambourne; Meghan Hughes; Lisa Smith; Ana Maria Murariu.

Once again, as I did this time last year, I beg the leave of the House to also remember, for personal reasons, Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry, both murdered in 2020, and, as mentioned earlier, Sarah Everard, murdered in March 2021. May they, the 95 women and four children mentioned here today, rest in peace.

2.10 pm

Baroness Bousted (Lab) (Maiden Speech): My Lords, I commend the noble Baroness, Lady Casey, on her sombre testimony of the tragic roll-call of women murdered by men. It makes me realise, yet again, that we should never forget that misogyny is an evil force with—far too often—lethal consequences for women and, as she has reminded us, children. I thank her for her testimony.

I feel greatly honoured to be in this House making my maiden speech—and on the subject of women. I was born in Bolton, the seventh of eight children in a large and loving Catholic family. My father was the headmaster of the local Catholic primary school and he had a saying: “You won’t inherit money, but you will get a good education, which will give you the means to make your way in the world”. All his eight children made their way in the world. My mother, as well as looking after her eight children, was a teacher, so perhaps it is no surprise that I became a teacher and that my professional life for the past 40 years—over 40 years now—has been in education as a teacher, an academic and, for the last 20 years, general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, and the joint general secretary, with Kevin Courtney, of the National Education Union.

Unions fight for rights and dignity in the workplace, and I pay tribute to the doorkeepers and all the staff who work so diligently to support the smooth running of this place. I have a terrible sense of direction and I am finding that this House is rather a rabbit warren, but all my requests for guidance and direction have been met with nothing other than courtesy and kindness. I thank the noble Baroness, Lady O’Grady, and the noble Lord, Lord Knight, my supporters in my introduction to this House, and the Leader of the House and the Whips, who have been so helpful in making us new Peers feel a little less strange and a little more competent—only a little more—day by day.

When I was 23, I read a book by Eva Figes with the title *Patriarchal Attitudes*. It changed my life. From that time on, I was determined to be self-reliant, to speak what I believed and thought, and to walk more confidently in the world. I stopped saying, “I’m not a feminist, but”, and started saying, “As a feminist”. That is a profound change.

There has been some implied—and some more than implied—criticism of teachers today. It is a bit too easy to criticise teachers, who work more unpaid overtime than any other profession to care for their

pupils and educate them. As a teacher, I worked to inculcate in my pupils a profound sense that the sexes are equal and that no one, and in particular no girl, should have her potential constrained through attitudes, beliefs and actions designed to humiliate them.

I feel that the progress we made in the 1980s has been reversed. Perhaps we thought we had won the battle for equality. We were sadly mistaken. In 2017, the National Education Union published a report with UK Feminista, entitled “*It’s Just Everywhere*”. It detailed the sexist attitudes and behaviours endured by girls in school. It found that sexual harassment, sexist language and gender stereotyping are commonplace in school settings, but teachers reported feeling unsupported and ill equipped to respond. Over a third of female students reported that they had experienced some form of sexual harassment, and almost a quarter had been subject to unwanted physical touching of a sexual nature.

I believe that the sexual harassment endured by girls translates too often into subject choices at GCSE and A-level, which can have a negative effect on their future careers and earning potential. We should note that the take-up of subjects that are portals to high-wage careers in IT and science remains too deeply divided on gender lines. In 2022 only 21.4% of computer science GCSEs and 14.7% of computer science A-levels were taken by girls, a number that has halved since 2015.

In 2024 a report by King’s College, funded by the Nuffield Foundation and titled *The Future of Computing Education*, found that girls are more likely than boys to say they do not enjoy computer science GCSE because it does not align with their career plans, or it seems more difficult than other subjects. The report calls for the reform of GCSE provision for computing to create a qualification that covers a wider range of topics, appealing to a more diverse student population and the needs of society.

This Government will shortly be announcing the results of their curriculum review, led by Professor Becky Francis. I hope that this review will consider the current gender imbalances in computing and other science subjects that are so heavily male dominated.

I will finish with a cautionary tale. In 2016 I spoke out about the sexist school bullying that prevents girls participating fully in the classroom. The Department for Education, on hearing of my concerns, issued a tweet. I will read it now:

“Story from @ATLUnion with no evidence is why sexism still exists. We should be celebrating the achievements and talents of women and girls”.

I and many others found the implication in this tweet, that speaking out about the sexist harassment endured by girls perpetuates the problem, to be utterly bizarre.

Of course we should celebrate the achievements of women and girls, but I am clear that we must also examine the barriers faced by girls—including the prevalence of sexist bullying in the classroom—to their participation in the full range of the curriculum. Like all young people, girls deserve the right to make choices about the subjects they study based on their talents and abilities, whatever these may be and wherever these may take them in their future lives.

[BARONESS BOUSTED]

I will continue to further the equality of women and girls in education and in the workplace during my time in this House. The struggle for equality is not over: we are just on the nursery slopes, and we must take up the cudgels and continue the fight.

2.17 pm

Baroness O'Grady of Upper Holloway (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow that wonderful maiden speech by my noble friend Lady Bousted. We have all been given a taste of her fierce intellect and education policy expertise, which will no doubt enrich this House.

As we have heard, my noble friend comes from a big family. In fact, if she had wanted to, she had enough siblings to form her own netball team and have a sub on the bench. I suspect that is one reason why she grew up to become a warrior for women and girls' equality, and for dignity for all working people. My noble friend championed the TUC's Unionlearn initiative, along with being an outstanding co-leader of the National Education Union. When she was TUC president, she also took responsibility for chairing the TUC General Council. As noble Lords can imagine, keeping order in a room full of union leaders, each with our own strongly held views, is no easy task—but it is perhaps excellent training for chairing a House of Lords committee in the future.

International Women's Day originates in the struggles of working-class women and their unions. In my personal experience, not only is my noble friend Lady Bousted on the side of women but she will speak up and get stuck in, and she does so with intelligence, wit and real sisterly kindness.

Today's trade union movement has incredible talent and expertise within its ranks: educators, engineers, coders, climate scientists and a growing number of members in new technologies and the gaming industry. Meanwhile, we have seen an extraordinary shift in the organisation of capital, with technology companies dominating the league table of the wealthiest corporations in the world. As well as wealth, big tech has enormous power to shape not only our material lives but our emotions, behaviour and politics. When Elon Musk provides a megaphone for alleged rapist and people trafficker Andrew Tate and known far-right agitator Stephen Lennon—aka Tommy Robinson—we all have an interest in how this industry is run and regulated. Let us be clear: in this country we absolutely support freedom of speech, but we draw the line at hate and incitement to violence.

I have always believed that technology has the potential to be a liberating force that can transform society. Think about the difference it would make if the estimated multibillion-dollar productivity gains were shared fairly in the form of decent universal childcare, shorter working hours or higher pensions. Imagine if the priority for developing work-based technologies was eliminating boring and dangerous tasks, and making every job safe, skilled and satisfying.

Women's equality is not just right in principle; it matters because it is about who gets to decide on tech design, rules and priorities, and in turn how that impacts on all our daily lives. For example, one reason

why we have seen race and sex discrimination baked into facial recognition technology is the very unrepresentative group who designed it. The tech bros would benefit from having more tech sisters.

Too often, technologies are designed to make working lives harder: tracking and monitoring staff oppressively, hiring and firing without a human review, and casualising employment contracts. Women, and black and ethnic-minority workers, are at the sharp end of these high-exploitation technologies in anti-union companies such as Amazon. We do not just need to change faces in the industry; we need to change systems of power.

According to a recent survey of its members working in tech, the professional trade union Prospect found that over 60% agreed that their employer's pay system is opaque and likely unfair. Is the Minister confident that Labour's Employment Rights Bill will tackle pay secrecy once and for all, so that women tech workers—in fact, all women workers—can win equal pay for work of equal value? When purchasing technology services, will the Government use their procurement power to lever up equality standards so that more tech apprenticeships go to young women, and so that rights to fair treatment and a union voice at work are enforced?

2.23 pm

Baroness Morrissey (Con): My Lords, I thank this House for its tradition of having an International Women's Day debate. This year it feels especially important to keep the spotlight on the contributions so many women make if we are to continue to make progress towards gender equality around the world. I agree that it is vital that women and girls are given every opportunity to study sciences and technology if that is what they dream of, as my noble friend Lady Stedman-Scott expressed so eloquently. It is clear that there are very many women who do, as we can see from today's news that there are now more female than male doctors for the first time ever in this country.

As colleagues—noble Baronesses—have already shared, there are many examples of the amazing contributions that women have made and, I am confident, will continue to make in the fields of technology, science and medicine. As has already been pointed out, we need more women at the technology table, which may well be a virtual one these days, to help avoid bias and bring women's perspectives to the fore as the digital revolution gathers pace.

I want to add a further point to today's discussion: while we must continue to enable and encourage girls to study STEM subjects, we must also encourage those very many girls who want to study the humanities to pursue their interests. For a start, real progress for women and girls is surely about having more choice, and not about being channelled down a certain path. I also believe that the role of humanities is more important than ever in an AI world. As AI continues to develop rapidly and take on many of the tasks currently done by human beings, including many of those done by people now working in technology, we will need good judgment, strong ethics and high emotional intelligence to ensure that AI is a positive force. We will need the perspective that comes from studying

mistakes made in history, the sensitivity found in the finest literature, the empathy gained through understanding psychology, a strong ethical compass that might be helped by a study of theology and the creativity that many arts and humanities disciplines foster.

I studied maths, further maths, physics and English at A-level, and then philosophy at university. Of all those, the philosophy has been the most useful in my long City career—yes, even in finance. Maths has of course been helpful, but in helping me manage money successfully or run a business well it has not been as critical as being able to analyse logically, challenge conventional wisdom, apply ethical judgments and have some understanding of the frailties of the human psyche, which are the enemies of successful investing. Those were all things that my philosophy degree taught me. My degree choice has also helped me to lead, largely because it showed me clearly that I do not have, and could not have, all the answers; in fact, when studying philosophy, you quickly learn that you do not really know anything at all. I was acutely aware that, as Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II put it so beautifully, leadership is often about finding ways of encouraging people to combine their talents to work together. I suggest that a history degree and a study of current affairs would also bear that out.

For decades, as has been noted, boys have dominated computer science, physics, and further maths at A-level, while girls have dominated many arts subjects, including psychology, sociology and English literature. The world, our country and many industries need both, and they do not need girls to feel that they need to emulate the boys to succeed. Women bring our own skills to the table. I always tell young women that they are not second-class men; they are first-class women. It would be ironic if, just as the world desperately needs more “soft skills”, as we say, we asked girls to become more like the boys by taking STEM subjects, and so they missed their moment, both to shine and to change the world for the better.

As others have already stressed, we now face a very significant threat. We cannot assume that we will have ongoing progress for women and girls, but we do have agency. Surely, one of our strongest arguments to convince the naysayers is that we bring additional talents and different perspectives to the table which can improve diversity of thought and business performance and help solve today's complex problems, which perhaps require empathy and emotional intelligence. In short, women should be able to succeed as women.

Huge kudos should go to the brilliant women scientists, technologists and doctors, but let us also encourage STEAM—adding an “A” for the arts to STEM; celebrate the achievements of women in every field; press on for progress with huge determination that no one can take away from us; and look forward with hope. I wish everyone, men and women, a very happy International Women's Day.

2.29 pm

Baroness Rafferty (Lab) (Maiden Speech): My Lords, I draw attention to my interests in academic nursing as professor of nursing policy at King's College London.

My heartfelt thanks go to my noble friend Lady Smith, the Leader of the House, for her incredible support up to and during my introduction and her generosity throughout. The noble Baroness, Lady Watkins of Tavistock, who is also my friend and a fellow nurse and academic, has been exemplary as my second supporter and introduction agency to the House throughout. My noble friend Lady Thornton—Glenys—has been so kind in shepherding me around the House and easing me into its ways.

I come to this House as a nurse and academic. Reading the brilliant biography by the late Baroness Patricia Hollis of Jennie Lee, one of my heroines, I could never have imagined speaking to you today. Like Jennie Lee, I was brought up in Fife, Kirkcaldy in fact, birthplace of Adam Smith and constituency to my other hero, Gordon Brown. Both Jennie Lee's father and mine worked in the coalfields of Fife. It was a tough life. I remember my dad cycling to Seafield pit in all weathers, coming home for a rest and a bite to eat before going out again to his second job in a local pub. My mother trained as a nurse in the 1930s and during World War II in the Civil Nursing Reserve. She inspired me to enter nursing through her stories of nursing prisoners of war in Bridge of Earn military hospital in Perthshire. I loved delving into her textbooks, devouring the gruesome details of disease. I also became fascinated by the practices of the past, firing my imagination both for nursing and its history.

Nursing is a science as well as an art, and I have been fortunate to work in a variety of roles as a clinician, academic and policy researcher, but I did not get off to a good start. Like my noble friend Lady Levitt, I spent rather too much time outside the headmaster's office, skipping classes and preferring the pool hall—in which I became very proficient—to homework.

Today's debate is highly relevant to nursing. Not only was international nursing forged in the crucible of the international women's movement at the end of the 19th century but the rationale for doing so was, in part, to combat the prejudice surrounding women's education by setting nursing on a scientific footing.

While nursing in England has become a graduate subject since 2013, its fate remains precarious, a situation made much worse by the increasing financial frailty of the university sector. The Office for Students estimates that over 70% of our universities will be in deficit this year. UCAS data shows that nurse recruitment in the UK has fallen by 4% since its pandemic peak. In Wales, nurse recruitment has fallen by 14%, yet a recent announcement by Cardiff University stated its intention to close the school of nursing. Particularly concerning is the steady downward trend of mature applicants to nursing. These numbers just do not compute in a scenario of chronic shortage of nursing staff. A landmark study that we published from King's College London in the *Lancet* in 2014 demonstrated that bachelor's-prepared nurses have better outcomes for patients in terms of mortality rates. A further study demonstrated that senior nurses contributed more than twice the benefit to patients, compared with their more junior colleagues.

Investing in nurse education and staffing across the career span yields clinical and economic benefits, reduces hospital length of stay and facilitates return to work.

[BARONESS RAFFERTY]

I am grateful for the excellent 2016 report—of which the noble Baroness, Baroness Watkins was also an author—from the all-party parliamentary group in global health, chaired by the noble Lord, Lord Crisp, which identified the triple impact of growing nursing globally. These include strengthening health systems, universal health coverage, gender equality and women's participation in the workforce, and skilled employment opportunities.

However, the engine room of the academic workforce is not in good shape. Council of Deans of Health estimates that more than 50% of the workforce is, like me, over 50—can you believe it?—with many universities struggling to recruit. In contrast, applications to engineering are booming. Could it help to boost the standing of the profession by designating nursing as a STEM discipline? I am sure that my noble friend the Minister will agree that we cannot deliver the refreshed long-term workforce plan or the 10-year NHS plan to come unless we support nursing education to secure the students, nurse scientists and clinicians of the future. I thank my noble friend the Minister for raising this debate, and I hope that these points might assist with the planning the Government are undertaking.

2.35 pm

Baroness Donaghy (Lab): My Lords, I congratulate my noble friend Lady Rafferty on her wonderful maiden speech. She is as qualified to speak about women succeeding in science as I am unqualified. She has done so many pioneering things in nurse education that I must confine myself to but a few of them: the first nurse to graduate with a doctorate from Oxford University—a DPhil in modern history; in 2008, she was seconded to the Department of Health to work with the noble Lord, Lord Darzi, on the Next Stage Review of the NHS; a member of the Prime Minister's Commission on the Future of Nursing and Midwifery between 2009 and 2010; and a member of the Parliamentary Review of Health and Social Care in Wales, which reported in 2018. She is a past president of the Royal College of Nursing, and in 2017 was nominated as one of the 70 most influential nurses in the 70 years of the NHS. She was a member of the *Times* Health Commission in 2023-24, and she holds degrees and honorary degrees from a range of universities.

Closer to home for me, my noble friend was dean of the Florence Nightingale Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Palliative Care at King's College. I was a non-executive director at King's College Hospital in the 1990s, and I was proud to chair appointment panels for the first consultant-level posts in palliative care, so I hope my noble friend Lady Rafferty does not mind if I bask in her reflected glory. Her analysis of what has happened in nurse education and training has some remarkable parallels with what has happened in teacher education and training—a subject which I know a bit about.

I thank my noble friend—Nurse Rafferty, Professor Rafferty, Dame Anne Marie Rafferty, Baroness Rafferty—for her maiden speech and in anticipation of the distinguished contribution she will make in this House.

On the subject of today's debate, I wish all participants a happy International Women's Day for 8 March and thank the five maiden speeches made or to be made.

The noble Baroness, Lady Brown, who has just finished her term of office as a distinguished chair of the Science and Technology Committee, recently called for the Government to review what she called the high upfront burden of current visa fees, which are higher than those in any comparable country. The noble Baroness, herself an engineer, said that the barriers faced by postgraduate students and early career researchers amounted to

“an act of national self-harm”.

Since 2022, the cost of a five-year skilled worker visa has increased by 22% to almost £12,000, and the upfront immigration health surcharge, which they also have to pay for, has risen by 66% to £1,035. Is the Minister able to tell us what steps the Government are taking to attract much-needed scientific talent to this country?

The noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Malvern, talked about a strong pipeline of qualified students into HE and careers in STEM areas, and said that the programme included strategies to raise girls' participation in mathematics post-16. However, on 29 January, an announcement was made about changes to the Advanced Mathematics Support Programme, meaning that, from 1 April, there will be a reduction in the number and type of events available. Similarly, the Government are cutting the Stimulating Physics Network and computing hubs. MEI, which runs the Advanced Mathematics Support Programme, has been forced to terminate the 40 area co-ordinator contracts. I appreciate that we have taken over an education service with a history of underfunding and neglect, but is the Minister able to give more information about how the Government will mitigate the effects of these cuts?

The UK has the largest female health gap in the G20. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has stated that the upcoming 10-year health plan and the spending review 2025 are a good opportunity for the Government to deliver on their manifesto promise that never again would women's health be neglected. For every £1 pound additional investment in obs and gynae services, it is estimated that there is an £11 return on investment. Absenteeism due to severe period pain, heavy periods, endometriosis, fibroids and ovarian cysts is estimated to cost £11 billion per year to the UK economy. As the royal college says, supporting women's health is vital for the UK Government's targets of economic growth and increasing the UK workforce.

The PwC Women in Work analysis said that, if sustained until 2030, continuing progress on female participation rates could contribute to a productivity uplift of 0.3% per annum, an appropriate UK GDP increase of £6.2 million a year. Can the Minister update the House on the steps the Government are taking to increase women's participation in the workforce?

Finally, it has been an absolute privilege to take part in this debate, not just to celebrate International Women's Day but to hear our five maiden speeches.

2.42 pm

Baroness Greenfield (CB): I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, for drawing attention to this timely issue. I declare an interest as founder and CEO of a biotech company, Neuro-Bio Ltd, having previously been a professor of pharmacology at Oxford University. Back in 2002, I was asked by the right honourable Patricia Hewitt to prepare for the then Department of Trade and Industry a high-level report, subsequently entitled *SET Fair*, outlining the difficulties of recruitment and retention of women in science. Sadly, over 20 years later, I feel that many of the difficulties that we discussed then still remain.

The question of women in science and technology is not just about fairness; it is about progress. Studies consistently show that diverse teams drive innovation. Research from McKinsey finds that companies in the top quartile for gender diversity are 25% more likely to outperform their competitors. In science and technology, diversity translates into better problem-solving, faster discoveries, and products that serve society more effectively. From Rosalind Franklin's work on DNA to Sarah Gilbert's leadership in developing the Covid vaccine, history proves that, when women thrive in STEM, humanity benefits.

However, systemic challenges remain. In UK higher education, only 31% of professors are women. In the UK's STEM workforce overall, only 29% of employers are women, and in the private sector, the number of female founders in biotech companies remains disproportionately low, hovering at around 10%. Even more disappointing, women founders such as me receive only 2% of venture capital investment, funding that is critical in commercialising one's innovation.

One of the greatest barriers to women in STEM is bias, both conscious and unconscious. In 2012, in a study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, faculty members rated male applicants as more competent and hireable than corresponding female candidates. More recently, a 2023 report found that women in STEM are less likely to be promoted than their male peers. This is not an issue of merit; it is one of perception. Blind recruitment processes and structured promotion criteria should surely become the standard. Institutions that have implemented these measures report fairer hiring outcomes and more diverse leadership.

A second challenge is a career break due to parenting responsibilities. The years when scientists must publish their most ground-breaking work coincide with the time when many are starting families. The current system offers a discouraging range of options for women: delay parenthood, risk career stagnation or leave research altogether. Here we could take a lesson from forward-thinking companies in the private sector offering "on-ramping" fellowships for women returning to research after career breaks. Government funding bodies could introduce similar schemes in academia—for example, grants specifically designed to support those re-entering the field after maternity leave.

Such initiatives would ensure that women can get back to progressing their research without the undue and unfair hurdles that arise from contributing to the

next generation. Meanwhile, in industry, tax incentives could encourage companies to offer more flexible career paths for women in STEM.

Then there is the lack of visibility and networking opportunities. Women, particularly in male-dominated fields such as biotech, often lack the mentorship and sponsorship that help to propel careers forward. Every major research institution should have a formal sponsorship programme where senior figures actively champion the careers of promising women scientists. We could introduce a "national women in STEM talent bank"—a centralised platform where women in science and technology can access mentorship, funding opportunities and leadership training, in the spirit of the Athena SWAN charter, but much wider and encompassing the private sector.

The root of all these challenges is early engagement. If young girls do not see themselves in STEM, they may never consider it as a viable path. Research shows that gender stereotypes about science start forming as early as primary school. Schools could partner with female scientists and engineers to provide visible role models. Critically, we must change the narrative by making the aforementioned solutions as prominent as we can. Rather than framing STEM as an uphill battle for women, we must present it as a field where women are thriving and driving the future.

International Women's Day should be not just a moment of reflection but a call to action. We know what works: transparent hiring, structured return-to-work programmes, active sponsorship and early engagement. It is time to implement these solutions at scale. The talent is there. The ambition is there. It is now up to us—policymakers, industry leaders, educators and female scientists—to break down the barriers that remain. By doing so, we will not only achieve equality but unlock the full potential of science and technology to change the world for the better, and ensure that the UK continues in its role at the forefront of driving the technologies of tomorrow.

2.47 pm

Lord Jones of Penybont (Lab) (Maiden Speech): My Lords, as I rise to make my maiden speech, it is my misfortune to follow four excellent maiden speeches. I just hope that I can maintain the high standard that has been established.

Before moving to the subject matter of this debate, I thank all those who have made my first month here so easy to navigate. I thank the doorkeepers, who have been patient in guiding me around the building and through the numerous corridors that can bewilder the new Member. I thank the parliamentary staff, who have supported me through my induction, and my party colleagues and the Front-Bench team, who have been so willing to explain the rules and regulations of this noble House. I have been particularly struck by the kindness of so many who work here and the welcome that has been extended to me. At my introduction on 27 January, I was supported by my noble friends Lord Murphy and Lady Wilcox of Newport, people I have known and respected for many years. It was an honour to have them by my side.

[LORD JONES OF PENYBONT]

I am grateful for the support I have received from my family. Most of them were here at my introduction, but my father was unable to attend because of illness. I know he would have been delighted to be here, as would my mother, had we not lost her some 15 years ago. I thank my children, Seren and Ruairí, who have had to put up with their father being away so much during their childhood. Now that they have grown into adults, they have been hugely supportive of everything that I have done.

Of course, I thank my wife, Lisa. During 30 years of marriage, she has been a great source of support to me, even when I was away so much when the children were younger. She has enabled me to develop a political career, and I do not think I would have done that had it not been for her steadfast love and support.

I count myself as a member of a fortunate generation compared to those who went before. My family before me consisted mainly of four generations of Welsh-speaking mining families, a legacy of which I am proud. It was the miners' strike that brought me into politics, and I think of my family today as I stand here, having enjoyed many opportunities that were simply not available to them.

I still live in the town of Bridgend—or Penybont in Welsh, hence my title—where I was brought up. When I was 18, I went to study law at Aberystwyth University, where I am now a professor of law: a development that would have stunned my student self and those who taught me at the time.

I practised at the Bar in Swansea for 10 years. Then, in 1999, I had the honour to be elected to represent my home area in what was then called the National Assembly for Wales. In 2000, I began a term of 18 consecutive years in government in various ministerial roles, as well as serving as First Minister for nine years.

It was a privilege to be part of the 2011 referendum campaign, when the people of Wales voted overwhelmingly in favour of primary powers for their Assembly—powers we used to create legislation that I would argue is ground-breaking. Your Lordships will be relieved to know that I will not list all the Acts passed during my time as First Minister, but I will draw your attention to one: the Human Transplantation (Wales) Act, which changed the law on deemed consent, introducing a soft opt-out scheme. That has led to more organs being available not just in Wales but across the UK for transplant patients. There are literally people walking around alive today because of that legislation. It is the one piece of legislation of which I am particularly proud.

I am, as far as I am aware, the first Head of Government in the UK to have come from a comprehensive school. That is a matter of pride for me, but it must also be one of concern, because we know that the schools attended by the vast majority of pupils have not contributed as they should have to government in the UK.

Turning to the subject matter of the debate, I mentioned earlier the opportunities I had that were not available to my grandparents. This afternoon, I think of my grandmother, who died 12 years ago at the age of 98. This is a cautionary tale for those who claim that

grammar schools are the pathways to opportunity by themselves. She lived at a time when opportunity for women and girls was strictly limited. She passed what was then called the scholarship, in 1925, and went to a grammar school. But the reality was that, as the daughter of a haulier in a pit, she had no option other than to leave school and get married. She lived a long and happy life, but I cannot help but think what she might have done, had she had the opportunities I was afforded. Which STEM subjects might she have studied?

It is my grandmother's example that drives me to ensure that as much opportunity as possible is afforded to as many people as possible. Her story is one of many, and I aware that, while some progress has been made in encouraging women to take up STEM subjects, there is still work to do. Progress has been made in the natural sciences, but there is a glaring gap between men and women in maths, engineering and computer science. The difference is stark: according to the Office for National statistics, five times more men than women are employed in IT. That gap increases to a ratio of 10:1 in engineering.

I know there are schemes to encourage more young women to study these subjects. I draw your Lordships' attention to the work of the Engineering Education Scheme Wales, originally set up to encourage young people between the ages of 16 and 18 to take up engineering-related subjects. It pairs young people with businesses that work with them on projects, giving them a taste of engineering as a career. Its work is also focused on encouraging more young women to study engineering, in order to bridge that huge imbalance in the sector.

It is clear there is more to be done. More needs to be done to remove those barriers to women entering and staying in STEM-related employment and I welcome my noble friend the Minister's words in this debate. She outlined the steps the Government are taking to address this issue, but it still seems to me that there is a cultural bias in our society that sees engineering and IT as male jobs. The steps the Government have outlined will help to overcome this problem.

In conclusion, progress has been made, but any country that wishes to maximise its talent pool must provide help to overcome barriers that hinder that objective. If I could use an idiom from the Welsh language, which I will translate into English so as not to cause panic among those recording my words today, the situation is “*da, ond nid da lle gellir gwell*”, which translates into English as “good, but not so good that it cannot be improved on”, especially compared with the recent past. We have heard stories within this debate about the disadvantages and barriers that so many women experienced in past decades. We must overcome those barriers. That is the challenge for the UK and it is one that all of us in society must play a role in meeting.

2.55 pm

Baroness Wilcox of Newport (Lab): *Diolch i chi am yr araith ragorol honno—an excellent speech and a sign of things to come. Congratulations to all my noble friends. What a wonderful bunch we have now. I am so glad to be part of this group. And I am delighted to be able to add my own observations on*

the immense dedication of the noble Lord, Lord Jones, to public life in Wales—and he is now able to make contributions to the whole of the UK from a seat in your Lordships' House.

Carwyn and I first met by chance when we sat next to each other in the audience of “Question Time”, which was being filmed in Cardiff in October 1998. He was a councillor in Bridgend at the time and we discussed politics as we waited for the programme to begin. Little did I think that, almost 20 years later, we would be sharing challenging discussions over the future of Welsh councils when I was the WLGA leader and he was First Minister. However, we always resolved those matters through such talks because of the openness and transparency local government found when dealing with the Welsh Government. This was in direct contrast to what my LGA colleagues in England were experiencing.

We also had similar starts in life. We both became politically active during the miners' strike of 1984-85. In Carwyn's autobiography, he says:

“What drove me into politics was the determination that whole communities of workers up and down the UK should never be treated that way again”.

He has put that sentiment into practice time and time again through his dedicated leadership of Wales in all of his roles, culminating in almost a decade as our First Minister.

I was sitting behind Lady Jones, or Lisa as I know her, and the children, Seren and Ruairi, when out of the blue Carwyn announced at the Welsh Labour Party conference of 2018 that he was stepping down as FM. There was an audible intake of breath from the delegates as it had been an exceptionally well-kept secret—not an easy thing to do in Wales. I could not commend more highly the noble Lord, Lord Jones of Penybont, into this House. He will make a valuable contribution in the years ahead. I am proud to call him a colleague and my friend. Croeso mawr, Carwyn.

In thinking about my contribution to this important International Women's Day debate, as a lifelong educationalist, a former teacher and a member of the NEU, I believe strongly in the importance of women's participation in science and technology—the STEM subjects—but I am absolutely passionate about this Government's mission to extend STEM into STEAM with once again the inclusion of arts into the curriculum and a much greater focus than the absence of creative and artistic learning that our children and young people have had in the state sector in England. I know that this Labour Government's mission is high standards for all and to break down barriers to opportunity, committing to ensure that art, music and drama are returned to their rightful place within the curriculum. In Wales, we have had the opportunity with a devolved education system not to be driven into the narrow focus of the English EBacc and Progress 8, which have effectively restricted creative arts subjects for the majority of young people.

In Wales, our new curriculum was published in May 2019. Expressive arts became one of the six areas of learning and included dance, drama, film and digital media, music and visual arts, linked by a common creative process and transferable skills. By contrast, in England, GCSE and A-level entries for arts courses have plummeted in the state school sector since the

EBacc was introduced in 2011, yet they remain buoyant in the private sector as public schools can devise a curriculum that suits their individual school without fear of the performance tables measures and Ofsted inspections that are based on them.

It is therefore to be greatly welcomed that the Government's current curriculum and assessment review will seek to deliver this broader curriculum. I urge my noble friend to look at how we have done this in Wales. The Budget put a welcome £2.3 billion uplift into school budgets next year, delivering on this Government's commitment to put education back at the forefront of national life.

I turn to the focus of the debate: women's participation and leadership. I had no idea that my noble friend Lady Rafferty was going to talk about Jennie Lee, but I am going to talk about her too. Last Tuesday, 25 February, marked 60 years since Jennie Lee, Britain's first ever Minister for the Arts, published *A Policy for the Arts—First Steps*, a remarkable achievement of participation and leadership in our political life that, despite the setbacks, has endured to this day. She insisted that the arts should be central to everyday life and publicly supported that for the benefit of all. In her words:

“In any civilised community the arts ... must occupy a central place. Their enjoyment should not be regarded as something remote from everyday life”.

Last week the Culture Secretary, Lisa Nandy, delivered the inaugural Jennie Lee Lecture. In it, she said that Lee's White Paper stated unequivocally the Wilson Government's belief in the power of the arts to transform society and to transform lives. She also announced over £270 million of investment that will begin to fix the foundations of our arts venues, museums, libraries and heritage sector in communities across the country—the green shoots of recovery. However welcome this investment is, though, it is evident that women are still underrepresented and undervalued in the creative industry workforce. It is up to all of us, women and men alike, to challenge the status quo and push for change.

That is so reminiscent of the struggles that we faced in the political world when looking for equality of opportunity at elected level. It would be remiss of me not to take this moment to mark the incredible achievements of my noble friend Lady Gale, of Blaenrhondda, who faced enormous barriers when establishing the concept of all-women shortlists and a balanced cohort to the first Welsh Assembly. It was her strength and tenacity that pushed these changes through and made political representation in Wales change from inequality to equality. That has remained steadfast for the past 25 years.

Let us learn from this great example and, within the creative industries, demonstrate the need to amplify the voices and talents of women and recognise the incredible contributions they make. With a diversity of roles, we can create a brighter and more vibrant future for that industry—one that truly values and represents the incredible range of talent, experience and perspective that women bring to the table.

Creativity is all around us, both within ourselves and others. It influences and shapes our lives from beginning to end. The promotion of women within all

[BARONESS WILCOX OF NEWPORT]
spheres—scientific, technological, creative and political—makes for a better world when we see ourselves around the table. As someone once told me, if they do not give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.

3.03 pm

Viscount Stansgate (Lab): My Lords, my Ladies—or can I just say “Colleagues”?—I am very pleased to take part in this debate. It is a pleasure to follow my noble friend and, of course, all five maiden speakers, whom I have listened to with great interest. It has been an extremely interesting debate. I do not think I have ever taken part in a debate with five maiden speakers before and I think, from what we have heard, that they will enrich the House for years to come.

It is also a pleasure to take part not because I have not spoken in this equivalent debate in past years—I have done so in every year that I could—but because the official title of today's debate is exactly the subject I have sought to raise ever since I have spoken, which is the role of women in science, and I gladly now do so again.

I start with a simple question: who was the first British person in space? I have been asking this question of people I meet in casual conversation in the run-up to this debate for a reason, and the answer I get is “Tim Peake”. People may remember Tim Peake floating through the International Space Station a decade ago, being chased by somebody dressed up as a gorilla. That is all fine and there is nothing wrong with it, except that it is wrong. The first British person in space was Helen Sharman, who on 18 May 1991, then aged 27, became the first British astronaut to travel into space as part of Project Juno. She was chosen from 13,000 applicants.

I start with this example because still, in 2025, women's scientific achievements are too often not sufficiently recognised. Women have been overlooked, underrepresented or even erased from history. Take, for example, Ada Lovelace: for years she was ignored and unknown. Her work with Charles Babbage's analytical engine in the 19th century had been forgotten, yet it was she who realised that the potential of the device extended far beyond mere number-crunching and hence is now considered by many as the world's first computer programmer. The programming language Ada is named after her and her image is on our passports.

I am grateful to all the scientific societies that have sent me briefings for today's debate. I cannot deal with all the information I have but would like to mention that the Institute of Physics, the Society of Chemical Industry, the Council for the Mathematical Sciences, the Physiological Society, the Society for Radiological Protection and even the Mines Advisory Group have provided me with some very helpful briefing. I also thank the House of Lords Library for its very helpful brief, which means that I, for one, do not have to belabour the House with the pertinent statistics that your Lordships will find the Library has provided.

I should declare an interest as the president of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee. It is Parliament's oldest all-party group, founded in 1939 to utilise the experience of boffins—a term of endearment in those

days—for the war effort. The first report that it issued was on the nutritional value of brown bread. I mention this because the Nutrition Society has written to me to say that shortly after that a group of people—all men—got together and founded that society, but its position has now been transformed. I am told that 75% of its members are now women and it has identified seven significant women in the field of worldwide importance, so there has been some progress. The Society for Radiological Protection wrote to me to say that having a visible female leader supported by women in key leadership roles has been

“instrumental in encouraging more women to be active”

and its own council is now 50:50, so that is also some progress.

Having more women involved in mathematics in the UK brings a wide range of benefits, including different perspectives in problem-solving, increased innovation in research and tackling potential biases in algorithms, which is particularly important in the field of AI. However, the Council for the Mathematical Sciences says that there is chronic underrepresentation of women at every level of mathematics education. Women account for under 40% of A-level students, 37% of graduates, 21% of PhDs, and only 12% of professors. This is a familiar pattern across the sciences. As a matter of fact, the Science and Technology Committee, of which I am a member, had a special session on maths on Tuesday this week.

Take physics: Marie Curie was the first woman to win a Nobel prize, and she won it for two separate subjects—the only person ever to do so. The Institute of Physics says that there is a significant and well-known problem with girls being underrepresented. Too many girls miss out on physics because they think the subject is not for them. They hear outdated stereotypes about the subject from family members and teachers. In her evidence to Parliament, the distinguished Professor Athene Donald of Cambridge, already mentioned by the noble Baroness, Lady Brinton, emphasised:

“Stereotyped behaviour directed towards a child will tend to lead to that child developing those stereotypical responses. A parent or teacher who says ‘girls can't do maths’ will be providing a message that children internalise ... These actions are not neutral; the implicit expectations will be imbibed and are likely to be material to decisions a child makes about what is ‘appropriate’ for them to ... do in later years”.

The IOP reports some improvements. That the proportion of women studying physics has increased has also been mentioned. The Society of Chemical Industry says that gender balance in science is “improving”, but that women continue to be underrepresented in graduate jobs—a very similar pattern to mathematics. The Physiological Society has provided a helpful brief covering a wide range of subjects that I cannot mention.

So what can we do? First, we must encourage young girls to explore STEM without fear or hesitation. Although my time is technically up, I must say that I am a grandparent and I have been watching a lot of “Peppa Pig” recently. Mummy Pig is, in fact, pregnant. I think this is important because there is something to be said for getting in touch with programme makers of this kind to help ensure that, in the development of their storylines, young people—or pigs—are given every possible encouragement to do whatever they like. This

idea that somehow it is not for them can be ruled out. We must invent an environment that supports women in science.

Finally—I really have run out of time—I invite everybody to the Attlee Suite next Tuesday, where the STEM for Britain event is being held. Early-career researchers from all the major subjects are coming to the House, and they will bring their research work. It is very competitive. These are the *crème de la crème* of the new generation, and it would benefit everyone in this Chamber if noble Lords just walked along in order to encourage them. Seven out of the last 10 winners of the top medal have been women, so I hope there is some progress to be made.

3.11 pm

Baroness Smith of Llanfaes (PC): My Lords, it is an absolute privilege to take part in this debate to mark International Women's Day. I congratulate all those who gave their maiden speech today. In particular, I look forward to working with the noble Baroness, Lady Alexander, and the noble Lord, Lord Jones of Penybont, to further devolution. Llongyfarchiadau, a *dwi'n edrych ymlaen i gydweithio*—I look forward to working with you both.

As a Welsh woman, I feel compelled to begin by reflecting on a key historical contribution of Welsh women internationally. Five years after the First World War, a group of courageous women in Wales embarked on a campaign for peace that would become a symbol of hope and unity. The Welsh women's peace petition, which began its journey in 1923, was the brainchild of a group of determined women. This petition spanned seven miles in length. It was signed by 390,296 Welsh women and carried across the Atlantic to the United States in an oak chest by four remarkable women: Annie Hughes-Griffiths, Mary Ellis, Elined Prys and Gladys Thomas. Among those signatories was my great-great-grandmother, who was from Neath Port Talbot. It is remarkable to think that, in 2023, 100 years after it was first signed, this petition returned to Wales and was digitised for the world to see at the National Library of Wales. I look forward to visiting an upcoming exhibition about the petition at Storiol in Bangor.

This campaign and the women who initiated it highlighted the long history of Welsh women engaging in global causes. It is fitting, therefore, that we reflect on their example as we discuss the role of women in the world today. As we mark this International Women's Day, we must consider the current state of global affairs. Just last week, while the defence budget received a significant increase, we learned that the international aid budget is set to be reduced by £6 billion a year. This is a troubling shift—one that disproportionately affects women and girls around the world.

We must carefully consider the impact these cuts will have on some of the most pressing challenges that women face globally, including in sexual and reproductive health and rights. When we discuss the rights of women and girls, particularly their sexual and reproductive health, we cannot ignore the role that STEM has played in improving women's lives. Innovations in these fields have allowed for advances that not only benefit women's health but provide greater autonomy, allowing women to make informed choices about their reproductive health.

The development of contraceptive methods, fertility treatments and safe childbirth procedures has given women more control over their reproductive choices and their futures. In addition to medical breakthroughs, the role of technology cannot be overstated. Telemedicine, for example, allows women in rural areas to access reproductive health services remotely. Mobile apps help women track menstrual cycles, fertility windows and pregnancy progress, further empowering them to make informed decisions. I must emphasise that the health data that women share on these apps must be protected by tech companies and not sold on, as I share the concern of the noble Baroness, Lady Hazarika, about the anti-abortion laws in the USA. Tech companies must not be allowed to weaponise fertility tracking apps to vilify women getting abortions. Data science has also played a crucial role in predicting and controlling the spread of STIs and in shaping public health policies that guide sexual and reproductive health education.

Despite these remarkable advancements, significant challenges remain in many low-income and rural areas across the globe. Access to sexual and reproductive health services is still limited. Cultural stigmas continue to hinder open discussions, and gender disparities in STEM fields restrict the contributions of women in reproductive health research and innovation. To overcome these barriers, we must invest in STEM education for young girls and women, ensuring that their voices and perspectives are represented in the research and innovations that shape reproductive health policies. STEM has already transformed sexual and reproductive health, making it safer, more effective and more accessible. It has given women greater autonomy and allowed for the development of life-saving medications. We must continue to harness this power of STEM to alleviate poverty and contribute to economic and social development globally.

As we see the cuts to the UK's overseas development assistance budget, I urge His Majesty's Government to recognise that investing in sexual and reproductive health and rights is not only morally imperative but highly cost effective. Research in these areas has the potential to yield substantial returns—£100 for every pound invested. Will His Majesty's Government consider ring-fencing sexual and reproductive health and rights funding within the aid budget? Women and girls across the globe deserve the chance to thrive, and it is our responsibility to make sure that they have the tools and support they need to do so.

3.17 pm

Baroness Morgan of Drefelin (Lab): My Lords, it is a great pleasure to take part in this debate. I congratulate the Ministers on making it possible and pay tribute to my noble friends who have given their maiden speeches today and really have, as somebody said earlier, raised the bar. It has been a real pleasure to hear so much about their history and what has brought them into the House of Lords.

I want to pay tribute to three remarkable groups of women who I believe play a vital role in promoting women's participation in science. The first and most important group has to be those women who teach STEM subjects in primary and secondary schools. I will go on and pay tribute to the women who lead

[BARONESS MORGAN OF DREFELIN]

our medical research charities, then I will close by talking a little about the patient advocates, almost entirely women, who have campaigned tirelessly for funding and a focus on scientific research of interest to women.

We have heard a lot about Welsh women in this debate, so it is a pleasure for me to build on that and talk about my mother, who was a science teacher. She also came from Neath, and she grew up in a very strong, close, working-class community there. She had real issues trying to get the funding she needed to get to university so that she could go on and become a teacher and teach her beloved science in some of the toughest schools in the UK. She inspired me and my sisters to go into science-related careers. Like the noble Baroness, Lady Rafferty, I would definitely classify my sister, who became a specialist nurse, as a scientist. The research that she supported was really quite incredible.

I pay tribute to those women who have been teachers in those difficult classrooms and in wonderful educational settings, who have been role models and encouraged girls to go into science, do science A-levels then go on to university or apprenticeships to take their careers further. We know that role models are really important here, and still today we see a situation where, at tops, 40% of STEM subject teachers are women. So there is much more to do but, if we get that level up, I believe that we will spark the interest of young girls to become the scientists of tomorrow.

Inspired by my mother, I went on to study science at university after a dalliance with student politics during the miners' strike—yes, tick, that fits the list. But my career took me into the medical research charity sector. As the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, emphasised, we have to think about the financials and the funding. It is important to note today that the medical research charities in this country contribute about £1.7 billion to medical research; they fund about 60% of the UK's public investment in cancer and cardiovascular research, and they are led by women in many cases.

Around 40% of the members of the Association of Medical Research Charities, including the AMRC itself, are led by women. Those are really important funding bodies for science. Notable leaders include Charmaine Griffiths, chief executive of the British Heart Foundation; Michelle Mitchell, chief executive of Cancer Research UK; and Claire Rowney, my successor at Breast Cancer Now. These charities engage in really practical activities to support women in their science, in programmes involving funding, recruiting and helping women to return to science after they have taken time out to have a family.

We know that it is a vital part of what medical research charities do, but they can do what they do only because of the incredible support they get from so many patient advocates. I pay tribute to the role of patient advocates. One of our own number, who is sadly no longer with us, Tessa Jowell, campaigned in her last weeks of life to improve the focus of research on brain cancer. I have seen thousands of women at

first hand campaigning to raise funds to establish a breast cancer research centre that has now become the best in the world.

We know that women want to work in areas of science focused on areas of concern to women themselves. By enhancing the resources made available for those areas, I believe we will also encourage the greater participation of women in science.

3.23 pm

Baroness Goudie (Lab): My Lords, I support the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, and congratulate her on being made Minister for Women and Equalities in addition to her other activities. I know that she will be fantastic on this issue. I also congratulate my colleagues on their maiden speeches today—in particular my two good friends, my noble friends Lady Alexander and Lady Hunter. It is not that the others are not my friends, but I have known those two for a lifetime. They are my friends and they know all my bad points; they all have good points, but they have known me too long.

I declare an interest relevant to today's debate, in that I am a founder and member of the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and an activist in Global Women Asia, which I helped to found, and which, among other things, represents women engineers who work in AI and other areas. It has now been going for about three years.

Turning to International Women's Day, I congratulate everyone on this great day and I hope we will have more speakers next year from around the House, celebrating the initiatives that enhance women's participation and leadership in science and technology, both in the United Kingdom and around the world. This occasion is not only a celebration of achievement but a reminder of the critical role women play in securing peace and shaping the future, especially as we transition into the AI age.

For centuries, women have been the bedrock of peaceful communities, acting as mediators, caregivers and advocates of justice and inclusion. Their involvement in peace processes has been shown to result in more durable and sustainable peace. In conflict zones across the globe, women are increasingly taking on roles traditionally reserved for men. They are clearing landmines, neutralising unexploded bombs and destroying weapons. Women are instrumental in helping communities recover and rebuild following the devastation of war. Their roles as peacebuilders, decision-makers, wage-earners and caregivers demonstrate that when women lead, peace is more resilient.

At the same time, we are witnessing a transformation in technology. Digital and AI innovations are reshaping every aspect of our lives: from the way we communicate to how Governments serve their citizens. Yet, as these systems grow ever more influential, there is a danger that they might perpetuate biases if not designed with care. It is imperative, therefore, that women are not merely participants but the engineers and architects of this digital revolution. Their insights, honed through diverse lived experiences, are essential in ensuring that technology systems are fair and serve all citizens equally.

Consider the pioneering work of Dr Joy Buolamwini at MIT Media Lab, whose research on algorithmic bias has exposed how technology can inadvertently

reinforce gender and racial prejudices. Similarly, the work of Kate Crawford in critically assessing the societal impacts of machine learning has challenged us to rethink our ethical frameworks. Here in the United Kingdom, leaders such as Dame Wendy Hall have been at the forefront of promoting inclusivity in computer science, laying a strong foundation for a digital future that reflects our shared values.

The statistics underscore the urgency of our mission. Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, as analysed by the Government, shows that while men dominate most STEM subjects in higher education, women lead in natural sciences, psychology, medicine, dentistry and allied medical subjects. Yet women are less likely than men to start an apprenticeship in STEM fields. Engineering UK analysis of Department for Education data reveals that women account for just 17% of engineering and technology-related apprenticeship starts in England. We must put more pressure on schools to tell more pupils about STEM, and have more visits to schools from people from these backgrounds, through Speakers for Schools and other organisations, including the education organisation in this House. This is vital. That 17% figure compares to 52% across all subjects. UNESCO's figures for 2016-18 indicate that women represented 28% of engineering, manufacturing and construction graduates and 30% of ICT graduates, compared with 57% in natural sciences, mathematics and statistics. Furthermore, STEM Women highlights how the lack of representation of women in STEM higher education impacts the workforce, and it calls for more initiatives to encourage women to study STEM, transition into the workforce and emerge as future leaders.

The rapid progression of technology offers a unique opportunity to level the playing field. Digital platforms and AI can dismantle traditional barriers, broadening access to education, employment and civic engagement. In every community, from conflict zones to urban centres, women have shown exceptional resilience and an innate ability to foster dialogue and empathy. Their participation in building the digital future not only enhances innovation but ensures that the systems they create are both equitable and compassionate.

In conclusion, promoting women's leadership in science and technology is not merely an issue of equality; it is essential for peace, justice and prosperity. As we stand on the threshold of the AI age, we must commit to a future where both men and women co-design the digital world. The House must champion policies that foster gender equality in every sphere of innovation, ensuring that the benefits of technological progress are shared by all.

3.30 pm

Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle (GP): My Lords, it is a great pleasure to take part in this International Women's Day debate, and I welcome the Minister to her new role. I should perhaps declare an interest, since I contributed several chapters to the two-volume series *The Honourable Ladies*, short biographies of all the women MPs up to 1996, which she edited with Iain Dale.

This is my fourth International Women's Day speech in your Lordships' House. In previous ones, I have uncovered buried, silenced voices of women from the past, and I was terribly tempted to do that this time. For women in science, there are myriad possibilities: from Aganice, an Egyptian princess during the Middle Kingdom who worked on astronomy and natural history, through to the 17th-century scientific illustrators Giovanna Garzoni and Maria Sibylla Merian—particular favourites of mine, both of whom, atypically for their time and centuries hence, treated insects as independent actors and agents rather than stiff, dead subjects to be pinned for the human gaze. It is possible to draw a direct line of ecological thinking by women from them to Suzanne Simard, the discoverer of what has been dubbed the “world-wide wood” of interrelationships between various species in woodland environments.

However, I could not focus on history today, not in the world of 2025. Instead, my speech will be, if I may humbly say so, a companion to that of the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox of Soho. The official theme of this International Women's Day is “Accelerate Action”, but, rather than that, we need, as the noble Baroness said, to feel the perilous nature of the moment. To put it in one verb, I would say our theme should be “Resist”, for what we are seeing is a dual and interconnected attack on women and on science by the leaders of the world's most powerful state, the United States of America, which was, according to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, responsible for 32% of global science and research funding in 2021.

It is not like we were not warned, for the destructive ideology of the Trump Administration was constructed in plain sight, in the form of Project 2025. I give the local woman's voice—from the US National Women's Law Center—to explain what is now being implemented in Washington. It says that this project

“seeks to impose a hierarchical, gendered, patriarchal vision of society ... focused on enforcing a vision of the family that relies on fixed and narrowly defined gender roles, and in undermining protections that enable women and LGBTQIA+ people to thrive outside of a male-dominated heterosexual family. It also seeks to reinforce racial hierarchy”.

We have to note that this is a world envisaged without democracy. If noble Members have not read *The Sovereign Individual*, I would urge them to. It was republished in 2020 with a preface from Peter Thiel, co-founder of the tech company Palantir, a name I recognise particularly from my time in the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme due to its pervasive presence across our military. The book claims that the “information revolution” will bring about the “death of politics”, for which might be read the death of human rights, the rule of law and what so many women and men have fought for over decades and centuries.

That attack on women and girls, a desire to restrict their human potential, is all too evidently part of a broader attack on science. I note an article in the journal *Nature* today stating the US National Institutes of Health has begun mass terminations of research grants that fund active scientific projects. The aim is to cancel grants in any way related to gender identity, diversity, equity and inclusion in the scientific workforce, environmental justice and climate change. Those ongoing projects are all to be cancelled.

[BARONESS BENNETT OF MANOR CASTLE]

I finish with some questions to the Minister. Of course, sitting in this Chamber we have limited influence on what happens in the United States—perhaps no real influence at all as it increasingly aligns itself with Russia rather than its traditional allies. However, this Government have a responsibility for what happens here in the UK.

I note that on Bluesky today there was an advert from a French university seeking applicants for a “safe place for science programme” that was explicitly directed towards US researchers. Will the Government work with UK institutions to similarly provide a refuge for researchers now based in the US?

Companies such as Google, Amazon and Meta, and firms with tentacles right through the UK Government such as KPMG and Deloitte, are all withdrawing, cancelling or reversing what are known as diversity, equality and inclusion programmes. Will the Government ensure that wherever they operate in the UK, particularly but not solely in the UK Government, British values and laws on diversity and inclusion will be upheld here on our soil?

To pick up on a point made by the noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Llanfaes, the slashing of budgets has had a huge impact on global efforts against polio, HIV, malaria and particularly tuberculosis. Are the British Government going to try to pick up the slack? I note that, with TB, there is great concern about antimicrobial resistance.

I want to finish by being a little positive. Final plans are now being made for 32 co-ordinated “stand up for science” rallies across the US and affiliated walkouts and protests around the globe, put together on the initiative of five early-career researchers. Will the Minister join me in supporting that call to stand up for science and agree that UK institutions, such as the Royal Society, should be doing just that?

3.37 pm

Lord Davies of Brixton (Lab): I spoke in this debate last year about the gender pensions gap. It is still there, but I am going to speak more broadly this year, following the theme—quite clearly set out—of how to promote women’s participation and leadership in science and technology.

Before moving on, I need first to congratulate my noble friends Lady Alexander of Clevedon, Lady Hunter of Auchenreoch, Lady Boustead, Lady Rafferty and Lord Jones of Penybont on their excellent and germane maiden speeches. They will all clearly be major assets to the House. I also congratulate my noble friend Lady Smith of Malvern on her appointment as Minister for Women and Equalities.

I welcome this debate. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to be here and to listen to what has been said. It is also a pleasure to contribute, despite the ever-present inevitability of mansplaining. I congratulate my noble friends Lord Jones and Lord Stansgate on their skill in avoiding that danger, but the only certain way to escape falling into the trap is simply to listen to the experience of women, particularly women with lived experience of success in science and technology. We have heard about that with great pleasure in this House today.

I also asked my older daughter. Not only is she a great friend and companion; not only is she a mother of a brilliant grandchild but I am immensely proud that she is an engineer. I have to emphasise that the credit is all hers that she is a professor in the engineering department at the University of Cambridge. I asked her what key point she would like to see raised in this debate. She mentioned in essence—I paraphrase—family-friendly policies that enable her to participate fully and deliver the work in which she is involved undertaking research, with that support both social and in employment. The specific issue she mentioned was support through maternity, through periods when, inevitably, women have children. Support for people in their careers through periods of maternity is obviously important to the individuals concerned and their families but it is also important to all of us, because it avoids the loss of the tremendous talent that is available, which we have to exploit—that is not quite the right word—or employ to the full.

In summarising the challenges and future directions, we have to understand that, despite the undoubted progress that there has been, women in STEM still face barriers, including unconscious bias, workplace discrimination and lack of representation in leadership positions. We have to foster sustainable change: efforts must go beyond entry-level recruitment and focus on career retention, leadership and policy reforms, not least addressing the issues that arise with maternity. We must recognise that women’s participation and leadership in science, technology, engineering and mathematics are vital for innovation, economic growth and social progress. The Government have made it clear that their number one goal is growth, and mobilising the full talent of women and girls is a crucial element in achieving that aim.

3.42 pm

Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge (Con): My Lords, I am delighted to take part in today’s International Women’s Day debate. I congratulate all the noble Lords who made their maiden speeches.

Artificial intelligence represents one of the greatest opportunities for growth and advancement since the industrial revolution. We should rightly be very excited about its potential. It is reshaping the world as we know it: powering our industries, aiding our scientific discoveries, and redefining how we live and work. However, as noble Baronesses have highlighted today, the people shaping AI do not reflect the diversity of those it serves. As of 2024, women are significantly underrepresented in the UK AI workforce, making up only 21% of its employees. The Alan Turing Institute warned:

“This is not only a fundamental issue of economic equality, but also about how the world is designed and for whom.”

Multiple studies have raised concerns that, without a diverse set of voices shaping the AI models we build, we risk creating an inbuilt bias. AI systems trained on biased data can replicate and amplify discrimination.

I am concerned that a recent Answer from the Department for Education said that, in 2023-24, just under 18% of STEM apprenticeship starts were by women. We must encourage girls from an early age to

take up STEM subjects in school so that not only can we improve the diversity of those in AI but the UK will have the skills and talent necessary for an AI future.

It is incumbent on us to ensure that the social biases that are currently being inflamed and entrenched by misogynistic influencers do not become embedded in the systems that look to be so intrinsic to our future. We have the responsibility to do everything in our power to help remove the obstacles faced by our next generation of young women to allow them to flourish and reach their full potential. Sadly, I fear that they are now facing greater barriers than ever before, due to the increasing prevalence and acceptance of misogyny in our society.

The poison of misogyny undermines our values and fuels harassment, discrimination and violence. The agenda is aided by algorithms that are pushing content to young boys at an alarming rate. A UCL study set up sample accounts on TikTok representing typologies of teenage boys with varying interests. It found that, while the content initially suggested to the boys was in line with their stated interests, it increasingly focused on anger and blame directed at women. After five days, the TikTok algorithm was presenting four times as many videos recommending misogynistic content on sexual harassment, and discrediting and objectifying women.

The study found that social media algorithms that amplified extreme misogynistic content were normalising harmful ideologies for young people. This is having hugely damaging repercussions on real-life social interactions. A University of York study found that 76% of secondary school teachers and, even more shockingly, 60% of primary school teachers were strongly concerned about the influence of online misogyny on their pupils. The study highlighted shocking examples of secondary school pupils espousing the views that women should not be in leadership roles and that they were too big for their boots. When teachers questioned where they got these ideas, they informed them that they liked to watch Andrew Tate.

Even more disturbingly, teachers in primary schools cited examples of where girls as young as primary age were told that women should not have careers and that they belonged in the kitchen. One informed his teacher that it is

“ok to hurt women because Andrew Tate does it”.

I am sure that many noble Lords will agree that, unless we tackle this appalling rise in misogyny in schools, these attitudes present a very real threat to the progress of young girls, who should not have to run the gauntlet of this abuse, especially during their formative years. If we do not take action, we risk creating a future where discrimination is automated and prejudice is coded into the very systems that are supposed to aid our advancement, not hinder it. We must not allow our future to be shaped by those who seek to do us harm.

We owe it to the next generation of young women—who may be aspiring scientists, doctors or engineers—to stamp out this vile form of abuse and give them every opportunity to flourish. In doing so, we are not only helping them but safeguarding the future of our society.

The future of AI must be built by all of us, for all of us. Let us ensure that women are at the heart of this progress.

3.47 pm

Lord Parekh (Lab): My Lords, it is a privilege and pleasure to participate in this debate. As is almost customary—it happens year after year—the debate has an overwhelmingly large number of female speakers; at a rough count, they are at least 24 out of 33. It goes to show how women continue to fight for their share of equality and that men are perfectly happy to allow them to do so.

I will ask three questions. First, what do we want to discuss in the name of STEM subjects? Secondly, why are we worried about fewer women going into STEM subjects, and why should it be a matter of concern to us, except because of some notion of abstract justice? Thirdly, assuming that it is a matter of concern to us, can we do something about it? Is it not a natural phenomenon, as the former president of Harvard University said, which got him into trouble?

I will address these three questions, in that order, very quickly. It is very well known that 30% of girls in higher education take STEM subjects, as opposed to 75% who go on to do study health, education and others. It is obvious. We need to be careful not to overgeneralise or homogenise girls. If you look at STEM subjects, girls tend to take more interest in algebra and chemistry than in physics and higher mathematics. There is a trend. That trend is global, it is not limited to one particular country. It appears in different forms. In some subjects it is more pronounced than in others. There is a global trend of girls not going for STEM subjects.

That leads me to my second question. If so, why should we worry about it? I can imagine lots of areas that girls do not go into. We do not regard that as a matter of serious concern. Why is this a matter of serious concern? First of all, there is a pool of talent which is being wasted, and, secondly, a pool of distinctive talent—not just intelligence and imagination, but imagination tuned in in a particular way, and seeing problems in a certain way. This is what women bring to the study of the natural sciences. If they are studying physics—or biology, or whatever—they bring to the subject a certain perception of what human needs are.

One example is what kind of car one should have. I read an article—I shall not rehearse it here—about car design. It did not occur to men to design a seat that would allow women to relax. It would simply not occur to men, not because they do not want to but because it is not a natural part of their daily experience. Whereas, when you put women in the driving seat and they design things, they begin to explore these requirements. So in that sense it is not only that we are wasting a pool of talent, we are wasting a pool of distinctive talent and imagination, which is not otherwise available.

If that is so, the next question is, “Can we do something about it?”. As I said earlier, some people seem to think that if a phenomenon has gone on for a long time, there must be a natural basis—a basis in human nature or some other form of nature—and

[LORD PAREKH]

that it cannot just be spontaneous. I tend to disagree. It is not a natural but a cultural phenomenon. It is not that girls accidentally choose not to go for STEM subjects. There is a cultural pressure—but a cultural pressure of what kind? That requires an elaborate analysis. There is a cultural pressure of two kinds: pressure from outside society, which channels their expectations, hopes and ambitions in a certain direction, and pressure from within those girls, who have internalised those beliefs and who, therefore, tend to move in that direction.

So you have a situation where the pervasive culture says that there are difficult subjects—such as physics or higher mathematics—and these will be too strenuous for girls to get in to and we should give them some rest. It was these expectations—shaped by our culture over a period of centuries—that shaped these girls' minds and got them to move in a certain direction. If you want to tackle them, we can certainly tackle them with more scholarships and more this or more that. But the greater concentration has to be on undermining this pervasive culture.

How do you counter a culture which shapes expectations and gets women not to go in certain directions? It is a long story but, to undermine that culture, there are several factors we need to take into account. When girls are growing up, from the age of two or three—or whatever—do they associate themselves with science and higher mathematics, or is it seen simply as a male phenomenon? Similarly, if you have mentorships and scholarships, more and more girls can be attracted to them. In short, can one create an environment in which a space is carved out where girls can flourish?

3.54 pm

Lord Loomba (CB): My Lords, we commemorate International Women's Day at a time when commitments to development aid and to diversity, equality, and inclusion programmes face unprecedented strain. Supporting education for women and girls, particularly in STEM subjects, remains a vital lifeline for millions who are disproportionately affected by poverty, gender-based barriers, and systemic discrimination, which restrict their ability to harness their talents for a better future.

I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, for tabling this Motion and for its focus. This year's International Women's Day theme

“For ALL women and girls: Rights. Equality. Empowerment”, is particularly pertinent as we examine the participation and leadership of women in science and technology.

Women remain underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics worldwide. UNESCO reports that women make up only 35% of STEM graduates—a figure that has shown little progress over the past decade. In sub-Saharan Africa, socioeconomic barriers, institutional biases and cultural norms further hinder women's participation in STEM.

Taking Mozambique as an example, the gender gap in STEM presents a significant challenge. Although gender equality in education has seen some improvement, women remain underrepresented in STEM disciplines.

This disparity is not merely statistical but indicative of deeper systemic challenges that limit opportunities for women and girls.

The 2024 UNESCO report, *Women's Participation in Higher Education in Southern Africa*, highlights these challenges. Across nine southern African countries, including Mozambique, women hold only a fraction of leadership roles in higher education institutions. In Mozambique, women occupy just 24% of senior academic positions, and in Zambia the figure is slightly higher, at 28%.

The barriers extend beyond education into professional STEM careers. Women in Mozambique and the region face obstacles such as limited mentorship opportunities, gender biases in hiring and promotion, and a lack of supportive networks. These challenges contribute to the broader issue of gender disparity in STEM fields.

Addressing these gaps requires co-ordinated efforts at multiple levels. Educational institutions must actively implement policies that encourage women's participation in STEM, including scholarships, mentorship programmes, and a learning environment that challenges gender stereotypes from early education through to higher education.

International support has played a crucial role in empowering women and girls in STEM. The United Kingdom has been a long-standing supporter of educational initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa, including Mozambique, through its overseas development aid programmes. However, recent reductions in aid funding raise serious concerns about the continuity of these essential efforts.

In this light, I ask the Minister, first, what programmes focused on education for women and girls that are supported by British overseas development aid have been or will be disrupted by the recent reduction in funding? Secondly, how do the Government plan to fulfil their commitment to support education for women and girls in Mozambique and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in STEM subjects, amid these funding challenges? We must reaffirm our commitment to gender equality in STEM, not only as a matter of social justice but as a catalyst for innovation and economic growth. By empowering women and girls in science and technology, we unlock a wealth of talent and perspectives that are essential for addressing the complex challenges of our time.

4 pm

Lord McConnell of Glenscorrodale (Lab): My Lords, I am very happy to follow the noble Lord, Lord Loomba, whose courageous and determined work in support of widows worldwide is known to many of us in this House. I am delighted to hear him speak up again here today. I also congratulate my noble friend Lady Smith on her appointment as Equalities Minister and on her excellent speech opening this debate. At the same time, I hope it will be appropriate for me to pay tribute to Anneliese Dodds MP for her dignified and principled conduct last week. I hope that she will remain a very active member of the other place and join us in campaigning in the months ahead.

I congratulate all those who have made their maiden speeches, including my fellow ex-First Minister, my noble friend Lord Jones, whose introduction to the

House is very welcome. I am so pleased to welcome in particular two Scots: my noble friend Lady Alexander, who—let me get this right—is the second former Labour Minister in the devolved Government in Scotland who was not a Member of Parliament in the House of Commons to have entered your Lordships' House. I have long argued that those who served only in Holyrood—or in the Senedd, for that matter—should be welcome in this House, and I am delighted that she has now joined me here. She will make a fantastic contribution.

I was delighted to hear the maiden speech of my noble friend Lady Hunter. We have been friends for a very long time, and her contribution to the modernisation of this country in the election and the running of the first four years of the 1997 new Labour Government is not widely enough celebrated and recognised. She was a pivotal individual at that time. I remember many illuminating moments, not least, perhaps, on the day when the then leader of the Opposition was about to try to persuade me to persuade the Scottish Labour Party to support a referendum on devolution before the new Government legislated, when the then Anji Hunter presented me with a glass of wine, at 10.30 am, to prepare me for the meeting and try to make sure that I was calm enough to hear the news that I was about to hear. She is a very welcome addition to your Lordships' House, and today's speech showed that her contributions will be outstanding.

As a former maths teacher, I have enjoyed the theme of today's debate. I have been very lucky to be inspired and mentored by many women throughout my life, including, perhaps in a similar way to the noble Baroness, Lady Stedman-Scott, by Mrs Craig, who was my first primary school teacher. She came to seek me out on the day I left primary school to tell me that if I could learn when to keep my mouth shut and be a little more disciplined, I could do absolutely anything I wanted to. To this day, I credit her with much of the incredible moments I have been able to enjoy in my life and career.

Almost all of my entries on the register have a link to today's topic, including the McConnell International Foundation, which currently sponsors 200 girls in rural Malawi to go to secondary school. These girls live in rural villages, where no one from their family has finished secondary school before. Last year, one of the girls went to university—the first from her village ever to do so. Of the 200, in a country where very high numbers of girls become pregnant in their teenage years or are forced into early child marriage, only one girl became pregnant last year, and she hopes to go back to school after the baby is born. The potential for education to transform those lives is shown in all my interactions with them. Girls' education transforms not just the lives of the individual girls but communities and families, going far beyond the individuals who personally benefit.

Many Members of your Lordships' House have today commented on the international aspect of International Women's Day. In Afghanistan, incredibly in 2025, girls and women are being held back from going to school and into higher education and from many other basic liberties. There is also the persecution in Iran—as we heard in the Statement earlier from the

noble Lord, Lord Hanson—the cynical, planned rape of women and girls in Sudan and elsewhere as part of violent conflict around our world, and the casual acceptance and encouragement of violence throughout our supposedly progressive, developed world since the Covid pandemic. Hundreds of thousands of girls are not returning to school to complete the educational opportunities that would give them a fairer chance in life. Throughout the world today, women's and girls' rights are going in reverse. Like the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, we should be angry about that and certainly not complacent or complicit in it.

While I absolutely endorse the Government's decision to increase defence spending, I believe, as I said last week, that it is short-sighted and counterproductive to reduce overseas development assistance to its lowest level since Harold Wilson was Prime Minister to fund it. There will be fewer girls finishing school, fewer health programmes giving young girls choices in their early adult years, fewer women entrepreneurs and more conflict, violence and famine as a result.

Will there be an impact study on women and girls before these cuts are implemented? Will programmes on sexual health, girls' education and conflict prevention, particularly the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative, be protected?

4.06 pm

Lord Clement-Jones (LD): My Lords, I am afraid that the noble Baroness, Lady Hazarika, has made it almost impossible to start a debate by saying “My Lords” any more. We will obviously have to change our conventions.

It is a great privilege to take part in this debate. We have heard a brilliant and insightful set of maiden speeches today. I particularly valued the weight of the Welsh and Scottish representation here. It is not always present in the force that it should be. I declare an interest as chair of Queen Mary University, which, relevant to this debate, has a very distinguished biomedical engineer at the helm of our School of Engineering and Materials Science, Professor Hazel Screen. I envy the noble Lord, Lord Davies, for having an engineer daughter to consult with on his speech today. I also thank the Minister, the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, for her introduction today and for moving the Motion. I congratulate her on her new appointment. I do wonder how many hours in the day there are, as I know the weight of her current post.

I was chair of the House of Lords Artificial Intelligence Committee, whose 2018 findings revealed a deeply troubling picture. Globally, over three-quarters of AI and data science professionals were male. In the UK, women's representation was even lower at just 20%. Seven years later, despite numerous initiatives, the needle has barely moved. I am not surprised that the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, is angry—we all should be. This is not just about fairness, crucial though that may be. This is not to undervalue the importance of the humanities and the arts. As we have heard from the noble Baroness, Lady Morrissey, and others, it is about the quality and safety of the AI systems being developed.

As the noble Viscount, Lord Stansgate, said, when teams lack diversity, the technology they create reflects those limitations. We are in danger of building tomorrow's

[LORD CLEMENT-JONES]

world with yesterday's biases. The implications are profound—from facial recognition systems that fail to properly identify women and ethnic minorities to recruitment algorithms that perpetuate gender bias or medical diagnostic systems trained predominantly on male data, as well as the proliferation of deepfake pornography, misogyny, threats of violence and trolling online, as illustrated by the noble Baronesses, Lady Hazarika, Lady O'Grady and Lady Owen.

The wider picture of STEM is equally concerning. As we have heard, women comprise only 29% of the UK's tech workforce. In engineering and technology apprenticeships, women account for just 17% of starts. Only 8.5% of active spin-outs had all-female founding teams, and just 16% had mixed founding teams. At leadership level, as the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, said, women make up a mere 6% of STEM leaders. These statistics represent not just inequality but a massive waste of talent at a time when these skills are crucial to our economic future and medical research, as the noble Baroness, Lady Smith of Llanfaes, pointed out.

The digital divide compounds these challenges. Women are 40% less likely than men to adopt technologies and there is a striking gap of 21 percentage points between junior men and women in adopting AI tools at work. This creates a vicious cycle—underrepresentation leads to technology designed without women's input, which in turn makes technology less accessible to women, as the Minister said.

We have seen some laudable initiatives. The previous Government's investment in AI and data science conversion degrees with scholarships for underrepresented groups was welcome. Organisations such as WISE, the Tech Talent Charter, which sadly closed down last year, and Women in AI have done valuable work. The Tech She Can charter, with more than 170 companies committed to increasing women in technology roles, shows industry recognition of the problem.

We must ask why, despite all these efforts, progress is so slow. The education pipeline remains a critical challenge and, although we have seen some improvement, with an almost 30% increase in girls starting STEM A-levels between 2009 and 2020, this has not translated into proportional workforce representation. Something is clearly going wrong in the transition from education to career and in career progression thereafter.

The persistence of the leaky pipeline in STEM education and careers, mentioned by the noble Baroness, Lady Bottomley, remains deeply concerning. While we see encouraging numbers of young women taking STEM A-levels and entering undergraduate programmes, the sharp decline at postgraduate level and into academic careers suggests systemic issues beyond mere time lag effects. I was very interested to hear what the noble Baroness, Lady Boustead, said about the culture in schools.

It is particularly striking that many capable female students report never having considered advanced STEM careers, not because of active discouragement but because they simply had not envisioned themselves in these roles. I was very interested to hear the noble Baroness, Lady Greenfield, set out a number of really

interesting suggestions for action in this area. I would suggest another few areas where government action could make a real difference.

First, we need a comprehensive review of the effectiveness of current initiatives. While individual programmes show promise, they often operate in silos. We need a coherent national strategy that co-ordinates efforts across education, industry and government. This should include early intervention in schools, support through higher education and workplace initiatives.

Secondly, we should consider mandatory reporting on gender diversity in STEM roles for larger companies, similar to gender pay gap reporting. What gets measured gets managed. This would provide crucial data to inform policy and hold organisations accountable. Companies should report not just on overall numbers but on recruitment, retention and progression.

Thirdly, we need targeted support for critical transition points, particularly in returning to STEM careers after career breaks. What happened to the pilot returners programme in the Midlands and the north of England, known as STEM ReCharge? This should include expanded training opportunities, flexible working arrangements and structured return-to-work programmes.

Fourthly, we must address the persistent barriers in workplace culture. This means tackling unconscious bias, mentioned by the noble Lord, Lord Davies, ensuring fair promotion processes and creating inclusive environments. The Government should lead by example in their own STEM workforce and require diversity initiatives as part of public procurement, as mentioned by the noble Baroness, Lady O'Grady.

Fifthly, we need specific focus on emerging technologies. With AI and quantum computing shaping our future, we cannot afford to repeat past patterns of exclusion. This means ensuring women's participation in this field from the ground up.

More fundamentally, as mentioned by the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, the noble Lord, Lord Parekh, and many others in this debate, we need to address the cultural barriers that persist in STEM fields. We should celebrate the prominent women in STEM, as we were asked to by the noble Baronesses, Lady Moyo and Lady Bottomley, but the very fact that we can name all these individuals—as role models who show what is possible—and their very exceptionalism, highlights the systemic problem we must address. That surely is self-evident.

This underscores the critical importance of visible role models and intentional mentorship. We need to move beyond passive representation to active engagement, ensuring that young women not only see themselves succeeding in STEM fields but are actively encouraged to see themselves in these roles. It is not just about technical skills; it is about creating an environment where girls see themselves as natural problem-solvers and innovators. Too often, this fundamental confidence-building is missing from young girls' experiences, creating invisible barriers long before career choices come into play.

Time is short, but I want to mention the international dimension, which was raised particularly by the noble Lords, Lord Loomba and Lord McConnell. Our

leadership in science and technology gives us both the opportunity and the responsibility to set global standards for inclusion. In this context, the announced cuts to the UK aid budget cast a huge and unwanted shadow over STEM development globally, particularly for women and girls. Are the Government still committed to the international women and girls strategy of 2023-30, launched only two years ago on International Women's Day? It set important goals. Given the Government's commitment to STEM education and gender equality, will efforts be made to protect these areas from the worst impacts of these cuts?

Looking ahead in the UK, we see that the stakes could not be higher. AI and other emerging technologies will reshape our society. If women remain underrepresented in the development of such technologies, we risk embedding gender bias into the architecture of our digital future. This is not just about equality; it is about ensuring that our technological development serves our entire society and not just half of it.

4.19 pm

Baroness Barran (Con): My Lords, it is a huge privilege to speak in this debate today, and to have listened to so many exceptional speeches that have highlighted the extraordinary achievements of women and, sadly, the oppression that too many still face. I start by congratulating the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, on finding another way to fill what little she had left of her free time.

We have heard five excellent maiden speeches. The noble Baroness, Lady Alexander of Clevedon, talked about her pioneering work in the Scottish Parliament, and in listening to her I felt that Malawi's loss was Holyrood's gain. The noble Baroness, Lady Hunter of Auchenroch, talked about alliance building. I felt that the tone of her remarks was welcome and very much the way that we all aim to work across all sides of this House.

Of the five, the noble Baroness, Lady Boustead, is the only one who I had the pleasure of knowing in a previous life—my previous life, but hers too. I recognise the way that she talked about herself in terms of self-reliance and walking with more confidence. She is warmly welcome here. There is lots of work to be done in the areas that both she and I are interested in.

The noble Baroness, Lady Rafferty, talked about being inspired by her mother. For the first time in several years, I have managed to resist talking about my mother in this speech, but, in listening to the noble Baroness, I felt that she will inspire many here. I am not sure there is a pool table anywhere in the House, though others might know, but there is plenty of homework.

I want to note other women on my Benches who have been influential. Quite rightly, the noble Baronesses who I mentioned talked about their political careers, and on these Benches my noble friends Lady Jenkin of Kennington and Lady May were influential in their work on Women2Win, which has changed the shape of our party.

Last, but definitely not least, was the noble Lord, Lord Jones of Penybont. It was a privilege to listen to the humanity that he expressed in talking about the

Act that he chose to highlight to the House today, which was literally, in his words, life-saving.

It is a double privilege to be standing here today, because I am taking the place of my noble friend Lady Williams of Trafford, who is unable to be here. Like many of us, she had a strong woman in her life—again, her mother—who paved the way for her to do a science degree. Her mother was a pioneer, going to University College Cork in the 1960s to study medicine alongside a small number of women, including several nuns. Apparently she was so talented that she was given full marks in an exam that she did not actually sit because she was busy having her son at the time.

As we have heard today in the speeches of many noble Lords and noble Baronesses, women have had to fight and campaign for the right to contribute economically in general, and in science and technology in particular, including for the stepping stones along the way of education, reproductive rights, childcare, health education and of course the right to vote. As we have heard, progress for women has not gone in a straight line, and in some cases it has gone backwards.

International Women's Day itself, 8 March, has seen major demonstrations calling for change, such as in Tehran in 1979, where women protested in their thousands against the mandatory wearing of the hijab. International Women's Day in 2012 saw the opening of the first women's internet café in Kabul. I wonder if it is still there—sadly, I think we can guess the answer.

Thinking about those stepping stones, the noble Baroness, Lady Hazarika, talked rightly about the importance of online safety. There is so much more to be done in all areas of gender-based violence. She mentioned the plight of older women, and it was striking that in the humbling and troubling list read out by the noble Baroness, Lady Casey, two of the ladies over 70 had no name. Such women are not traditionally recognised as victims.

The noble Baroness, Lady Boustead, talked about the sexual harassment of children in classrooms, which of course happens in this country and internationally. My noble friend Lady Owen of Alderley Edge talked powerfully about the changing shape of misogyny online and how that impacts behaviour offline. Rightly, the noble Baronesses, Lady Smith of Llanfaes and Lady Bennett, and the noble Lords, Lords McConnell and Lord Loomba, expressed their concerns about the impact of aid cuts, particularly on girls' education. Of course, education has been a crucial way for women to gain their economic independence, exercise their rights and fulfil their potential. The noble Lord, Lord McConnell, painted a vivid picture of the 200 girls in Malawi and the change that education can make to their lives.

Turning to the technology sector itself, the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, rightly said that this is an issue of power, justice and fairness, sentiments that were echoed by the noble Baroness, Lady Greenfield. My noble friend Lady Stowell gave us the strong sense of the community of women in the Beeston Plessey factory and how that became the heart of the local town.

Just to bring a little ray of hope, in the spirit of my noble friend Lady Moyo, there is, as many noble Lords have said, fantastic work in diversity going on

[BARONESS BARRAN]

around the country, including from the other Professor Sue Black—not the noble Baroness in your Lordships' House—at Durham University. She is best known, perhaps, for her work on Bletchley Park but also with Tech Up Women, ensuring that we have more diversity in AI in particular.

We have heard about remarkable women from the global north. I would just like to mention a few who stand out from the global south, including Dr Asima Chatterjee from India, whose groundbreaking work in organic chemistry led to treatments for epilepsy and malaria, Dr Segenet Kelemu of Ethiopia, who transformed agricultural science, and, in Latin America, Dr Adriana Ocampo of Colombia, who has led NASA's New Frontiers Program.

Looking forward, it feels like we are at a particularly perilous time in our history, as we look at some of the geopolitical shifts that are taking place. The conversation about the need for more defence expenditure and more investment in AI to drive the defence systems of the future has been dialled up, perhaps unimaginably, when compared to just a few weeks or months ago. As others have observed, much technological talent has been focused on consumer innovations in social media, food delivery apps and other services that can thrive only in a stable and peaceful world. It feels inevitable that more investment needs to, and will, go into critical areas of innovation, particularly in relation to defence and, within this, AI.

Defence in particular remains an area with low representation of women—where women's voices, insights and skills are vitally needed, exactly as my noble friend Lady Morrissey and the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, said, to create the strong ethical framework and organisational culture that this sector needs, perhaps almost more than any other. We need women to be part of the solution and not just the voices left behind as men suffer the ultimate price of warfare. We must not lose sight of the absolute imperative to protect our values of freedom, democracy and the rule of law, without which opportunities for women will evaporate.

As we close this debate, we remember the brave women all around the world fighting for their freedom, their right to go to school and their right to develop their talents and potential. We celebrate the extraordinary achievements of women in science and technology, without whom so many advances would not have been made. Many in this House have been role models to and champions of younger women. So, on this International Women's Day, I particularly wish that our daughters and granddaughters, in the widest sense, seize the opportunities that life presents them. In the words of the late, great Maya Angelou,

“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better”.

4.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Business and Trade and Department for Science, Information and Technology (Baroness Jones of Whitchurch) (Lab): My Lords, I wish a very happy International Women's Day—nearly—to all noble Lords. We have had an absolutely fabulous debate. I congratulate my

noble friend on her new ministerial appointment, and I thank her for setting out the size of the challenge before us, the progress made so far to accelerate action, and where we want to get to.

I thank all noble Lords for their wisdom in this debate—some have of course made their maiden speeches today. First, I thank my noble friend Lady Alexander of Clevedon, whose leadership in Scotland and work in the education sector will add another strong voice championing women in higher education. I thank my noble friend Lady Boustead, who brings her expertise from a world I hail from too—the trade unions, given her role as the joint general secretary of the National Education Union—to help us analyse how to improve the lives of working women. It is wonderful to have another strong voice from Wales in this House, and I thank my noble friend Lord Jones of Penybont for becoming an honorary member of the sisterhood, and for the perspective he brings from his political experience as First Minister of Wales.

It was an honour to hear from my noble friend Lady Rafferty, whose extensive experience in the nursing world—as the president of the Royal College of Nursing, for example—can help us continue to focus on the experience of women working in health and, I hope, improve it. Finally, I thank my noble friend Lady Hunter of Auchenreoch—I will pronounce that right eventually—whose political experience is very welcome, as is her continued support for women in business through her role as a senior adviser at Edelman and her other business roles.

One of the many things that the civil rights activist Marian Wright Edelman gave the world is the words:

“You can't be what you can't see”.

She meant that it is hard for people to imagine themselves in fields where they do not see people who look or sound like them. So let me begin by paying tribute to some pioneering British women in science and technology. They are not always the ones whose names are attached to the Nobel Prize, and they are not always the ones whose pictures are hanging on the walls in hallowed spaces. They are often the ones whose legacies go unrecorded, but without whose essential work we would not have achieved half the scientific and technological progress we have.

Without Mary Somerville, the 19th-century queen of science, we may not have discovered the planet Neptune. Without Karen Spärck Jones's work in computational linguistics, we would not have the tech that underpins search engines. In her words,

“Computing is too important to be left to men”.

Without Professor Jocelyn Bell Burnell, we would not have uncovered the existence of radio pulsars, a by-product of exploding stars that allows us to test some of the most fundamental ideas of physics.

The noble Baronesses, Lady Brinton, Lady Greenfield and Lady Bottomley, reminded us that women have had to overcome sexism and obstruction in some of our many respected academic institutions. Often, that continues today. Thankfully, at the same time, girls have many new role models to look up to. Some of them are paving the way for more people to enter these fields.

I am grateful, for example, to my noble friend Lord Stansgate for reminding us that Helen Sharman was the first UK astronaut. Anne-Marie Imafidon passed her A-level in computing at just 11 years old, and now runs Stemettes, an organisation which gets more women and non-binary people into STEM. Sheridan Ash and Claire Thorne founded Tech She Can to improve the pipeline of women in technological roles. So far, their work has reached 130,000 children.

The noble Baroness, Lady Stowell, and my noble friends Lady Alexander and Lord Jones also reminded us that role models can often be nearer and closer to home, since we stand on our mothers' and our grandmothers' shoulders. We often reflect on what they could have been and what they could have achieved with the right support. As the noble Baroness, Lady Stedman-Scott, reminded us, we have come a long way here in the House of Lords since 1958. My noble friend Lady Hunter reminds us of the excellent women leaders that we have had in this House, including our outstanding current Leader, the noble Baroness, Lady Smith.

We have other outstanding scientific leaders here. For example, in co-founding Darktrace, the noble Baroness, Lady Gustafsson, built one of the fastest-growing companies in Europe, achieving unicorn status in just four years. One of the noble Baronesses we heard from earlier, the noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, was hugely influential in starting the dotcom boom and has dedicated much of her career to digital and social inclusion. She also now co-chairs an advisory board set up by DSIT to steer our new digital centre of government. I thank her for bringing her expertise to bear here.

My noble friend Lady Gale reminds us of the fight we had to increase the number of women MPs and the success that we can see in the latest intake. As she quite rightly says, this happened not by accident but through very hard and determined work by a number of women.

Like all of us, my own journey shapes how I see these issues. I started my career as a trade union official, representing many low-paid women in the public sector and campaigning for better rights at work—rights that I am pleased to see protected further in the forthcoming Employment Rights Bill. In the nearly 20 years I have been a Labour Peer, I have seen the political environment around me grow more collegiate and more equal. When this Government came into power in July, I was thrilled to be appointed as a Minister for both DSIT and DBT. I can now officially call myself a woman in STEM.

My dual role means that I get to see all the facets that shape women's participation in science and technology up close, from the subjects girls are encouraged to pick at school, to the investment gap when female entrepreneurs seek funding, to the faces you see around a boardroom table or behind goggles in a lab. What surprised me most when I took office was the mismatch between the talent our science and tech sectors need and how few girls ever see that career as an option. On the one hand, you have top firms struggling to fill vacancies; on the other, many of the girls I meet in schools do not know about the opportunities in these fields or why they should care. Yet these are exciting, creative, well-paid jobs. Globally, tech salaries are more than two-thirds

higher than the average. That is a message we must keep shouting about, as it shows girls that people like them work in these worlds because there are opportunities there. To flip Marian Edelman's words: if you can see it, you can be it.

As my noble friend Lady Smith made clear, we have a long way to go, but we are making progress. Women are progressing in the percentage of STEM sectors that we encourage them to be in. This point was reinforced by the noble Baroness, Lady Moyo. There have been 35% more STEM A-level entries by women and girls since 2010; there are STEM ambassadors in 80% of state schools, 48% of whom are women; and women apprenticeship starts have increased by 7.5% on the previous year. So we are making progress, but of course we have further to go. As my noble friend Lady Boustead pointed out, and I share her hope, the curriculum review will address the unacceptable gender gap in, for example, girls taking GCSE computer science. So I hope that we will address those issues fairly quickly.

Of course, I also take the point made by my noble friend Lady Wilcox, that it is not just about science and technology; we also need the insights and judgments that a grounding in the arts and humanities can bring. I absolutely agree that STEM needs to be redefined as STEAM.

So many noble Lords raised the issue about diversity and the challenges that we face. The noble Baroness, Lady Lane-Fox, said that she was angry that we need to shout about this issue again, and I absolutely understand why she feels that way. The noble Baroness, Lady Bennett, echoed those concerns in her call to resist, in terms of the attacks on women's rights across the pond. It is such a short-sighted approach in so many ways. As my noble friend Lord Parekh and the noble Lord, Lord Clement-Jones—he is my noble friend—made clear, that attitude means that we are missing out on a distinctive pool of talent, which we could all use and utilise. It is a blind policy in many ways.

I have to make it absolutely clear that in the UK, increasing diversity across all sectors, including science and tech, continues to be a priority for this Government. It is a priority reflected in legislation and which we will continue to uphold. Firms with over 250 employees have had to report on their gender pay gap every year since 2017. As part of the equality Bill being introduced later this year, they will have to report on pay gaps for ethnicity and disability too. Under the forthcoming Employment Rights Bill, companies will also have to publish equality action plans to show what they are doing to improve gender equality. So I can assure my noble friends Lady O'Grady and Lord Davies that the Government are committed to delivering on diversity and on equal pay for work of equal value, as well as to giving women the tools to challenge any secrecy where that occurs. Family-friendly policies are, of course, at the heart of our Employment Rights Bill. We will continue to hold companies in every sector up to a high standard here, and support them as they reap the rewards that we know that greater diversity will bring.

Diversity is vital in its own right, but—as the noble Baroness, Lady Owen, and other noble Lords have pointed out—women also have to be at the table when technology is designed, or we risk inbuilt biases and

[BARONESS JONES OF WHITCHURCH]

distorted algorithms. Those are issues that the AI Security Institute and the implementation of the Online Safety Act are determined to address. The noble Baroness illustrated why that is such a challenge and so important to us.

My noble friend Lady Rafferty also made the important point that bias and stereotypes continue to blight recruitment and enhancement in the nursing profession. I am grateful to my noble friend Lady Donaghy for highlighting the need to improve women's health, which is important in its own right, of course, but it also ensures that women are fit, healthy and able to participate fully in the workforce. I reassure her that we are overhauling our policies on women's healthcare. For example, we are committing an extra £57 million to the Start for Life services for new and expectant mothers.

The noble Baroness, Lady Smith, raised the important issue of the challenge of sexual and reproductive health. She is right that technology and AI applications can play a hugely important role in transforming women's health in those areas. I am also grateful to my noble friend Lady Morgan for highlighting the huge contribution that medical research charities play in improving health outcomes, particularly those for and mainly run by women. Those will continue to be important priorities for this Government.

When we think about women's participation in this world, we must look at two angles. First, we must look at women as shapers of science and technology, making discoveries, founding start-ups and working in industry—a point made by many noble Lords. We must also look at women as users of technology, because there are plenty of issues that disproportionately affect women here. Women around the world are more likely to be excluded from digital life. Where they are included, the online world can be weaponised by abusers to make women and girls feel unsafe. If women do not feel safe online, or do not have the devices, connections or skills to get there in the first place, they are fundamentally left out of the conversation.

My noble friend Lady Hazarika reminded us that women are often the losers as sexual abuse and misogyny become rife on online sites. I can assure her that we are moving at pace to implement the Online Safety Act, but also to identify what more needs to be done. Like her, I pay tribute to the noble Baroness, Lady Bertin, for her groundbreaking report on pornography, which we will now take steps to implement. I remind the House that we are committed to halving violence against women and girls in a decade and moving at pace to achieve that ambition.

I am also very grateful to the noble Baroness, Lady Casey—I would say “my noble friend”—whose very moving testimony to the 95 women and four children murdered by men pulled us all up short and was a very stark reminder of the challenges we still face in tackling violence against women. I am also grateful to my noble friend Lady Goudie for reminding us of the important role women play globally as peacekeepers and helping to rebuild shattered communities. I am grateful to the noble Lord,

Lord Loomba, for raising the continued global challenge of women's participation in education and STEM initiatives.

My noble friend Lord McConnell quite rightly raised concerns about women's rights going into reverse globally. These are challenging times. However, I remind noble Lords that, for example, we are funding UNICEF's Girls' Education and Skills Partnership, the Strengthening Higher Education for Female Empowerment programme and the AI for Development Diversity programme in the global South: so a number of these initiatives are continuing.

It has been a privilege to hear from so many in this House today, including many who are themselves role models for women and girls in science and technology. We must continue to give women and girls the tools and skills to make sure that they are not locked out of the digital world. We must continue to make sure that there is a world where they feel safe and we must continue to give women in the UK and around the world more paths to found their own firms, to get into research labs and to reach senior levels in businesses, because we cannot move forward when half the world is held back. Societal progress and growth depend on all of this.

So, I am grateful to noble Lords for all the contributions that have been made this afternoon. I am sorry if I have not managed to pick up every point, but noble Lords will have seen that I have been scribbling madly. All points were extremely well made and I think we have had an excellent debate today. I thank all noble Lords for that.

Motion agreed.

Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill

First Reading

4.48 pm

The Bill was brought from the Commons, endorsed as a money Bill, and read a first time.

India and Southeast Asia: Free Trade Agreements

Question for Short Debate

4.49 pm

Asked by Baroness Anelay of St Johns

To ask His Majesty's Government what progress they have made in securing free trade agreements with India and countries in Southeast Asia.

Baroness Anelay of St Johns (Con): My Lords, trade is the bedrock on which successful economies are built. The UK's withdrawal from the EU has given us the opportunity to pursue an independent trade policy, ratifying and implementing new trade agreements with other countries.

Last week, the Business Secretary said:

“Securing a trade deal with what is soon-to-be the third biggest economy in the world is a no-brainer, and a top priority for me and this Government”.

I welcome the Labour Government's decision to resuscitate the free trade talks with India, which were initially launched four years ago by Boris Johnson and Narendra Modi—but we are not alone in the race to get a deal. The EU is also knocking on India's door. Last month, Ursula von der Leyen visited Delhi and said that the EU and India were pushing to get a free trade agreement this year. Is that timeframe the same for the UK Government?

In a time of increasing global disruption, it is more important than ever to maximise our opportunities for international trade. There are both challenges and opportunities when negotiating trade agreements—of course, there always are. The trade talks begun by Boris Johnson were not concluded by the time of the general election last year. The BBC and newspaper reports suggested then that the sticking points included high tariffs in India on Scotch whiskey and relaxing fees and visa rules for Indian students and professionals coming to the UK. India was also reported as requesting an exemption from the UK's planned carbon border adjustment mechanism. Do the Government plan to make concessions on all those issues? Do they have any red lines? If so, would they include the protection of sanitary and phytosanitary standards?

An FTA with India could indeed offer the UK both economic and geopolitical advantages, and give us better positioning in one of the most economically dynamic regions of the world. The wider geopolitical considerations could bring greater collaboration on issues such as security and climate change—matters that are in our minds every day in this House.

If tariffs and trade barriers were reduced, or indeed eliminated, UK companies could reach Indian consumers at more competitive prices, particularly perhaps in sectors such as technology, machinery, pharmaceuticals and financial services. The UK has a strong tech industry, about which we have just heard in the previous debate, and India has a large and growing demand for technology, engineering and digital services.

India's expanding middle class creates more demand for a variety of products and services. The UK could tap into this growth, especially in consumer goods, education and healthcare sectors. India is a significant player in global supply chains, especially for sectors such as IT, textiles and pharmaceuticals. An FTA could improve collaboration between UK and Indian companies, creating far more efficient supply chains, and of course reducing costs thereby.

However, there are obstacles, stemming from economic and political challenges, which require careful consideration. For example, how do the Government plan to overcome the complexity and risks in resolving the difference in regulatory standards, particularly in industries such as pharmaceuticals, food safety and digital services? I am sure we all recall that India's approach to intellectual property protection, particularly in the fields of pharmaceuticals and software, is far less stringent than in the UK. Seeking improved access for UK agricultural exports could meet resistance from domestic producers and stakeholders in India, who are currently heavily subsidised.

There is also the significant matter of human rights standards in India. We have heard much of that earlier today, and quite right too, because in two days' time it

is International Women's Day. The FCDO's most recent annual report on human rights refers several times to the human rights abuses in India, particularly of women, marginalised groups and religious minorities. Can the Minister give a commitment that, when the Government negotiate with the Indian Government for a trade agreement, it will include discussions on human rights? In particular, will they raise the importance of protecting women's sexual and reproductive health and rights?

I would like to refer briefly to Indonesia. It has become one of the world's major emerging economies. Members of this House and another place used their February Recess to go on a British Group Inter-Parliamentary Union visit to Indonesia to learn more about its governance and economy, and the impact of UK soft power. They were impressed by the establishment there of the Deakin University Lancaster University Indonesia, which provides high-quality business and tech education. It means that Indonesian students can gain degrees there which are not only accredited by a UK university—Lancaster—but accepted by the Indonesian Government as being equal to a sarjana degree from a local Indonesian university. It is the very first international joint campus of its kind. Does the Minister agree that innovative work, such as that by Lancaster University, is to be welcomed and enhances the UK's soft power?

In conclusion, I certainly hope that a trade agreement with India could be highly advantageous to the UK. It could increase market access, trade diversification and services expansion, and strengthen our geopolitical relationships. That would, I hope, contribute to long-term economic growth and strategic influence. I hope that closer involvement in soft power ventures in Indonesia could raise the profile and expertise of the UK there.

Both India and Indonesia, together with China, are members of the BRICS intergovernmental organisation. In trade, we know that the economic heft of China casts a shadow over all negotiations. Securing FTAs and other trade agreements in India and south-east Asia is not an easy task; I recognise that. I look forward to hearing from the Minister, now and in the future, on what progress the Government are able to make.

4.57 pm

Lord Sahota (Lab): My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Anelay of St Johns, for securing this very important debate. I wish it was longer than one hour, but we are where we are.

The buzzword these days is trade. If noble Lords do not believe me, ask President Trump. It is trade that makes the world go round. These days, when it comes to a healthy relationship with another country, it is a healthy trade agreement that counts the most. Everything else comes after—mostly everything, and not always.

The UK and India have long historic and cultural links, going back hundreds of years. Every year, thousands of students come to the UK to study. Some of the Indian Prime Ministers have studied in UK universities. Dr Manmohan Singh was one; he is credited with opening up the Indian economy to the world—some even say that he is the saviour of the Indian economy.

[LORD SAHOTA]

Then there is a large Indian diaspora, contributing not only to the UK's economy but to academia and, dare I say, politics.

India is on the move. Its GDP is now the fourth-largest or fifth-largest in the world, ahead of the UK, and is on track to surpass Germany and Japan in the next decade. It is growing at over 70% annually, a pace that most developed countries can only dream of. Its ambition is clear: India wants to become a developed economy by 2047, when it marks the 100th anniversary of its independence. That means massive investment in infrastructure, technology, manufacturing and so on. It means a growing middle class of some 800 million people, hungry for British goods and services.

Where are we, then, on securing a free trade deal with India? I understand that negotiations have been ongoing for more than two years, and that they are not getting anywhere. It is my understanding that it is India that is dragging its feet. In today's world, trade is not just about goods and services: it is about relationships, influence and shaping the future of our economy. Can the Minister tell us what the current timeline is for concluding a UK-India free trade agreement? What concrete progress has been made on resolving key sticking points? Trade is about growth, jobs and opportunity. If we get this right, we can shape the UK's economic future for decades to come, but, if we get it wrong—or worse, do nothing—others will fill the gap. I urge the Government to move swiftly, be bold, and ensure that Britain is at the heart of the fastest-growing region in the world. I look forward to the Minister's response.

5.02 pm

Lord Bilimoria (CB): My Lords, the India I was brought up in as a child was an inward-looking, insular, protective economy with a low level of growth. Since 1991, India has emerged as the fastest-growing major economy in the world, an emerging global economic superpower, and the fifth-largest economy in the world, soon to be the third-largest economy in the world. I predict that, by 2060, it will be the largest economy in the world.

I have been privileged to be at the forefront of UK-India relations for 22 years as co-chair of the India-British partnership, a member of the UK-India roundtable, the founding chair of the UK India Business Council and, currently, co-chair of the India All-Party Parliamentary Group. I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Anelay, for leading this debate at this very important time.

India is only the UK's 11th-largest trading partner, and yet it supports 600,000 jobs between both nations. The goal, of course, is that we get this to increase to over \$100 billion of trade by 2030. We have been negotiating this free trade agreement since 2022, when I was president of the Confederation of British Industry, the CBI. Three years have gone by. The benefits of an FTA are lower trade costs for businesses, greater consumer choice, lower prices and the maintenance of standards.

There was a pause in negotiations because of the elections last year in both countries. There are sticking points. We all know about India and Scotch whisky.

We know about the greater mobility that India would like for professionals and students—I am the co-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Students. Why, I ask the Minister, can we not take international students out of the net migration figures? That would help so much. Of course, India wants faster visa processing and concessions on national insurance for temporary workers. Are the Government considering this seriously?

From the UK's point of view, we would like access, including for cars, where the duties are very high in India, and for Scotch whisky, where the duty is 150%. It has been reduced from 150% to 100% for bourbon, and we would like Scotch whisky duty reduced to 30%, if that is possible. Then, of course, there are financial services. The total trade in goods and services between our countries grew by 10%, and is now at £42 billion.

The diaspora is the living bridge; its members include people like me. I am proud to be part of the largest ethnic-minority community in the UK—and the most successful by far, reaching the very top in every field, whether it is politics, business or any other area.

We have talked about trade, but there is also investment. If we look at the Grant Thornton *India Meets India Tracker* report, we see that there are almost 1,000 Indian companies in the UK, turning over £50 billion and employing over 100,000 people. There are 635 British companies in India, with a revenue of £51 billion and employing almost 700,000 people. The amount of, and potential for, collaboration on technology and innovation is huge. Security and defence are important in this uncertain world in which we live, yet, over the last decade, only 3% of India's defence acquisitions came from the UK. As India seeks to advance its defence industry and diversify away from Russia, the British defence sector could emerge as a key collaborator on technology transfers and support India's "Make in India" efforts.

Then there is India's membership of the Quad. I have said for a long time that the UK can join the Quad; does the Minister agree that we could have Quad Plus? Of course, we are already members of AUKUS. The Indian Minister of External Affairs, Dr Jaishankar, is in the UK as I speak. At Chatham House yesterday, he said that he was "cautiously optimistic" about the UK-India free trade agreement negotiations and that he hoped that "it doesn't take that long".

I say to the Minister: three Diwalis have gone by since we started these negotiations, so please let us set a deadline, let us not have the best being the enemy of the good and let us conclude this free trade agreement. Let us get it done.

5.05 pm

Lord Vaizey of Didcot (Con): My Lords, it is a great pleasure to follow my noble friend Lord Bilimoria and his focus on India, reflecting the huge amount of work that he does promoting UK-Indian relations. I also congratulate my noble friend Lady Anelay on securing this debate—she obviously has a distinguished record, having served as a Minister in the Foreign Office covering south-east Asia, and knows of what she speaks.

I speak as the chair of the UK-ASEAN Business Council, a post I have been proud to hold for the last two years, having also been the trade envoy to Vietnam under the premiership of Theresa May. It is a region that I have got to know very well, and it remains a huge source of opportunity for the UK. Trade between ASEAN and the UK stands at around £50 billion a year. The UK is slightly ahead on exports against imports. On goods and services, there is roughly a 50-50 split in what we export.

If we go through the members of the UK-ASEAN Business Council, it will give a flavour of where those opportunities lie, with professional service companies, financial services companies, universities and education companies. We recently had the Premier League join us, which reflects, as it were, the new economy and the new businesses, especially the tech businesses, that can make huge inroads in this area.

Noble Lords do not need reminding that we have fantastic ties in the region. Malaysia and Singapore are both Commonwealth nations, with very visible investment in the UK—you have only to look across the river to see the incredible regeneration of Battersea Power Station. Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam are also huge and growing economies where we do a lot of business. There is prominent investment from Thailand. My noble friend Lady Anelay mentioned her visit to Indonesia. I was lucky to sit down with the President of Indonesia when he visited the UK recently as well as the Prime Minister of Malaysia, who was also in the country recently. We are constantly visited by high-level politicians from all those countries, all of whom want to engage with us.

We are very lucky to have some first-class officials based in the region, not least Martin Kent, our trade commissioner, and Sarah Tiffin, our ASEAN ambassador. There is everything to play for. We have a free trade deal with Singapore, as well as a digital economy agreement. We have a free trade deal with Vietnam; we piggybacked on the EU deal. Minister Alexander negotiated an enhanced trade partnership with Thailand, which we signed in September. We have an economic growth partnership with Indonesia. They are not very sexy names, but they are important agreements.

We are the first dialogue partner with ASEAN for 25 years. Of course, we are members of the CPTPP, which includes four ASEAN members, with three more knocking on the door. The CPTPP is already delivering significant benefits—we can now of course export chocolate to Malaysia without paying any tariffs. The CPTPP has given us, in effect, a free trade agreement with Malaysia by the back door.

I conclude simply with two to-do points for the Minister. First, Malaysia is currently the chair of ASEAN. I cannot emphasise enough how engaged Malaysia is with the digital agenda and how much it seeks to engage with the UK on digital, not least on artificial intelligence. Many new institutions have been established in Malaysia which quite openly mimic ours, with imitation being the sincerest form of flattery. They look to us for guidance—not in a patronising sense—on how they should develop their tech policy and tech infrastructure. Secondly, I was flattered to be asked to the Indonesian embassy to meet the Minister for Eurasian affairs, who simply put

his cards on the table and said: “We are very keen to have a free trade agreement with the UK”. It is sitting on the table. I do not know if it is quite oven ready, but we have an enthusiastic partner in Indonesia. We recognise that the Government have priorities in terms of their free trade deals, not least with India, but Indonesia is a very willing partner.

5.10 pm

Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle (GP): My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Anelay of St Johns, for securing this debate, which is extremely timely. As many noble Lords have noted, the attempt for a UK-India free trade agreement started in January 2022 and restarted just last month.

I am concerned chiefly with one issue of transparency. The Government have apparently inherited the negotiating objectives from their predecessor Government, but they have given no indications that they plan to seek any alteration or to reopen any concluded chapters. I hope that this is a different Government from the Johnson Government, so we might expect a different approach. One of my chief areas of concern is ISDS, investor-state dispute settlement. The position of both this Government and their predecessor on ISDS has often been ambiguous. It was exempted from the UK’s first, from- scratch, post-Brexit free trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand, but, in other contexts, Ministers have publicly defended the continued use of ISDS. In December 2023, the then Investment Minister, the noble Lord, Lord Johnson of Lainston, was asked during a session of the International Agreements Committee whether the UK would press for ISDS in the India negotiations, to which he responded that he did not know. This Government have yet to set out their position. My chief question to the Minister today is what the Government’s stance is on ISDS in the India deal and the south-east Asian deals?

Why am I so concerned about ISDS? Coincidentally, the *Guardian* is running a large series of articles that set this out very clearly. One of those highlights the case of Greenland, where the world’s largest financial litigation company, Burford Capital, is backing a case against it—population less than 60,000. It is demanding that, despite the population democratically agreeing that they did not want uranium mining in Greenland, either uranium mining is agreed or £11.5 billion is paid to the company that was going to mine it, and of course, that litigation funder. Litigation finance used to be focused on claims about car accidents and similar, but the *Guardian* highlights that more than 1,400 cases have been launched against Governments and they have become far more common and lucrative. Far more than £120 billion of public money was awarded to firms through ISDS courts, including at least \$84 billion to fossil fuel companies and £7.8 billion to mining companies. These have become an increasingly popular investment class for hedge funds and other investors. We have the democratic decisions of Governments, for which the peoples are being forced to pay by what are essentially financial gamblers. It is therefore obvious why we should not have ISDS in the India trade agreement.

Very briefly, I have a couple of other points to raise, about the labour and environmental chapters in the India deal. A leak in September 2023 reported that

[BARONESS BENNETT OF MANOR CASTLE]
trade negotiations had already led to the conclusion of the climate and labour chapters. That will not include legally enforceable commitments on labour rights or environmental standards. Can the Minister say whether the Government are truly happy and are proceeding on that basis of no legal commitments?

Finally, I note the lack of democracy in the situation we are now in compared to when we were a member of the European Union. All this is incredibly opaque and non-transparent. Surely the Government want to turn over a new leaf and start doing this in a democratic and open way when we are talking about free trade deals.

5.14 pm

Baroness Verma (Con): My Lords, I thank my noble friend Lady Anelay for this debate, which is incredibly timely and important. I have been involved with business-to-business with India for over three decades. I was a non-executive of the Leicester Asian Business Association as my first dip into business-to-business.

A fast-moving geopolitical movement is going on around us, so it is critical that we secure deals with India, the country with the largest population on the planet: 1.4 billion people. Both countries are well-respected convenors for many other nations, as we have seen—India in its own region, in the south-east Asia region, and the UK with its convening powers across Europe, as recently seen by Prime Minister Starmer, and with our allies such as America and others. At this critical moment, we know that by securing this FTA we will start to leave some of the extra dependency that we have had on a very few countries and engage with a much wider region. Therefore, we really need to encourage this deal to be done as quickly as possible.

I want to address the strengths of why the UK is best placed to be with India on this deal. First, as the noble Lord, Lord Sahota, said, the relationship goes back many years. It is now also a relationship that is coming together because we have a diaspora here that is incredibly important to both India and the UK. I do not think the diaspora of nearly 2 million people that we have in this country is fully utilised for its soft power strength. I urge the Government to look at how they can further engage with the diaspora links to get some of those nuances, which sometimes become stalling blocks, to unlock.

I am president and founder of the India APPG. It has been one of the most popular APPGs in Parliament, because India recognises the importance of our parliamentarians as we recognise the importance of engaging with India. There are so many areas where I think we can strengthen our relationship outside the FTA. Some of those are the defence sector, tech, research, developments in space, higher education and, of course, sustainable green technologies.

We have so many envoys in other countries; it is beyond my understanding why we do not have dedicated envoys for a country as big as India from the UK. I know that Ministers have a big job, and our high commissioner and deputy high commissioners are brilliant, but they are tasked with a lot to do in a large country. Trade envoys are therefore critical. I am sure my noble friend Lord Vaizey will say that it is the soft power that you take with the trade envoy role that helps to

continue cementing this partnership—this relationship. I said it over and over again when my party was in government; I do not know why it did not happen. I now ask this Government to see whether they can take a leap and a jump and please encourage trade envoys there. We are a country at the front line of convening; let us utilise our strengths.

5.19 pm

Lord Loomba (CB): My Lords, I welcome this debate and thank the noble Baroness, Lady Anelay, for bringing this important issue before the House. I approach it as someone with many decades of experience at the heart of UK-India trade relations. Indeed, I had the privilege of playing a central role in the twinning of London and Delhi in the early part of this century. Through this, I have seen at first hand how trade has strengthened the relationship between our two nations, reinforcing our bonds as equal partners with deep ties.

At a time of increasing global uncertainty, such ties matter more than ever. A well-structured free trade agreement between the UK and India will create jobs, open new markets for British businesses and enhance investment flows between our economies.

The much-anticipated free trade agreement between India and the United Kingdom stalled for over two years in the midst of political shifts and economic uncertainties. It was brought back into focus with the British Business and Trade Secretary, Jonathan Reynolds, meeting his Indian counterpart, Piyush Goyal, in New Delhi on 24 February and kick-starting two-day discussions. I hope it progresses fast and for the good of the two countries.

The latest round of talks has been marked by a renewed sense of urgency and ambition, as both nations work to iron out the differences and finalise a mutually beneficial agreement. We are aware that there are many complexities, and one impediment to reaching such an agreement has been the UK Government's reluctance to reform visa rules for overseas students, including from India. It is clearly in both our countries' interests to encourage academic exchanges, which in turn foster innovation, business partnerships and cross-cultural understanding. It is therefore counterproductive to count overseas students, who bring substantial revenue to our universities and economy, within the immigration statistics unless they seek to remain beyond a reasonable period, such as two years after graduation. Can the Minister confirm that the Government will adopt a pragmatic approach to student visas, recognising their mutual benefit, and ensure that this issue does not impede progress towards a free trade agreement?

5.22 pm

Lord Purvis of Tweed (LD): My Lords, I am very grateful to the noble Baroness for bringing this debate to us and the very sensible way in which she opened it. It is a regrettable fact, notwithstanding the excellent work of the noble Lords and noble Baronesses who have contributed to UK-India and wider regional trade, that we are punching below our weight when it comes to seizing the opportunities for trade in this area. It is just three years since the boosterism of what had been claimed would be a five-star agreement by

Diwali in 2022. The reality of trade policy is such that there are difficult trade-offs—literally—and hard choices to be made.

In that regard, I wish the Government well in the talks that are under way. I believe there is now a sense of reality, not of boosterism. Even under the previous Administration, the anticipated 15-year gains to UK GDP of an FTA with India were forecast to be between 0.00% and 0.08%. Nevertheless, in the very sectors that the noble Baroness, Lady Anelay, mentioned, we can see sector-by-sector growth.

One aspect that has not been mentioned in the debate so far, which I raised in the debate we had in 2022, is trade diversion. We have to be very mindful that if we have an FTA with India, which I would support, then even on the previous Government's figures almost all of the potential gain in extra trade with India would be off-set by reduced trade with other countries in the ASEAN region through trade diversion. Any tariff benefits for one nation could well be at the cost of others, especially for Bangladesh. I hope that the Minister can say that trade diversion is a key part of the discussions that we are having with India.

It has also been raised that there are areas of complexity in our relationship with India, whether it is India in BRICS, the war-games with Russia that they have been carrying out over the last year or the rupee-rouble swap, where certain sectors of the Indian economy have profited from sanction circumvention on Ukraine. There are also the barriers that many noble Lords in this House have worked hard to reduce over many years, especially within the financial sector, FDI, lack of consensus on greenhouse gas emissions, nuclear energy, farming subsidies and policies, et cetera. I hope all these areas can be addressed in the talks.

Finally, regarding the wider area, just before the February recess I and other parliamentary colleagues visited Singapore and Malaysia through the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. The Minister is held in very high regard. At every meeting we had, people asked us to pass on our regards to him. That leads to one of our observations, which the noble Baroness, Lady Verma, touched on. We are not sending a sufficient number of Ministers, high-level officials and delegations to this region. Human-to-human discussion is very important when it comes to facilitating trade and soft power, and we should be doing more of it. I am very pleased that Minister West will be in the region; I wish her luck for the visit. It was also very clear to us that Malaysia's presidency of ASEAN and its green vision for renewable energy and green technology are an enormous opportunity for the UK.

I close with an appeal to the Minister. I suspect that he will not be able to respond to me today. There is an economic integration programme that the UK Government fund, looking at how we promote trade within ASEAN. That is scored as official development assistance because it is technical assistance. I very much hope that with the decisions to cut official development assistance by more than half, those areas of technical support—for trade promotion, for the very growth that we wish to see—will be protected and not cut.

5.27 pm

Lord Sharpe of Epsom (Con): My Lords, it is a pleasure to follow the noble Lord, Lord Purvis, and I am very grateful to my noble friend Lady Anelay of St Johns for tabling this short debate, which I am sure all noble Lords would agree has been most fascinating.

As she said regarding the progress of His Majesty's Government in securing free trade agreements with India and countries in south-east Asia, this is the bedrock. It is a matter of enormous significance. After leaving the European Union, the previous Conservative Government pursued an ambitious and outward-looking trade policy. They secured agreements that unlocked new opportunities for British businesses and consumers, and our commitment to the Indo-Pacific region was steadfast, as I am sure all noble Lords would acknowledge. We recognised its growing economic dynamism and strategic importance. I gently say to the noble Lord, Lord Purvis, that this is not boosterism but common sense.

In May 2021, Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Prime Minister Modi agreed to deepen trade co-operation between the UK and India via the enhanced trade partnership. The noble Lords, Lord Sahota and Lord Bilimoria, made compelling observations about India's spectacular growth, which makes the case for this deal and obviously a future FTA extremely attractive. The strategic approach under that agreement outlined the following benefits of such a deal: a potential increase in UK exports to India of between £8.8 billion and £16.7 billion by 2035 and a boost to UK GDP of potentially up to £6.2 billion by 2035, depending on the final terms. The Government's strategic case is surely unarguable. It is to develop the UK's status as an independent trading nation that seeks trade and investment opportunities and champions free trade. Surely that is even more pertinent in a world where such principles are currently under threat.

The noble Lord, Lord Purvis, asked a very interesting question on trade diversion. I look forward to the Minister's answer on that.

I appreciate that any agreement reached must be beneficial for both countries, and that can take time. That being said, British exporters in financial services, technology, life sciences and manufacturing have much to gain. Will the Minister give us an update on progress for the benefit of our ambitious British businesses seeking more certainty for their exporting future, particularly in light of the competition from other areas and countries that were pointed out by my noble friend Lady Anelay and the noble Lord, Lord Sahota? Perhaps the Minister might also comment on the comments of my noble friend Lady Verma and the noble Lord, Lord Bilimoria, about the wonderful advantage we have because of our diaspora population in this country.

Our trade relationships with ASEAN nations, which is a region representing the world's fifth-largest economy—I do not need to tell the Minister anything about that—are in danger of stagnation. The majority of the work behind the UK's accession to the CPTPP was done under the previous Government and we of course welcome the current Government's accession, but we must now capitalise on this advantage. The previous

[LORD SHARPE OF EPSOM]

Government's agreements with Singapore and Vietnam set a strong foundation. Can the Minister tell the House what steps the Government are taking to advance new partnerships with Indonesia, which is a fabulous opportunity, as my noble friend pointed out, and with Thailand and the Philippines? What is the Government's strategy for this region, which is so ripe with potential benefits for this country?

As my noble friend Lord Vaizey so articulately explained, the trade benefits are substantial. Given his position as chair of the UK-ASEAN Business Council, I think the Government should seriously consider enlisting his services in that part of the world.

Free trade has long been a driver of prosperity, innovation and economic growth. The Conservative vision was one of openness, dynamism and ambition, but, under this Government, we are concerned that we are seeing signs of drift. Can the Minister reassure me that the Government are still steadfastly aligned with the previous Government's strategic vision, as outlined under the previous Indian deal?

Negotiations of this scale require leadership, vision and determination. Businesses and consumers need certainty, and our global partners need confidence in Britain's commitment to free trade. So, finally, what specific steps are the Government taking to accelerate trade talks with India? How do they intend to build on the CPTPP and partnerships in south-east Asia. Perhaps most importantly, do the Government still believe in the previous Government's strategic vision?

5.31 pm

Lord in Waiting/Government Whip (Lord Leong) (Lab):

My Lords, I am pleased to respond to this QSD. I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Anelay, on securing this debate and thank all noble Lords who have contributed this afternoon. I will aim to respond to as many points raised as I can and, if I do not, I promise to write to noble Lords on their unanswered questions.

First, I want to briefly touch on the close relationship between the UK and India. The UK and India have a deep and vibrant relationship, building on the living bridge between our two countries. Some 1.7 million people with Indian heritage call the UK their home, including many of our colleagues in this House and my wife. Our two countries are deeply interwoven through our shared values as democracies committed to the rules-based international order, our cultural ties and—it would be remiss of me not to mention—our shared love of curry and cricket. Our relationship also includes the millions in India who follow the Premier League and the huge market for Bollywood movies in the UK, which I and my wife enjoy most weekends and whose music we occasionally dance to.

Of course, these ties are also visible in our mutual championing of trade—free and fair trade, and investment—which is what we are here to discuss today. This Government's core mission is to deliver economic growth. Boosting trade abroad is essential to delivering growth at home. That is why this Government are committed to negotiating a comprehensive free trade agreement and bilateral investment treaty with India—one of the fastest-growing economies in the world.

Securing a deal with India is a top priority for this Government and it is easy to see why. India is expected to be the third-largest economy in 2028, with 60 million middle-class consumers by 2030. But UK exporters currently face substantial tariffs, including a 150% tariff on whisky, as one noble Lord mentioned earlier.

Our trading relationship with India was worth £41 billion last year. Our investment relationship already supports close to 600,000 jobs across both economies, with Indian FDI projects in the UK creating more than 7,500 jobs in 2023-24. But there is more that we can do. That is why, on 24 February, my right honourable friend the Business and Trade Secretary, Jonathan Reynolds, travelled to India to relaunch negotiations towards a free trade agreement. The bilateral investment treaty that liberalises the trade of goods and services between our countries upholds the UK's high food safety and environmental standards and protections, and facilitates easier temporary movement of businesspeople to provide their expertise. I am pleased to say that good progress was made and negotiations continue to move forward at pace towards a deal that delivers on our mutual ambitions of economic growth.

I will touch on a couple of points raised by noble Lords before I move on to the issue of trade with south-east Asia. We are aware of India's ongoing talks with the EU and their stated ambition on a timeline. Although our focus is on delivering a quality agreement rather than any agreement that may be achieved at pace, securing a deal is a top priority for this Government, as it is for India, so we are pleased that progress was achieved in the Secretary of State's recent visit towards our shared commitment to progress these negotiations at pace.

I hope Members of this House will appreciate that, in order to secure the best deal, I cannot compromise the UK's negotiating position by getting into the specifics of a live negotiation. In any trade agreement, one of the main ambitions is to reduce the tariffs that UK exporters face. This is particularly important when Indian tariffs can exceed 100% on goods such as whisky, as I mentioned.

On visas, which several noble Lords mentioned, our negotiations consider only business mobility, so they cover only relevant business visas, which are, by their nature, limited, temporary and for specific purposes. This is also beneficial to UK exporters delivering services abroad. Student visas are not part of the trade deals.

The Government have made clear that we are willing to negotiate at pace towards a deal in the best interests of the UK. Although I recognise and agree that we would all like this deal to be speedily signed, the Government can sign only once we have secured the right deal for the UK, so we will prioritise the quality of the deal rather than the haste with which we can secure it.

The noble Baroness, Lady Anelay, asked whether there are any red lines and, if so, what they are. To achieve the best possible deal for the UK, we need to protect our negotiating positions. That is why we cannot go into details of live negotiations. What I can say is that this Government will seek a deal that drives economic growth for the UK as a whole while respecting

key UK sensitivities, such as those in the NHS, our food, and health and safety agreements, which will not change under this or any UK free trade agreement. Any free trade agreement will not undermine the UK's high sanitary standards, which are not and will not be decided in any trade agreements. The Government are firmly committed to upholding these high standards.

On post-study work visas, which the noble Baroness, Lady Anelay, and the noble Lords, Lord Bilimoria and Lord Loomba, mentioned, I remind all noble Lords that this Government's position on net migration has not changed, and I make a plea for them to wait for the government White Paper on migration. I am not going to be drawn on this at this stage.

We remain committed to the protection of universal human rights. When we have concerns, they are raised directly with partner Governments, including at ministerial level. This engagement is undertaken separately from negotiations of any free trade agreements, although they are part of building on open and trusting relationships with important partners.

On the issue of CBAM, we will not compromise our high food standards, as I said earlier. We will also not undermine the effectiveness of our CBAM when we are implementing any trade deals.

The noble Baroness, Lady Verma, asked about trade envoys to India. The UK-India trade relationship is a top priority, as I mentioned. The Government will consider the noble Lord's suggestion. I put on record that we currently have an excellent UK trade commissioner to India, and he is doing a fantastic job.

The noble Baroness, Lady Bennett, asked about ISDS. The Government consider ISDS on a case-by-case basis, and I am not going to pre-empt the outcome of any further negotiations. The noble Baroness also asked about the environment and labour. We cannot use an FTA to change a partner's domestic legislation, but an FTA builds on a closer relationship to have honest conversations. On intellectual property, I will have to write to the noble Baroness, as that touches on some very complex areas.

I turn to the issue of trade with south-east Asia. I was born and grew up in Malaysia, in the ASEAN region, which has 10 member states with something close to 670 million people and a combined GDP of some £3.6 trillion, and is growing at a rate of 5% annually. It is a big market and we should consider it. The UK recognises the importance of south-east Asian markets to UK businesses and to the global economy. The noble Lord, Lord Purvis, is right: more Ministers should visit the region, and I encourage my ministerial colleagues at the Department for Business and Trade to consider visiting Malaysia, Singapore and the wider region. I am really pleased that the Minister, Catherine West, is visiting Malaysia this week.

Total trade between the UK and south-east Asian markets is worth about £50 billion, as mentioned by the noble Lord, Lord Vaizey. I want to place on record

my thanks for all the work he has done as chair of the UK-ASEAN Business Council. He has done a fantastic job.

South-east Asia can be a valuable source of investment and growth for the UK. As we have seen recently, the Malaysian company YTL announced £4 billion-worth of investment in the UK over the next five years, including transforming the Greater Bristol area and delivering something like 30,000 jobs across the UK. The UK has secured bilateral free trade agreements with Singapore and Vietnam through the CPTPP, as mentioned, and it secured an agreement with Brunei and Malaysia for the first time. In February 2022, the UK and Singapore signed a digital economy agreement.

Outside of the formal free trade agreements, the UK has strong trading relationships with south-east Asian countries. The Department for Business and Trade has regular trade and economic dialogues with Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia. The UK and Thailand recently signed a UK-Thailand enhanced trade partnership. The UK engages regularly with ASEAN as a dialogue partner, and I think we are the first European dialogue partner to ASEAN. The UK and Indonesia will work towards a new Indonesian-UK economic growth partnership, which is normally the precursor to any formal conversations on a free trade agreement.

The noble Lord, Lord Purvis, asked about trade diversion. The Government carefully consider the impact on the wider region when negotiating a free trade agreement, and will do so as part of any deal.

The noble Baroness, Lady Anelay, asked about Indonesia and the potential for economic growth. Recognising the importance of Indonesia to the global economy, the Prime Minister and President Prabowo agreed to work towards a new Indonesian-UK economic growth partnership, as I mentioned earlier. The UK values projects such as those that the noble Baroness mentioned, and transnational education is one of the fastest growing sectors for this country.

The noble Lords, Lord Vaizey and Lord Sharpe, asked about future trade agreements. While we cannot currently commit to seeking new FTAs with partners in south-east Asia, it is important that we find ways to enhance our bilateral co-operation and economic ties, and to maintain our trade relationships into the future. That is what we have been doing with enhanced partnerships.

In conclusion, the Indo-Pacific region remains a key and ongoing area of interest for the UK. Its dynamic and developing economies represent opportunities for the UK. I am pleased to see strong progress in our discussions with key partners in this region, ensuring that our future relationships remain mutually beneficial, forward-looking, and supportive of prosperity and economic security.

House adjourned at 5.44 pm.

Grand Committee

Thursday 6 March 2025

Ukraine (International Relations and Defence Committee Report)

Motion to Take Note

1 pm

Moved by Lord De Mauley

That the Grand Committee takes note of the Report from the International Relations and Defence Committee *Ukraine: a wake-up call* (1st Report, HL Paper 10).

Lord De Mauley (Con): My Lords, I speak today as chairman of the International Relations and Defence Committee to introduce our report, *Ukraine: A Wake-up Call*. The report provides a sobering, and now urgent, assessment of the implications of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine for United Kingdom defence policy and the broader security of Europe. Before delving into the detail of the report, I thank the members of the committee, including my predecessor as chairman, the noble Lord, Lord Ashton of Hyde; the excellent clerk and staff, who put a huge amount of work into the report over the summer; and the witnesses who appeared before the committee.

The findings in our report are stark. The war in Ukraine has shattered the assumptions underpinning western defence thinking since the end of the Cold War. This is indeed a wake-up call not just for us but for the whole of Europe. The war has exposed critical gaps in our capabilities and the fragility of our defence industrial base—all because of our assumption, now revealed as wrong, that future conflicts would be short and limited.

The first conclusion of the report is that NATO deterrence failed. President Putin calculated that the West lacked the political will and the military capability to stop him. This calculation, tragically, was in part correct: our deterrence posture has been found wanting. We must rebuild deterrence through improved military capability, clear messaging and a united front with our allies. This has taken on a new significance following the rift created by the heated exchanges between President Trump and President Zelensky last week and the continuing developments this week.

Another significant development since the publication of our report has been the Prime Minister's recent announcement of an increase in defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2027 and the ambition to increase it to 3% in the next Parliament. While welcome, our report concluded that 2.5% of GDP may not be enough to meet the UK's growing defence needs or plug existing gaps. Subsequent events have underlined that point.

This leads me to the current state of our Armed Forces. The Army in particular has already shrunk to its smallest size since the Napoleonic era, and it is questionable whether it will be able to field sufficient fighting forces beyond an initial deployment. The Prime Minister has said that he is willing to put troops on the ground in Ukraine to help guarantee the country's

security. While I fully understand his objective, it is difficult to imagine how the Army would be able to maintain a credible deterrent force in Ukraine, for any extended length of time—let alone fulfil its other obligations, which seem likely to grow—without increasing in size significantly.

Crucially, we must rebuild the appeal of military service to the next generation. We also need to revitalise our reserves. Ukraine has shown that well-trained and properly equipped reserve forces can, literally, make all the difference. Ours are woefully underfunded. We must ensure that they are ready to mobilise at scale, when needed, and that numbers are boosted so that they can also be deployed to protect critical national infrastructure at home.

Critical national infrastructure deserves a specific mention, because the experience of Ukraine provides a clear warning to the United Kingdom: Russia has relentlessly attacked Ukrainian energy systems and communication networks. We are already witnessing a troubling shift towards more aggressive hybrid tactics being deployed, in the UK and nearby, by Russia and others. We must up our game in countering hybrid attacks. If not, our enemies will realise that they can get away with it, placing us in an ever more vulnerable position.

Defence is not just about soldiers and capabilities; it is also about cybersecurity, the security of our supply chains and resilience within our communities. The concept of total defence, long practised by nations such as Sweden and Finland, must be adopted here. We must move beyond the notion that defence is the sole responsibility of the military. Total defence entails a high state of readiness by both the state and society to defend themselves in case of threat of war, crisis or natural disaster.

I will now speak in my personal capacity rather than as a member of the committee. There is a little-known but influential organisation, which is critically poised to play a leading role in helping the United Kingdom achieve a total defence stance, called the Council of the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association. I declare an interest in that I am currently its chairman. The CRFCA has strong and embedded relations throughout the United Kingdom, with local and devolved Administration politicians, business leaders and opinion influencers through the extensive nationwide membership of the Reserve Forces and cadets' associations. The RFCAs are the only defence-related organisations that reach all the regions and devolved nations, and the membership connects with all sectors and communities in society.

The Minister recently commented in answer to a Written Question:

“The RFCA has an extensive volunteer membership ... bringing a wide breadth of expertise and community links. The RFCAs' extensive network of volunteer members, based within communities across the UK, enable the RFCAs to ... connect to society ... While the number of hours volunteered is not formally recorded either for the volunteer membership or non-executive board members, it is estimated that this figure is around 69,000 hours per year”.

In answer to another, he said:

“The vast majority of active members make no claims, reflecting their sense of service and deep connection with the UK's Reserve Forces and Cadets”.

[LORD DE MAULEY]

There is a move afoot in the Ministry of Defence to dispense with this organisation, first created by Haldane in 1908 when it was realised that, to be efficient, while command and training of the Reserve Forces should be centralised, conversely, the raising and administration of those forces could be efficient only if decentralised, this being deemed essential to the encouragement of local effort and the development of local resources in time of peace. This is what the RFCAs, the successor to what were the county associations, provide today with their wide membership; they are local in origin and situation, cognisant of local capabilities and requirements and thoroughly integrated into their communities.

In its stead, the MoD wishes to create a non-departmental public body with one centralised board of paid non-executive directors with little or no experience of, or commitment to, reserves or cadets. There is a significant risk that this, as well as the proposal that the current membership should be retained merely in an advisory or associate capacity, will disenfranchise the members when they recognise that they will have little ability to have a say on how central government directives are implemented in the regions from which they come and on the support they give to sustain the reserve.

At a stroke, the MoD will have lost a body of natural supporters with deep links into the society of their communities and regions, just as the strategic defence review may well place a greater reliance on the reserve for the total defence of the United Kingdom. To quote a former commanding officer tasked with raising a new reserve battalion: “My experience of raising a new battalion has convinced me that the associations are essential to look after the interests of the Reserve Forces as a whole, not just a harmless institution that has to be humoured. It therefore concerns me that there is a view among some civil servants and regular officers of the MoD that the RFCAs are anachronistic and expensive bodies which work against the established chain of command and are positively detrimental to the ‘one Army’ concept”. The RFCAs are here to help and can make a significant contribution to the defence of the nation.

To return to the committee’s report, yet another urgent lesson from Ukraine concerns our defence industrial base. Decades of budget cuts and reduced industrial capacity since the end of the Cold War have left the UK’s defence industry unprepared for high-intensity prolonged conflict. Our procurement processes are too slow and risk averse. Ukraine has, by necessity, embraced a model of rapid innovation, working hand in glove with commercial technology companies and adapting in real time on the battlefield. This is the agility we need. To achieve this, the Government must rebuild trust with the defence industry, whose leaders repeatedly told us that it needs clear, long-term commitments—not shifting goalposts—to enable it to scale up production.

We must also broaden our partner base, including those we may not traditionally think of as military suppliers, in order to provide the cutting-edge capabilities our Armed Forces require. Recent events have underscored the critical need to strengthen our industrial engagement with our European partners. We found that increasing

collaboration in integrated air and missile defence should be high on the list of priorities for the Government. The report also highlights the importance of nurturing partnerships. Of course, it did not predict the schism in the western alliance we are witnessing right now, but that only serves to make it even clearer that the UK Government must now use all their diplomatic skills—as I think the Prime Minister seems to be doing, and I commend his efforts—to ensure the unity of the western alliance in support of UK and European security efforts.

Finally, we must acknowledge an uncomfortable truth: the UK is a medium-sized regional power. This may not be a bad thing, but it requires hard choices to be made and a realistic narrative from the Government about what our Armed Forces can deliver. Our report calls for a coherent model that leverages technology, industry, the reserves, diplomacy and society itself to rebuild our deterrence posture and make sure that it is credible. This should be at the heart of the strategic defence review, and the Government must ensure that their response to the review is swift and provides a clear road map for how this can all be achieved. The hard-earned lessons from the war in Ukraine are our wake-up call, and the time to act is now. I beg to move.

1.11 pm

Lord Liddle (Lab): My Lords, first, I pay tribute to the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley. I think it is an appropriate thing to do in a week when the House has been debating the hereditary Peers Bill. He is the inheritor of one of the longest-standing peerages that there that there are, I think, but in his time here—and I have now been here for 15 years—he has made a major contribution to the House. I would just like to put that on record.

The report is right that we need a wake-up call, and I think that there are already signs in the way that Keir Starmer is responding to the crisis that that wake-up call is being heeded. I know a little bit about Ukraine. From the late 1990s to 2004, Tony Blair appointed me to head a No. 10 delegation to meet regularly, which we did every three or four months, with the Ukraine presidential Administration. I was lucky, of course, to be given lots of nice trips around that wonderful country to the Crimea, where I sat in Joe Stalin’s chair at Yalta, and to wonderful cities such as Odessa, Lviv and Kyiv itself.

It was always clear to me in those conversations that there was a great division in Ukraine between those who saw themselves as totally dependent on Russia for their security and their energy and those who wanted to become what I would call a normal European country. Of course, Blair was a very strong advocate of European enlargement, so I could readily say to them that the Labour Government of the time respected their European vocation. Indeed, when I went to Brussels with my noble friend Lord Mandelson and the trade talks started with Ukraine, one of the great things that caused the revolution on the streets in Ukraine, both in 2007 and in 2013, was the feeling that they wanted to be part of Europe, not a Soviet satellite.

I think our Prime Minister has done really well, and I am glad to see that so many people on the Opposition agree on that. There is nothing wrong in principle with

President Trump's wish for peace, and he is right, of course, that there is the most awful killing going on. Not least is the brutality of what Russia has done in Ukraine—and we should not forget this in all these discussions—particularly in taking children from Ukraine to be Russianised. That is absolutely shocking, and it should not be forgotten in any peace discussions.

The basic condition of a peace has to be that Ukraine remains a free and independent country able to pursue its European vocation and membership of the EU. Clearly, security guarantees such as NATO membership have not been ruled out, but the European arm of NATO really has to step up to the plate. That is absolutely crucial. There is, of course, no certainty that the guarantees from the US that we are seeking will actually come. Keir Starmer is doing his best. The Ukrainian President seems to think that the minerals deal, with Americans on the ground in Ukraine, will itself provide a security guarantee; I have to say that I do not agree.

We are on course for a very big need for European rearmament. I welcome the step towards 2.5%, but in my personal view that is nowhere near enough. I think that, with the Robertson review, we need to be thinking much more in terms of something like 3.5%. There is encouraging news on this today from Germany, where the likely new German coalition under Friedrich Merz has decided that all defence spending over 1% should come outside the fiscal brake that they have. I think we need to do something similar in Britain.

Britain has to be full part of this European rearmament. This is not anti-NATO; in fact, it is the only way of saving NATO, by convincing the Americans and President Trump that we are ready to stand up to the plate. But this must be done in a co-ordinated way if it is to secure efficiency and rationalisation of the way that Europe works. I am a little sceptical of talk of buying British in this context, because we have to be co-ordinated. One of the reasons that Europe is so weak is because of that lack of planning and co-ordination.

Fundamentally, what the Russians want is a defeated and demoralised Ukraine, where they can convince the people that they should elect leaders who accept Russian satellite status. That is not what we want. There has to be no Munich in Europe as a result of the present crisis.

1.19 pm

Lord Alderdice (LD): My Lords, I start by thanking our previous chair of the committee, the noble Lord, Lord Ashton of Hyde, and our current chair, the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley, and indeed our clerk and her colleagues for the tremendous work that they have done in drawing together the information that emerged in our inquiry and the many thoughts and reactions that we had as members of the Select Committee.

Much has happened since its publication in September 2024, but the thrust of our report remains absolutely relevant and on target. It was, as its title says, *A Wake-up Call* then; surely the events of the past few weeks have shaken out of their slumber those who did not recognise the urgency of the call at that time and continued to sleepwalk towards disaster. The report sets out with great clarity how Europe as a whole—and

our own country, I am afraid—has failed to pay attention to the drift into what I have described as a third global conflict. I have spoken about this in your Lordships' House before, especially after the Russian invasion of Crimea because, even at that time, the direction in which we were going was clear.

However, as in so many other fields, people tend to live in the world that they wish existed, rather than in the one that they actually inhabit. Europe in general preferred to believe that major international wars in Europe were a thing of the past. After 9/11, many academics and analysts wrote about the new wars, which would consist only of terrorism and intra-state disruption, but insisted that major wars between developed states would not arise. This was an extension of the thought that was around in the later 20th century that technological developments, especially after 1945 and the existence of nuclear weapons, were so damaging and destructive that the truth was that no one would actually contemplate them.

In fact, new technologies rarely replace the old technologies of warfare completely. They simply add more weapons, more tactics and more strategies to the armamentarium. A hundred years ago, most warfare took place on land and sea; then, air became important and, subsequently, space did so as well. But, as if four spaces were not enough in which to have conflict, we developed the cyber world, and we are now in effect engaged in a global conflict in cyberspace.

An old intelligence officer with whom I worked for many years used to talk about the need to be an educated customer of intelligence. What he meant was that we need not only to accumulate ever more data but to analyse it satisfactorily. That means looking at it realistically. When Vladimir Putin wrote and talked a lot about his intention to take territory and restructure the global security architecture, many western analysts said, "Oh, his speeches are just bad history and foolish nonsense". Even when he amassed troops on the borders of Ukraine, many regarded this as just showmanship and did not prepare themselves for the coming conflict.

It is much the same with President Trump. People often complain that, when politicians get elected, they do not do the things they promised during their election campaigns. The problem with President Trump is the opposite: he does try to implement the things that he has promised. It is necessary to listen carefully to what he says. When he talks of wanting peace, what he is talking about is peace between Russia and the United States; it is not a peace that will satisfy Ukraine or Europe. As far as he is concerned, they are small fry that he can happily disregard because the big players are just the United States, Russia and China; the rest are just what the French call garniture—kinds of vegetables.

This report sets out clearly the urgent need to review our failed deterrence policy, not least because we cannot have the same confidence that our nuclear capacity will always be able to operate with the necessary current US collaboration. We can hope that it will, but we cannot be certain. There are colossal financial and technical implications—and, indeed, implications for our alliances. The NATO we knew is simply not able to be depended upon, but we do need alliances and we need to work closely with others.

[LORD ALDERDICE]

It is also true that one downside of having a full-time professional military is that the country as a whole gets to believe that the defence of the country is somebody else's responsibility: "It's the Government. It's the military". They are absolutely crucial, of course, but, particularly as the amount of resource available has been cut back, it is not possible for the Government and the military on their own to give citizens a guarantee to fulfil the absolute fundamental responsibility of defence and protection. We need a whole-of-society approach and sense of responsibility; as has already been mentioned, our colleagues in Finland and some of the other Scandinavian countries have recognised this for some time. That will need a change in the psychological posture of our people as a whole, as well as in the provision of materiel.

In regard to our weapons systems, bigger is not always better. Some of the things we have seen Ukraine being able to do with small amounts but with creativity need our attention. We need steady nerves but a commitment to face the fearful reality before us and to face the current underpreparedness with necessary funding, personnel and a change in attitude of our community as a whole.

1.25 pm

Baroness Coussins (CB): My Lords, I also have the privilege of being a member of the International Relations and Defence Committee. I will confine my remarks in this debate to one of the points in chapter 3 of our report, "Nurturing partnerships". This looks at the concept of defence in a more holistic and big-picture way than just the size of the Armed Forces or the supply chains and capability of weapons, crucial though these things self-evidently are.

Alliances, partnerships and reputation also underpin our defence posture and, in the case of Ukraine, have exposed an important weakness when we consider the situation globally and long-term. We need to think very carefully about the response of the countries which we generally call the global South to the support from the UK for Ukraine, partly so that a rounded view of the current situation can take place, but also so that the UK in formulating its future defence strategies and capabilities can be realistic about those alliances, partnerships and reputational risks on which our engagement in any future combat situation might depend.

As the report states:

"International engagement is integral to deterrence and escalation management".

At the time of the report's publication—I am certainly not going to go into the astonishing change in voting behaviour by the US at the UN recently—the UN's 193 member states had voted on six emergency special session resolutions on Ukraine. Most countries supported the first of these, which condemned Russia's invasion, with only one-quarter of states not in favour. All those that abstained or voted against were countries in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and south-east Asia: the global South. This pattern held in subsequent votes and few countries in any of those regions have imposed any sanctions on Russia or given any material support to Ukraine.

Meanwhile, Russia has been able to divide and rule between the positions of the West on one hand and of the global South on the other, by talking up the Soviet Union's historical support for decolonisation, attracting support particularly in Africa and Asia. Our report quotes a former Portuguese Minister, who said:

"Ukraine's plight would receive a lot more sympathy in the Global South if it were presented as a war of national liberation ... if you described Russia as the last European empire".

While the UK has been reluctant to embrace this narrative, Russia has gone full speed ahead with diplomatic initiatives to court and secure support from the global South.

For example, it held a Russia-Africa summit and parliamentary conference in 2023 and described a new foreign policy approach in opposition to the so-called western neocolonialism. It also held the first ever Russia-Latin America conference in the same year. This has resulted in countries of the global South feeling aggrieved at what is perceived to be a distracting concern of the West with Russian aggression. They would prefer to see attention towards issues such as debt and climate change, rather than what is being viewed as western hypocrisy and double standards, particularly towards the suffering of people in regions of the world other than Ukraine.

Evidence we received from the Henry Jackson Society suggested that these undesirable trends could be shifted by a more assertive role by the UK in the Security Council and the G7, away from a subordinate position of reliance on the US, and stressed the importance of maintaining a physical presence in regions of potential conflict.

I suggest that this all adds up to a clear pointer that the Government's recent decision to fund greater defence spending—vital though that must surely be—by raiding the international aid budget might be short-sighted and ultimately self-defeating. If the UK's future defence capability, strategy, deterrence and engagement are to command the respect of global leadership rather than risk a global cold shoulder, we will need a more holistic definition of defence and the support, not the cynicism, of the global South. We should pay more attention to Latin America and avoid short-changing Africa. On the surface, I can see that that sounds literally miles away from our defence agenda, but the interconnectedness is now more important to understand than ever before. I look forward to the Minister's comments on these points.

1.30 pm

Lord Grocott (Lab): My Lords, our Select Committee was half way through its taking of evidence when we were rudely interrupted by a general election. It is a tribute to the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley, and his predecessor in the chair, the noble Lord, Lord Ashton, that we picked up the pieces after the election and completed this report. It is a tribute as well to our secretariat, who were terrific.

If I were to summarise the lessons we learned in our report from the war in Ukraine, I would say that they are a surprising mixture of the old and the new. On the old side, we have the front line and the trenches, which are eerily reminiscent of conflicts over 100 years ago

and which showed the importance of mass in military operations. On the new side, we have the evidence of the huge importance of drones, which, as we say in paragraph 183, are ubiquitous in Ukraine for intelligence, target acquisition and reconnaissance, as well as for direct attacks. Then, aside from the mechanics of warfare is the international context in which the war is being fought, on which I very much agree with everything that the noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, said. What has the war told us about the standing of the West in the international community, in particular those countries of the global South?

First, on the importance of mass, as we say in paragraph 34,

“the evidence we heard points to the current size of the British Army being inadequate”.

Before we even begin to talk about increasing the size of the Army, we need to focus a little on the immediate problem of the apparent inability to recruit enough people to maintain present strengths. The figures we had were that, up to July 2024, 11,940 people joined the regular Armed Forces, while, in the same period, 15,700 left. We need a 25% increase just to stand still. I would like to hear from the Minister the strategy we now have for delivering the numbers required, particularly in the light of the increased funding announced last week. How much will be accomplished by retaining existing personnel and how much by new recruits? I am sure he agrees with me that retention has great advantages because, in a sense, you already have the finished product.

I would also like confirmation—I think this is such an important point in recruiting—of the fact that skills acquired in a career in the Armed Forces are extremely valuable for life outside the military, and special emphasis should be given to this powerful selling point. In our evidence, we heard that the armed services are consistently in the top 10 of UK apprenticeship providers, with no fewer than 24,800 people undertaking their apprenticeships in 2022.

Finally on recruitment, the Government said in their response to us that:

“The Armed Forces need to continue to attract a range of diversity, talent, skills and experience which is fully reflective of the society it serves”.

Which groups are particularly underrepresented, and are there good grounds for believing that targeting them will bear fruit in the recruitment challenges facing the forces?

Now to the significance of new technology, especially drones, in the lessons learned in Ukraine. The sheer scale of the use of drones in Ukraine is staggering. Dr Ulrike Franke from the European Council on Foreign Relations told us that drones

“are omnipresent on the battlefield”.

She said,

“we are talking about hundreds of thousands of small drone systems being used, and lost, every month”.

Two issues concerning drones stand out from our evidence. The first is the rapidity of development of drones and of defence systems to counter them. This means that there is, in effect, a drones arms race, with any advantage to either side always in danger of being

short-lived. The second issue is simply one of drone production capacity. As we say in our report, it is estimated that

“Russia is producing around 300,000 drone units per month”, compared with Ukraine’s production of 150,000. I ask the Minister: where are we in the drones arms race? Are sufficient resources being provided to keep us ahead in drone technology and defence systems? Is the industrial capacity available to produce drones on the scale that modern warfare requires?

Finally, I turn to the lessons we should learn from the Ukraine conflict about the international context and the standing of the West. In paragraph 34 of our report’s recommendations, we say:

“As the UK Government is facing a world where the Global South is becoming more assertive, with some countries leaning towards China or Russia, it is vital for the UK to be more proactive and have a strategy on how to engage with the Global South”.

The fact that 40 countries are sanctioning Russia because of its aggression can give only limited comfort to the West, bearing in mind that the overwhelming majority of countries are not imposing sanctions, and many of those are helping Russia, in one way or another, to evade the effects of sanctions. I would like to hear the Minister’s judgment about what the war in Ukraine has told us about the standing of the West in general in the international community and of the UK in particular. The war in Ukraine has been long and bloody. Lessons have to be learned. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

1.37 pm

Lord Howell of Guildford (Con): My Lords, I was not a member of this excellent committee, but I think that this is an absolutely admirable report that is amazingly timely, very important and, indeed, a wake-up call to us all. Although I was not a member, I take a little slice of pride as a godparent of the committee because the noble Lord, Lord Hannay, and I had to push the authorities very hard to get the committee set up, which we eventually did, and it has been an outstanding success. This is one of the best reports it has ever produced. I have three points to add, quickly, to the excellent introduction from the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley, in which he covered most of the things I want to say.

First, we should note what he said about reserves. At the moment, our reserves, which used to be called territorials, number 34,280—although I am not quite sure about that; there is a lot of dispute about the number. That is on top of the 74,000 regular Army troops, making the total strength of the Army, Navy and Air Force 134,000, or whatever it is. That can be enlarged very quickly. People forget how rapidly, in the 1930s, the reserves went from being held at about 200,000 into the millions, and then merged totally into the Army. All that happened in a matter of weeks. I cannot claim to remember in the case of my father, because I was two years old at the time, but I am told that he had about a fortnight to transform from being a retired regular back into a territorial, and then went into full combat organisation and was in the desert within a month of the war being announced on 3 September. The whole speed of this thing can be

[LORD HOWELL OF GUILDFORD]

greatly improved, as the report rightly says, and to have bureaucracy slowing it all down is a lot of nonsense. We need to look at that very clearly; the call-up can be much quicker. That is my first point.

Secondly, this report is so good because it brings home that the whole issue is much wider than the picture books and child versions of what warfare is about. We think about the trenches and the front line, and it is absolutely true about the drones that the noble Lord, Lord Grocott, just eloquently mentioned. The sheer numbers—the report mentioned 2 million—that Ukraine alone is mobilising can really change the whole nature and drive people back into the trenches like in 1914. I am told that, within 200 miles on either side of the front line, and certainly on the Russian side, anyone who comes out of a trench for a smoke—or, dare I say, a pee—is instantly spotted and probably dead within three or four minutes. This is the changed nature of the whole pattern of the front line.

An even bigger nature change is that it is not just about the front line. Obviously, civilians are targeted, rather as Hermann Göring did with trying to smash all our cities—he failed. Now, of course, Putin has far longer-range rockets of far greater accuracy. All the utilities are targeted, and we want to watch, know and learn from the Minister to what extent we are developing new air defences and missile repellents for, for instance, our power stations. If they can be taken out, and if electricity can be taken out of the system, I am told that, within three days, civil chaos and collapse of morale happens behind the lines. Of course, it is the same lesson that Germany in particular learned in 1918: if morale collapses behind the lines, it spreads to a collapse in morale in the Armed Forces as well. The Russians are well aware of that and are using that strategy in Ukraine at this moment. The concept of having total defence against this kind of warfare, total defence in terms of mobilising people on a far larger scale—regulars and territorials—and having more combat-trained troops ready to add to the regular troops is vital.

On my third point, I differ a little, I think, from the report. The report says that it is all about Europe and how we get together with our European partners. It is not; it is a global issue. There are principles—and fears—that go right through Asia, where all the growth of military, civil and domestic economy will take place over the next 30 years. Japan is extremely nervous about any kind of peace that we negotiate in Europe that gives in to Russian force. They say that that would immediately trigger Xi to have a go at suffocating Taiwan, which would lead to Pacific war and then to world war. We have, but sometimes neglect, our great range of Commonwealth network friends, right through Asia and Africa. They are just as concerned and need to be mobilised just as much. In fact, if you add it up, we probably have more friends—you might say they are soft-power friends and their Governments do not always agree—around the world, outside Europe, than the United States has. The United States might be losing friends at the moment, becoming not America the beautiful, but America the feared, in terms of what it will do next. We need America, but it also needs us.

My fear is that Putin will outwit Trump and offer a peace that looks good to start with but in fact can last only 10 minutes. If he does not do that, he may even offer the kind of peace that leads to the conquest of Ukraine by the Russians. That would of course be the worst of all worlds.

1.43 pm

Lord Stirrup (CB): My Lords, I congratulate the members of the International Relations and Defence Committee on this excellent report. It is usually a matter of great regret that we are not able to debate such Select Committee reports until long after they are published, but in this case the delay is a positive advantage. Why? To echo the noble Lord, Lord Alderdice, it is because, if the war in Ukraine was a wake-up call for us and our European partners in NATO, surely the events of the past few weeks in Munich and Washington have served to tip us entirely out of our cosy collective bed on to the cold, hard floor. The recommendations made in the report are based on a forensic analysis of the evidence and are well judged. I support them all. However, the context has clearly changed—and not for the better.

We all want NATO to survive and to continue the invaluable work it has done over so many decades to guard our collective security. The United States has been at the core of that endeavour, and we wish American involvement to continue. I believe that it will, but we can no longer expect it to be on the scale that it has been in the past. This goes beyond the vagaries of one President or any sense of growing American isolationism. Senior officials in Washington, both civilian and military, have made it clear that, despite their enduring commitment to NATO, they are substantially shifting their weight of effort from Europe to the Pacific. This should not surprise us. This development has been under way and slowly building in momentum over many years. That the American shift now coincides with a dramatically increased risk to our security has just served to open European eyes that, for too long, have remained resolutely shut.

It is now starkly apparent that if we in Europe do not provide adequately for our own security, no one else will. It is also clear that shouldering this responsibility is the surest way of retaining American involvement in NATO. For too long, we and our European partners have scabbled around in the smallest margins of public expenditure to fund our defence. It was inappropriate in the past; it would be utter folly now. There is a growing acknowledgement by many political leaders in Europe that we are in an era of rearmament. This is right, but we need to define and follow through on what that means. Europe's militaries, including our own, are too small as fighting units, inadequately armed and lacking in key strategic capabilities. Rearmament means making good these deficiencies. That will take two things: time and money. We have the first, but none to waste.

Russia's military capability, particularly in its ground forces, is depleted after three years of gruelling combat in Ukraine. This will take time to rebuild, but it can and will be rebuilt. Meanwhile, Russia has learned some important operational and tactical lessons from its early failures in the war, and its nuclear, aviation

and maritime capabilities remain largely untouched. So, in one sense, we are in an arms race with Russia, and we cannot afford to fall behind.

This brings me to the cost of rearmament: it will be considerably greater than the Government have yet acknowledged. It is worth reflecting that, at the time of the first Gulf War—the last time we fielded a full armoured division for high-intensity conflict alongside an extended air campaign—we were spending 4% of GDP on defence. Even then, we had to cannibalise the whole of the British Army of the Rhine in order to field that armoured division. So the Prime Minister's commitment to raise defence spending to 2.5% of GDP in the financial year 2027-28 is clearly inadequate; 2.5% of GDP would merely close the gap between the current level of resource and the cost of the existing programme, and there are two years before even that happens. As things stand, it seems that defence will actually receive less cash next year than it will in this. I cannot imagine quite how the Minister will defend this in the House.

So what is the cost? SACEUR has set out a defensive posture that, in his view, would deter Russian aggression—something the inquiry report rightly identifies as the overriding requirement. SACEUR has also identified the contribution that he needs from the UK. This should be costed and a plan drawn up to achieve the necessary force levels and sustainability as soon as possible. I cannot put an accurate price on this, but it will be well north of 3% of GDP so, to put us on the right path, we need 2.5% immediately and we need to pass 3% before the end of the decade.

Of course, the money should be spent wisely. Other noble Lords have commented and will comment on this, but I identify two important issues that need to figure prominently in our plans. The first is the requirement for continuing technological innovation and rapid capability development. This will involve a much closer and more flexible use of SMEs than has been normal in our procurement system to date. The second is the importance of well-trained and equipped reservists. With this in mind, I echo the remarks of the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley, in opposing any suggestion that this crucial part of our capability be put under a non-departmental body. That would be a bad idea at any time but folly today.

The Prime Minister has said that Europe must do the heavy lifting in Ukraine, but heavy lifting requires muscle. We have allowed our military muscle to atrophy for far too many years; we now need substantially to rebuild it and to rebuild it quickly, before it is too late.

1.50 pm

Lord Anderson of Swansea (Lab): My Lords, those were wise words from the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup. I join him in congratulating the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley, and his committee.

All seem to agree that the context within which the report was drafted has changed dramatically. Obviously, one would be the announcement by our Prime Minister of an increase in defence expenditure and more to come, but also the flurry of announcements made since Munich by the President and the Vice-President, which makes some argue whether we can still rely on the US and whether all the assumptions we have made

since the Second World War about transatlantic relations are put in question. Are we still confident that the US will come to our aid? I note that the former US ambassador to Moscow said over the past few days that we need to rethink the side on which the US is now, because there have been so many things said by the President which favour Moscow, and there has been no criticism of Moscow but much criticism of President Zelensky, who was lectured, indeed humiliated, when he visited the White House and may yet again, Canossa like, have to go on his knees when next week he visits, or is likely to visit, the President, possibly with President Macron and our Prime Minister. The question of trust must arise and must affect all our relations, including our reliance on the US for the nuclear deterrent.

There is an old adage, “Think it, don't say it”, and we have to understand our Prime Minister when he bites his tongue, I guess, about things he would like to say about the utterances of President Trump, but he cannot say them, and we are more able to do so.

You can talk about the responsibility for the war. President Trump mentioned Ukraine as starting the war. He wants to increase the G6 to the G7, and it is sad to see the way in which Congress, or at least the Republicans, a few days ago sycophantically rallied around the President, yet a few months ago, they would have given just the same response to President Zelensky. Now they exult in the President's new clothes.

Paragraph 155 of the report states that we should: “expect a gradual shifting of US priorities”.

There has not been a gradual shifting. There has been a fundamental reversal by President Trump, by the pause, in terms of Ukraine, on both the military side and intelligence. To remove intelligence, in terms of both the offensive and defensive capability of Ukraine, can harm the war effort immensely so that Putin can take yet more land in advance of any peace treaty.

Since the publication of the report, we have seen this flurry of declarations, and we need to re-evaluate our relationship. It is argued that the specialist cadre in the Foreign Office regarding Russia has hollowed out. I recall that many years ago when I was in the Foreign Office in response to that challenge, we responded to the Hayter report to increase concentration on Russia. Do we now need a similar Hayter report?

I turn to particular aspects of the report: the wider challenge of defence in a more diverse society and the role of the reserves, which the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley, spoke wisely about. The older generation in our country is more ready to relate to the military than the younger generation. When I sell for the Royal British Legion for 11 November, I often find that young people are reluctant to give to the military whereas older people are very ready to do so. We need to educate our communities.

Many have made points about the global South, as it is now called. The committee says that we should deal with that with ODA—that does not sit easily with the recent cuts to ODA.

Finally, there is the question of realism, mentioned in the summary and discussed well by the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley. Can we still afford the full spectrum

[LORD ANDERSON OF SWANSEA]

on defence and to what extent should there be a substantial move to our European allies and a rejection of some of the ideological antagonism towards Europe? It is very important that the Government respond to the new Germany, as Chancellor-to-be Merz asks to be brought within the circle of our nuclear powers. On this point of realism, we should invite everyone to go to Delphi, consult the oracle and perhaps be ready to examine ourselves and know ourselves better than we do at present.

1.56 pm

Lord Soames of Fletching (Con): My Lords, I join in the congratulations to the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley, and, before him, the noble Lord, Lord Ashton, to our wonderful committee staff and to all those who took the trouble and time to give us evidence for this important and substantial report.

I start by saying, across the political divide, that our Prime Minister has handled events thus far with exceptional calm and confidence. It gives great strength to our case that the nation is united in its support for Ukraine and its determination to ensure that we are prepared to make a greater contribution to NATO, which is long overdue, and thus to European security. It is a great pity that we no longer have a seat in the Councils taking place today in Brussels.

I strongly support President Trump's determination that this should be the case, but respectfully remind him that the Atlantic alliance, which is the most successful defensive organisation of all time, is not something just to be dismissed at the flick of a switch. We will get further quicker if we undertake the vast amount of work that has to be done in an orderly way without the baleful histrionics. He should also realise that, whatever agreement he thinks we may be able to reach with President Putin, the Kremlin will continue to view the West as an enemy. We must therefore take all necessary steps to continue to be aware of the danger it represents and its activities, which are harmful to ourselves, our people, our country and our allies. To this end, we need, as everyone agrees, to build up our defences and our resilience. Investing in our security is in our interest and we need to recognise our urgent obligation to the country to do it.

The wake-up call—now an alarm call—that this committee deals with is extremely timely. It will affect this country's military activities across all domains and mean profound changes in the military and civilian establishments, in particular in the reordering and encouragement of our defence industrial base, which has so much to offer. I agree strongly with the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, on this. To this end, I urge Ministers to study the case histories of the Americans, who do this sort of thing extremely well, particularly businesses such as Anduril, which I saw the other day and is doing so much in the private sector in R&D and production and at far lower prices than the conventional manner.

I also support strongly an urgent look at how the reserves in all three services can play a bigger role and bring into the defence field many more people who

would otherwise not be involved. I strongly—very strongly—support the comments from the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley, in this regard. Of course, we await the outcome of the strategic defence review from the noble Lord, Lord Robertson. Although we can, I think, all be pleased with the intention to raise spending on defence, to be frank, what is planned at present is nowhere near enough, as several noble Lords have said.

In the months ahead, it will be increasingly important that the public understand that this country is going to have to change its dispositions. I think that it would be a wise step to establish a ministry of civil defence, which would accelerate the planning of the kind of unforeseen circumstances and eventualities that are clearly going to arise; it would be a focus for urgency in building our required, but much overdue, national resilience. Incidentally, I wonder whether the Minister will consider whether it is entirely sensible to send the carrier strike group to the Far East when it may well be required for urgent duties nearer home. It seems to me foolish to dispatch so much of our limited naval power such a long way from its home base at a time of considerable tension.

In my view, the reason why the events of the past few weeks have come as such a tremendous shock in this country is because the Article 5 commitment—and NATO's solidarity behind it—allowed a billion people in 32 countries to sleep easily in their beds at night. To be frank, that is no longer the case. They will continue to be able to do so only if deterrence is real, robust and understood by friend and foe alike. Deterrence means having the right capabilities and the right forces, with the right equipment, at the right place and at the right time, to defend our people and to frighten off those who wish us ill. In Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine, we have been reminded vividly of what is at risk. We must take all necessary steps. The stakes before us are sky-high and, as this report makes plain, we need to wake up to them.

2.02 pm

Baroness Harris of Richmond (LD) [V]: My Lords, I, too, congratulate the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley, on introducing this excellent report. It makes grim reading. By its reckoning, we are not defending ourselves as a country well enough. It pre-dated, but was prescient in, its conclusions, which played out in the terrible scenes at the White House last week when, finally, American foreign policy was laid bare.

There will be no security backstop guaranteed by our long-term allies. We have in effect been cut off from what we have long believed to be our security lifeline. America, under this President and his wealthy backers, has reneged on that long-held view that the western alliance worked together against the dictator and aggressor, Putin. That view was shattered to pieces when, at the recent United Nations General Assembly, the resolution blaming Russia for starting the war was voted against by peace-loving, democratic nations such as Belarus and Hungary—and the United States of America. Now, President Trump is threatening to revoke the legal right of 240,000 Ukrainian refugees to stay in the US. Who could possibly have thought it?

That was only the beginning. Things have deteriorated inexorably since then. This report articulates the urgent need for us to examine and address the areas that we need to support in our military strategy in order to assure this nation that we can protect and defend ourselves—the very first priority of any Government. In doing so, we need to ensure that we play our important part in a pan-Europe security role, helping Ukraine to survive this terrible war, particularly since the United States has just decided to suspend its military aid to Ukraine—a shocking, brutal and traitorous act toward a country trying to save itself from Russian aggression.

There is so much in the committee's report, ranging from the underlying importance of deterrence, through the defence recruitment system and how we build mass, to how we need to recruit and retain more reserves and the urgent need to better understand and work with our defence industry. I applaud all the speeches that have talked about this; it is a blueprint that I hope will be studied and accepted by those about to produce our strategic defence review.

The report identifies what must now be done to rectify this, at speed—all the while acknowledging how difficult this will be when our resources are so low and money is scarce. However, raiding our international aid budget to help pay for this urgent uplift to our national security is, I believe, the wrong way to go about it. There are around \$300 billion of frozen Russian assets across the G7 and the EU. We hold around £25 billion of those. Will the Government urgently bring forward legislation to unblock those assets? The money that we have taken from the international aid budget could then be put back and made to work in those countries whose very existence relies on our support. In the long run, that soft power that we have exercised so well in the past will be remembered.

The report also makes much of engaging the whole of society in understanding the importance of defending ourselves against future aggression. A *déjà vu* moment for me came as I recalled my visit to the civil defence college in Easingwold some 35 years ago. We had three days of intensive training in all aspects of what we should do in the event of nuclear war being declared. As local councillors at the time, we were given insight into how we should help our communities prepare and ultimately survive any attack. We had tabletop exercises, discussions and military personnel guiding us through debates and lectures.

Shamefully, some of us treated this important seminar as a bit of fun—light-hearted relief from our day job as councillors. One evening, I organised an escape committee to the local pub, when we were not supposed to leave the estate. It was only when we were subjected to the awful sound of air raid sirens on some exercises that the reality of what we were doing there had the desired impact on us. Ukrainians have had that every day for the past three years and the reality of Russian terror in so many unspeakable ways.

There was a bunker at County Hall in those days and only one person was in charge of running our county's emergency defence service—how very British. At least we had an appreciation of just what was

involved in civil defence. My fear now is that this knowledge is completely lost and that it will require a considerable effort to bring it back into existence. The report is a wake-up call indeed for this and I ask the Minister what plans the Government have to bring back civil defence awareness in our society.

Now we know that we cannot count on America any more to help in the defence of our way of life and our values as democracies, we have to stand as one against those malign forces that seek to destroy those values. Ukraine has shown us how to do this and we must continue to help that brave country fight for its right to exist. This report charts the work needed to bring this forward at speed. Now is the time for us to make ourselves ready.

2.09 pm

Lord Sahota (Lab): My Lords, it is conventional wisdom across all cultures and societies that when someone visits your home as a guest, you treat the guest with utmost respect and courtesy; it is only good etiquette. You do not berate, bully, belittle or humiliate your guest in public.

President Zelensky's country has been invaded by a tyrant, and he is travelling across the world pleading for help to save his nation. He is not the invader or the aggressor. He is simply asking for the invaders to leave so that his people can live in peace with their neighbours. Therefore, I appeal to the President of the United States to reinvoke his guest, listen to his plea and then stand firmly in support of Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine is indeed a wake-up call for all of us in Europe. After the Second World War and during the Cold War we all knew where we stood. On one side we had Warsaw Pact nations and on the other NATO. No country dared cross another's border for fear of nuclear conflict. Each side watched the other. Our spies followed theirs, and their spies followed ours. We disapproved of their political system, and they disapproved of ours. Yet, in this strange reality, we coexisted.

Then, at the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, the Berlin Wall came tumbling down. We thought we had won the Cold War—indeed, we had. Out of the ashes of the Soviet Union, 15 new nations emerged, finding their own voices, including Ukraine. In the Balkans, after a brutal and bloody civil war, seven more nations found their independence. We celebrated, we breathed a sigh of relief believing that a new world order had arrived, that liberty and liberal democracy had triumphed and that we could let our guard down. How wrong we were.

As some of the new European nations applied to join NATO, our numbers grew, but in the shadows, a Russian bear, an ex-KGB officer with a secret agenda and historical grudge was plotting his rise to power. When he finally took control of Russia, we welcomed him with open arms believing we could do business with him. How wrong we were. In 2014, when he felt secure at home, he invaded Crimea. Our failure to act emboldened him and led him to plan his next move. Three years ago, he launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Only then did we wake up to the grim reality of a new era in Europe.

[LORD SAHOTA]

Yet even now some right-wing populist politicians in NATO countries are allying with Putin. They are questioning the very existence of our alliance. If they succeed in gaining power in their respective countries, Europe will face yet another terrifying threat. Credit must be given to Sweden and Finland, nations which share hundreds of miles of border with Russia, for recognising the danger and immediately applying to join NATO. The time has come for us to make tough decisions. If Russia can deploy North Korean troops to protect its border, why should Ukraine not have the right to invite NATO forces to protect its borders? At their request, we must stand by them not just in words, but in actions. Welcome to a new world order.

2.14 pm

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie (Con): My Lords, it is a huge privilege to serve on the International Relations and Defence Committee and particularly so to be part of this inquiry. I add my thanks to our chair my noble friend Lord De Mauley, our previous chair the noble Lord, Lord Ashton, and congratulate and thank enormously our wonderful committee staff.

As other noble Lords have said, much has happened since the publication of this report in September. I completely agree with my noble friend Lord Soames that a wake-up call has indeed become an alarm call. We looked at this subject because we wanted to look at the lessons for the UK. We were not trying to second guess what might happen in Ukraine, so that is where I am going to focus my remarks today.

There is a huge amount of support from around the Room today for the reserves. This report noted that Ukraine was able to draw on a large pool of reservists at the start of the Russian invasion. The establishment of the TDF—the Territorial Defence Forces—empowered local communities to take an active role in national security. In evolving from volunteer militias into formal branches of the armed forces, they have boosted the essential mass of the resistance at multiple levels. As other noble Lords, and our chairman in his opening remarks, pointed out, our report pointed to the reserves in the UK as providing a cost-effective model to do just that—build mass—yet a reduction in reserve workforce numbers confirms that the capability of the reserves, as my noble friend Lord Howell of Guildford pointed out, has declined.

Others have already highlighted the RFCAs. To follow up, in an Answer to my Written Question asked on 3 February, the Minister acknowledged the multiple ways that the RFCAs offer support to recruitment, in some cases seeing a 200% improvement in expressions of interest, so I trust he will heed the warnings he has heard today regarding turning them into a non-departmental public body at this time. Surely we have to encourage all links between defence and the wider public, particularly in community and employer engagement, and in areas across the country where local knowledge and understanding may perhaps be limited within the MoD.

I understand that the Minister for Veterans and People is a current serving reservist, as—I declare an interest—is my daughter. We have been told that the

Minister is conducting yet another review to determine how defence can utilise our reserves forces. Could he not instead respond to and implement the recommendations already set out in the RF30 review conducted by my noble friend Lord Lancaster of Kimbolton? If the UK is going to send peacekeepers to Ukraine at any point, we are definitely going to need highly trained reserves. In our report, Professor Vince Connelly's evidence noted how history shows that in past crises reservist units were deployed irrespective of their readiness level, making it essential that we put systems in place to enable them to be ready now. This is now personal for me, so I urge the Government not to consider deploying reservists such as my daughter for any task for which they have not been fully prepared. Recommendation 15 of our report states that the Government should prioritise reinvigorating the reserves, and I hope the Minister will today confirm that they will act rather than just wait for another review.

Like many others, my daughter performs her military duties outside core working hours, and I suspect her employer has absolutely no idea of what she does or what she is being trained to do when it gives her time off. We have to straddle the military and civilian landscapes and vocabulary. The population is losing its connection to our Armed Forces. The Minister will know that I had very limited knowledge of military vocabulary until we took part in the AFPS scheme together. This detachment and lack of understanding of what defence means is coming through in the political challenges that the Government have in the population understanding the need to increase the defence budget, and there is alarmingly low public awareness of the threats that face the country. Our report urges the Government to pay greater attention to homeland defence. Others have referred to the Scandinavian all-of-society approach and the need for collective preparedness. Should we be expecting a duty to contribute from individuals, private companies and public organisations? We know that from the start Russian forces targeted critical national infrastructure in Ukraine, and here in the UK we are daily experiencing potentially devastating cyberattacks from malicious actors, which at the very least cause us severe economic loss. I suggest that protecting the UK's critical national infrastructure should be not only a key defence priority but the responsibility of us all.

I understand that the Cabinet Office is leading on whole-system crisis and resilience planning, which will incorporate a whole-of-society approach, and this could include work on the contribution of the general public to national security and resilience. Can the Minister say any more about this work? How are wider civilian non-governmental organisations being included? When might we expect to hear any details on timings and outcomes?

Our report outlines how the war in Ukraine illustrates that engaging the whole of society in defence is crucial for building a resilient and prepared nation, and I urge the Government to prioritise reinvigorating the reserves, fostering wider public-private collaboration and enabling a more candid narrative about the meaning of defence and its value to us all.

2.20 pm

Lord Alton of Liverpool (CB): My Lords, this excellent Select Committee report offers an urgent and timely analysis, rightly stating:

“The UK must commit to spending more on defence, spending it better, and leveraging its alliances by design”.

It also cites a different alliance: the deadly quartet of Russia, North Korea, Iran and China—a country on which we foolishly make ourselves ever more dependent, and a quartermaster that, if it wished, could end this war tomorrow. The report also points to Putin’s deepening connections to key global South countries, referred to by other noble Lords. I too question the wisdom of savaging our programmes in the global South, thus creating a dangerous void into which China and Russia will continue to march.

Defence and development are not binary options and there is an alternative, wiser, moral way of funding both. A hypothecated penny-in-the pound increase in income tax, to be used for defence only, would raise £6.6 billion in the next financial year—more than the £5.8 billion that will be raised by a 0.2% cut to the ODA budget. How many of the \$300 billion of Russian state assets frozen by the UK and our G7 partners have been repurposed to pay for the defence of Ukraine? There is even a risk of the £25 billion in the central bank of Russia, frozen by the UK and managed by Euroclear—referred to earlier—being returned to Russia. What are we doing about that? Why are we still waiting for the release of £2.5 billion from the sale of Chelsea Football Club to help victims in Ukraine? The Government have given no clear reason why these desperately needed funds have not been made available.

Earlier this week I attended a meeting here in Parliament addressed by a Ukrainian MP and Ukrainian prisoners of war, some of whom had been captured after the appalling destruction of Mariupol. They detailed horrific examples of torture and degradation of prisoners, which included rape, electric shocks, beatings and conflict-related sexual violence. We heard about tank cells with as many as 30 prisoners kept in confined captivity. Breaches of the Geneva Convention have been routine. We heard of more than 2,000 attacks on clinics and hospitals in Ukraine: horrendous war crimes. Over 100,000 files for prosecution have been opened, all pointing to the “mother crime”—the crime of aggression. Perhaps the Minister can tell us when the special tribunal needed to bring the perpetrators to justice will be established. What are the remaining roadblocks?

Noble Lords should note, too, that the International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants for Putin and Lvova-Belova for the deportation of Ukrainian children. What do we know of the fate of the 19,000 missing children? The forcible transfer of children to another group is defined in Article II(e) of the 1948 convention on the crime of genocide as one of the grounds for defining genocide. What work are government lawyers doing to prosecute this violation of the genocide convention?

In a world increasingly contemptuous of the work of the International Criminal Court, the rule of law and human rights, this is more important than ever. The UK led the way in 1945 and must do so again

in 2025. With likeminded nations we must create a great web—a network of accountability from which, however long it takes, there will be no escape route. To that end, the Government should use the new Crime and Policing Bill to introduce the principle of universal jurisdiction. They should expand the scope of Sections 51 and 58 of the International Criminal Court Act 2001 and consider other measures. I hope the Government will work with the Joint Committee on Human Rights in carefully examining the opportunities presented by this Bill to strengthen justice and accountability.

Ultimately, the cost of deterring war is a fraction of the cost of fighting one. Page 58 of the Select Committee’s report states that deterrence is key to preventing atrocities such as those committed by Russia in Ukraine. Along with hardheaded military deterrence including, for instance, ramping up production of British-Danish Gravehawk air-to-air missiles, we should not underestimate the deterrent effect that the strengthening of international law and our judicial institutions can play in challenging and deterring dictators. To that end, is it not about time that we joined those countries and international institutions that have designated Russia as a terrorist state or a state sponsor of terrorism? Why have we failed to do the same?

Last week’s appalling defenestration of a courageous war leader may have made what Mr Trump called “good television” but that shocking, discreditable charade would have been unimaginable in the White House of a Roosevelt or a Reagan. It would have been unthinkable to break alliances, insult allies and line up with a Russian regime led by a war criminal. To justify this by suggesting that aligning with Russia will somehow counter China—described as a reverse Kissinger—is delusional. Beijing’s cheers will have been even louder than Moscow’s as it gleefully watched the abandonment of a sovereign state, the dismantlement of the world order, division in Europe and the rupturing of transatlantic alliances. An emboldened Xi Jinping, Putin’s puppet master, will take it as a signal that he can do to Taiwan what Putin has done to Ukraine, and do so with impunity and without consequences.

2.26 pm

Lord Risby (Con): My Lords, I congratulate my noble friend Lord De Mauley and the members of the International Relations and Defence Committee on their excellent report. For 18 years in the other place, I represented a constituency with three air force bases, two American, including the nuclear strike force. I often felt concern that one day the hugely disproportionate American contribution to Europe’s defence would be challenged, given the low priority given by NATO countries to defence expenditure, but who would have thought that the reasons for any reduction of American support would have arisen after a country totally hostile to NATO had without reason attacked a democratic European country? Indeed, this is a grotesque wake-up call that we need to address.

President Trump has stated that the invasion of Ukraine would not have happened if he had been President. Well, maybe. Let us remind ourselves of the Budapest memorandum signed by Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom, which agreed that in return for Ukraine giving up its arsenal of nuclear weapons,

[LORD RISBY]

they would respect the sovereignty, independence and existing borders of Ukraine. Had Ukraine kept its nuclear weapons, one may doubt that Russia would have dared to invade, but how many times have we seen examples of Russia signing an agreement and simply not abiding by it? There can be no illusions.

The report rightly highlights the importance of nurturing relationships and partnerships. The United Kingdom has played a vital role in leading from the front in support of Ukraine and in pushing others to do more themselves. This was particularly evident in the decision to send modern NATO heavy equipment, such as the Challenger 2 main battle tank in January 2023. Britain was the first country to take this bold step, and once the precedent had been set, many others followed our lead. This must continue. That these efforts have continued across two Governments and enjoy real cross-party support should be a source of satisfaction for us all and, indeed, for the Ukrainians most of all.

An area that the report touches on, and one where partnerships are vital to success, is sanctions. To be frank with ourselves, the collective effort on designing and enforcing sanctions has been underwhelming. The level of exports to and imports from Europe and Russia via third-party countries has increased enormously. Although sanctions have made it more difficult for Putin to bring in the cash and parts that his Russian war machine needs, we must face the fact that we have been inadequate in cutting it off. We need to draw conclusions about this for ourselves for any future possible conflict.

It looks, however, as if the endgame is in sight. What is critical is that the Ukrainian economy recovers and that foreign investors feel confident investing in the country. That requires clear assurances about security. The Russian navy became very aggressive and dominant in the Black Sea, with the intention of making it impossible to export Ukrainian products, notably grain. There was real anxiety that this would lead to a rapid collapse of the Ukrainian economy, and indeed a threat of horrifying starvation in parts of Africa and the Middle East. Our role in the Black Sea in seeing off Russian aggression is praiseworthy. Between 2014 and 2021, the Royal Navy deployed 11 warships in the Black Sea.

Turkey, however, introduced rules under the provision of the 1936 Montreux convention. Strategically and from an economic point of view, the Black Sea must remain open for Ukraine's future security and prosperity. The RAF in Romania supports NATO's Black Sea policing mission. However, our efforts are limited compared with Baltic countries. We have a defence treaty with Poland, we provide unilateral security assurances to Finland and Sweden, and we have a defence agreement with Estonia. I say this because, in the event of a settlement, it is certain that Crimea will remain Russian, thus offering the opportunity to damage Ukraine and contest the Black Sea again.

We should react to this decisively, including through a closer relationship with Romania, Europe's biggest gas producer from offshore fields. It is good that Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria are removing floating mines with the help of two former Royal Navy Sandown

class minesweepers. Just as our activities in the Baltic have given real, measurable confidence and security, we need to consider how our early success in the Black Sea should be used for Ukraine's economic recovery, benefit and security. I hope that the Government will give this real consideration.

2.32 pm

Lord Hannay of Chiswick (CB): My Lords, the International Relations and Defence Committee's report, which was so eloquently introduced by the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley, and is the subject of today's debate, was published last September. Given the volatility of the situation with respect to Ukraine since then, particularly since the re-elected President of the United States and his new Administration took office in January, one could be forgiven for querying whether it was still relevant. However, quite apart from the prescient title, this report contains nuggets of advice and warning that are as relevant today as the day that they were written. I will mention two in particular.

The first section of the report is entitled:

"The underlying importance of deterrence".

That deterrence has ensured that we have not had what President Trump referred to last week as World War III throughout the past 80 years. Deterrence is a fragile concept, depending as much on the perception of your potential adversary as on your own allies' political will. In recent weeks, the Trump Administration have hacked some considerable chunks off our deterrence, to the extent that the probable future Chancellor of Germany—a lifelong Atlanticist—on the night of his election victory questioned whether they could still be relied upon. That really was a wake-up call, and will need to be effectively addressed in the run-up to the next NATO summit.

It needs also to be remembered, as was mentioned by several noble Lords, including my noble friend Lord Alton in particular, that if NATO's deterrence is weakened, it will have negative consequences too for the allies of the United States in the Far East and the South China Sea. It is little short of astonishing that President Trump, who appears to give greater importance to that region of that world, has not worked out that linkage.

The second key point that I mention from the report is the conclusion reached, which reads:

"We welcome the new Government's commitment to negotiate an ambitious security pact with the EU. This could represent an important step towards rebuilding credible conventional deterrence".

Clearly, that requires all European members of NATO to strengthen their defence spending substantially; in that context, the Government's announcement last week of such an increase is very welcome. How far has the security pact project now progressed? What prospect is there for a breakthrough on that by the time of the UK-EU summit on 19 May?

Turning back to Ukraine, the newly appointed US Secretary of Defense told us that we can have confidence in President Trump because he is

"the best negotiator in the world".

If your Lordships are tempted to believe that, I suggest you read a report written by your Lordships' same committee, published early in 2020, about the deal

with the Taliban struck by President Trump, which provided for a time-limited and uncontrolled withdrawal of all NATO troops from Afghanistan. That deal paved the way for the miserable fiasco later that year.

The shenanigans that occurred at the UN on the day marking the third anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine defy description or analysis. To end up, as the United States did, abstaining on a Security Council resolution that it was itself sponsoring stretches credibility to breaking point, as does vetoing a resolution put forward by its allies in the company of the aggressor, Russia. That will not strengthen the chances for a just and lasting settlement in Ukraine. Things have gone a long way downhill since the first Cold War ended.

I make one final point. During last week's meeting at the White House between Presidents Trump and Zelensky, several references were made to the need for diplomacy; the Vice-President was particularly eloquent on the subject. Well, now we know one of the essential components of successful diplomacy: avoid discussing in public contentious issues that are components of future policy. We could do with a bit more of that sort of diplomacy. I hope that the Minister will say what the Government are doing to encourage that sort of diplomacy—not just using the word as a genuflection in its direction.

2.37 pm

Baroness Helic (Con): My Lords, I welcome this debate and commend the committee's excellent, timely and necessary report. If the war in Ukraine has taught us anything, it is that we can no longer afford to rely on others for our security. The United States, once a steadfast ally, is proving unpredictable, to say the least. As the Prime Minister said:

"Europe must do the heavy lifting".

The burden of deterrence, security and stability falls on us.

I welcome the Prime Minister's leadership in positioning the United Kingdom as a bridge between America and Europe, as well as the increase in defence spending. However, as the report rightly points out, this is not enough. The lesson from Ukraine is clear: prevention is far cheaper than war. Time and again, from Georgia to Crimea to the Donbass, weak responses from democracies have emboldened rather than deterred aggression. The report rightly emphasises that deterrence is not just a moral imperative but the most cost-effective strategy.

We must act with urgency. Russia, even under sanctions, spends nearly as much on its military as the whole of Europe combined. With a weakening US commitment to security in Europe, we risk being outspent, outgunned and outmanned by a malign power on our doorstep. Strengthening our collective security through the UK-EU defence pact is an imperative. If deeper co-operation can secure the immense benefits of interoperability, intelligence sharing and joint procurement, we must be pragmatic enough to pursue it. In the past, we had the luxury of choice; that choice disappeared in a matter of weeks in February 2025.

However, security is not only about military strength. As the report highlights, winning over the global South, where Russia and China have spread disinformation—very successfully—is crucial. Development aid is not an act

of good will, and diplomacy is not a hobby. I strongly hope that the rebalancing under way will not further shrink the FCDO's budget.

While our focus is rightly on Ukraine, we must not lose sight of another emerging crisis that holds profound strategic importance to us: the western Balkans. If we were to do so, we would shamefully neglect the most important lessons of Ukraine. Before I say more, I take this opportunity to thank the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Peach, for his personal dedication and service in advancing UK interests in the western Balkans over the past three years. The instability of the western Balkans is directly tied to Russian interference and our national security. As the Foreign Secretary put it, "our partnerships in the region are central to our efforts to tackle irregular migration".

I have raised concerns about this region on multiple occasions. I regret to say that my warnings have not been heeded and neither the previous nor the current Government have acted decisively so far.

I visited Bosnia this past weekend, and I must say clearly: Bosnia today mirrors Ukraine prior to 2022. Secessionist actions in the country closely follow the path taken by the separatists in Donbass. Their external enablers in Serbia are playing the same role that Russia did in Ukraine and the Kremlin is active throughout the Balkans too. In the last two days alone, the secessionist pro-Russian leaders have aggressively destabilised Bosnia. The region's assembly has pushed through laws that undermine state police and judicial powers, set up a parallel legal system and adopted a Russian-style crackdown on civil society. In a blatant challenge to the Dayton Agreement, authorities have also hinted at a full withdrawal unless post-1995 state institutions are dismantled.

Secessionists in Bosnia openly speculate about the possibility that the United States will no longer stand foursquare behind European efforts to uphold the sovereignty and territorial integrity of that country. They further speculate—in a move that would have been unthinkable only a month ago—that the United States will side with Russia in the closed UN Security Council meeting on Bosnia taking place around now. The risk of escalation is real, whether by reckless miscalculation or deliberate provocation.

Does the Minister agree that the lessons from Ukraine must be applied now to avert the possibility of further conflict in the region, which Europe can so ill afford? As he will know, international security structures to deter conflict exist in the country, but they are dangerously undermanned. Can he give his assessment of NATO and EUFOR's ability to respond to further escalation? Can he give an update on the UK's renewal of the status of forces agreement with EUFOR? Will the Government now actively consider rejoining Operation Althea and strengthening NATO HQ in Sarajevo? The committee's report rightly commends the Joint Expeditionary Force as an international success story. Replicating such models across Europe, including in the western Balkans, could provide the unity and deterrence that the region so urgently needs.

Ukraine faces its darkest hour—besieged by Russia in the East and betrayed by some of her allies in the West. We cannot afford to stand idle. This report presents

[BARONESS HELIC]

a stark, if inconvenient, truth: our military is underfunded, our technology is outdated and we are woefully unprepared for war. As we stand firm with Ukraine, we cannot ignore Europe's forgotten flank, the western Balkans. Pre-emptive, decisive action based on deterrence not only is cheaper but gives us the chance to regain the initiative, push back against Russia and its allies and move beyond the cycle of a perpetual reactive response. We have not prevailed over Russia since the Cold War. The western Balkans is one region where we can, and must, do just that.

2.43 pm

Lord Hogan-Howe (CB): My Lords, I speak not as an expert in any of the military or diplomatic matters that noble Lords have spoken about but as someone with some experience in security and a growing frustration with the lack of commitment from Governments on both sides to prioritise defence, which I think many in the country share. I agree that this is an excellent report; it was produced in September 2024, but in the past few weeks the skies have got darker rather than lighter, which only amplifies the conclusions the report draws rather than detracts from them.

I praise this Government for the major change of direction announced by the Prime Minister on 25 February, when he gave a date for the increase to 2.5% of GDP to UK defence, but that was for 2027 and then it will increase during the next Parliament to 3%. I do not believe it is inconsistent to both support that announcement and to say that I think it is too little and will not deliver fighting forces quickly enough for reasons that I hope to set out. I challenge whether 2.5% is growth. I think there is some evidence that it is in fact filling the gaps we have, rather than being the growth it is being portrayed as. I think that is inconsistent and does no one any favours.

My first concern is that we are not yet using clear language to explain to the public the danger that we and Europe are facing. It seems that we have tempered our approach until now in an attempt not to antagonise the bear at our door. The problem is that Russia has taken this as a sign of our weakness, not our strength. Churchill knew a little about how to motivate people and a country. He appealed to the emotions with a clear analysis, a plan of action and speeches that the public heard and understood. In that respect, I commend President Macron yesterday evening, who was starting to speak in a language that people may start to think is making a difference. This is genuinely not a political point. I think the public need to know that this will cost money, and it may yet cost lives.

I do not believe that people join our Armed Forces and entirely consider the decision. They may lose their life; they may lose their life chances or be left physically and psychologically diminished should they have to fight. They will fight for their countries, families and way of life if they feel that they must. Improved efficiency in our recruiting only makes the process quicker and cheaper. Politics can help it deliver people and fighters.

Ironically, since 2022, as Russia walked into Ukraine, our Armed Forces have got smaller, at a time when all our Governments had been saying they were getting bigger.

People can see this inconsistency. This report makes clear that our industrial and economic base is unprepared to produce the armaments we need at the speed we require. The Government must help manufacturers fire the furnaces and they must know how much money will be spent on our defence, exactly what is needed and when. Then they can tool up, skill up and invest in research to defend our country, support our friends and defeat an enemy.

Many of the weapons systems have very long lead times of production. Just one example is the production of warships. The noble Lord, Lord West, is not here today; I guess that he would have talked about frigates—

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Lord Coaker) (Lab): I can feel his presence.

Lord Hogan-Howe (CB): We probably ought to name one of them after him. But they do not grow on trees; they do not arrive in do-it-yourself kits and Amazon has no Prime delivery options. It takes a while. We will also need strategic reserves of raw materials if we are going to build these things and make sure that we can deliver what we have promised.

I mention in passing one domestic issue, which should not be forgotten. It was alluded to a little earlier. Some of the home security will also need to be enhanced. Our police counterterrorist units presently focus on extreme Islamism and right-wing terrorism. They will, in the future, also have to concentrate on counterespionage. That is of course something that the security services do but, when it comes to action—somebody has to lock them up, put them before a court or do whatever we have to do—there will need to be significant resources following them around and, at some stage, taking them out.

I also remark on our special constabulary, which are another form of reserves. They are there for the police and there are fewer than 20,000 at the moment. If the police go to war, somebody has to backfill and that was their intention. They are volunteers; they are not paid. They are not an expensive option, but they can help. It means that those police officers who could be released, could be released quicker.

As of today, we have not started any order processes, as far as I am aware. It will not be until at least the summer after the defence review by the noble Lord, Lord Robertson. I want to put a challenge in here because the noble Baroness, Lady Fraser, made this point and I thought it was a really good one. We are waiting for the review from the noble Lord, Lord Robertson, which of course is sensible. I just worry, is there not some military leader in this country who knows already what we need? Surely somebody knows that we need to double the tanks, triple the Navy or whatever else. The defence review can pull this together but, if we are waiting for another three or four months, that will then be the start of a very long procurement process others have already alluded to. I worry that, if we take too many things in incremental, logical, stepped phases, others will speed past us. We know who we are talking about in that respect.

Russia has already invaded Ukraine, and it obviously threatens Moldova and Lithuania, so I ask the Government this: when will they press the procurement

button for all the reasons everybody has talked about today because there will be a time lag when we decide to do it? It is time to send a symbolic message to Russia. Poland did: it is building an army, a military, of 300,000. Announcing 3% in three years is not a very strong message to me. What is ours? I have not heard it yet. Even when we have spent this money, what is it going to do? The time for gentle prose has passed. The time for action has started. This report is about the events in Ukraine, but it is really about the defence of the UK. I think we have heard enough to know that we need to do something now.

2.50 pm

Lord Shinkwin (Con): My Lords, I start by echoing the praise of the noble Lord, Lord Liddle, for our hereditary colleague and my noble friend Lord De Mauley. I thank him and his committee for producing such an excellent report, and I wonder if anyone has ever thought of such a painfully prescient title.

The report's recommendations are surely all the more pertinent precisely because they have been overtaken by events. Their validity, even poignancy, is being borne out as we speak. Indeed, I am not sure that I have ever spoken in a debate in which I have been so keen to be proved wrong and for my fears to turn out to be groundless. The ground, as others have said, is shifting beneath our feet. Even though I agree with it, I fear that recommendation 2, particularly that the Government should articulate how much money will be available to UK defence, has to be seen in the highly fluid context where there is a risk that it means it sets a limit and creates two risks: first, that it signals to the mass murderer Putin that there is a point beyond which we shall not go and thus risks emboldening him, and, secondly, that it fails to take into account the rapidly shifting dynamic of what was, until a few weeks ago, a secure transatlantic relationship for, as the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, suggested, spending will be crucial to retaining US support.

Recommendation 8 highlights the importance of "understanding the human aspects of war", the

"failed assessment of Putin's will to fight"

and the need for the UK and NATO to

"focus on developing a better understanding of Putin's strategy and intentions".

Central to that, I suggest, is recognition that Putin is a professional liar. As a former KGB operative, as we have already heard, it was in his job description. It would also appear to be, regrettably, in his DNA. I am not suggesting that we do not appreciate that, but I am not sure that the bromance between Putin and Trump indicates that the US President does. Trump is no fool, but I share the fear of other noble Lords that he is being played for a fool by a master of the art.

The committee is right to mention in conclusion 9 the

"human aspects that determine the outcome of wars"

and the relationship to "deterrence, defence and de-escalation" because they have huge ramifications for the future of NATO and global security. This is especially important because as the renowned journalist Bob Woodward implies in his excellent book *War* such

vital considerations seem to be playing second, if not third, fiddle to Trump's very human desire, even determination, to exact revenge on Volodymyr Zelensky for failing to do his bidding nine years ago. The consequence seems to be a personal vendetta that rivals that of only one other man: Putin. In only such a scenario do I begin to find it possible to understand how the supposed leader of the free world can betray an ally fighting for its life, literally on the front line of freedom. Conclusion 31 surely contains perhaps the most poignant understatement of the entire report that:

"The war in Ukraine has thrown the role of alliances at a time of war into the spotlight".

How true that is when one considers the grotesque spectacle of the supposed leader of the free world treating Ukraine almost as a vanquished enemy whose resources are to be seized as reparations for a war that it did not start and which it is determined to end.

I finish by thanking His Majesty's Government and the Prime Minister for acting on the basis of the report's conclusion 61:

"Developments in Ukraine are relevant to UK national security and, in particular, the protection of its critical national infrastructure".

This of course includes the NHS.

My question to the Minister is: can the two words "trust" and "Trump" belong in the same sentence? Can we rely on a previously steadfast ally? I desperately want to be proved wrong, but the jury is out. It is beyond doubt that Ukraine is proving to be a wake-up call to a far greater degree than most of us could possibly have imagined.

2.57 pm

Baroness Tyler of Enfield (LD): My Lords, I join others in congratulating the committee on producing a first-class report, which is frankly more prescient than I expect its members could ever have imagined in their wildest dreams, or perhaps I should say nightmares. To say that the world has turned upside-down at a dizzying pace in recent days is an understatement, but the report's recommendations remain completely relevant. In essence, we need a completely new response and quickly.

I will say a few words about the current situation before turning to several of the specific recommendations. While I join others in saluting the tireless efforts of the Prime Minister, who has played a critical role on the world stage, I do not believe that we can rely on the USA to be a strong and dependable ally. Indeed, Trump has made it clear that he does not accept a continuing responsibility for the security of Europe. As the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, made clear, that has a wider resonance in the USA. Article 5 of the NATO agreement—the glue we have relied on for so many years—is no longer anything like as secure as it was. We are in a new and dangerous situation and our response must take account of this.

The response that the Prime Minister has adopted to try to broker re-engagement between the US and Ukraine while seeking to put together a coalition of the willing to defend Ukraine is to be welcomed. It is clear that the UK and our European allies will have to accept a step-change increase in resources for our own

[BARONESS TYLER OF ENFIELD]

defence, as the report we are debating makes crystal clear because, once one strips away the rhetoric, the reality is this: Trump is imposing huge pressure on a so-called ally to agree to a surrender/ceasefire on America's terms, which are to cede territory to Russia and mineral resources to the USA without guarantees to ensure Ukraine's future security. It has paused military aid to and suspended intelligence sharing with Ukraine. It is widely reported that Defense Secretary Hegseth has instructed the US Government to pause all offensive cyber operations against Russia. Ukraine is meant to be grateful.

The key recommendations and conclusions of the report, which I reread last night, are stark and commendably clear. I wholeheartedly endorse them, particularly the focus on a whole-of-society approach.

I turn to a couple of specifics. First, on strengthening industrial partnerships, the report talked about the Government facilitating a broad church of industry engagement to bring in non-traditional defence suppliers such as start-ups, small and medium-sized enterprises and tech companies. It also argued that the Government would need to mitigate the risk of collaborating with commercial partners that lack previous experience in defence. It is currently very difficult for new entrants to the UK defence market to establish and prove the required safety, security, quality, et cetera, to the MoD and regulators. New entrants may also have to work for many years at their own expense before they start generating revenues.

An existing model that could be considered is based on UK advanced manufacturing research centres, involving scientists, engineers, researchers and technology specialists working together to develop innovative technologies, systems and products. This approach could be used for innovative defence for the UK Armed Forces, where the role of government would be primarily twofold: to work with the scientific and research community and lead industrial partners to set up and fund these advanced defence manufacturing research centres; and, crucially, to put in place risk-sharing framework contracts with lead industrial partners to co-finance the development and industrialisation of the most promising concepts. Can the Minister say what thinking the Government have been doing in this area?

One area not really covered in detail by the report is undersea cable attacks. A recent BBC in-depth article set out the extent of Russia's shadow fleet, used to carry embargoed Russian oil products, and the extent of suspected seabed infrastructure sabotage in both the Baltic Sea and closer to home. Twice in recent months, the surveillance ship "Yantar" was spotted gathering intelligence about the UK's underwater cable network as part of its hybrid warfare on this country's critical infrastructure. The UK has around 60 undersea cables that come ashore on its coastline, particularly concentrated around East Anglia and the south-west. Only yesterday, the *Times* reported that Russia had sent a warship into the English Channel to escort a suspected arms shipment in a sanctioned cargo vessel from Syria for possible use on the front line. These are all very worrying developments. The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, on which I sit, recently launched a new inquiry into how vulnerable

the UK is to undersea cable attacks. Will the Minister say what assessment the Government have made of this current threat?

I conclude by repeating that assuming the US will side with Ukraine to provide a backstop and security guarantees is a fundamental misunderstanding of Trump's position. Trump has a huge agenda with Russia, and many suspect that he is looking to strengthen US bilateral relationships with Russia to deliver what he believes to be huge economic and security benefits to the US and also, potentially, to strengthen Russia's focus and reliance on China. What update can the Minister give us on the use of Russian frozen assets to augment our immediate defence spending, not simply the interest but the capital sums? Is fast-track legislation being considered? Ideas have been circulating for an international rearmament bank that would facilitate access to private sector capital for Ukraine's ongoing struggles. Do the Government plan to pursue this? On the longer-term move to 3% of GDP for defence spending, what plans do the Government have to set up cross-party discussions to see whether a consensus can be reached on how this might be funded?

3.03 pm

Lord Roberts of Belgravia (Con): My Lords, I, too, welcome this excellent report, which struck me as a model of its kind. Of course, after the disgraceful scene in the Oval Office on Friday, the situation has changed since the publication of the report and significantly for the worse. We must not underestimate the gravity of what has happened, which is that during a war against totalitarian dictatorship the United States has effectively changed sides. It is very unusual for a country to change sides during a major war. Historically, Italy did it in 1943, but that was hardly decisive. However, the Saxons and Württembergers changed sides on the third day of the four-day Battle of Leipzig in October 1813, which doomed Napoleon in that campaign. Before that, the Stanleys changed sides on the morning of the Battle of Bosworth, which similarly spelled doom for Richard III.

We might be shocked by the Trump Administration's volte-face but we should not be surprised by it. He never hid his antipathy to Ukraine and her existential struggle. Frankly, he is right about the pathetic and woeful levels of GDP that we and the Europeans presently spend on defence. However, the sheer brutality of his dealings over the past week, and especially the United Nations vote alongside Russia, Syria, the Central African Republic, North Korea and Belarus—countries in which I am sure your Lordships would like to live—from which even the Chinese had the decency to abstain, thrusts us into utterly uncharted territory.

What needs to be done now seems clear. The rest of NATO must get its spending up to the 3.4% of GDP that the Americans spend. The \$300 billion of frozen Russian assets sitting in Euroclear in Brussels need to be given to Ukraine. EU cohesion funds need to be repurposed for defence, and defence spending needs to be exempted from the EU's fiscal deficit rules. Meanwhile, missile defence systems must be rushed to Kyiv and Kharkiv.

The brave President Zelensky needs to do his country yet another great service by biting his lip, stop speaking truth to America's overwhelming power and sign the

minerals deal that will financially incentivise the United States to be invested in a durable peace. Winston Churchill called President Roosevelt's lend-lease agreement "the most unsordid act", when the Americans allowed us 65 years to pay off the debt. By total contrast, the Trump Administration are gouging Ukraine while the war is still going on—the very definition of kicking a man when he is down. There is no point in expecting security guarantees worth their salt from the United States for the heavily armed 700-mile border that will now scar south-eastern Europe, probably for decades. Security guarantees are only worth while if they are given willingly. The Europeans and some countries outside Europe, such as Canada and Australia, will instead have to patrol that long frontier between civilisation and barbarism. The willingness of the Canadians and Australians, once again in their histories, to step up to a great task should make us proud of the Commonwealth.

Mr Vance has spoken of trying to stop pushing Russia

"into the hands of the Chinese",

but a policy of trying to draw Russia away from the Chinese orbit will not work. Democracies' attempts to draw dictatorships away from other dictatorships have consistently failed ever since the Stresa Front of 1935. It might take time to fail, but fail it will. Meanwhile, the tragic by-products of the Administration's Ukraine policy are already evident, not least in a 15% drop in pro-Americanism in this country almost overnight. I fear that, if the United States was to suffer another 9/11—God forbid—we would not see the wholehearted and full-throated support for her that we saw in 2001. A wholly transactional foreign policy has unseen costs that do not show up on balance sheets and profit and loss accounts.

When Winston Churchill spoke in the Munich debate, he used words that Europe should heed today, as we fundamentally rebalance our world in the light of this startling American defection to the side of a dictator who, throughout his career, has only ever wished America ill. Churchill said that we needed

"a supreme recovery of moral health and martial vigour",
so that we could

"arise again and take our stand for freedom as in the olden time".—[*Official Report, Commons, 5/10/1938; col. 373.*]

We must adopt that stance, adopt it now and take this first-class report as our template.

3.08 pm

Lord Tyrie (Non-Affl): My Lords, we have before us a very important report at an important time, indeed a turning point. Rather than pick out particular aspects of the report, perhaps I could summarise what I have been hearing so far this afternoon in three conclusions: Europe can no longer rely on the United States for its defence; Europe alone is not currently capable of defending itself or Ukraine; and President Trump's most recent statements and conduct are compromising the credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrent. Those are pretty serious conclusions for us to be drawing. I will say a few words on each.

On whether Europe can still rely on the US to defend itself, I strongly agree with what the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, said. The US has been focusing away from Europe and towards Asia for a

long time, and has been doing so based on a ruthless and dispassionate assessment of its own self-interest. Flagger that up is not anti-Americanism; saying it is a necessary antibiotic to clear some foggy, sentimental minds, particularly those clouded by too much attachment to the special relationship. We all hope that Article 5 is still alive in Washington but, like many noble Lords in this Room, I feel much less confident about that than I was only a few weeks ago. Just as concerning is that a similar assessment will be being made by potential adversaries, and therefore the risk of an extension of this war, or some further war, even if caused only by a miscalculation on this, is made much greater.

I will provide a few figures on the second conclusion that I drew—that Europe is not currently capable of defending itself. European-NATO GDP stands at \$27 trillion. By comparison, Russia's GDP stands at about \$2 trillion and the UK's is \$3.6 trillion. Russia is supported by China; in fact, I do not think we have discussed China enough today. Part of the key to the solution, or at least to providing a long-term peace, probably lies in Beijing. On the question of European weakness, President Trump is right: Europe is well capable of defending itself. Our weakness is derived from a weakness of collective will and failure to organise logistics and co-ordinate our manufacturing capacity; it is not one of underlying economic capacity.

While I am throwing out a few numbers, I also point out that, based on figures from the Kiel Institute, 0.5% of European-NATO GDP in one year provides a sum greater than the total value of US support to Ukraine in the three years of this war. Another figure worth bearing in mind is that China's GDP is six times that of Russia, which has, at least to some degree, become a satellite of China as a consequence of this war.

On the third point, the question of nuclear deterrence, I strongly agree with what the noble Lord, Lord Hannay, said, and will add a couple of observations. Even if US nuclear policy has not changed in substance, President Trump's disruptive style of diplomacy, and the uncertainty that comes with it, increases the risk of miscalculation. Certainty and consistency of policy bolster deterrence, but we are currently experiencing the opposite. Secondly, any diminution of the credibility of deterrence increases the risk of coercion of parts of Europe into concessions. That is the road to Finlandisation, and it is extremely concerning.

I end by referring to the fact that not only do we need to spend more money on defence and work much more closely with Europe to reconstruct our military manufacturing capacity and secure interoperability; we must also work with Europe to re-establish credible deterrence. On that, I quote what Friedrich Merz said two days before his election, to which the noble Lord, Lord Hannay, referred:

"We need to have discussions with both the British and the French—the two European nuclear powers—about whether nuclear sharing ... could also apply to us."

Two days later, on the night of his election, he said,

"My absolute priority will be to strengthen Europe ... so that ... we can ... achieve independence from the USA".

He said the US

"does not care much about the fate of Europe".

I do not know whether he is right, but I do know that we cannot rely on him being wrong.

3.15 pm

Baroness Fall (Con): My Lords, like other noble Lords, I congratulate the chair and members of the committee on this thoughtful and timely report. Although it is ostensibly about Ukraine, it focuses, of course, on the fragility of western security as we know it—or have known it since the Second World War. That is underpinned by NATO, the future of which now lies in the balance.

As the committee articulates so clearly in the report, things were already shifting before Trump started to take down the western security umbrella. They changed on the day that Russian troops marched into Ukraine, in February 2022—a clear failure of NATO to deter Russia in the first place. All this begs the uncomfortable question of whether we can claim to have a credible deterrent; many noble Lords have mentioned this today.

What do we actually mean by “deterrent”? I argue that it must have three factors: capability, preparedness and intent—that is the believability that an actor or set of actors will use force if they have to. It is possible that we have gradually been losing sight of this since the Cold War. The alarming question on all our minds today is whether we are seeing the end of the US-driven western alliance, as the USA’s statements about its preferred way forward on Ukraine, the role of NATO and the expectations from Europe, alongside the onslaught of geoeconomic weapons such as tariffs, have unnerved us all and led us to question America’s commitment to the transatlantic partnership from a military, political, economic and cultural perspective.

I mention this last point because here was the surprise. Much of the rest was already in the market, as others have said: the rush to peace with Putin, the not-unreasonable call for more European defence spending and the signal that American priorities may lie elsewhere. We knew, too, that Trump liked the word “tariff”—he called it “the most beautiful word”—but it was the Vice-President’s comment that Europe’s greatest threat lay within, and was not China or Russia, that really shocked us to the core. It made us wonder whether America is on our side.

In the past few weeks, we have heard accusations that the invasion was Ukraine’s fault and concessions were handed out to Russia without seeking its representations. Ukraine’s tireless and brave leader, holding the front line against tyranny, was branded a dictator. There was the ugly unravelling of talks in the Oval Office last Friday. All that came at the end of a week when the Americans sided with Iran, North Korea and Russia in the UN, as my noble friend Lord Roberts said.

Here, we have a sense of America treating its friends like its enemies and its enemies like its friends, as many noble Lords have said. This is the uncomfortable reality in which we find ourselves, but what does it actually mean? First, there is clearly a resetting of US-Russia relations. Is it to prise Russia away from China in a sort of reverse Kissinger move—many people have said that that would not be a good policy—or does Trump simply prefer to make deals with the strongmen of the world?

That begs a second question: what does all this mean for the China-US relationship, whose fraught relations have so dominated geopolitics in recent years? On the western alliance, the bottom line for us is that the security dynamic with a Trump-led USA is fundamentally shifting. I think that Trump would support a Europe that supports itself. We now need to decide how to respond and come up with a strategy. Herein lies the challenge but also the opportunity—one that opens up big strategic questions for us as a nation about who our closest allies are. What of NATO? What of Five Eyes? How much money will we need to spend on defence? Should we build a European defence umbrella within NATO or elsewhere? Is this umbrella something that we could offer as a new security home for Ukraine?

We are already seeing some choices—the decision to increase defence spending last week, for example. I support that, as other noble Lords have done today. I understand the decision to find that increase from ODA, which looks like a quick fix—no doubt there are savings that can be made there—but I have grave concerns about putting soft power against hard power, especially at such a critical moment when USA is retreating from the global stage. We must think strategically about how we influence and protect ourselves in the world, without leaving an opportunity wide open to the likes of China. This also means addressing some of the issues around the mass resilience and internal coherence of our own Armed Forces, as many noble Lords and noble and gallant Lords have pointed out today.

To return to what we mean by deterrence, we must also look at our society and its willingness to defend our values—or, as the report puts it, the human aspects of war. According to a *Times* survey in recent weeks, Gen Z—of which I have a few living with me—say that they would not want to go to war. We cannot know that for sure, but we can know that a divided, unresilient society that has forgotten the price of peace is unlikely to unite under a common purpose.

I end by paying tribute to the sacrifices that the people of Ukraine have made and continue to make for their freedom since the Russian invasion of their country just over three years ago. I find their determination and courage humbling and a reminder of the values that we hold dear but are often complacent about. We must remain firm in our loyalties; they are not, and never will be, to Putin’s Russia.

3.20 pm

Lord Skidelsky (CB): My Lords, I will not speak directly to the proposals of the report to improve our military capabilities but will consider the framework in which they are set.

The report’s underlying assumption is that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has made Europe a much more dangerous place, against which we have to rearm ourselves if we are not to suffer the fate of Ukraine somewhere down the line. The report was published before Trump’s victory in the US election and therefore before the possible defection of the United States, which has been the subject of a great deal of comment this afternoon but I do not think touches the main

point that the report wants to make. I reject the report's line of argument. I am the first person to do so in this debate and have done so fairly consistently over the past two or three years. Therefore, I reject the conclusions which follow from it. I will try to explain why.

In 1989, an American political scientist called Francis Fukuyama published an iconic article in the journal *The National Interest* called "The End of History?", and the subsequent two decades have sometimes been called "the Fukuyama moment". Basically, he argued that the fall of the Soviet Union had brought about the end of history, because the causes of war between the great powers had been removed. There was a lot of initial confirmation of that, such as Gorbachev's dream of joining the common European home. Out of that optimism came the idea of an exciting peace dividend. Of course, there would be mopping-up operations, especially in those parts of the world lagging in their appreciation of western values, but these would be nothing like the mass industrial warfare that we had experienced in the two world wars and which threatened throughout the Cold War.

The Fukuyama view of history was largely myopic. It presupposed that the world would rapidly become democratic and that science and technology would simply promote international economic co-operation. Neither of these expectations was realised. But out of the disappointed hopes of those two decades it was easy to construct a completely opposite future marked by the clash of civilisations, between the autocratic and the democratic powers, and fierce competition between the major nations of the world for control of artificial intelligence technology.

In a way, far from wanting to join Europe, Russia was depicted as wanting to attack it and even to conquer it if given the chance. In this perspective, the rhetoric of the Cold War was simply repurposed to the perceived dangers of the new situation. That has remained the conventional view; John Healey, the Defence Secretary, has said that Russia is very dangerous and the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, has said in this debate that we face a dramatically increased security risk.

It is interesting that all the witnesses who gave oral evidence to the committee came from the defence sector. Therefore, it is not surprising that the report strongly advocated a new or beefed-up defence industrial society and economy. What is wrong with all that? There is confusion running through the report between the nature of modern warfare, of which Ukraine is an example, and the nature of Russia's intentions to Europe, as revealed by its invasion of Ukraine. Dr Peter Roberts of Exeter University rightly warned the committee of our inability to understand intent, which is a major flaw in our thinking, and that is true of the report. Yes, the Ukrainian war reveals the threatening nature of modern warfare, but not the kind of threats we face from Russia in Europe.

The accepted view is that this invasion reveals the expansionist nature of the Putin regime. There are, however, many knowledgeable and respected analysts in Europe, the United States and the global South who deny that premise and argue with Jack Matlock, a former US ambassador to Russia, that Putin was provoked

into invading Ukraine because NATO was trying to draw Ukraine into a hostile alliance and, had it not been so engaged, there would not have been an invasion.

Let me sum up. I am not against the rearmament of Europe. We live in a dangerous world, of course, but military spending is not an end in itself; it is a means to security. There is no special virtue in spending X rather than Y per cent of GDP on defence. The threats to security have to be perceived and analysed accurately—far more accurately than this report does to justify the volume and nature of the proposals that it is making.

3.26 pm

Lord Balfe (Con): My Lords, your Lordships can always tell when they are getting to the end of a debate, because the noble Lords, Lord Skidelsky and Lord Balfe, will be speaking. Like the noble Lord, Lord Skidelsky, I disagree with much of the report, but I thank the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley, and his colleagues for giving it to us, because this is exactly the time to discuss how we are going to handle the new situation.

Fifty-five years ago, Ted Heath, our then Prime Minister, outlined quite clearly why we should move away from the United States and start to look at the interests of Europe when we are defending Europe. In that, he was surprisingly supported by Enoch Powell. They both fell back on the doctrine that states do not do favours for other states. They have foreign policies to maximise their impact. That was always confirmed to me when I was in the European Parliament. For some years, I was on an outfit called the Transatlantic Policy Network and, through that, got to know the late Senator John McCain quite well. He was quite clear with me that there is no special relationship. He once said, probably very accurately, "There is only a special relationship in that we rely on you to keep the sergeants' mess in control while we look after the officers". He was right.

To an extent, I welcome President Trump and his disruption because it is long overdue. The invasion of Ukraine was clearly illegal, but it was not unprovoked. There were years of provocation preceding it, which ended by chasing Viktor Yanukovich out of office. From then on, there was little hope that Ukraine would settle down as a NATO ally in the West because Putin, who is in charge of his country and has to do his best for it, is of the view that the borders need redrawing. I have been in Crimea and all over the Donbass region. It is Russian. Let us face that: it is not Ukrainian; it is Russian and that is why there is little objection to a Russian presence there. Your Lordships are not meant to like these facts, but they are the truth.

What we now have to do, in my view, is adjust our policies in Europe so that we can break Russia away from China. We seem to be settling back and saying, "Oh yeah, Russia and China are going to get together". China is far more of a threat to western values, because it does not rely on a western philosophy in the way that it looks at the world and, if it is allied to Russia, that means it is on the borders of Europe—it will have bases in the Arctic before long. My view is that we need to come to terms with Trump.

[LORD BALFE]

One challenge for the Ministry of Defence is that we need to make sure that our nuclear deterrent will actually work. I was assured by John McCain that the Americans held the key to certain aspects of launching the missiles that made them completely under American control. Could we launch an independent missile? France can, and that is why France will be the leader of the new European security dimension.

The people we need to look to are Merz in Germany—the new chancellor—and Giorgia Meloni, who has a very good vision of how Europe should turn out, and we must hope that Macron can be succeeded by someone who has European interests at heart and is not a nationalist. I see that as being our big challenge: we have to get back into Europe as a country and get as close to the Europeans as we possibly can. We will not be able to lead the European defence initiative, for the bad reason that we decided to leave the European Union. We will not get in there, because France will claim the initiative—and, frankly, if I were France, I would claim the initiative—but we do need to get more closely aligned.

My final point is that we have had some mention of the Scandinavian version of security. That is based on a form of national service and on defending the home space. We need to indulge in that. There is no market in Britain for body bags, and there is no market in Britain for foreign adventure beyond that necessary to defend our own country and our close allies in Europe.

Lord Skidelsky (CB): Hear, hear!

Lord Balfe (Con): See, I said I would get no cheers.

3.33 pm

Lord Houghton of Richmond (CB): My Lords, I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. I am sorry that I have missed some of it. I declare a relevant interest in the register as an adviser to a defence-related tech company called Thales UK.

I start by agreeing with the view of many that it is a shame it was not felt appropriate to hold this debate in the Chamber. I say this because I think that more recent events give the report a relevance far beyond the relatively narrow focus of its original purpose. In my view, for example, it has a far wider and compelling relevance to the use of information by Governments in the age of artificial intelligence. For my part, I will not focus on any of the specific recommendations of the report, as I have great confidence that others have covered that ground. Rather, I want to spend my allotted time on just one issue: why did we name the report *A Wake-up Call*?

Many noble Lords will be familiar with the works of the Israeli academic Yuval Noah Harari, the author of the best-selling books, *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*. His most recent book, *Nexus*, which my son bought me for Christmas at my direction, is a compelling history of information networks from the stone age to present times. In very simple terms, just of one of Harari's many insights is his belief that there exist two very different views of how information is used. One is a somewhat naive view of information that sees it as the asset by which truth is established and from which

wisdom thereafter flows, so the greater the amount of information that can be gathered and assessed, the closer we come to truth and therefore wisdom. Harari does not share this naive or simple view. Rather, he believes that the end use of information, specifically in respect of how nations are governed, is a far more dangerous trade-off between truth and order. More specifically, he argues that Governments, since they are the most powerful institutions in developed societies, have the greatest interest in distorting the truth or at least in hiding the most inconvenient facts. Indeed, he argues that allowing Governments to supervise the truth is like appointing the fox to guard the chicken house.

I would argue that, certainly for at least the past 15 years, successive British Governments have distorted the truth about the state of our Armed Forces. As Chief of the Defence Staff, I bore close witness to this and to some extent always understood why a slightly varnished version of the truth was necessary to avoid public alarm. I could perhaps understand how successive defence reviews rather committed to the delusion that all was well. I could appreciate why inconvenient facts about our performance in NATO, the real costs of the nuclear enterprise, the hollowing out of war-fighting resilience, the state of our Reserve Forces, the lack of a continuum of deterrent capability which permitted the control of escalation and countless other such issues were all being hidden. Indeed, since coming to this place, I have also occasionally marvelled at how at the Dispatch Box dissembling on defence issues has seemed the accepted order of the day.

However, at least two people have seen through these distortions and delusions. One is President Putin, who reached his own conclusions about NATO's true deterrent capability, a capability that in his eyes lacked credibility and which he was, and seemingly remains, fully prepared to put to the test. The other is President Trump, who recognised that the United States of America was being taken for a wholly unfair ride by the European members of NATO and that it was well past the time when Europe needed to pay for its own security. It is for these reasons that the committee chose the title it did. The UK, Europe and NATO all need to wake up to some remarkably harsh realities.

I am left hoping two things. The first hope is that we have not woken up too late. My fear here is that we already have. In this context, we must be very wary of who benefits from a ceasefire. My view is that it is the side that wins thereafter the race to rearm. My second hope is that, when it comes to our national security, we never, ever, fall so deeply asleep again. The sole issue that I ask the Minister to give assurances on is that, if UK forces are committed to an operational role in Ukraine, it is only in the context of the appropriate command and control, the correct equipment and materiel and the proper security safeguards. Finally, in closing, I wish this Government nothing but good fortune in trying to navigate their way out of this truly awful mess.

3.38 pm

Baroness Smith of Newnham (LD): My Lords, this has been a fascinating debate. Like others, I thank the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley, and the committee for

producing an excellent report that has contributed to this being such a stimulating debate. Clearly, there are other, slightly more recent factors that have contributed to it being even more timely and interesting than it might have been, and I agree with the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Houghton of Richmond, that it would have been preferable if the debate could have been held in the main Chamber.

We are just over three years after the start of the current operations in eastern Ukraine. I put it like that because today we have really talked only about the situation since February 2022, yet the situation in Crimea since 2014, which was mentioned by my noble friend Lord Alderdice, and the situation in Georgia in 2008 remind us that Russian expansionism is not new.

Although the title of the report, *Ukraine: A Wake-up Call*, is very telling, it is also important for us to remember that for too long, this country, like our NATO allies, tended to turn something of a blind eye. We do not talk about the fact that 20% of Georgian territory is still occupied by Russia. We do not talk very much about Crimea because we seem vaguely to have assumed that it is now just Russian, so we talk about Ukraine of the borders of February 2022, but until two weeks ago, we had at least assumed that we were on the same page as our transatlantic allies.

We are on the same page as Canada. Indeed, Donald Trump and JD Vance have done the most extraordinary thing: they have united Canada and have persuaded the Québécois that they are Canadian after all. Donald Trump appears to be doing something that his friends in the Reform Party probably would not like, which is reuniting Europe, not in terms of European institutions—I am not going to get into any technicalities about the UK-EU security relationship in terms of a bilateral relationship that is signed and sealed as a treaty—so much as the very clear fact that European states need to work together.

There has been a wake-up call, which we began to see at the time that this report was written, but it has become ever greater. At the same time, President Putin has managed to catalyse NATO by ensuring that Finland and Sweden have finally decided that they should be NATO members rather than outside it, so there are a lot of unintended consequences. As noble Lords have pointed out, this report was completed six months ago. By House of Lords standards, debating it within six months is quite quick. The fact that the Government have already responded is excellent but, obviously, nobody could quite have predicted what has happened in the six weeks since President Trump was inaugurated for the second time.

We are in a very different situation where our American allies perhaps cannot be relied on as in the past. As my noble friend Lady Harris pointed out in her trenchant and powerful speech, the US vice-president's comments were, quite frankly, unacceptable. To suggest that the United Kingdom is "some random country" that maybe fought some war 30 or 40 years ago is absolutely unacceptable and reprehensible. The transatlantic relationship might not be a special relationship in US eyes in the way that it has sometimes been in British rhetoric. As the former UK ambassador to the US, Dame Karen Pierce, pointed out yesterday

to the International Relations and Defence Committee, the Americans do not see it in a sentimental way, and they never have. As several noble Lords have pointed out, it is quite reasonable that the United States, particularly, but not only, under Donald Trump, in many ways sees the transatlantic relationship through a transactional lens.

One wake-up call we need to understand is that whoever is the American President, we cannot simply assume that NATO will go back to the alliance it was during the Cold War. We need to be aware of that but, equally, we need to be able to trust our allies. We cannot have the vice-president of one of our allies rubbishing the United Kingdom or denigrating the President of Ukraine. It is utterly unacceptable.

I absolutely agree with the many noble Lords, starting with the noble Lord, Lord Liddle, who pointed out that the Prime Minister has been very effective over the past few weeks in working with both the US and our European partners. However, we also need to make sure that we are not only standing up with Ukraine against Putin but standing firm against the United States when it is not acting as a reliable partner.

Various issues arise from that. It will surprise noble Lords that I agreed with a couple of points made by the noble Lords, Lord Balfe and Lord Skidelsky. On the question of our relationship with the United States, at a meeting yesterday, it was pointed out to me that we should not just assume that we go back to old-fashioned business as usual. However, the UK's relations with the United States are qualitatively different from those of our European partners: we are part of the Five Eyes, we have various defence capabilities that our European partners do not, and we clearly have the nuclear deterrent. As the noble Lord, Lord Balfe, pointed out, the French nuclear deterrent is independent, but ours is closely tied to the United States. Is the Minister able to confirm that we can use our deterrent independently? It is clearly important because our deterrent is the NATO nuclear deterrent and France's is not. That is my first question.

Various noble Lords have mentioned the incoming German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, who has talked about the UK and France sharing their nuclear deterrent. To what extent are we able to do that beyond saying that NATO offers a nuclear umbrella? There are questions about the non-proliferation treaty, which is not frequently talked about anymore, but there may be issues there, so it would be interesting if the Minister could comment.

Defence expenditure is one of the issues that has been partially overtaken by events in the past two weeks. We now have a timetable to get to 2.5% and several noble Lords talked about moving to 3%. That is my party's policy, and we believe we should do it quickly, but not on the back of development. The noble Lord, Lord Skidelsky, made a valid point that we might say that we need to increase defence and there might be various niche capabilities that the noble Lord, Lord West, would want if he were in the Room, but we need to be clear about what we would be spending that 3% on.

Defence procurement is clearly one of the issues. The questions raised about our defence industrial base are hugely important. My noble friend Lady Tyler of

[BARONESS SMITH OF NEWNHAM]

Enfield was one of the Peers who mentioned that we need to strengthen our defence industrial base and to work with small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly those that have found that the uncertainty pending the SDR has created issues with their balance sheets and cash flow. Will the Minister tell the Committee what work is being done with small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly those that have dual-use capabilities? Equally, we need to be working with our European partners. As several noble Lords mentioned, interoperability is vital. Defence spending of 3% may or may not be enough. We need to make sure that we have the right capabilities, in the right place, at the right time, not just as the United Kingdom but with our NATO partners and allies.

My final question is on the size of the Armed Forces. For years, these Benches have been saying that we need to restore the 10,000 cut to the Army. We also strongly believe that we need to strengthen the reserves, but the other important point that was raised is about total defence or civilian defence.

Taking the lessons of our Finnish and Swedish partners is important. What are His Majesty's Government doing not only to think about civilian capabilities but to talk to the United Kingdom? At the moment, we are, to an extent, talking to ourselves. We will have people watching online. There will be people from the Armed Forces or veterans listening in. There might be people from the Russian embassy or the American embassy listening in; maybe even the Chinese embassy has an interest. What we really need, however, is to be saying things that reach out to the ordinary citizens—in particular, not people of our generation, because most of us will be over the average age of the UK population. The noble Baroness, Lady Fall, pointed out that she lives with some Gen Z people. We need to be reaching out to them, to schools, to universities and to our young people to explain why defence and security matter.

This is not just about the past; it is about the present. It is about the defence of democracy and standing up not just for Ukraine but for what it stands for. We are doing it for Europe and for a future that is for Gen Z, their children and grandchildren.

3.51 pm

Baroness Goldie (Con): My Lords, it has been a pleasure, albeit a sombre one, to listen to this debate. I first pay tribute to my noble friend Lord De Mauley for his tireless work in chairing the committee and to all the noble Lords involved in the production of this report.

As the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, observed, committee chairs sometimes feel aggrieved at the sluggish progress from a report's publication to the actual debate on it. However, recent events have certainly thrust this report into stark relief, emphasising how timely some of the warnings were and, at the same time, flinging us into new territory, which was probably not at the forefront of the committee's thinking. Unchanging is that Ukraine is of critical importance. I pay tribute to the Prime Minister's sure-footed diplomacy and his unwavering support of Ukraine. I suggest that we can support his endeavours by reaffirming our political unity for that support, so that the clearest possible message of unity is heard from this Parliament.

The noble Lord, Lord Liddle, rightly reminded us of the brutal and repugnant reality of Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. Saliently, the report takes head-on the post-Cold War role of NATO and the distinction between a defensive alliance ready to come to the aid of each other and the need to develop that into a deterrent alliance. It is fair to say that the illegal invasion of Ukraine by Putin galvanised a NATO rethink about purpose, resilience and kinetic responsiveness. If we consider recurring NATO exercises, JEF and the enhanced forward presence, a lot of that was actually there and was already happening. As a Defence Minister, I saw that collaboration in practice.

Where I think the committee report compels serious reflection is on the need for coherence between nuclear—the ultimate and ever-present deterrent—and conventional deterrence. I commend the Government's recognition of that in their response and of the clamant need to deny our adversaries the chance to perceive deterrence gaps in which they may operate. This requires forensic military analysis, intricate strategic planning and a committed response from, if I may say so, principally European NATO members. My noble friend Lord Soames is absolutely right beyond doubt: Russia is, and will continue to be, a threat. I realise that the Minister will be limited in what he can share with us about this new future but, if there is encouragement on that front that he can offer, we should be very pleased to hear it.

The committee was clear about the need for increased defence expenditure; numerous contributors have spoken on that. From my perspective, the Government's recognition of and response to that is very welcome. Although the strategic defence review has been operating as a pause button on procurement, crystal clear to everyone is how the pace of increased defence expenditure will have to accelerate post 2027. That has been a clear message from this debate, and I hope that the Government are receptive.

The noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, is absolutely right to call for clarity about rearmament and to emphasise a potential real cost. The noble Lord, Lord Hogan-Howe, is absolutely correct that this threat environment and the rearmament imperative must be shared with the public. There is an urgent need for re-education of what it means to live in an age of live threat and to understand the implications of that.

Let me just clear my throat; this Room, unlike the Chamber yesterday, seems to be very warm. Specifically in relation to Ukraine, events are fast-moving and unpredictable, but there are some certainties. Whatever happens in the near future, I think that these are the following certainties. Ukraine's long-term security requirements require us to be not reactive but anticipatory. Can the Minister provide clarity on the Government's long-term thinking for supporting Ukraine's military capabilities, economic resilience and, of course, reconstruction efforts. How do we maintain that commitment beyond the immediate crisis, ensuring that Ukraine is safe and can defend herself in future?

The report rightly highlights:

“Developments in Ukraine are relevant to UK national security and, in particular, the protection of its critical national infrastructure”. It also highlights the importance of resilience within our own society. Hybrid warfare, cyberthreats and disinformation campaigns are tools that we have seen

be used by hostile states to undermine democracies. We must enhance our national resilience by countering disinformation, securing critical infrastructure and strengthening cybersecurity.

My noble friend Lord Soames's suggestion of a dedicated civil resilience unit—whether that is a ministry of civil defence or not—is, at this point in our affairs, a very serious suggestion meriting close attention. I hope that the Minister will feel able to respond to that. Can I also ask the Minister to elaborate on what measures are being taken to specify and fortify our national resilience against such threats?

My noble friend Lord De Mauley mentioned the Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Associations. The RFCAs are a strong British tradition with a deep connection and sense of service to our Reserve Forces and cadets, much of it emanating from voluntary activity. I commend my noble friend on his excellent work in this field. I agree that the Ministry of Defence should be very cautious about doing anything to jeopardise that underpinning voluntary ethos. I have to say, this is a classic case of there being a high risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. That would not be good; indeed, at this geopolitical time, it would be very bad. I say to the Minister that, if this NGU concept is being promoted from within the department as a box to be ticked somewhere in the depths of Whitehall, I think that it will face a very rocky road in the House. There are far more pressing defence priorities demanding our attention.

If we have learned anything else from the war in Ukraine, it is a stark reminder of certain things. The international rules-based order cannot be taken for granted. If we wish to deter future aggressors, we have to learn the lessons of a conventional deterrence failure and transform that into an effective deterrence future. We have to invest in our defences at pace. We have to stand unwaveringly with our allies. We must not allow the practice of principled, professional and decent diplomacy—very much manifested by the noble Lord, Lord Hannay, both today and, if I may say so, in his day—to be traduced by aberrant transgressions.

The Prime Minister has been an exemplar of the former. He demonstrates how to do it and why we need it. It is very important that, in whatever lies ahead, the Prime Minister's example is supported by us all, because a world without that decent, professional, principled diplomacy—this goes back to the point about communication made by the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Houghton—would be a poorly informed world. It seems to me that, if we can take away these lessons and look at much of what the report suggests, we have the solution for how to create a safer world—and, perhaps most importantly, how to send a message to any potential bullies and say, in the words of the Scots, "Wha daur meddle wi' us?"

3.59 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Lord Coaker) (Lab): Well, I hope I do not have to answer the last question.

Noble Lords: Oh!

Lord Coaker (Lab): Anyway, I first declare an interest: my son-in-law is in the Mercian Regiment in the reserves, and it would obviously be inappropriate for me not to mention that, as I will mention reserves in much of what I say.

May I also say what a pleasure and privilege it is to be in a debate? I think the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, mentioned that not many people may watch these debates; I can assure her that they are read far and wide, and the importance of what we say here should not be underestimated by those who are part of our great family, but also by others who perhaps do not have the same intent. It is important for us to remember the significance of the remarks that are made here.

I just say to the noble Lords, Lord Balfe and Lord Skidelsky, that it is of great significance and strength that, in this Parliament, within the legal framework of our country, anybody is free to make the comments that they wish to make without fear or favour. Although I did not agree with some of the points that they made, I am proud to be part of a Parliament where they can express those opinions.

It is also important to remind ourselves, before I come to the report of the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley, of the significance of the debate that we are having, as it reminds us all that our country, virtually unanimously, has been proud to support and continues to support Ukraine. That is great, and something that our country can be complimented on. I know that, across Europe and beyond, other countries look to us with that pride as well.

It is also important to restate that the vast majority of our country understands that the fight in Ukraine is our fight as much as theirs, and that their front line is our front line. With that, I am very grateful to the noble Baroness, Lady Goldie, for the significant support that she gave to me when she was a Minister and I was in His Majesty's Opposition, and in speaking for the Opposition now; and to the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, from the Liberal Democrat Benches; and all those from the Cross Benches and across Parliament for their general support for what we are doing in Ukraine. For those who read our debates, it is of huge significance and reminds them that there is no weakening of our resolve to continue with that struggle. Whatever the debate on the level of defence spending, we continue to spend billions of pounds a year to support that endeavour. That is really important context.

I take absolutely the point by the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Houghton, in his interesting and challenging speech, that, whatever commitments we make, we should make sure that we see them through. Wherever that leads us in the future, that is a very real and proper challenge to make to Government and Ministers. I take that very much on board and thank him for his comments.

What an outstanding report this is from the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley. We will come back to its title, *Ukraine: A Wake-up Call*, because it speaks to not only our nation but Europe as a whole. It makes all sorts of points—far too many for me to address—but the fundamental point is that, whoever had won the US election, Europe would have had to do more. Although we can look to the election of President Trump and some

[LORD COAKER]

of the comments that have been made, if Kamala Harris had won then she would have been demanding—maybe not in the same way or to the same extent—that Europe do more as well. That is why this title is so important, because it reflects a growing reality on the continent of Europe. As the noble Lord, Lord Soames, so aptly put it, the committee could have called it “An Alarm Call”. The events of the past couple of months have demonstrated the need for greater urgency, speed and determination to take the necessary action.

One of the most important things that comes through in the report, which I have discussed with the noble Baronesses, Lady Goldie and Lady Smith, and the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, in other debates, is that we have to rebuild deterrence. We need to understand that stopping war often means having to prepare for it. That is an unwelcome and difficult truth but, in today’s world, it is the reality.

The report also recognises, in a way that has not always been apparent, the changing nature of war and that we need to wake up to that. The noble Lord, Lord De Mauley, the committee—many of whom are here—and those who have worked with it should be commended on this, given that the whole country is starting to wake up to that too. It pointed out the need, as many noble Lords have done, for homeland defence, defence of critical national infrastructure and the importance of the reserves. All those things are really significant. Many noble Lords have heard me say in the Chamber that, if anyone had been saying this two, four, six or eight years ago, they would have been looked at with disbelief for talking about the need for us to understand how we develop homeland defence. That is a criticism of all of us, but it is a fact. The report seeks to do that.

The noble Lord, Lord De Mauley, asked me about the strength of the reserves. The official figure I have, from 1 November 2024, is that there are 32,080 trained and untrained reserves. He also mentioned the importance of the defence industry. The wake-up call is not only for the military but for the defence industry. We are seeking, through our new defence industrial strategy, to include SMEs and some of the businesses that the noble Baroness, Lady Smith, and other noble Lords mentioned, to set up new structures and to try to ensure that we do not have a situation where our stockpiles are not big enough and, frankly, we cannot restock them quickly enough. We cannot be satisfied with that. Part of our response is to work with industry and to upskill, but we are also making an organisational change in the Ministry of Defence to set up the new National Armaments Director to accelerate the changes we need.

We are also trying to become a closer partner, as the noble Baroness, Lady Goldie, mentioned, on the European defence industrial strategy to rebuild relationships there. That is not being met with universal approval from every European country, although many see the advantages of it. It is in Europe’s interest and ours; I know that we are not in the European Union, but co-operating on the defence industry in a way that allows interoperability is in both our interests and, strategically, the right thing to do. We have to find a way of overcoming that.

I say to my noble friend Lord Liddle that, yes, we are working to 2.5%. Another really important figure is the 3% in the next Parliament. There will always be debate about defence spending, as we have heard today. The noble Lord, Lord Alderdice, made points about a whole-of-society response and homeland defence. I agree with him on that.

The noble Baroness, Lady Coussins, talked about the importance of alliances across the world. I agree with that. Notwithstanding the debate about ODA money being used for defence, she will no doubt be pleased that I, as a Minister with some responsibility for defence and diplomacy, have been to Africa and South America. We are seeking to go to those countries to further develop and maintain our relationships with them and to establish and develop relationships in other parts of the world. Notwithstanding overseas development assistance, those countries are asking for our military assistance—not necessarily with divisions or thousands of fighter aircraft but with the doctrine, training and the confidence we can give them in tackling the terrorist threats and destabilising impacts in their own countries.

The most incredible example of that which I have seen recently is the work that we are doing in Nigeria, a close ally of ours. I saw a small number of personnel working with its people to help and support them, with the threat that they face from Islamic State West Africa and Boko Haram, to try to stabilise their country. That was helping with development and security as well; the noble Baroness is right to make that point.

The noble Lord, Lord Grocott, talked about the size of the Army. Obviously, the defence review will have something to say about that. We are really trying to tackle the recruitment and retention crisis that he mentioned; we implemented straight away the recommendations of the Armed Forces’ Pay Review Body and we recognise the skills agenda. There are a significant number of vacancies in the existing defence budget for skilled workers. We must find a way to tackle that, including by improving conditions, changing childcare arrangements and improving housing. We have changed the contract—I had better get this the right way round—from Capita to Serco to try to improve that. This will not have an immediate effect, but we are trying. The noble Lord asked in particular about the cyber route. We are creating a new cyber route for people with those skills because, without being rude, we are not sure that the current route would be open to some of those recruits if they were trying to get into the Marines, but we need those people.

The noble Lord, Lord Howell, mentioned the importance of the reserves. He is absolutely right to make the point about the importance of the interconnectivity between different regions of the world and how conflicts in different parts of the world impact on each other. I saw this when I went to Vietnam; it has been very unsettled by the closer relationship between Russia and China, which has changed its view.

I very much support the points made by the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, about NATO and the importance of the US relationship. Whatever our view, that relationship is really important. Taking up the point from the noble Lord, Lord Hannay, this is really

difficult as a Government seeking to bring about a meaningful peace as soon as possible in Ukraine—working with Ukraine to deliver that, so that it is at the table, and then trying to get the US to support that. As the noble Lord pointed out, you cannot do that simply by responding to every single headline in the paper, every single tweet that is put out or every single comment that is made.

As the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, pointed out, the US relationship is absolutely vital to us. Of course it is changing, and we see what is taking place, but it should not be taken as weakness or as not understanding what is happening. Diplomatic solutions sometimes have to be sought carefully, constructively and quietly. That is real leadership. The easy thing would be just to join in with everything that is being said, and no progress would be made, but I take the point by the noble Lord, Lord Hannay, on that.

I understand the point by the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, about rearming and spending: the need for rearmament is very important. My noble friend Lord Anderson made the point about the US and the importance of that relationship. The noble Lord, Lord Soames, talked about the importance of NATO; whether or not we have a Minister for Civil Defence, we understand the importance of homeland defence and the need for us to step up. It is really important.

My noble friend Lord Sahota mentioned changing geopolitics, and the noble Baroness, Lady Fraser, mentioned the importance of resources and reserves. I am going to meet the noble Lord, Lord Lancaster, who I think is a major-general in the reserves—I hope he is not a lieutenant-general—in due course with respect to that. I congratulate the noble Baroness's daughter on her service.

I agree with the noble Lord, Lord Alton: we are seeking to accelerate what we do about frozen Russian assets. We are using £2.26 billion as a new loan to Ukraine which, as he knows, is the profits of the assets and he is talking about the actual assets. We will do what we can with respect to that.

The noble Lord, Lord Risby, was right to point out the need to think about the rebuilding of Ukraine. I say this to the noble Baroness, Lady Helic: as she knows, I was in Bosnia recently, trying to show that the UK Government understand the importance of what was happening in Bosnia, the undermining of the Dayton agreement and our need to consider what to do with respect to Operation Althea and all the various other things, as she well knows.

I thank the noble Lord, Lord Hogan-Howe. He will be pleased to have noticed that the single intelligence account, which is the money for the services, went up by £340 million between 2023-24 and 2025-26 to try to tackle some of the very real points that he made.

I thank the noble Lord, Lord Shinkwin, for the points that he made, and the noble Baroness, Lady Tyler, on the importance of SMEs.

The noble Lord, Lord Roberts, used Churchill's words to inspire us. We need to continue to remind ourselves that Churchill, Ernie Bevin and all these people from

the past must be looking down on us and thinking, "I hope they rediscover some of the spirit that we had," to deal with the challenges that we face.

On the noble Lord, Lord Tyrie, and the need for Europe to stand up and the EU and the UK standing together, I say absolutely. I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Fall, for the points she made about working across the world and Generation Z. I am sorry that I am going on, but I ask noble Lords to stay with me for a minute or two. On Generation Z, I agree with the points she made, but the only thing I would say is on the contradiction that every single remembrance and military event I go to is packed with young people. Cadets but also other people are attending remembrance services, walking around and being involved. Through that they understand the value of service.

It is great that the noble Lord, Lord Skidelsky—and, indeed, the noble Lord, Lord Balfe, as well—says what he did. I understand the points he made and the challenge he made to all of us to understand it and what it means for our policy.

I have said what I did about the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Houghton. I again thank the noble Baronesses, Lady Smith and Lady Goldie, very much for the overall support that they have given.

I am going to read out just one thing on nuclear, and I do not want to get this wrong for obvious reasons. It is a very important point. I will read from the actual notes because it is carefully phrased. The conflict in Ukraine is not a nuclear matter for the UK. However, we have assigned our nuclear deterrent to the defence of NATO since 1962, and we remain ready to deter threats to the UK and against our NATO allies.

The UK's nuclear deterrent is completely operationally independent. Only the Prime Minister can authorise the use of our nuclear weapons, even if they are deployed as part of a NATO response. The UK has a long-standing close relationship with the US on all defence nuclear issues, which has endured through many changes of government in our two nations. That is all I wish to say about that particular matter, but I hope it is helpful to the noble Baroness, the Committee and everybody else.

I thank the noble Lord, Lord De Mauley, again for his report. It has made a great contribution to the defence and security of our nation and beyond. Thank you very much.

4.20 pm

Lord De Mauley (Con): My Lords, I am sure that noble Lords all want to rush away and catch their trains, so I will only be a couple of minutes. I am grateful to all noble Lords who have spoken. There was an unusual convergence of views among the vast majority of those who spoke, which I think should be encouraging to His Majesty's Government and to us all. I do not have time to give credit to all noble Lords who have spoken but, save for the noble Lord, Lord Skidelsky, and my noble friend Lord Balfe, there was little I heard that I disagreed with. Even with them, I am sure there are things that we can find to agree on.

[LORD DE MAULEY]

The noble Lord, Lord Liddle, the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, and others, concurred that increasing defence spending to 2.5% of GDP will not be enough. As we said in the report, it is not just that we spend more, but that we spend more astutely. I agreed strongly with the noble Lord, Lord Grocott, on the need for the MoD to sort out recruitment. The Minister told us a bit about how that will be done.

My noble friend Lord Howell of Guildford spoke specifically about reserve numbers. He is right that it would not be difficult to increase reserve numbers dramatically, and we should. I will not go into detail, but I have the experience of recruiting reservists based on 50 years of close involvement. I joined the Territorial Army in April 1975, and I am the honorary colonel of the reserve unit that I joined then. I know exactly what needs to be done. It does not need to be hugely expensive. I am available on call to the Minister. I beg him not to rely entirely on the counsel of regular soldiers in the MoD; I respect them hugely, but point out that reservists' motivations are different to those

of regular servicepeople who have shown, time after time, that they misunderstand the motivations and needs of reservists.

The noble Lord, Lord Anderson, gently chided us, pointing out that we forecasted a gradual shift of US priorities. I hope the Grand Committee will forgive us our optimism. I think the views expressed by most noble Lords today suggest that the vast majority of the report is, as the noble Lord, Lord Hannay, said, as valid today as it was when we wrote it. I thank the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup, and my noble friends Lord Soames, Lady Fraser and Lady Goldie, for echoing my concerns about the future of the RFCAs. I say to the Minister that we want to help; please do not tie one hand behind our back.

I thank the Minister for his response to the debate. I am pleased that we agree on so much. It is often said that we always plan and prepare to fight the last war, rather than the next. We must break that mould.

Motion agreed.

Committee adjourned at 4.23 pm.