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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 11 February 2021

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Orders, 4 June and 30 December 2020).

[NB: [V] denotes a Member participating virtually.]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Office for Veterans' Affairs: Government Support

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support the Office for Veterans' Affairs. [912174]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Johnny Mercer) [V]: The Prime Minister set up the Office for Veterans' Affairs because he, like me, is determined to ensure that this country becomes the best place in the world to be a veteran. In addition to excellent officials, the OVA benefits from expert advice from the Government's Veterans Advisory Board and the newly appointed veterans adviser.

Mr Speaker: Let us head up to the north-west with James Daly.

James Daly [V]: [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Speaker: There is a little hiccup, I think. We are definitely going to have to move on.

Local Elections: Covid-19

Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con): What safety measures his Department plans to take to help ensure the 2021 local elections can take place during the covid-19 outbreak. [912189]

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What plans the Government have to help ensure the May 2021 local elections are covid-secure. [912220]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take the questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Ian Levy) and the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) together.

Mr Speaker: We now go to Ian Levy in Blyth Valley.

Ian Levy [V]: In 2019, I think we all took for granted the ability to run election campaigns that could properly engage with the electorate. Campaigning for this year's elections on 6 May will look very different, but now more than ever, there is a need to engage with our constituents. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital that all those who stand for elections should be able to convey their messages to voters, and will he please elaborate on how he believes campaigning should go ahead in a covid-secure way?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: democracy should not be cancelled because of covid-19. The polls that are scheduled for May will go ahead, and it is important that he and others communicate with his constituents. Of course, social media provides one means of doing so. At the moment, door-to-door campaigning and leafleting are not allowed because of covid restrictions, but we will be reviewing how we can make sure that he and others can keep faith with the constituents who elected him so memorably just over a year ago.

Matt Western [V]: The public will be expecting covid-safe and fair elections in May. Presently, households are receiving flyers for pizzas and takeaways delivered by individuals, but volunteers are not supposed to be delivering leaflets for political parties, although some are clearly ignoring that. In local elections, the public need representatives who will speak up for them and not for property developers such as the six leading Tory donors that have given £4.5 million, an increase of 400%, since July 2019. Does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster agree that if only paid-for leafleting were allowed, that would be a disastrous disservice to our democracy?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes a series of important points. It is quite right that some political activists have been leafleting on the ground in a way that current rules do not allow for, and we deprecate that across the House. His broader point is right as well, of course; we must make sure that our democratic processes are free from any taint of interference. He is also right that the role of property developers needs to be scrutinised when we are looking at how we clean up our politics, and I know that he will be as eager as I am to make sure that Unite the union does so as well.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The advice that came from the Government this week on local elections was welcome; however, the most innovative idea appeared to be to bring your own pencil to the polls, so I would like to ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster two specific questions.

The first is on the use of schools as polling stations. Many schools are having to use school halls for teaching, which would not normally have to happen. What support will the Government give local registration officers to find appropriate venues with appropriate ventilation?

The second question is on the issue of elections falling into different areas of the tiering system, which may well be in place by May. Might there be an unfair political advantage to one candidate if the restrictions were lesser in one area than another?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady raises two important questions. The first is with respect to schools. The Minister for School Standards, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick

Gibb), will be writing to local authorities and schools today, alongside Ministers in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, to outline how schools can be used in a safe and appropriate way, but we are also making funding available to local authorities so that alternative venues other than schools can be used where appropriate.

The hon. Lady's second point, relating to unfairness as a result of different restrictions perhaps occurring in different local government areas, is an important one, and one that we are taking into account as we plan for these local elections.

Government Contracts: Small Businesses

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase opportunities for small businesses to bid for Government contracts. [912176]

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase opportunities for small businesses to bid for Government contracts. [912179]

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): What steps he is taking to reform Government procurement to boost (a) local growth and (b) the small and medium-sized enterprises sector. [912195]

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase opportunities for small businesses to bid for Government contracts. [912202]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez): The UK spends £290 billion on public procurement each year. Now that we have left the EU transition period, we aim to make it simpler, quicker and cheaper for small and medium-sized enterprises and social enterprises to bid for Government contracts, as set out in our ambitious procurement Green Paper. We have already introduced a policy that will allow below-threshold contracts to be reserved for smaller UK suppliers, and we hope our new approach to social value will secure wider public benefit by allowing us to contract with firms that deliver more apprenticeships, local growth opportunities and environmental benefits.

Stephen Metcalfe [V]: I know that my hon. Friend will agree that our small and medium-sized businesses are the bedrock of our economy. I am sure that she will also agree that giving them the opportunity to bid for Government contracts will give them a significant boost and help them recover from what has been a very tough year. Will she lay out exactly how the Government will be promoting this opportunity to SMEs, so that businesses in Basildon and Thurrock can start to bid immediately?

Julia Lopez: I agree with my hon. Friend that the opportunities in this space are huge, and we think that our reforms will play a huge role in our post-covid recovery. For too long, complex and opaque procurement rules have benefited bigger and less innovative firms. Our reforms will simplify the current framework of over 350 regulations into one uniform set of rules, and move from seven procurement procedures to three. Our

free-to-use digital platform, Contracts Finder, should make it easier for businesses in his constituency to find relevant opportunities. We want to make supply registration far simpler, so that data has to be submitted only once to qualify for any public sector procurement.

Miriam Cates [V]: Small businesses in my constituency would like the opportunity to bid for more Government and council contracts, but the current procurement rules are too complex and inevitably favour big firms. Can my hon. Friend assure me that we will be using our new freedom from EU procurement rules to deliver more commercial opportunities to innovative, dynamic SMEs in Penistone and Stocksbridge?

Julia Lopez: Absolutely. I know that my hon. Friend, as someone who has run a business herself, understands the bureaucratic frustrations that too many of her constituency businesses come up against. We want public buyers to divide contracts into more accessible lots and allow them to reserve contracts under a certain threshold for small, innovative firms. We are also pushing ambitious targets on prompt payment, and we aim to simplify the bidding process so that it does not favour big firms, which inevitably have greater resources to devote to form-filling and box-ticking.

Danny Kruger [V]: I welcome the recent Green Paper setting out the freedoms that the UK now enjoys to create a new framework for public procurement, including a new exceptional power for public bodies to commission for wider public benefit. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to go further and make this exception the norm, ensuring more joined-up services and better overall outcomes for the public? Otherwise, we will be getting only half the Brexit dividend that we could in the field of procurement, with freedoms but not the actual implementation.

Julia Lopez: My hon. Friend is quite right. Our proposed procurement reforms will not in themselves deliver change unless commercial teams across the public sector actually understand how to deploy them to greatest effect. That is why we are introducing a programme of training for contracting authorities. On the matter of wider public benefit, I refer him to our social value model. We do not want to award only to those that make the cheapest bid; we also want to award to firms that offer value for money in a much broader sense, including to the community in which the service is being delivered. I know that is something he cares very passionately about, given his thoughtful review on a new social covenant.

Caroline Ansell [V]: I so welcome all that my hon. Friend has said on this. I am mustard-keen to see Government contracts open up and work for businesses and charities in Eastbourne. The latest feedback from one of my manufacturers, which has just ventured into this arena with a bid to the Ministry of Defence, highlights the absence of a published timeline on decision making for the contract, which the manufacturer says is essential information to allow it to plan for success, build capacity and ensure that it delivers for all its customers. Will she look at this situation, to ensure that the whole process is as transparent and as small business-friendly as possible?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting this; she raises an important point. I am happy to look into the specifics of the case and take it up with officials, or she might want to look at the public procurement review service. All Departments, including the MOD, are actively supporting the SME agenda, and one of the ways we hope to encourage more bids from SMEs is by publishing contract pipelines well in advance, so that they have much more time to plan and resource bids, and shorten the time in which contracting bodies make decisions.

Trade: UK and EU

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help ensure goods can continue to flow freely between the UK and the EU. [912177]

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help ensure goods can continue to flow freely between the UK and the EU. [912183]

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure frictionless exports to the EU. [912185]

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help ensure goods can continue to flow freely between the UK and the EU. [912190]

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help ensure goods can continue to flow freely between the UK and the EU. [912193]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): Our trade and co-operation agreement with the EU is the first free trade agreement that the EU has ever reached based on zero tariffs and zero quotas. The agreement will help unlock investment and protect high-value jobs right across the UK. We will now take full advantage of the opportunities created by this deal, helping to boost productivity, unlock investment and safeguard high-value jobs in the UK. Goods are flowing freely through our ports, with levels of freight around what we would expect for this time of year, but we are also working closely with businesses that are facing challenges, and we are in regular operational contact with EU countries in order to smooth trade.

Lia Nici [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer, and I know he is doing all he can to reduce the turbulence, but Grimsby fish exporters are reporting to me that despite the EU agreement on free trade, French ports are introducing additional paperwork and extra costs. They are even insisting that we hire EU nationals to do that additional work. Will he take this matter up, so that we can ensure that the people of the EU continue to enjoy the highest quality seafood in Europe, processed in Great Grimsby?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The highest-quality seafood in the whole of Europe is produced in Great Grimsby. Indeed, I remember my dad, when he ran a fish processing business, sending some of the fish that he bought at Aberdeen fish market

to Grimsby for processing, and it was enjoyed on tables across Europe. She is absolutely right to say that there are still some bureaucratic obstacles that we need to negotiate and navigate. We have set up a specific seafoods export working group, which meets twice weekly, and we are engaging with our friends in France in order to ensure that we can continue to enjoy Great Grimsby fish.

James Wild [V]: Two exporters in Kings Lynn, Guy Raymond Engineering and Captain Fawcett, a gentleman's grooming firm, have raised concerns about waiting up to 16 hours for HMRC transit documentation, delays in customs clearance in France and other countries as they interpret the rules differently, and each courier firm demanding different informational declarations. This is delaying the delivery of their products, so will my right hon. Friend take up these issues with courier firms, HMRC and our EU partners so that goods can continue to flow to customers?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that in order to ensure that we have a seamless flow of trade, each individual element in that chain needs to be working as effectively as possible, so we are working with courier companies to ensure that we can smooth any difficulties, HMRC is looking at easements and facilitations, and of course we are talking to our EU friends and neighbours to ensure that there is a consistent approach.

Anthony Mangnall: Under the terms of the EU-UK trade deal, there is a requirement to set up a sanitary and phytosanitary trade committee as well as a committee on fishing. When will those committees be set up? If the EU does not adhere to the rules and the agreements that were made, will we restrict the licence given to any European fishing vessels in our waters?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is a formidable advocate for the seafood sector; one of the largest fishing ports in England is in his constituency. He is absolutely right to say that there are means and mechanisms by which we and the EU can work together to smooth the export of high-quality seafood. There have been difficulties and challenges, but we are overcoming them and it is also important that we reserve our own rights when it comes to ensuring that the EU lives up to its side of the bargain.

Mr Robertson: Less than an hour ago, my office received a call from a haulier in my constituency who has been sending animal-based products to the continent for 40 years. The vet-checked lorry, which had its seal on, was held up at the Calais compound for 11 hours, even though it was on its way to Germany. It was eventually passed with just a cursory glance. In his meetings with his EU counterparts later today, will my right hon. Friend raise such issues and stress to them that it is not acceptable, and certainly not necessary, to do that?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Exporters have gone to great lengths to ensure that the products of animal origin that they are exporting meet the SPS requirements that are in place, and delays of the kind he mentions are unacceptable, so I will investigate that case.

Mrs Murray [V]: Fishing exporters in my constituency are having problems exporting to the EU. We signed a deal that said we could export to the EU. What action is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that these exports happen without hindrance, and will he start boarding EU vessels in retaliation if we still see this obstructive action on the part of the European Union?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend has been one of the doughtiest defenders of the fishing sector in this House for a few years now, and she is absolutely right to say that we need to ensure that any bureaucratic obstructions that individual EU member states may still be applying are lifted. As I mentioned in response to our hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), we will reserve our right as an independent coastal state to do whatever is required to ensure that our fishermen are backed up every step of the way.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP) [V]: The House of Commons Library described the EU trade and co-operation agreement by saying, as the Minister has:

“There will be no tariffs or quotas...provided rules of origin are met.”

However, it went on to say:

“There are increased non-tariff barriers, but measures on customs and trade facilitation to ease these.”

Given that 60% of companies have had difficulties importing from or exporting to the EU, and that 30% or more of companies have had their supply chain impacted in both directions, when will the measures to ease the problems at the borders begin to work?

Michael Gove: First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his appointment to his new role in the recent Scottish National party Westminster reshuffle, and look forward to working with him across the Dispatch Box. He is right to say that a number of facilitations and easements have been put in place, some before the end of the transition period on 31 December, but we are providing more support, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises in order to enable them to take full advantage of their new opportunities.

Stewart Hosie: I am struggling to see the advantages and new opportunities. A firm in my constituency, Wilde Mode Ltd, imports, among other things, rolls of printed fabric from Poland. Before Brexit, the cost of delivery was less than €40, but because courier and other companies are no longer shipping to the UK the owners of that company are now being quoted €2,000 for the same delivery. As the Minister will know, that is completely unsustainable. So I ask again: when will the measures to ease these problems be put in place fully and actually start to work?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the case of the firm in his constituency and will look specifically at that firm's challenges, and the position of both the firm in Poland that supplies all those fabrics and the courier he mentions, in order to make sure that any interruption in the free flow of produce from Poland to Dundee is dealt with.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab) [V]: A Make UK survey shows that 61% of manufacturers are suffering disruption to their supply chain; one car company is parking hundreds of cars because of problems with

its supply chain; road haulage in Northern Ireland is in chaos; the Road Haulage Association survey shows that more than one in two of its members throughout the UK are swamped by red tape; and Government officials are even advising companies to set up hubs on the continent, when we should be building British and buying British. What will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster do finally to ease such burdens on business on our great British companies, which are deeply damaging, at the worst possible time?

Michael Gove: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman on the need to build British and buy British. The procurement Green Paper that the Cabinet Office Minister Lord Agnew produced enables us to do just that. The hon. Gentleman mentioned a number of examples of disruption. There have been some challenges, but there have also been some reports, including, I regret to say, in *The Observer*, that have not been wholly accurate in their depiction of the challenges our exporters face.

Jack Dromey: Does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster begin to recognise the scale of the mountainous problems confronting British business? The Government left them with one week between Christmas eve and 1 January to adapt to new rules running to hundreds of pages. Then, when companies all across the UK raised their concerns, the Prime Minister dismissed them as “teething problems”. Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster take this opportunity to apologise to British business for the disruption the Government have inflicted on them?

Michael Gove: I know the hon. Gentleman has dedicated his life, both before he came into this House and in this House, to supporting British manufacturing, so I take seriously the concerns he raises. We meet business representative organisations every week through the Brexit business taskforce in order to deal with any challenges and to explore additional opportunities. I should have welcomed him to his new role in the shadow Cabinet Office team. I look forward to working with him, because I know that he is dedicated to making sure that British manufacturers, the best in the world, have all the opportunities they need. I hope to work pragmatically with him to achieve just that.

Transparency in Government Contracts: Covid-19

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to help increase transparency in procurement of Government contracts as part of the covid-19 response. [912178]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The Government already have robust processes in place for spending public money fairly and achieving value for money for the taxpayer. We recently published detailed proposals for new and improved procurement rules in the Green Paper that I mentioned earlier, and these proposals include specific measures to strengthen transparency through the commercial lifecycle, from planning through to procurement, contract award, performance and completion.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy [V]: Last week, the Government's own legal representatives admitted that they had breached procurement law by persistently failing to publish details

of covid-19 contracts. The Good Law Project could also expose the wholesale failure to comply with obligations of transparency, and questions remain over the £500 million-worth of taxpayers' money spent on personal protective equipment deals with companies that are Tory donors. Does the Minister agree that this is reflective of the Government's failed response to the pandemic and that this lack of accountability has completely damaged confidence and trust in the Government?

Michael Gove: I do not quite agree with that. It is fair to say that we do need to be vigilant when it comes to the use of public money and the awarding of contracts, but it is the case that, if we look at, for example, personal protective equipment and other goods that were sourced during the course of the covid pandemic, 99.5% of the goods that were sourced were operational and effective. We were also procuring at speed. There were suggestions from across the House as to some of the companies that we should have contracts with. Not all of those suggestions were necessarily absolutely spot on, but what we did do was to ensure that we prioritised those companies that were capable of meeting the needs of the hour.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): The Institute for Government last week highlighted that 99% of the Government's covid contracts had not gone out to tender. Does the Minister agree that this cannot continue and only leads to suspicion about the nature of the awards and who is getting them? Will he tell the House when the Government intend to wind down the extensive use of these extraordinary procurement powers? Can he give a date?

Michael Gove: Again, let me welcome a new member to the shadow Cabinet Office team, and I look forward to working with the hon. Lady and congratulate her on her promotion. It is the case, of course, that we want best practice to apply in all procurement, and the recent Boardman report that the Cabinet Office commissioned emphasises some changes that we can make in order to ensure even greater effectiveness and transparency. At the beginning of the covid pandemic, when there was a global demand for personal protective equipment, we used perfectly legitimate, well-understood expedited practices. There were, as I mentioned earlier, a number of suggestions from across the House, including from Labour MPs, of companies and firms that could help. It was important that we looked at those with speed and expedition in order to ensure that those who were capable, as many were, of providing us with the equipment that we needed were able to get that equipment on to the NHS frontline as quickly as possible.

Voter Fraud

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): What plans he has to tackle voter fraud in elections. [912180]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The Government are committed to delivering our bold agenda of electoral reform to strengthen our democracy and protect public trust and confidence in our elections. As outlined in our 2019 manifesto, the Government will introduce measures requiring identification to vote at polling stations and to stop postal vote harvesting.

Dr Poulter [V]: The Minister will be aware that, during the previous election and, indeed, during the 2017 election, there was considerable concern about students potentially voting in more than one location. Is there more that my right hon. Friend can do to ensure that we prevent this from happening? Rather than just relying on retrospective prosecutions, can we look at improving the registration process to stop people registering to vote or potentially trying to vote in more than one location at a general election?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. My colleague, the Minister for the Constitution and Devolution, is looking at exactly how we can ensure that we have effective voter registration so that either confusion or, indeed, an outright attempt to subvert the integrity of the poll can be dealt with, and we will be bringing forward more detail in due course.

Strength of the Union

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to strengthen the Union. [912181]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The Government are committed to protecting and promoting the combined strengths of our Union, building on 300 years of successful partnership. It is vital that we continue to work across the United Kingdom on common challenges that we all face, such as the roll-out of the covid-19 vaccination programme. We also need together to focus on issues such as protecting jobs and supporting our NHS.

Dr Hudson [V]: As the MP for a border region, I am acutely aware of the importance of our great Union, physically, economically and historically. I welcome the Government's plans to establish 10 free ports across the United Kingdom—a move that will help to secure thousands of jobs and regenerate communities. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the exciting Cumbria free port multi-centre proposal, involving Carlisle airport, Barrow and Workington, with its specific strengths in Union connectivity and clean energy, would help to propel our region's economic recovery and play a key role in the Government's levelling-up agenda by attracting investment and jobs to our region?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Carlisle, Barrow and Workington working together can ensure not just that Cumbria and the north-west of England benefits, but that the borders region as a whole benefits. The support that this Government have given to the borderlands growth deal is an example of the way in which the interrelations between Carlisle, Dumfries, Hawick and other significant parts of this United Kingdom mean that we are stronger together.

Dunlop Review: Publication

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): What his timescale is for publication of the Dunlop review into UK Government Union capability. [912184]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): It is our ambition to publish Lord Dunlop's review of Union capability as soon as possible. Of course, it is vital that we progress the joint review of intergovernmental relations as part of that.

Ian Paisley [V]: I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for that answer. I look forward to the publication of the promotion of Union capabilities. The Chancellor boasts of his Unionist credentials. Indeed, he even boasted once in my local paper that he could sing "The Sash". Today he has a chance to protect the Union in his meeting with Maroš Šefčovič. Will he make it clear that the protocol is causing societal and economic damage to the Union, and will he press on with the alternative arrangements that he previously supported and was signed up to?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is right; I do have a formidable singing repertoire. I can also sing "The Fields of Athenry" and "Flower of Scotland", not to mention "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot", although the last of those songs was perhaps sung with a little less fervour last Saturday than is normally the case. I am a convinced Unionist. I do believe in the strength of the United Kingdom—all of us working together. I look forward to working with him and all representatives from Northern Ireland to ensure that our United Kingdom can flourish in the future.

Touring Musicians: Reciprocal Visa-free Travel

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What offer his Department (a) made to and (b) received from the EU on reciprocal visa-free travel for touring musicians during negotiations on the future relationship with the EU. [912186]

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): What offer his Department (a) made to and (b) received from the EU on reciprocal visa-free travel for touring musicians during negotiations on the future relationship with the EU. [912188]

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): What offer his Department (a) made to and (b) received from the EU on reciprocal visa-free travel for touring musicians during negotiations on the future relationship with the EU. [912196]

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): The Government proposed to the EU that musicians and their technical staff be added to the list of permitted activities for short-term business visitors in the "entry and temporary stay" chapter of the trade and co-operation agreement. That would have allowed musicians and their staff to travel and perform in the EU more easily without needing work permits. The proposals were developed following consultation with the EU's creative industries, but were rejected by the EU.

Alison Thewliss [V]: The UK's music industry is worth £5.8 billion annually and supports 200,000 jobs, so for a Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Minister to suggest recently that a touring visa was not compatible with Brexit goals has caused huge anger and frustration to

many of my constituents who work in the sector and are seeing no benefits of Brexit, only additional costs and red tape. What is the Minister doing to secure reciprocal visa-free travel for those in our creative industries whose careers and jobs depend on it?

Penny Mordaunt: We continue to work with the EU Commission and member states to ensure that we can have the kind of opportunities that the hon. Lady describes. In the meantime, we do want to support the sector, which is why the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has set up the £1.57 billion cultural recovery fund, which is currently supporting 75,000 jobs.

Angela Crawley [V]: Radiohead have called this Government "spineless". Whether it is Elton John, Ronan Keating or Brian Cox, there is a continuing all-star line-up of some of our biggest exports who are emphasising the importance of touring for musicians at all stages of their careers. How does the Minister feel about the prospect of major acts deciding that they need base themselves abroad because our parochial laws do not allow the movement needed to compete on the global stage?

Penny Mordaunt: It is not about our parochial laws. During the negotiations, the EU tabled text regarding paid activities that can be conducted without a visa. Those proposals would not have addressed our arts sector's concerns; they did not deal with work permits at all and would not have allowed support staff to tour with artists. The only way we are going to get movement on this issue is to get the EU to agree to our very reasonable proposals. I urge everyone, whether they are politicians or from the cultural sector, to work with us to persuade our counterparts of our common-sense approach.

John Nicolson [V]: Brexit chaos is not just impacting bands and orchestras in the music industry. Given prohibitive new Brexit visa costs, they will need to begin hiring crew and equipment from European suppliers. What hope does the Minister offer those who face losing work because of Brexit?

Penny Mordaunt: We are, through DCMS, providing support to the sector. We want to get these issues resolved, but in the meantime we want to do all we can to support businesses and artists, whether they have been impacted because of travel restrictions or the pandemic. That is why DCMS has set up a new forum to work with the sector, to listen to its needs and to act on them, and obviously the Scottish Government are part of that.

Democratic Inclusion

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve democratic inclusion throughout society. [912187]

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve democratic inclusion throughout society. [912213]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): This Government are committed to enhancing inclusivity in our democracy. We provide funding to a number of initiatives and organisations to encourage younger people, including the National Citizen Service, the UK Youth Parliament,

and the British Council. Online registration makes it easier than ever to register to vote. We are also leading a programme of work to ensure that our elections are more accessible for people living with disabilities.

Mr Sharma [V]: More than 2 million people in the UK have sight loss, and a recent RNIB report found that less than half of blind and partially sighted people are satisfied with their experience of voting. When will the Government introduce the RNIB recommendations?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. We should do everything we can to ensure that people living with disabilities, including those with visual impairment, can be fully included in the democratic process, and we will be coming back shortly with thoughts about the RNIB's helpful proposals.

Navendu Mishra [V]: Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people already experience low levels of democratic engagement, and racism, hostility and discrimination. With many lacking ID, the Government's voter ID plans are set to systematically exclude GRT people. Instead of working to break down barriers and improve accessibility, why are Ministers putting their energy into creating barriers to voting for the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people?

Michael Gove: We do not want to create any barriers to anyone voting. We take seriously our responsibilities to ensure that all groups within society, including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people, have full access to all of their democratic rights.

Trade: Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support hauliers operating between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. [912191]

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): What discussions he has had with his EU counterparts on potential derogations and flexibilities in the implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol. [912223]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): Following my conversation with Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič last week, we have continued to work intensively to find solutions to outstanding issues that have to be addressed through the Joint Committee. I have taken forward our continued engagement in that constructive spirit, and I look forward to speaking to Vice-President Šefčovič later today.

Ruth Jones [V]: The Minister will know that Manufacturing Northern Ireland has warned that the biggest challenge facing the Northern Ireland protocol is the lack of business preparedness in Great Britain. This is important for businesses on both sides of the Irish sea, and of course for hauliers in Wales and across the United Kingdom. Why has his Prime Minister—the Prime Minister for the Union—spent a year telling us that there will be no checks between Great Britain and Northern Ireland when we can all see that that is simply not the case?

Michael Gove: The protocol that was negotiated as part of the withdrawal agreement is there to ensure unfettered access for goods from Northern Ireland to Great Britain, but it also ensures that we can play our part generously in supporting the maintenance of the EU single market by making sure that there are processes. Those processes should be as light-touch as possible, and that is the aim of the conversations I am having with Vice-President Šefčovič and others.

Stephen Farry [V]: The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will be very conscious of the tensions that are building in Northern Ireland and the need for some sort of creative solution. Does he recognise that the absence of a sanitary and phytosanitary or veterinary agreement with the EU makes the scale of the problems faced across the Irish sea much bigger than it needs to be? As such, will the Government consider going to the European Union to try to negotiate such an agreement over the coming months? That would go a long way to defusing many of the tensions and problems currently being faced.

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is right: there are a number of different ways in which these problems can be more effectively resolved. Thoughtful contributions from the Alliance party and others are very welcome. We want to look at a range of pragmatic solutions, and I am grateful to him and his colleagues for putting forward a potential way forward in a constructive spirit. There is no single right way forward, but, as I say, I am grateful to him and his colleagues for their constructive approach.

Government Procurement Policy

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of Government procurement policy. [912194]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez): The end of the transition period provides an historic opportunity to overhaul our dated public procurement regime. We undertook an extensive programme of stakeholder engagement to identify where improvements could be made, and the recently published Green Paper sets out those long-planned proposals. The changes put value for money and transparency at the heart of the new approach and will cut red tape and unleash wider social benefits from public money spent on procurement.

Kate Osborne [V]: Private providers of public services are excluded from freedom of information requests, which means that, for example, Serco does not have to reveal the 29 different businesses to which it has outsourced contracts. Does the Minister support the expansion of the Freedom of Information Act to the private providers of public services, or does she think that it is okay that that information should be kept hidden from the public eye?

Julia Lopez: Serco is an approved supplier on the Crown Commercial Service contract centre framework and gained a place on that through fair and open competition, but I accept what the hon. Lady says about freedom of information requests and I am happy to look into that further for her.

Civil Service Apprenticeships

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the quality of civil service apprenticeships. [912197]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez): The civil service will launch its new apprenticeship strategy next year. The first phase will have delivered 30,000 apprenticeships by next April, but going forward I want to focus not just on numbers, but on the quality of training on offer, so that Departments get much better at growing their own talent and plugging skills gaps. To that end, we recently published the curriculum and campus for Government skills, with the goal of setting the highest standard in vocational training for all civil servants, including apprentices.

Saqib Bhatti [V]: As it is National Apprenticeship Week, will she please explain to the House what is being done to make the civil service apprenticeship scheme accessible to all, including my constituents in Meriden, who she will find are some of the most talented and hard-working in the whole country?

Julia Lopez: I commend my hon. Friend on his promotion of his constituents. I have spoken previously about our ambitions to move more and more civil service roles, including apprenticeships, out of London and to the regions. That programme is moving apace, but we have already created 1,911 apprenticeships in the west midlands over the past five years. I encourage the good people of Meriden to apply for some of the live vacancies that are on offer right now. We have also got a new relationship with the Birmingham local enterprise partnership that works with schools and colleges across the west midlands to help talented, dynamic people to understand just what an exciting and fulfilling career they could have in the civil service.

Regional Economic Growth: Covid-19

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the Government's programme on regional economic growth after the covid-19 outbreak. [912199]

The Minister without Portfolio (Amanda Milling) [V]: This Government are committed to boosting prospects for all communities, so that everybody gets the same access to opportunities in life. During the covid-19 pandemic, the Government have protected more than 37,000 jobs in Wolverhampton alone through the coronavirus job retention scheme. The spending review also announced longer-term investments to help level up the UK, including £5 billion to support UK gigabit broadband roll-out and £4.2 billion for intra-city transport settlements.

Stuart Anderson [V]: There is no one championing economic recovery more in the west midlands than Andy Street, and it is a pleasure to work with him in Wolverhampton. Will my right hon. Friend provide the great residents of Wolverhampton with an update on the potential move by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to our great city, and will the Department seriously consider looking at the possibility of the i9 as an office location to start with?

Amanda Milling: I thank my hon. Friend for his championing of Wolverhampton, alongside Andy Street's for the west midlands. With Cannock Chase being not that far from Wolverhampton, I can understand his enthusiasm for that great becoming home for the MHCLG. Our Places for Growth programme is working with

Departments to finalise relocation plans, as we work to ensure that our geographical locations cover as representative a distribution across the UK as possible, including the west midlands, and further details will be provided shortly.

Topical Questions

[912234] **Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The nature of our new relationship with the EU outside the single market means that there are practical and procedural changes to which businesses and citizens must adjust. I can announce today that the Government are launching a £20 million SME Brexit support fund to help small businesses adjust to new customs rules of origin and VAT rules when trading with the EU.

Rachael Maskell [V]: The institutional framework within the UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement provides the UK with an opportunity to rebuild its relationship with the EU, including through a civil society forum. Can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster say what progress has been made on establishing the civil society forum and when he expects it to meet? Will he commit today to a significant majority of participants coming from charities, social enterprises and trade unions, in the light of the central role they play in our society?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady is right that the civil society forum is one of a number of ways in which the UK and the EU can work together in the interests of all. She makes a very important point about the importance of involving not just the third sector but trade union participants in that work, which gives me an opportunity to thank the millions of trade unionists across the country who have contributed so much to our response to the pandemic.

[912239] **James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con):** I know that questions on the European Union have been done to death this morning, but they are important, not least to my constituents. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that the glitches we are currently seeing are nothing more than teething problems and that the European Union can be convinced to honour all protocols to ensure seamless free trade?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is absolutely right. There are some specific issues that relate to our departure from the European Union that can be resolved in the next few weeks and months, as we adjust to a new situation, and they are a consequence of change. There are other aspects of our relationship that are a new normal, and the £20 million we have announced today is a way of ensuring that small and medium-sized enterprises can be fully equipped for those challenges and also for all the opportunities that our departure from the EU brings.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Earlier this week, the Public Accounts Committee revealed that the Government's secretive VIP procurement fast lane had dished out contracts worth £1.7 billion, yet on 18 November, the Paymaster General claimed in the House that there

was “no such thing” as a high priority lane. Given the scale of public money, concerns from the National Audit Office and apparent confusion at the Cabinet Office, when will the Government publish the names of businesses awarded contracts through this fast lane and, crucially, how they got on it?

Michael Gove: The Cabinet Office and, indeed, the whole of Government moved as quickly as we could to ensure that those on the frontline received the equipment that they needed. Indeed, the hon. Lady was one of a number of Members of Parliament who wrote to me outlining firms that could play a role in this. Every single firm that was recommended to either the Cabinet Office or the Department of Health and Social Care went through a rigorous policy to ensure that they were capable of providing the equipment required. As a result of going through that rigorous policy, we were able to ensure that those on the frontline got the equipment that they needed.

Rachel Reeves: Everybody understands the need for speed in a pandemic, but so many contracts delivered personal protective equipment that could not even be used by those on the frontline, and the National Audit Office has said that taxpayers paid over the odds. Those who are able to get on this VIP fast lane are 10 times more likely to be awarded a contract, leading to PestFix and the Health Secretary’s pub landlord getting contracts. If it is honestly about what you know rather than who you know, can I ask again when the Government will publish details of who was on the VIP fast lane and how they got there?

Michael Gove: The first thing to say is that, as the hon. Lady knows, more than 99% of the goods that were supplied were capable of being used in the NHS and, as she also knows, the National Audit Office reference to paying “over the odds” reflected the fact that, in a global pandemic, when demand was dramatically outstripping supply, prices rose for every nation—every developed nation. That is one of the reasons why the Government asked Lord Deighton to ensure that we could have domestic PPE capacity, and his amazing work has contributed to making sure that our economy overall has become more resilient. Of course it is the case that, whether or not a recommendation was made for a contract from a Member of Parliament such as the hon. Lady or anyone else, every contract had to go through the same appropriate process of due diligence, and it is of course the case that every contract will be published and is being published by the Government so that there can be appropriate scrutiny of value for money.

[912240] **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: Local elections are going to play an important part in this country’s democracy. At the end of play, after the polls have closed, there are the counts, which involve staff from the council, observers and candidates moving around indoors for hours at a time. How is the Department going to ensure that people fulfilling these roles will be kept safe from infection?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend raises a very important point, and my hon. Friend the Minister for the Constitution and Devolution has been working with local authorities,

returning officers and others to ensure that we can have counting carried out in a safe way. That will mean the results of elections will be a little bit later than we might normally have expected, but it is more important to be safe than sorry in these circumstances.

[912235] **Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kempdown) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Postal votes in this forthcoming election will be more important than ever, as elderly and vulnerable people, even when vaccinated, might still be at risk of getting mildly ill from the virus. I understand the difficulty of an only postal vote ballot, but will the Minister consider directing local authorities to provide a postal vote application form with every polling card and ensure that every local authority has a freepost address for postal vote applications to be sent back to, so that people have the choice on how to vote at no cost to themselves?

Michael Gove: I welcome the constructive approach taken, as ever, by the hon. Member, and we will look at his proposals. It is already the case that we are revising the way in which proxy voting can work in order to help those who may be suffering as a result of the pandemic, but I will look at the proposals that he has put forward, which do seem to be in the spirit of greater democratic inclusion and engagement.

[912241] **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con) [V]: As previous Members have said, these elections on 6 May are likely to see more postal and more proxy voting. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that all measures will be put in place to prevent voter fraud, given the likelihood of more postal and proxy voting?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. We want to promote democratic inclusivity, but we also want to protect the integrity of the voting system. It is important, when we have elections being carried out in the circumstances that we will face this May, that we make sure that both requirements are met. Again, my hon. Friend the Minister for the Constitution and Devolution is working with local authorities to ensure just that.

[912236] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: Recent polling commissioned by Scope has found that a quarter of disabled people are concerned that they will be unable to access a vaccination centre and a third of disabled people are concerned about catching covid at a vaccination centre. What action are the Government taking to ensure that the vaccine roll-out is fully accessible and safe for disabled people, and how will the Government ensure that no disabled person waiting for their vaccine is left behind?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes an important point. Our NHS has been working to ensure that our vaccination centres are safe and accessible, and the Government have overall been seeking to communicate to every group the importance of securing a vaccination as early as possible. We will continue to work with fantastic organisations such as Scope to ensure that the needs of everyone living with a disability are effectively met.

[912243] **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): Last year, the people of Greater Manchester had the opportunity to vote for Laura Evans as the Conservative candidate

for the mayoral position taken away from them. Will my right hon. Friend do all he can this year to ensure that people across the United Kingdom have the opportunity to vote for their chosen candidates and to engage in full and normal campaign activities?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Without taking anything away from the current Mayor of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, I would have to say that the Conservative candidate would be even better in that important role and, I think, more accurately represent the changing complexion of the north-west, where, thanks to effective constituency champions such as my hon. Friend, people are recognising that Conservative representation in our great cities is the best way of getting Britain moving.

Mr Speaker: I think Bolton is still a town!

[912237] **Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP) [V]: Since December, Argyll and Bute's shellfish exporters have been, in their words, haemorrhaging money. Last week, one small company even paid €1,400 to taxi prawns from Boulogne to Brittany to prevent losing a high-value customer permanently. This cannot be dismissed as teething problems—the industry is being destroyed. When will we see a long-term plan to help all seafood exporters withstand the impossible trading conditions they find themselves in?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. His Scottish nationalist party colleague, Fiona Hyslop, who is the Minister in the Scottish Government, is working with the UK Government to ensure that we do everything we can to support the seafood sector across Scotland and, indeed, across the United Kingdom. But I cannot help but observe that if the Scottish nationalist party had its way, we would be back in the common fisheries policy and we would not be able to take control of our waters in the way that we want to.

[912238] **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: Scottish electoral officials believe that upwards of 2 million people could use postal votes in the Holyrood elections in May, meaning 2 million extra absentee voter registrations—nearly four times the normal number. The Electoral Commission believes that 3% to 5% of those votes could be spoiled by voters incorrectly filling out forms, which could invalidate up to 135,000 votes. With a similar trend expected across the UK, what steps are the Government taking to address that concern?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for drawing wider attention to this issue. It is one that the Electoral Commission and the Minister for the Constitution and Devolution are taking seriously in order to ensure the integrity of voting this May.

[912248] **Paul Girvan** (South Antrim) (DUP) [V]: Pet owners who have always travelled to GB from Northern Ireland—many do it several times a year—face extreme expenditure on vet bills and additional paperwork. It affects not just those travelling from Northern Ireland

but those from England, Scotland and Wales, as we are a closely connected nation with family members throughout the United Kingdom. Our veterinary standards match or exceed those in the EU. What measures are the Minister and his Government taking to address this injustice within our great nation by Europe and the Northern Ireland protocol?

Michael Gove: The hon. Member makes an important point. It is vital we ensure that we can have travel for citizens across the common travel area with their pets, and we have been working with the European Union and indeed the Irish Government to ensure that that continues. I hope to be able to update the House on progress in the coming days.

[912246] **Ruth Edwards** (Rushcliffe) (Con): [V] I thank my right hon. Friend for his tireless work to ensure free trade flows post Brexit. Will he join me in welcoming a fantastic proposal to boost trade? It is for a free port in the east midlands that covers key sites in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire and will create 60,000 new jobs in the region.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an impressive pitch for the east midlands, which we know is the commercial heart of the United Kingdom and so a very appropriate location for a free port. The ultimate decision of course rests with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but I am sure he will pay close attention to the case that my hon. Friend and her colleagues make.

[912252] **Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab) [V]: The right hon. Gentleman will agree that the contaminated blood scandal is a human tragedy. It has resulted in more than 3,000 deaths to date, and an astonishing 200 victims have died since the inquiry began. Justice has been denied and many individuals have not received any form of compensation. When can Sean Cavens, a constituent of mine, and the other victims expect the justice that they deserve?

Michael Gove: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the case of not just his constituent but all those who were affected by this issue. He has been a very effective campaigner on behalf of the victims, and a statement will be made in the House shortly on the Government's response. Again, I thank him and other colleagues who have been so effective in making sure that we do not forget the victims of this affair.

Mr Speaker: Last but certainly not least, I call Theresa Villiers.

[912247] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The arrogance and intransigence expressed in Commissioner Šeřčovič's letter to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has caused many of us to conclude that the EU's professed concern for Northern Ireland was only ever a disguise for its cynical negotiating objectives. Will my right hon. Friend take a tough approach with the EU on fixing the immediate problems of the protocol, but also develop a replacement so that we can remove it altogether in future?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend accurately reflects the sentiments and feelings of many in the House and beyond. It is vital that we work constructively to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland recognise that the United Kingdom Government will stand up in every forum and in every way for their rights as integral members of this great nation.

Mr Speaker: I am suspending the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business to be made.

10.31 am

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

10.37 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 22 February will include:

MONDAY 22 FEBRUARY—General debate on covid-19.

TUESDAY 23 FEBRUARY—Opposition day (17th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 24 FEBRUARY—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Fire Safety Bill, followed by consideration of Lords message to the Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Telecommunications Infrastructure (Leasehold Property) Bill.

THURSDAY 25 FEBRUARY—General debate on the proposal for a national education route map for schools and colleges in response to the covid-19 outbreak, followed by general debate on Welsh affairs. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 26 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 1 March will include:

MONDAY 1 MARCH—Motion to approve the draft Electricity Supplier Payments (Amendment) Regulations 2021, followed by a motion to approve the draft International Waste Shipments (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2021, followed by a motion to approve the draft Electronic Commerce Directive (Education, Adoption and Children) (Amendment etc.) Regulations 2021, followed by a motion to approve the draft Automatic Enrolment (Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band) Order 2021, followed by a motion to approve the draft Major Sporting Events (Income Tax Exemption) Regulations 2021.

TUESDAY 2 MARCH—Motion to approve the draft Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 and the draft Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions And Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, followed by a general debate on covid-19 and the cultural and entertainment sectors.

WEDNESDAY 3 MARCH—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his Budget statement.

THURSDAY 4 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget debate.

FRIDAY 5 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

Right hon. and hon. Members may also wish to know that, subject to the progress of business, the House will rise for the Easter recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 25 March and return on Tuesday 13 April.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the business and for the recess dates, which I think I had not known previously. He did not mention Westminster Hall and the important debates listed there. I know the

Chair of the Petitions Committee has quite a few petitions, and we will later hear the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee say that he too has a number of debates. I pay tribute to Matthew Hamlyn and his team for saying to the Procedure Committee that they are ready to go as soon as the Leader of the House brings forward the motion, so may we have a motion on 22 February to enable the House to return to Westminster Hall on 8 March? This is the only way for the House to return to Westminster Hall safely. It is quite interesting that we have a Government stuffed full of journalists, yet they want to gag Members of Parliament and our constituents.

If the Leader of the House cannot do that, will he please find time for the Petitions Committee debates, including one arising from a petition signed by over 100,000 of our constituents, about Indian farmers, whose families have taken part in a peaceful and dignified protest to protect their livelihoods? Satyagraha is the Gandhian peaceful protest that is in the Indian DNA, but we have seen scenes of terrible violence against those who are protecting their livelihoods. I have had no response to my letter to the Foreign Secretary yet.

Last week, I raised figures showing that three quarters of applications for the £500 test and trace support payment have been rejected, and it is not clear why. On Tuesday, a report that was to go to the Department of Health and Social Care entered the public domain; it suggested that areas with stubbornly high rates of covid had more test and trace support payments rejected than were successful. It also cited factors including socioeconomic deprivation and multigenerational occupation—structural reasons why areas of enduring high transmission persist. Those areas also have higher proportions of black, Asian and minority ethnic and young people. I know the Government prefer to spend £1.9 billion on their friends with links to the Conservative party—oh, there goes another one: the Health Secretary gave a £14.4 million contract to his friend yesterday—but please will the Leader of the House raise the point in Cabinet that when people are asked to self-isolate, they should be given the support as of right?

The Equalities Minister was wrong when she said there is no evidence to suggest structural or institutional racism. That contradicts the report in *The Lancet* on 12 November. She said yesterday that her next report will be published in two weeks' time—that is still late—but could we have a statement telling us what recommendations in the first report were implemented, and a statement on the second report as well?

Hon. Members will know that this is the year of the ox and cow. An unelected body set up by the Secretary of State, the Trade and Agriculture Commission, said it would produce its report in six months. It started on 28 July and six months takes us to 28 January, so that report is late as well. When can we have that report published, and could we have a statement in the House? The Government can add fish to the Trade and Agricultural Commission report, too; that would be very helpful.

My constituent Andy Brown, a support officer for the Black Country Multiple Sclerosis Society, has said he is alarmed that benefits payments are to be made to bank accounts, rather than to Post Office accounts. Age UK says that 4 million over-65s have never used the internet. May we have a statement on the evidence behind that policy? The Government say they want to

protect the high street, but they are actually stopping people going to the high street and using their post offices.

I thank you, Mr Speaker, and the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) for the urgent question on Yemen, but there was no update on Luke Symons. Richard and Gabriella are waiting for Nazanin, and Sherry, Elika and Arriane are waiting for Anoosheh, both of whom who are held in Iran. The UK has the presidency of the United Nations Security Council this month, and President Biden has issued a raft of sanctions against Burma as a result of the coup. Will the Leader of the House ensure that we use the presidency properly to ensure that a Government democratically elected in what the Carter Center said were free and fair elections is restored in a proper way?

It is the International Day of Women and Girls in Science, and we pay tribute to all those women and girls who take science subjects. Mr Speaker, I think your daughter is a science teacher. We thank them all for their hard work and remember them today. Finally, I wish everyone a happy lunar and Chinese new year tomorrow.

Mr Rees-Mogg: As an old Hong Kong hand, let me say gong hei fat choy, Mr Speaker. I hope that everybody has a very happy Chinese new year. Today is indeed the International Day of Women and Girls in Science, a day worth noting, and it is also the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, a day to which the right hon. Lady and I will attach great importance.

As regards the British holding of the UN Security Council chairmanship, yes, of course the British Government will push for their belief in human rights, in good order and in the better coming together of the global community. That is what we are always pushing for, and our holding the chairmanship of the G7 as well as that of the UN Security Council this month is very important.

I will take up, as always, the point that the right hon. Lady makes about Luke Symons, to ensure that the Foreign Office is, once again, reminded of its responsibilities to UK nationals overseas, and indeed to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. This is a matter of great importance to the country, and the right hon. Lady is right to raise it weekly.

Let me go back to the beginning of the right hon. Lady's questions and the point about Westminster Hall. She must remember that she was keen that it should be closed, and in bringing forward that motion I was acting only in response to representations from across the House that it was felt necessary that it should be closed. I was probably the most reluctant person to close it, because I believe in the importance of scrutiny. It has to be borne in mind that to bring it back would require extra people on the estate. I would certainly think that was reasonable, because I think it is important that we have democratic scrutiny, but those who asked for Westminster Hall to be closed must make it clear that they think it is right that more people should come back on to the estate. If that is the clear message that I get, of course I will do everything I can to facilitate its return.

Valerie Vaz: Hybrid.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The right hon. Lady heckles with "Hybrid", but even hybrid requires extra people to come on to the estate.

Valerie Vaz: Where is the evidence?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This has been checked, and between four and 10 additional people will be required to come on to the estate on a daily basis with the reopening of a hybrid Westminster Hall. That is the point. That may not be a very large number, but the advice from the Government is currently that people should not be coming in if they do not have to do so. The right hon. Lady asked for Westminster Hall to be closed and it was, because of people coming on to the estate, and she really cannot have it both ways. I am certainly in favour of scrutiny; I think it is good for the Government. If representations are made that this increase in numbers is proportionate, I am more than willing to bring forward the relevant motions, but it needs to be clear that people have accepted that.

The right hon. Lady mentions the payment of £500 to people through Test and Trace. It is obviously important that benefits are paid properly and efficiently to people who are entitled to them. The Department for Work and Pensions has done particularly well in ensuring that the welfare system has held up during this very difficult time, with a very large increase in the number of people requiring universal credit and requiring general support—it has been an achievement. Indeed, one of the reasons this has been so little talked about is because of how well the system has worked, but if there are any specific problems that the right hon. Lady is aware of and she raises them with me, I will take them up with Ministers.

On that subject, I note that the right hon. Lady has written to me about a response from an official rather than a Minister. Ministers should respond to Members of Parliament, as long as Members of Parliament themselves write; there is a slight tendency, which I do not think applies to the right hon. Lady, of Members getting their assistants to write to Ministers. Such correspondence is not entitled to a ministerial letter and it is not in the normal courtesy to ask assistants to write to Ministers. But the right hon. Lady is entitled to a ministerial response and I will try to ensure that she gets one as soon as is practicable.

As regards my hon. Friend the Minister for Equalities, it is hard to think of a more forthright or sensible Minister of the Crown at the moment. She does an absolutely fantastic job and I am sure she will report to the House. She has a balanced, sensible and wise view, and is deserving of full support.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con) [V]: Tribute needs to be paid to you, Mr Speaker, the House Service and the Leader of the House for making sure that Parliament has continued to function throughout the pandemic. The discussion that has just happened about Westminster Hall is critical to Back-Bench Members of Parliament. The Grand Committee Room is simply not fit for purpose at this time—there is insufficient airflow, too many staff would be required to be on the palace estate and it is not equipped for hybrid proceedings. None the less, there are rooms in the palace that are ready to do that. Will my right hon. Friend to reflect on that and bring forward a motion that will allow for Westminster Hall-type debates to take place in the Boothroyd Room, in Committee Room 10, or possibly even in unused time in the Chamber?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her question. I am certainly happy to look at bringing back Westminster Hall, if that is what the House wishes.

We have sought to take a balanced approach throughout the pandemic, and have made every effort to ensure that proceedings are in line with Public Health England guidance and safe for members of staff. My right hon. Friend knows well that I brought forward the motion to suspend Westminster Hall in the light of the rising covid-19 case numbers and following representations from across the House. I was perhaps the least supportive of reducing scrutiny, but brought forward those motions on a cross-party basis.

I will reiterate what I said to the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz): to bring back Westminster Hall physically or in a hybrid fashion will require some additional people on the estate. We therefore need to be satisfied that there is a consensus that it is safe and right for the House to take that step. In my view, that is perhaps a decision most sensibly taken once we have heard from the Prime Minister about the road map out of lockdown when we return from recess.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for setting out her view, and I am glad that she does think that it is proportionate to have a small number of extra people on the estate for hybrid proceedings. I have noted that, and if others make similar representations they will find that this is a door that can easily be pushed open.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP) [V]: I echo the comments of the shadow Leader of the House and of the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), the esteemed Chair of the Procedure Committee, in calling for action to be taken in terms of Westminster Hall-style debates. May we have an assurance from the Leader of the House that, when an appropriate alternative to physically sitting in Westminster Hall is presented to him, he will immediately act to produce a motion to resume in some shape or form, following one of the alternatives that have been suggested?

We are almost a year on since we went into the first lockdown. Over that period, many support schemes have been announced by the Government that have been very welcome and needed by so many, but we still see millions excluded by this Government. Will the Leader of the House bring forward a debate or statement in Government time to outline exactly why this Government feel that these people are unworthy of support from them, especially with the Budget coming up?

Recently, my constituent Deborah Kayembe was named as Edinburgh University's next rector. Deborah is an esteemed human rights lawyer and also a refugee, and shows us the benefits that refugees can bring to each of our communities. In the light of the Migration Advisory Committee's saying that it is time to review the Government's anti-family-migration rules, may we have a debate in Government time to consider the hugely positive contribution that refugees make to each of our nations and to give hope that, perhaps, some of the measures such as the minimum income requirement could be reviewed?

Like the shadow Leader of the House, I welcome the fact that today is International Day of Women and Girls in Science. With Midlothian a centre of scientific excellence, does the Leader of the House agree that promoting careers in science for women benefits us all,

and will he ensure that time is allowed by the Government for us to celebrate that? I end by joining the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House in wishing all a very happy Chinese new year.

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I begin on a point of very strong agreement with the hon. Gentleman and thank him for the point that he made about encouraging women and girls to have careers in science? That is a thoroughly good thing, but we need more scientists generally for our future prosperity. Men and women will need to go into science, and we have seen the advantage of science with the roll-out of the vaccine programme.

I also very much agree with the hon. Gentleman on the great contribution made to British society by refugees. This country has long been open to refugees, going back many hundreds of years. That has helped to build and strengthen our nation, and will continue to do so in future. I cannot promise him debates in Government time on either question, but I confess that it is nice to find myself in agreement with a member of the SNP; that is a rare treat.

We are also broadly in agreement on the question of Westminster Hall. I take it from what the hon. Gentleman said that he, too, thinks it is proportionate to have extra members of staff coming on to the estate to reopen it in a hybrid fashion. If it is clear that that is the consensus of the House, I am more than willing to bring forward the necessary motion.

I think everyone has sympathy for those of our constituents who have not been supported. We have all been in correspondence with people who have difficult circumstances. The Government have done as much as they reasonably can. The support offered is very large—£280 billion for the country at large—and it covers 95% of people who receive the majority of their income from self-employment. I accept that it does not cover everybody. The difficulty is ensuring a scheme that is fair to taxpayers as well as fair to individuals, and I think my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has got the balance right.

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con) [V]: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, with children returning to their classrooms next month, MPs should lead by example and return to the Commons Chamber?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend very much appeals to my sympathies in this matter and makes an excellent point. We keep the approach in Parliament under review, and over the year we have made adjustments depending on the state of the pandemic. It is clear that the House works better when it is physically present. Scrutiny is better and debate is more thorough. The ability to hold the Government to account and seek redress of grievance is enhanced by physical presence. I hope we can get back as soon as possible and I share my hon. Friend's view that we are here to lead by example, and to show the rest of the country when it is safe to do things. Our doing so would be a very good example.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: Gong hei fat choy, Mr Speaker. Last week, when I asked the Leader of the House for protected time for debates aired on alternative days, he suggested—rather offhandedly, I am afraid—that I wanted things both ways. What the Backbench Business Committee actually wants on behalf of Back Benchers

on both sides of the House is the number of days for Backbench debates as stipulated in Standing Orders, and that does not include general debates on subjects determined by themselves in Government time.

I echo the requests made earlier. The Chairs of the Procedure Committee and the Petitions Committee—the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell)—and I met the Leader of the House last night. The purpose of the meeting was to ascertain what measures were being put in place to open a second Westminster Hall-style debating chamber, so that debate applications from the Petitions Committee and the Backbench Business Committee may be aired using virtual or hybrid participation of Members.

We understand that the technical capacity and space alternative to Westminster Hall exists to facilitate that. All it would seem that we need is for an order to be placed, and an undertaking that as few members of staff as possible be returned to allow that to happen. That is an important facility for Members across the House, and they and their anxious constituents—and particularly the members of the Petitions Committee—want to get these debates heard. For the avoidance of doubt, I reiterate that it need only involve as few members of staff as absolutely necessary in an alternative venue, given current public health conditions.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very encouraged that the hon. Gentleman makes it clear that he does think it is proportionate for a few extra members of staff to come back to facilitate the reopening of scrutiny. As I said earlier, if that is the view of the House and people are clear that that is what they think is appropriate—although I notice that it is extra members of staff, not so much MPs volunteering to come down, which is a certain incongruity, but let us leave that to one side—if that is the consensus of the House, I refer the hon. Gentleman to what I said earlier.

Last week, I said that the hon. Gentleman wanted it both ways. He did, and I gave it to him both ways, as it happens, because we had a motion to give him protected time. In fairness, at the beginning of the Session, before the Backbench Business Committee was established, the Government did make time for Backbench Business debates, and although they do not formally count in terms of the Standing Orders, they certainly are in the spirit of the Standing Orders.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): It is brilliant news that this Conservative Government have confirmed funding for 40 new hospitals across the country, with a further eight new schemes to bid for future funding. Will the Leader of the House provide Government time for a debate on this topic and back my campaign to ensure that Airedale General Hospital in my constituency, which is due for urgent refurbishment works, having originally been constructed from aerated concrete, is listed as one of the final eight projects?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very glad that my hon. Friend supports the Government's policy. The first £3.7 billion of funding for 40 new hospitals has now been confirmed, with a further eight schemes to be invited to bid for future funding, to deliver 48 hospitals—we are building back better and bigger than was promised in our manifesto—by 2030, so we will deliver on the commitment.

The Department of Health and Social Care is aware of the issues surrounding past use of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in construction, including at Airedale General Hospital, and I note that my hon. Friend raised that. The Department is focusing on work on designing the criteria for the further eight new hospitals, which will be communicated to trusts in due course. My hon. Friend has made a plea for his own hospital, and he is right to do so, but I am sure that he may also want to make that plea to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: Tomorrow, Luton's civic mayor, Councillor Maria Lovell, is holding a "wear it red" day to help raise funds for her nominated charities this year, Luton Foodbank and the Luton and Dunstable University Hospital's helipad appeal. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Maria Lovell and all other civic mayors for their hard work and commitment to their democratic, ceremonial and charitable roles?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is an absolute pleasure to do that, and to congratulate Maria Lovell on what she is planning to do to raise money for her preferred charities as the Luton civic mayor. Civic mayors bring a great deal of pleasure to their communities. They have an ability to thank people who work in the voluntary sector, who are unsung heroes across our communities. The hon. Lady is so right to raise this issue, because it is not just civic mayors; it is lords-lieutenant, high sheriffs—all those people who just go round and say thank you. This is a really good bit of our civic society and one we should all take pleasure from.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con) [V]: It has taken the Transport for London Bishopsgate High Court case to force Lib Dem-run Sutton Council to rethink its unpopular road closure schemes. While the announcement that all schemes are to be suspended is a temporary relief for Carshalton and Wallington residents, those who have been fined so far will not get their money back; fines remain in place, and the Lib Dems are determined to find a way to bring back these schemes, despite their own consultation showing huge resident opposition. May we have a debate about residents' voices being heard in local government rather than their concerns being ignored?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. The Lib Dems hate the motorist; we all know that. They are fanatical anti-motorists. I am on the side of the motorist, as are Her Majesty's Government. We support motorists. It is one of the great expressions of freedom; the open road, the ability to go where one wants—admittedly not under covid regulations, but normally, the ability to get in one's car and drive where one wants is a great British freedom and one that we should celebrate and enjoy, and we should not have pettifogging lefties making life difficult for us. I am fully in support of my hon. Friend. I think he should remind us of the failings of the Lib Dems at every opportunity that he possibly can, but the best way to do that is at the ballot box, by electing a Conservative pro-motoring council.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Currently the largest protest on the planet, the peaceful farmers' protest in India has been ongoing for months now.

[*Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhési*]

Given our serious anxieties, more than 100 hon. Members signed a letter to the Prime Minister seeking his intervention. Well over 100,000 constituents—incredibly, from every single one of the 650 UK constituencies—have signed an online petition, including more than 3,000 from my Slough constituency. Given those facts, and given the arrest of journalists, peaceful protesters and human rights activists such as Nodeep Kaur, who, it is alleged, has been tortured and endured sexual assault while in police custody, will the Leader of the House please facilitate a debate on this important matter at the earliest opportunity, just as we debated a petition in this Chamber last week?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman raises something that is a matter of concern across the House and across constituencies. The right to peaceful protest is a fundamental one, along with freedom of speech and internet freedom. India is a very proud democracy and a country with which we have the strongest possible relations. I happen to think that over the next century our relationship with India may well be our most important relationship with any country in the world. As India is our friend, it is only right that we make representations when we think that things are happening that are not in the interests of the reputation of the country of which we are a friend. The Foreign Secretary discussed the farmers' protest with his Indian counterpart in December. The UK Government will continue to follow the farmers' protest closely. Agricultural reform is a domestic policy issue for India. We will continue to champion human rights globally, and having the chairmanship of the UN Security Council this month is a part of that.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend consider calling a debate in Government time to discuss the current situation facing the fish-catching sector? Far from being in a position where we will have an expanded fishing sector in five years' time, there is a real danger of vessels going to the wall now and having no sector left unless urgent financial help is given.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is such a powerful champion for the fishing industry and has been for the whole time she has been a Member of the House of Commons. The Government are focused on supporting our fishing fleet to see how it can thrive now that we are out of the European Union. By regaining control of our waters, the trade and co-operation agreement puts us in a position to rebuild our fishing fleet, and we will see our fishermen benefiting from increased quotas throughout the annual negotiations with the EU and other coastal states, starting with an immediate 15% uplift this year. Throughout the adjustment period, the UK Government will contribute taxpayers' money to our fishing communities and do everything we can to help to rebuild the industry. The Prime Minister has committed £100 million in funding for the fishing industry, with more detail to be announced in due course, and that is in addition to the £23 million that has recently been announced to help with some of the earliest problems that have arisen. The initial difficulties that fishermen have faced are very serious, and they are not taken lightly by the Government. I will certainly pass on my hon. Friend's concerns to the Environment Secretary and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I appreciate the Leader of the House's support for Toad of Toad Hall, the great open road and the desire for everyone to drive, but has he seen the British Lung Foundation's report this morning saying that 6 million elderly people are at risk from air pollution, we are poisoning children and pregnant women, and we are poisoning the atmosphere that all of us breathe? Is it not time that we had an early debate on the need for powerful changes? Let people drive, but let them drive electric cars and let us stop them poisoning people with what comes out of the tailfin of Toad's vehicles.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of air pollution, although he does not mention the great diesel scandal. Diesel was encouraged by the last Labour Government, of whom he was a supporter, and by the European Union, with figures fiddled by European manufacturers to pretend that diesel emissions were less dangerous than in reality they are. To my mind, it is one of the great scandals of modern political history, and it happened when his party was in office.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On 11 July 2019, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), now the Prime Minister, signed a solemn veterans pledge in a national newspaper that promised:

“New legislation to end repeated and vexatious investigations into historical allegations against our servicemen and women—including in Northern Ireland—to be passed before the next General Election.”

Eighteen months and a general election later, not only has this not been passed, but we have never even seen it, because the rumour is that those in the Northern Ireland Office who are responsible for the Bill have not even finished drafting it yet. Our veterans deserve better. So will the Leader of the House liaise today with the Prime Minister and our obviously hesitant Northern Ireland Secretary to finish drafting the Bill and bring it forward, and will he make time available for Second Reading before the Easter recess on 25 March?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is always difficult having a time period set on general elections when we have the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, which was not a fixed-term Parliaments Act. I think it would be reasonable to go by the expected life of the Parliament, rather than simply when, by happenstance, an early election took place. However, the Government have been absolutely clear that they will put an end to vexatious claims against the armed forces and have introduced the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill to help reduce the uncertainty faced by our service personnel and veterans in relation to historical allegations and claims arising from overseas operations. I think that meets the first half of the promise.

The second half of the promise is in relation to Northern Ireland. I can assure my right hon. Friend that the Government will introduce separate legislation to address the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland in the coming months in a way that focuses on reconciliation, delivers for victims and ends the cycle of reinvestigations into the troubles in Northern Ireland, delivering on our commitments to Northern Ireland veterans. My right hon. Friend is right to raise this point. The Government take the issue of veterans closely to their heart. We have

a Veterans Minister who is always on the side of veterans. This is a serious issue, and the commitment is to introduce the legislation in the coming months.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) [V]: Pre-schools, nurseries and childminders in England have been asked by the Government to stay open, but, unlike schools, early years settings have been left on their own with no access to fast and regular asymptomatic testing to protect staff and families. Will the Leader of the House ask his colleagues in the Department for Education to make an urgent statement on what support early years providers, who have so far been working throughout lockdown without access to lateral flow tests, can expect from the Government?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government have made widespread support available to local councils, including £4.6 billion of unring-fenced money that local councils can use to help early childcare settings. Lateral flow testing is being rolled out to an increasing number of areas to allow people to be tested. Indeed, it is even available in the House of Commons for Members, Members' staff and other people who work on the estate, if they need it, so this is happening.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): I had one of those lateral flow tests last week. It was a very pleasant, if tickly, experience.

Melanie Beck, who runs the MyMiltonKeynes business improvement district, was announced as the new chair of the charity MK SNAP last week. I was particularly pleased that last October she was recognised with an MBE for community services during covid. I note that some Opposition Members, who are in fact led by a knight of the realm, recently floated the idea of doing away with the honours system. Perhaps my right hon. Friend would agree with me that doing so would be a regressive step; in particular, it would mean that we would lose the ability officially to recognise the wonderful work of community champions such as Melanie. When shielded residents needed supplies, Melanie contacted her network and offered MyMiltonKeynes resources. She even roped in family members to drive buses and vans to deliver supplies to those in need. This honour is well deserved, and we should be rightly proud of our heritage.

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I begin by congratulating Melanie Beck on being appointed a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire? My hon. Friend is so right that the honours system rewards people up and down the country who go above and beyond their duty, and who ensure that we have a better community life and community spirit. That has been so apparent during the pandemic.

Our honours system is one of the glories of our nation—one of the baubles of our nation—going back to the Order of the Garter, which was founded in 1348 by Edward III, with St George as the champion and patron saint of our nation. We have had that great link with St George since he took over the patronage of England from various other people; Edward the Martyr, Edward the Confessor and St Alphege were considered rather more before George took over with the Garter. Then there are the other orders of chivalry, including

the Knights of the Bath. Henry VIII went through that wonderful ceremony as a baby, pretty much—a three-year-old—when he was installed as a Knight of the Bath and literally did have a bath, before the order was re-founded in 1725 in a different form.

The honours system links us to our history and inspires and encourages people to do great things. It is one of the glories of our country, and should be kept and cherished. But we do bear in mind that whenever we look at a new Labour person and scratch them, they are as red as can be underneath.

Mr Speaker: I don't think we should scratch anybody.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: The Chemical Industries Association has described UK manufacturing businesses paying twice as much for energy as those in other European countries do, as an “ongoing blocker of opportunity”. Can we therefore have a debate in Government time on providing UK industry with a level playing field on energy prices? This is needed to give chemical companies in my constituency certainty to secure future investment, an essential driver to transition to net zero, and ensure low-carbon UK businesses and their goods are able to compete for market share around the world.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman makes the fundamentally important point that energy costs are an essential part of how competitive a nation can be. The Government's energy strategy, with a huge increase in wind energy, will over the longer term ensure that we have both secure energy supplies and ones that are economic. May I point him in the direction of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions? Actually BEIS questions were earlier this week, but if he were to take it up with the BEIS Secretary, I think that would be the right way to go.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con) [V]: The Leader of the House will be aware that the Mayor of London has announced the new taskforce for his commission for diversity in the public realm and, unsurprisingly, it seems to be made up almost entirely of left-wing political activists, campaigners and celebrities, instead of historians and experts. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern about these unelected activists being given the power to interfere with London street names and monuments, and will he consider granting a debate in Government time to discuss how we can defend our great capital city's proud history and heritage?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It seems to me that the Mayor of London has replaced Red Ken as Red Kahn. Who would have thought that we would have a more left-wing leader of London than Ken Livingstone? But now we do, and Red Khan is he. It is quite wrong that these loony left-wing wheezes should be inflicted upon our great metropolis, and I think the Mayor, in his zeal, is potentially treading on the toes of councils anyway. The councils have the right to name the streets by and large, not the Mayor of London, and I do not think he should interfere in things that are not his responsibility. As I was saying on the honours system, we should celebrate and glory in our wonderful history and in the great heroes of our nation going back over centuries.

Mr Speaker: Let us dampen the tone down.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): It has been 19 months since the Government first launched the review into a cruel benefit system that forces those who are terminally ill to prove they have less than six months to live. In that time, Marie Curie and the Motor Neurone Disease Association estimate that as many as 5,800 people may have died waiting for a decision on their benefits. Please can the Leader of the House chase the Department for Work and Pensions and the Treasury to come to the House urgently and make a statement telling us what they are going to do, so that more people do not have to suffer?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this, because it is an important and troubling point. It is difficult in terms of administration because of the lack of certainty about somebody's lifespan, but it is important that somebody nearing the end of his or her life should be treated more generously by the benefit system and not have that as an additional worry as their life draws to a close. I will of course take this up with both my right hon. Friends, as the hon. Lady requests.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is today meeting his opposite number in the European Commission regarding the Northern Ireland protocol. This is a major constitutional issue that affects all Members of this House. Could I press the Leader of the House to ensure that a statement is made at the earliest possible opportunity by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster so that Members of this House can question the decisions and the agreements that are being made?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster was in the House immediately before me and open to questions at that point, but of course that was before the meeting that is taking place. It is of fundamental importance that we ensure the unity of the United Kingdom and that any arrangements that we have with the European Union respect that. No agreement that we could ever possibly make could undermine the unity of the United Kingdom, and that must be clear to our friends in the European Union.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) [V]: My constituents Hayley Orr and Alan Scobie are musicians whose livelihoods are affected by the lack of visa-free access to the EU. Alan's band Skerryvore also helps generate tourism in Scotland. FMX Event Services, also based in my constituency, which provides equipment for major band tours, cannot operate across the EU, which is putting half its business at risk. When will we have a Government statement confirming how many livelihoods and businesses are affected by this Government's pig-headedness, and setting out a solution that allows reciprocal free movement for artists and their back-up operations?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I often find that I am sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman's questions, but I am sorry to say that on this occasion I am not, because the pig-headedness is not that of the United Kingdom or Her Majesty's Government. The EU and member states could match our arrangements tomorrow if they wanted to, and we hope that those in the music industry who have spoken

so passionately about touring in Europe will encourage them to do so. The message that he needs to take is to the European Union. We have made provisions for musicians to travel and for things to be as light-touch as possible, but the EU has not reciprocated. If I may use a musical analogy, it takes two to tango.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con) [V]: I have joined colleagues from both sides of the House and across the east midlands to back the bid for a freeport in the east midlands. The freeport would be the best connected, with air, road and rail connections; would bring international investment to the region; and has the potential to create up to 60,000 skilled new jobs. May we please have parliamentary time to discuss just how fantastic the east midlands freeport bid is, and why it should be the Government's first choice when they create the new wave of freeports in Britain?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Since this subject was last raised in the House, I have become slightly conflicted, because there is a freeport bid coming in from quite near me, in Bristol. However, it would not be right for me to campaign for my own area from the Dispatch Box. Freeports are a fantastic idea, which is why there is so much support for them and why so many Members want them in their constituencies. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his welcome efforts to campaign for a freeport in the east midlands, and I will make sure that his representations are passed on to the Treasury. He really is a great advocate for his constituents, and I hope that they will be able to reap the benefits of a freeport, but then I hope that the economy generally will be able to reap the benefits of many freeports.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab) [V]: We rarely debate the Government's poor treatment of the north, where life expectancy is falling for the first time in a century, but where we have seen the severest cuts to public health service provision of any region. There are now 195 fewer GP surgeries in Yorkshire and we have the slowest declining covid infection rates. Meanwhile, the Government sent half of the north's vaccine supply down south. We know that they cut free school meals for the autumn break, but hunger, poverty, service cuts and covid all march hand in hand. May we therefore have a debate in Government time on their disgraceful health record in the north of England?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Mr Speaker, I will of course bow to your wisdom on this, but I believe the word "balderdash" is parliamentary, and it applies to the hon. Gentleman's question. The Government have stood with the north throughout this pandemic, with over £10 billion in support for local authorities, additional Nightingale capacity and millions of vaccine doses already delivered, and we are putting the region at the centre of our community testing plans, with 300,000 in Liverpool being among the very first to benefit. Looking ahead, we will be building on the £13 billion for transport across the region and £5 billion for the northern powerhouse, with High Speed 2; Northern Powerhouse Rail, our multi-billion pound rail investment; a £4 billion levelling-up fund, building on billions of pounds of towns fund investment; £4.2 billion for the local public transport fund; and four hospitals in construction, or about to start, as part of our 40 hospitals plan. This

Government's record in the north is second to none. We are building back better, and we are building back better in the north first.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con) [V]: The Government have committed unprecedented sums of public money to a generous package of economic support, procurement of vaccines and more to secure our UK covid recovery. Does my right hon. Friend consider that this is the time for the House to receive an update on the costs of the restoration and renewal programme, and debate its affordability to the public purse?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Currently, the Commissions of the two Houses are receiving indications of the costs of the business plan. It is of fundamental importance that what happens to this House has the consent of this House, not a previous House, because Parliament cannot bind its successor, and that the expenditure is proportionate and reasonable. Everybody wants to secure this building and to ensure that it is safe, but we cannot spend billions of pounds on it. That would simply not be proportionate in view of the economic situation of the rest of the country.

Mr Speaker: Let us head up to the Shetlands and Alistair Carmichael.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker—not quite as far as Shetland today; I come to you from Orkney. I ask the Leader of the House whether we can have a debate in Government time on the operation of the UK-US extradition arrangements, which were entered into under a treaty of the Labour Government in 2003. He will have seen press reports about the case of British businessman Mike Lynch, which demonstrate that the treaty is not only open to abuse but is being abused. We need arrangements that are equal in fairness to each side. Many Conservative Members were critical of the treaty in 2003. Can we now start a debate about getting improvements?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The issue that the right hon. Gentleman raises has aroused concern. Any extradition treaty should be proportionate and fair between the two parties and we should always ensure that Her Majesty's subjects are treated fairly in any legal proceedings that may arise in this country or overseas. I was always concerned about the European arrest warrant for those reasons and the right hon. Gentleman is right to raise this important subject.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab) [V]: Given that the Transport Minister has not responded to my urgent letter of 24 January regarding an external assessment of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency homeworking potential, and further to that, given the synchronised pinging of apps this week, resulting in 40 staff from two zones being sent home to self-isolate, and the latest news that an individual's waist measurement is now part of the agency's health and safety homeworking eligibility criteria, will the Leader of the House please facilitate a statement that could clarify all those issues?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This issue has been raised in the House before and answers have been given. The reality is that some people at the DVLA will have to go into

work and that not all its work can be done from home, for example, the issuing of licences and secure printing. As I mentioned the last time the matter was raised, some people occasionally get points on their licences and in this instance, points do not mean prizes, unless being banned from driving is viewed as a prize. That all has to be done securely and confidentially and is therefore very difficult to do from home. As I understand it, the DVLA has taken all the appropriate measures to ensure that it is a covid-secure workplace. However, if the hon. Lady has an outstanding letter to a Minister, I will, as always, try to facilitate a prompt response.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the disastrous failings of Operation Midland and Operation Yewtree, which have been heartbreakingly revealed by Lady Brittan this week? If she is right, and I have no reason to believe that she is not, how on earth have the people responsible for that monumental failure not been relieved of their positions? The only accused person left alive today who is suffering directly as a result of that failure is my former parliamentary colleague and neighbour, Mr Harvey Proctor.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I suppose the question is *quis custodiet ipsos custodes*—who guards the guards themselves? My hon. Friend, in his reference to Operation Midland, raises serious concerns. Like him, I have a particular sympathy for Harvey Proctor, who was most disgracefully treated by the investigation, which had a serious effect on the life he had rebuilt for himself in his career, employment and indeed housing. The treatment of Lady Brittan is shameful. That a grieving widow should be traduced in that way, with the justice of the peace who issued the warrant saying that he was misled in so doing is a matter of the gravest seriousness. I think we all feel enormous sympathy for Lady Brittan and Harvey Proctor because of the way they were both treated. It was a blot on the Metropolitan police's escutcheon.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP) [V]: Projects like the Forest of Memories are working to create a network of sustainable and biodiverse forests across the United Kingdom in memory of those who tragically lost their lives during covid-19, including those staff who served us all on the frontline of this horrific pandemic. May we have a debate on the importance of supporting memorials of remembrance at this critical time in history that understand the need for sustainable places of reflection for the bereaved, for families and for our communities, marking those tragically lost and their invaluable contribution to society?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I congratulate the hon. Lady on the work she is doing on promoting the Forest of Memories. As we go village to village around our country, there are war memorials, almost all of which were obviously put up about 100 years ago following the first world war. We have historically been good at remembering people who have died in particular circumstances. The hon. Lady's suggestion in terms of a forest is a noble cause and, although I cannot promise her a debate in Government time, Mr Speaker is looking remarkably benign at the thought of an Adjournment debate.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con) [V]: As we approach the anniversary of the original covid lockdown—an incredibly significant moment when the world literally changed—can the Leader of the House arrange for a Minister to come to the Chamber to set out plans for an annual national commemoration: a moment when we can come together to remember those who died, those who have given significant service and those who have made incredible sacrifice? In coming together as a country, remembering, learning and looking forward, it would be a real moment of unity for us all.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend, with her characteristic genius, has brought in her question at absolutely the right time, because my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is sitting on the Treasury Bench and will have heard her appeal for a proper memorial for what has happened over the last year. The Prime Minister said on 26 January that

“when we have come through this crisis, we will come together as a nation to remember everyone we lost”.

While the Government’s immediate focus is on protecting the lives and livelihoods of the nation, there is none the less the need to remember those who have lost their lives and to recognise those involved in the unprecedented response.

The Government have begun planning to ensure that an appropriate commemoration can take place in the United Kingdom and will set out details in due course, but I think it is at the stage where good ideas will be extremely welcome. This needs to be a community and national effort, so if people do have good ideas, they should bring them forward.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) [V]: I do not know whether you, Mr Speaker, or the Leader of the House have seen the really moving interview that the Welsh rugby player Alix Popham and his wife Mel gave about the brain injuries that he has suffered from playing rugby—or for that matter, the story of my amazing constituent, Adam Harcombe, who suffered a brain injury when he was attacked in the street. I know that the Government are working on this, because I found out by very secret means—well, a text message from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster—that there has been a cross-departmental ministerial meeting to look at what more the Government can do about brain injury and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is now working on concussion in sport. Will the Leader of the House please ensure that when the Government have something to announce, we have a proper statement and a proper debate in the House of Commons? It is great that we are doing work on this now, but we must ensure that everybody gets the benefit of that.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is right to address this issue, which is being taken very seriously by sporting bodies, who perhaps in the first instance have the best ability to look into these problems. But yes, of course, if

there is a statement to be made, I will do everything I can to ensure, as the ministerial code requires, that it is made to this House first.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I have had my Weetabix this morning, Mr Speaker, and I hope you have had yours. Weetabix is a world-famous breakfast cereal made in Burton Latimer in the Kettering constituency. One debate that has been dividing the nation this week, and is perhaps even more divisive than Brexit has been over the years, is whether having Weetabix with baked beans is an attractive serving suggestion for a healthy meal. We all need a little light relief in these difficult times, so may we have a debate on breakfast cereals and their contribution to a healthy diet, so that we can all arrive at the shared position that, with whatever it is served, Weetabix is a great British breakfast cereal fully worthy of promotion?

Mr Speaker: I have mine just with milk.

Mr Rees-Mogg: As they used to say: “Weetabix unbeatabix!” My personal preference, if I were to eat Weetabix, would not be to have it with baked beans, which I have always found absolutely disgusting—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry if I have upset the makers of baked beans. There was an advertising slogan—which would be thought desperately politically incorrect nowadays, and I hope the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) will forgive me—which was:

“A million housewives every day pick up a tin of beans and say, ‘Beanz meanz Heinz’.”

But when I was a child, this was corrupted to “a million housewives every day pick up a tin of beans and say, ‘Yuck, throw them away’.” I am sorry, but that has always been my view of baked beans. However, Weetabix is absolutely splendid served with hot milk and brown sugar, although for preference, Mr Speaker, you will know what I like for breakfast: it is nanny’s home-made marmalade on toast.

Mr Speaker: I think the good people of Wigan will be offended, because that is where all the baked beans for Europe come from. I can see the factory at Orrell sending letters to the Leader of the House now.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Pension Schemes Act 2021

High Speed Rail (West Midlands – Crewe) Act 2021

Medicines and Medical Devices Act 2021.

I am suspending the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business to be made.

11.36 am

Sitting suspended.

Future of Health and Care

11.40 am

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Mr Speaker, I come to the House today to set out our White Paper on the future of health and care. The past year has been the most challenging in the NHS's proud 72-year history. The health and care system as a whole has risen in the face of great difficulties. Throughout, people have done incredible things and worked in novel and remarkable ways to deliver for patients, and we in this House salute them all—not just the nurse who may have had to care for two, three or four times as many patients as he would in normal times, and not just the surgeon who may have been called to treat patients beyond her normal specialism, but the managers across health and care who have come together in teams, as part of a health family, at local and national level; the public health experts, who have been needed more than ever before; and the local authority staff who have embraced change to deliver for their residents—and from all, a sense of teamwork that has been inspiring to see.

As a citizen, I care deeply for the whole health and care family, the values they stand for and the security they represent. They are there for us at the best of times, and they are there for us at the worst of times. As Health Secretary, I see it as my role sometimes to challenge but most of all to support the health and care family in their defining mission of improving the health of the nation and caring for those most in need.

I come before the House to present a White Paper based firmly on those values, which I believe are values that our whole nation holds dear. The White Paper is built on more than two years of work with the NHS, local councils and the public. At its heart, this White Paper enables greater integration, reduces bureaucracy and supports the way that the NHS and social care work when they work at their best—together. It strengthens accountability to this House and, crucially, it takes the lessons we have learned in this pandemic about how the system can rise to meet huge challenges and frames a legislative basis to support that effort. My job as Health Secretary is to make the system work for those who work in the system—to free up, to empower and to harness the mission-driven capability of team health and care. The goal of this White Paper is to allow that to happen.

Before turning to the core measures, I want to answer two questions that I know have been on people's minds. First, are these changes needed? Even before the pandemic, it was clear that reform was needed to update the law, to improve how the NHS operates and to reduce bureaucracy. Local government and the NHS have told us that they want to work together to improve health outcomes for residents. Clinicians have told us that they want to do more than just treat conditions; they want to address the factors that determine people's health and prevent illness in the first place. All parts of the system told us that they want to embrace modern technology, to innovate, to join up, to share data, to serve people and, ultimately, to be trusted to get on and do all that so that they can improve patient care and save lives. We have listened, and these changes reflect what our health and care family have been asking for, building on the NHS's own long-term plan.

The second question is, why now, as we tackle the biggest public health emergency in modern history? The response to covid-19 has accelerated the pace of collaboration across health and social care, showing what we can do when we work together flexibly, adopting new technology focused on the needs of the patient and setting aside bureaucratic rules. The pandemic has also brought home the importance of preventing ill health in the first place by tackling obesity and taking steps such as fluoridation that will improve the health of the nation. The pandemic has made the changes in this White Paper more, not less, urgent, and it is our role in Parliament to make the legislative changes that are needed. There is no better time than now.

I turn to the measures in detail. The first set of measures promote integration between different parts of the health and care system and put the focus of health funding on the health of the population, not just the health of patients. Health and care have always been part of the same ecosystem. Given an ageing population with more complex needs, that has never been more true, and these proposals will make it easier for clinicians, carers and public health experts to achieve what they already work hard to do: operate seamlessly across health and care, without being split into artificial silos that keep them apart.

The new approach is based on the concept of population health. A statutory integrated care system will be responsible in each part of England for the funding to support the health of their area. They will not just provide for the treatments that are needed, but support people to stay healthy in the first place. In some parts of the country, ICSs are already showing the way, and they will be accountable for outcomes of the health of the population and be held to account by the Care Quality Commission. Our goal is to integrate decision-making at a local level between the NHS and local authorities as much as is practically possible, and ensure decisions about local health can be taken as locally as possible.

Next, we will use legislation to remove bureaucracy that makes sensible decision making harder, freeing up the system to innovate and to embrace technology as a better platform to support staff and patient care. Our proposals preserve the division between funding decisions and provision of care, which has been the cornerstone of efforts to ensure the best value for taxpayers for more than 30 years. However, we are setting out a more joined-up approach built on collaborative relationships, so that more strategic decisions can be taken to shape health and care for decades to come. At its heart, it is about population health, using the collective resources of the local system, the NHS, local authorities, the voluntary sector and others to improve the health of the area.

Finally, the White Paper will ensure a system that is accountable. Ministers have rightly always been accountable to this House for the performance of the NHS, and always will be. Clinical decisions should always be independent, but when the NHS is the public's top domestic priority—over £140 billion of taxpayers' money is spent on it each year—and when the quality of our healthcare matters to every single citizen and every one of our constituents, the NHS must be accountable to Ministers; Ministers accountable to Parliament; and Parliament accountable to the people we all serve. Medical matters are matters for Ministers. The White Paper

[*Matt Hancock*]

provides a statutory basis for unified national leadership of the NHS, merging three bodies that legally oversee the NHS into one as NHS England. NHS England will have clinical and day-to-day operational independence, but the Secretary of State will be empowered to set direction for the NHS and intervene where necessary. This White Paper can give the public confidence that the system will truly work together to respond to their needs.

These legislative measures support reforms already under way in the NHS, and should be seen in the context of those broader reforms. They are by no means the full extent of our ambition for the nation's health. As we continue to tackle this pandemic, we will also bring forward changes in social care, public health, and mental health services. We are committed to the reform of adult social care, and will bring forward proposals this year. The public health interventions outlined in this White Paper sit alongside our proposals to strengthen the public health system, including the creation of the National Institute for Health Protection, and last month we committed in our mental health White Paper to bringing forward legislation to update the Mental Health Act 1983 for the 21st century.

This landmark White Paper builds on what colleagues in health and care have told us, and we will continue that engagement in the weeks ahead, but it builds on more than that: it builds on this party's commitment to the NHS from the very beginning. Eagle-eyed visitors to my office in Victoria Street will have noticed the portrait of Sir Henry Willink, who published from this Dispatch Box in 1944 the White Paper that set out plans for a National Health Service, which was later implemented by post-war Governments.

Throughout its proud 72-year history, successive Governments have believed in our health and social care system and strengthened it for their times. I believe the NHS is the finest health service in the world. I believe in the values that underpin it: that we all share responsibility for the health of one another. Its extraordinary feats this past year are unsurpassed even in its own proud history. Once again, we must support the NHS and the whole health and care system with a legislative framework that is fit for our times and fit for the future. We need a more integrated, more innovative and more responsive system, harnessing the best of modern technology and supporting the vocation and dedication of those who work in it. This White Paper is the next step in that noble endeavour, and I commend this statement to the House.

11.50 am

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I suppose we should also thank Andy Cowper for advance sight of the White Paper.

We are in the middle of the biggest public health crisis that our NHS has ever faced: staff on the frontline are exhausted and underpaid; the Royal College of Nursing says that the NHS is on its knees; primary care and CCG staff are vaccinating and will be doing so for months ahead, including, possibly, delivering booster jabs in the autumn; and today, we learn that 224,000 people are waiting more than 12 months for treatment. This Secretary of State thinks that now is the right moment for a structural reorganisation of the NHS.

We will study the legislation carefully when it is published, but the test of the reorganisation will be whether it brings down waiting lists and times, widens access, especially for mental health care, drives up cancer survival rates, and improves population health. We are not surprised that the Secretary of State has ended up here. We warned Ministers not to go ahead with the Cameron-Lansley changes 10 years ago. It was a reorganisation so big that we could see it from space. It cost millions. It demoralised staff. It ushered in a decade of wasted opportunity and, of course, he voted for those changes and defended them in this Chamber, so, when he stands up, I hope that he will tell us that he was wrong to support them.

We have long argued for more integrated care, but how will these new structures be governed, how will they be accountable to local people, and how will financial priorities be set, because when something goes wrong, as tragically sometimes it does in the delivery of care, or when there are financial problems, such as the ones that we have seen at Leicester's trust, where does the buck stop?

The Secretary of State is proposing an integrated care board tasked with commissioning, but without powers to direct foundation trusts, which spend around £80 billion and employ around 800,000 staff. He is suggesting a joint committee of the ICS and providers as well, but who controls the money, because it is from there that power flows? Both of those committees will overlap with a new third additional committee, the integrated care system health and care partnership, which includes local authorities, Healthwatch and even permits the private sector to sit on it. All these committees must have regard for the local health and wellbeing board plans as well. How will he avoid clashing agendas and lack of trust between partners, as we have seen at the ICS in Bedfordshire and Luton, for example? Nobody wants to see integrated care structures that cannot even integrate themselves. Legislation alone is not the answer to integration. We need a long-term funded workforce plan; we do not have one. We need a long-term, cross-governmental health inequalities plan; we do not have one. We need a sustainable social care plan; we were promised one on the steps of Downing Street and we still do not have one.

When the Secretary of State voted for the Cameron reorganisation 10 years ago, it was presumably because he wanted, in the words of the White Paper at the time, "to liberate the NHS". Now he is proposing a power grab that was never consulted on by the NHS. It seems that he wants every dropped bedpan to reverberate around Whitehall again. He is announcing this just at the very moment when the NHS is successfully delivering vaccination, which is in striking contrast to the delivery of test and trace and of PPE early on where he was responsible. Again, we will look carefully at the legislation, but why is he so keen for these new powers? Why is he repealing his responsibility to set an annual mandate and bring it to Parliament?

The Secretary of State wants to intervene now in hospital reconfiguration plans, but why is he stripping local authorities of their power to refer controversial plans to him? With his new powers, will he reverse outsourcing? Will he end the transfer of staff to subcos? Will he bring contracts back in-house and block more outsourcing in the future? He is ditching the competition

framework for the tendering of local services, while potentially replacing it with institutionalised cronyism at the top instead.

Fundamentally, how will this reorganisation and power grab improve patient care? The Secretary of State did not mention waiting times in his statement. It is mentioned once in the leaked White Paper. How will he bring waiting lists down? How will he improve cancer survival rates and widen access to mental healthcare, and by when? How will this reorganisation narrow widening health inequalities, and by when? Given that the Prime Minister insists that lessons cannot be learned from this pandemic until the crisis is over, why does the Secretary of State disagree with that and consider this reorganisation so urgent now?

Matt Hancock: I will take that as cautious support. I know that the hon. Gentleman sometimes has to say these things, but I am very glad that he leaves the door open for yet more enthusiastic support in the future, not least because of all the questions that he just asked. The proposals on the table—the proposals in the White Paper—are addressed directly to make the improvements that he calls for.

The hon. Gentleman raised an important point about the vaccination programme. The vaccination programme is one of the largest and also one of the most successful civilian operations that has happened in this country, and that is because of the teamwork among the NHS, local authorities, the Department and the brilliant civil servants who work in the vaccine taskforce. It is that combination, that teamwork and that integration which is making the programme the great success that it is.

The hon. Gentleman asked about timing, and I say to him: why argue for delay? Why stop work to integrate? Why stop work to ensure the NHS is more accountable? When people are working so hard in the NHS for us, why should we not work hard in this Parliament to give them the legislative support that they need and have asked for? That is the question he needs to answer if he wants to continue an argument for delay. If not now, when? There is no better time than immediately, so I hope that he will, on reflection and on reading the White Paper, come forward with enthusiastic support.

I absolutely look forward to debates about the details and the implementation. I look forward to the parliamentary passage of a significant piece of legislation in the future, and I look forward to the hon. Gentleman's engagement on that, but the removal of bureaucratic barriers cannot wait. The increase in the integration of the system should not have to wait, and accountability for this enormous amount of taxpayers' money to this House, and through this House to the citizens whom we serve, is something that should be welcomed right across this Parliament, and I hope that it will be.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con) [V]: May I start my comments by thanking the brilliant staff at the Royal Surrey County Hospital for the wonderful care they gave me—this morning, as it happens, when I unfortunately slipped over and broke my arm on a morning run. I have just come from the hospital.

It is a very big deal to do a structural reorganisation of the NHS, and I know from my time as Health Secretary how distracting it can be, but it is none the less the right thing to do and a brave thing to do, because NHS staff want nothing more than to be able

to give joined-up care—joined up between hospitals, GP surgeries, the social care system and community care—and the current structures make that more difficult than it should be.

I also welcome the public health measures, particularly on obesity, given the high mortality rates that obese people have had during the pandemic. However, these integrated care systems are going to be very powerful, so my question to the Health Secretary is this: how will the public know in their area about the quality and safety of care, and whether waiting lists are being properly managed? How will they know how good all that is? Is he planning to ask the CQC to do Ofsted ratings, as it successfully does for hospitals and GP surgeries?

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to my predecessor's work setting up integrated care systems in the first place. In a way, this legislation builds on the foundations that he laid when he was in my job, and I look forward to working with the Health and Social Care Committee on the legislation as it proceeds. We have already had discussions, and I am grateful for the Select Committee's work so far and the insights it has provided.

The question my right hon. Friend raises about the accountability of ICSs is absolutely central, not just to accountability for the use of taxpayers' money, but to driving up both the quality of care for patients and the health of the population the ICSs serve. It is critical that we ensure the correct combination of high levels of transparency, the role of the CQC as inspector, and accountability up from the ICS, through NHS England, to Ministers and therefore Parliament, and through our democratic processes to taxpayers. The White Paper sets out at high levels how that accountability will work. The details will be a matter for the Bill. The combination of transparency and clear lines of accountability are vital to make sure that while we use the integration provided for in the Bill to empower frontline staff to deliver care better, they are held to account for the delivery of that care and, critically, the outcomes for the population as a whole whom we serve.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: Health and social care staff always do their best for their patients and residents, regardless of legislative systems, but I welcome the Government's recognition of the damage caused to the NHS in England by the Health and Social Care Act 2012, and the proposal to reverse some of its most obstructive and expensive aspects, particularly section 75, which forced the outsourcing of services, promoted competition instead of collaboration, and made pathways more disjointed and confusing for patients, especially those with complex conditions. The devil, however, will indeed be in the detail.

Which model of integrated care is the Secretary of State proposing? Will he merge organisations, including commissioning groups, or, as the NHS would prefer, create new public NHS bodies, similar to the health boards we have in Scotland? When sustainability and transformation partnerships were created, their transformation budgets were quickly used up in covering debts caused by the bureaucracy of the healthcare market, so what additional funding is he committing to bring about this reorganisation? Given the pressure of covid, the backlog of urgent cases, and extensive staff vacancies, how does he plan to create the capacity for

[Dr Philippa Whitford]

staff to carry out such service change? Covid has highlighted the vulnerability of the care system, so what plans are there to integrate health and social care?

Finally, the Secretary of State has highlighted health inequalities, but poverty is the biggest driver of ill health. What discussions has he had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and other Cabinet colleagues about promoting the prioritisation of health in all policy decisions?

Matt Hancock: Of course health is an important consideration in all policy decisions. The overall response to the pandemic has demonstrated that.

The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of integration and to ask what plans there are for the integration of health and social care. Indeed, that is at the core of the proposals, as I set out clearly in my statement, and at the core of the White Paper. The integration of health and social care has improved significantly this year as a result of people having to work together in the pandemic. Fundamentally, social care is accountable to local authorities, which pay for it, and therefore to the local taxpayer, whereas the NHS is accountable to Ministers and central Government. The combination of these two vital public services is a challenge that I think can be addressed through the integrated care systems. We have been working very closely with the Local Government Association in England and the NHS to try to effect that integration as much as possible.

The hon. Lady raises the issue of funding. Of course, the NHS has record funding right now, and rightly so, but these reforms are about spending that money better to improve the health of the population, to allow new technology to be embraced, and to remove bureaucracy. It is not about having to spend more money on a reform; it is about reforming in order to spend money as well as possible.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): When I was in the Army, I was badly hurt, and I was put under the care of the NHS. In turn, it sent me to a private practitioner, in Harley Street actually, who did me the world of good, and I paid nothing. Now, as an MP, I am frequently asked, "Are the Government intending to privatise the NHS?". My reply is, "No, of course they aren't, and very little of the NHS is privatised." Could I ask my right hon. Friend to inform me how much of the NHS is privatised as a percentage and whether the plans are to increase it or not?

Matt Hancock: The NHS is not privatised at all. The NHS is delivered free at the point of care, or free at the point of use, according to need, not ability to pay. Of course, the NHS buys all sorts of things—it buys goods, technology, scalpels and services of different scales and sizes—and it employs people, and this combination is essentially what the NHS is made up of. It matters not the name of the provision; what matters is the care for the patients, and the quality of support for the population's health. The pandemic has demonstrated that what matters is the outcomes, and the coming together of different types of provision has always contributed to the delivery of care for patients, as my hon. Friend set out. That will no doubt happen for the entire future of the NHS,

which I have absolutely no doubt will go from strength to strength, not just now, after the last 72 years, but for the next 72 years, and after that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I am fully in favour of a review of the NHS that brings it up to date and makes it the best healthcare centre in the world, but if he wants to make this a milestone, surely he should slow down a bit. Why not consult cross-party? At this unique time, when we have all been in this together, why can he not consult more? Why does he not to listen to the people, and consult those who work in the NHS, as well as the people who have benefited from it? Why rush this? Why not talk about it and get cross-party support? Politicians of all kinds have never ever got the NHS absolutely right. Why not work together across party lines, and consult the people who work in the NHS, and those who benefit from it? Slow down, Secretary of State, and you will get me on your side.

Matt Hancock: I very much hope to get the hon. Gentleman on side and supporting these reforms, not least because many of them were in not just the Conservative party manifesto, but the Labour party manifesto on which he stood. We have consulted extensively on the measures in this set of reforms over two years. I look forward to further work, consultation and discussions with parliamentarians on all sides before, during and no doubt after the passage of the Bill. It is an incredibly important piece of work. What I do not want to do is delay the improvements that people on the frontline have called for. The core measures of this Bill have been built on the asks of the NHS, working with local government, and I think we should get on and deliver that.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): I give my overwhelming support to these proposals, particularly the drive for innovation and technology, which will improve not only access to care but care outcomes for patients. The Secretary of State will be aware that in Burnley General Hospital, we already have some advanced surgical robots that provide incredible care. Could I urge him to look, as part of these reforms, at how we can make sites such as Burnley Hospital regional centres of excellence in areas such as surgical robotics?

Matt Hancock: Yes. We care about technology in the NHS because we care about people and the improvements to people's lives that it can generate. Surgical robots are just one example. I am very glad to hear that they are being used in such an innovative way in Burnley Hospital. I would love to come and see that for myself some time. This is exactly the sort of progress that the NHS should be making to free up the time of dedicated and highly skilled clinicians, and to enable the delivery of more high-quality surgery because of, for instance, the higher magnification that one can get in using a robot for surgery. That is just one example of the sort of thing that we can push further as a result of the measures in this White Paper.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): When you go to Burnley, Secretary of State, I know you will also put Ribbles Valley, Chorley and a few other places on your list.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State may be aware that before I returned to Parliament, I had some involvement with the establishment of the

Greater Manchester model of health and social care. Can I offer him two insights from that? First, social care is clearly not yet funded in the way that is needed if we are to have proper integration. Secondly, it was possible to have a Greater Manchester strategic level for the nearly 3 million people of the conurbation, but to have integration and delivery at the district level. On the integrated care systems, will he guarantee that there will be nothing that prevents the very successful model that Greater Manchester is already pioneering?

Matt Hancock: Yes. The changes in Greater Manchester, in which the hon. Gentleman had an important role, are a good example of where we can drive this sort of integration. I can confirm that nothing I am proposing would get in the way of that. In fact, I hope that the changes in the White Paper will help areas that, like Greater Manchester, are already some way along this journey to go further, and will support them by ensuring there are fewer legislative barriers to the sorts of actions that they want to take. That includes both the measures across the NHS and the integration between health and social care.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con) [V]: Frontline health and social care providers have shown enormous flexibility, innovation and collaboration in dealing with this crisis. I welcome the Secretary of State's proposals. I am particularly pleased that he suggests the need both for clear political accountability and strong local autonomy for the frontline. Will he assure me that, unlike Nye Bevan, the Secretary of State does not want to hear the sound of dropped bedpans in his office in Whitehall, and that, rather, we need a more local, more collaborative and more community-led approach to health and social care, as proposed by the Conservative Henry Willink—as he says, the original designer of the NHS?

Matt Hancock: Yes, that is absolutely right. In fact, my hon. Friend put it rather better than I did. Perhaps I will take up his rhetorical suggestions for how to make this case. Accountability is important, but the more local the decision making, the better. There should be local decision making across a whole range of partners—not just in the core NHS, but by providers of services, from whatever sector they come, including the voluntary sector, which, during this pandemic, has been embraced more. We need to build on that to make sure that we have a system that can truly serve local needs. Ultimately, all healthcare is locally delivered, because it is delivered to an individual to improve or save their life. Essentially, we need to make sure that the appropriate decisions are taken as locally as reasonably possible.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab) [V]: The pandemic has shone a light on massive health inequalities across the country. The Secretary of State announced the abolition of Public Health England in September, but there is still no clarity on where the vital health improvement function will sit in the future. Why are we hearing about new structures for the NHS today without also getting clarity on the arrangements for vital elements of public health and prevention?

Matt Hancock: There is a simple, clear reason for that, and I am very glad that the hon. Lady asks that question, because it is an incredibly important function. We will set out more details on the arrangements for

health improvement functions, but the population health approach that is embedded within the integrated care systems set out in the White Paper will itself be at the fulcrum of delivery of health improvement and of narrowing health inequalities. If we think about it, around 20% of the impact on someone's health is what happens in hospital; the rest is what happens outside hospital, the extra support that people can get and, of course, the choices that people make. Integrated care systems will be supported and funded in such a way that their goal is to improve the health of the local population, not just of the patient.

Health improvement is embedded in the structure and the design of the future of the NHS embedded in the White Paper, and the wider health improvement responsibilities will flow from that. We will set out the precise organisational structure of those shortly, but I needed to get the White Paper out first, because it is off this population health approach that the future of health improvement will be built.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con) [V]: I welcome the commitment to more joined-up care, which must include mental health. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 committed to parity of esteem between physical and mental health. Will the Secretary of State set out how, specifically, the White Paper builds on that? Will it require and measure parity of esteem in output, and particularly outcomes, for mental health? If not, why not?

Matt Hancock: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support. Parity of esteem between mental and physical health is critical, and of course it is embedded in a population health approach. It is critical that the new integrated care systems will of course have responsibilities for provision of mental health services as well as physical health services. The historical silos in the provision of mental health and physical health services need to be brought together; so often, the provision of both is critical in a world in which many people have multimorbidities, including challenges with both their physical and their mental health.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for announcing a progressive strategy, which we all welcome. Does he not agree that this pandemic has opened our eyes to the gaps in frontline service provision and that, if nothing else, we must ensure that nothing is able to prevent basic cancer treatment from taking place as we go forward? I spoke recently to someone in the midst of a cancer battle who said that they had been trying to fight with one hand tied behind their back. How will the Secretary of State ensure that patients awaiting scans and treatment plans are able to safely access them?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. The figures out today demonstrate the scale of the challenge when it comes to cancer treatment. Of course the pandemic has had a challenging impact on cancer treatment. We are supporting cancer alliances to improve outcomes as much as possible, and to work through the backlog that has inevitably built up because of the pandemic. Cancer alliances are a very important part of the future of the delivery of care. In many cases, they will be bigger geographically than an ICS. For them and for other specialist treatments, of course some cases will have to be at a larger scale

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than an ICS. Alongside putting these reforms in place, we are absolutely determined to do everything we can to ensure that people get the treatment for cancer that they need as soon as possible.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con) [V]: I very much welcome the White Paper. I urge my right hon. Friend to “think workforce” at every stage, but to ensure that prevention is the golden thread that runs through all future legislation and plans. Given that the last 12 months has very much laid bare the impact of inequalities on our public health outcomes, will we be truly bold and return to our prevention Green Paper, which the Secretary of State knows well, when it comes to facing the obesity crisis, smoking prevalence, alcoholism, diabetes and stroke prevention, to name just a few?

Matt Hancock: Yes. There are measures in this White Paper that precisely pick up the work of the prevention Green Paper that my hon. Friend did so much to shape when he was in the Department with me. In fact, many of the proposals in the White Paper are built from conversations that he and I shared. I want to put on the record my gratitude for the work that he did in shaping this agenda, because ultimately a population health agenda is an agenda about the prevention of ill health. Of course we must—and we will—treat those who become ill, but it is far better for everybody to support people to take a shared responsibility, including their own personal responsibility to stay healthy in the first place. The population health agenda that will be at the heart of the integrated care systems is ultimately a preventive agenda, and one that I am very glad to hear that he supports so wholeheartedly.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD) [V]: On this day eight years ago, the Government announced and then legislated for a new funding model for social care, which the Tories then scrapped two years later. Eight years on, we have yet another NHS reform announcement, but only yet another promise to reform social care. With 25,000 care home deaths during the pandemic, what will it take for the Prime Minister to make good on his promise to fix social care, and when will the Secretary of State start the long-promised cross-party talks to find a solution?

Matt Hancock: On the contrary—this White Paper covers health and care. It covers the integration of the NHS and social care at a local level. Of course there is further work on funding, as we have committed to in our manifesto, but the integration of those services, which has been so important during the pandemic, is one of the critical pieces of the forthcoming health and care Bill.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con) [V]: I congratulate the Secretary of State on this very important plan and announcement. As he knows, the Island is already piloting some ideas, so I thank his team of excellent advisers and the Secretary of State himself. May we have more pilot schemes to support his work? As he knows, the benefit of his approach may be felt more strongly on the Isle of Wight than anywhere else in Britain, due to our excellent but unavoidably small hospital at St Mary’s, the smallest county council in

England, and our age profile. We want to help him and we want to be at the front of the queue. Will he also please consider the position of the 12 unavoidably small hospitals in England as part of the programme, of which St Mary’s is the most unique because it is on an island? I thank the Secretary of State and his team for their great work.

Matt Hancock: With an ask like that, it is hard to say anything other than yes, enthusiastically. I am keen to work with my hon. Friend, who is such an incredible voice for the Isle of Wight. The services on the Isle of Wight, by its island nature, are more closely aligned together than in many other parts of the country, but nevertheless suffer from some of the bureaucratic silo requirements in current legislation. I hope that these proposals will be received enthusiastically by all those involved in the provision of health, social care and public health on the Isle of Wight because they will remove the legislative barriers to closer integration and allow them to continue in the direction in which I know they are enthusiastically working with my hon. Friend’s support.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab) [V]: In the middle of a pandemic, when its implications for future healthcare are still not fully understood and when NHS staff are exhausted, with no respite on the horizon, there are real concerns that the Secretary of State is embarking on this reorganisation now. So how will these plans specifically address the lengthening backlog in cancer treatments in Halton and the north-west? How will replacing local decision making with large sub-regional health bodies allow greater local accountability and encourage local innovation?

Matt Hancock: The devolution of decision making to integrated care systems will help to join up care and deliver it more effectively. That is one reason why these proposals have been received so enthusiastically by the NHS itself and by NHS colleagues, including from local government, not least because the proposals originated from proposals from the NHS. I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman and suggest that he works with his local NHS to make sure that this legislation goes through in the most high-quality way possible and that we have a high-quality debate on it, so that it can serve his constituents in exactly the way he sets out.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con) [V]: I know from conversations I have had with the Health Secretary in Mansfield that much of this change will be widely welcomed, and joining up our services is vital if we are to have the best possible healthcare system. I just have one concern: the announcement also talks about new public health measures, and there is an obesity strategy that I fear risks increasing inequality by raising the cost of the weekly shop. Surely education is the key to public health, by, for example, teaching people to cook fresh meals, as people need the skills to make healthier choices or they just end up paying more. So will the Health Secretary ensure that the public health elements of these reforms focus on that education and do not just end up hitting people in their pockets?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course I am alive to that concern, and I look forward to further discussing these measures with my hon. Friend. The crisis has demonstrated how helping people achieve a healthy weight is important,

and the Prime Minister has shown personal leadership on that in policy terms. Of course more information and education is an incredibly important part of this because it is about shared responsibility, including personal responsibility, to improve public health. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend on the details of it and making sure that we can get this into such a shape that it genuinely supports the tackling of obesity in a way that supports people, as he sets out.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab) [V]: A decade ago the Minister and his Conservative colleagues pushed through the Lansley reforms, even though NHS staff warned us that they would lead to fragmentation and waste. Why should we trust him now, given that he and his party got it so wrong then? How will he gain the trust and confidence of all NHS workers for his plans, and for the timing of these reforms?

Matt Hancock: The reforms that we have set out were themselves initiated and generated from the NHS, which may be one reason why I am so pleased to have seen such a strong, positive reaction from the NHS to these proposals. They are about what happens over the decade to come. Of course we always need to be improving the NHS, and each reform is a matter of the context of its times. These reforms are about more innovation, more integration and more accountability for the NHS, all with the goal of supporting those who work on the frontline to deliver better care.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con) [V]: Covid has changed the way we live and work. We have all had to adapt, and our NHS has been forced to find better ways of working. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that our NHS will learn from our covid days, adopt some of the new measures in place and improve its performance over the coming years, while delivering on our commitment to recruit 50,000 more nurses and build 40 new hospitals?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. We are on track to hire 50,000 more nurses over this Parliament and build 40 new hospitals over the decade. Those were core commitments in the manifesto that my hon. Friend and I both stood on with great enthusiasm, and I look forward to delivering on them. The White Paper will help towards that, but that is on track and under way already. He is quite right about learning from what has gone well in the pandemic, during which the NHS has had to work so incredibly hard, and the White Paper will help to do that.

Some of the culture and some of the ways of working have been more flexible, more dynamic and more joined-up within the NHS over the past year, embracing more modern technology than ever before. It is critical that we keep pushing that culture forward and supporting people in driving that culture forward and do not fall back to old ways of working. The White Paper will help us to do that, but it is only one part, because it is everybody working as a team and working together that is at the core of where things have gone well over the pandemic.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab) [V]: A year and a half ago, we halted the dangerous back-door privatisation of key services in Bradford's hospitals while Ministers sat on their hands and ignored the outcry of NHS staff and local people. The proposals in the press confirm

what I and many others have long said about the disaster and waste of privatisation in our NHS—
[Inaudible.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Imran, it is a very bad line, even on audio-only, but the Secretary of State is going to have a go at answering.

Matt Hancock: The irony is that the proposed changes that the hon. Gentleman was concerned about, which were halted, were ones that it is currently legally impossible for a Minister to stop without going through a whole process, which he knows about. The proposals in the White Paper will make it easier for us to work together collaboratively on the right outcome and remove some of the bureaucracy that, frankly, stops Ministers getting involved when a project is not going in the right direction. On that basis, I hope that he welcomes the White Paper.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry about the gremlins, Imran, but the Secretary of State did very well in answering your question.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con) [V]: Can my right hon. Friend assure my constituents that bringing health and social care much closer together will help to provide a more efficient, higher-quality service? Can he specifically outline how an integrated care model may help to reduce demand for emergency services in Lincolnshire?

Matt Hancock: I very much hope so. This is about being able to deliver services according to local need and, crucially, not just looking at the patients who turn up—whether that is to an emergency service or through their GP for treatment in secondary care—but trying to get ahead of that and support people to stay healthy, bringing the budget of the NHS to bear on keeping people healthy in the first place. That preventive agenda is critical and can ensure not only that people stay more healthy but that we spend money more wisely.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: Having been in Parliament in 2010, I voted against the Tory-Lib Dem coalition's flawed reorganisation, the failure of which has led us to today's announcement. As well as sharing concerns about having another reorganisation during a pandemic, what guarantees can the Secretary of State give that these changes will improve the health of my constituents when, under his plans, Hull will be lumped into an artificial hotch-potch of the Humber Coast and Vale ICS: an area of 1,500 square miles with cities, market towns and remote rural and coastal communities, with little transparency and no clear lines of accountability to local people in Hull, with our stark health inequalities?

Matt Hancock: Improving the accountability of ICSs is absolutely at the heart of the White Paper. I set out the three sections, and one of them is accountability to ensure that as ICSs get stronger powers and a statutory footing, there is the accountability that necessarily goes with that.

There is a perfectly reasonable debate to have about the geography of ICSs, making sure that they cover the right scale to be able to deliver services effectively and yet are local enough to deliver for local people. That has been an ongoing discussion. The aim is to implement

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the measures set out in the White Paper by April 2022 and by that time we will need to ensure that those geographies are right. In very large part they are already, but if there is further work to do in any area, I am happy to have a discussion about that.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con) [V]: The demands of the pandemic on Stockport Council, GP services and my constituency hospital, Stepping Hill, have shown the benefits of joint working and data sharing to improve care and health outcomes. I therefore welcome today's announcement. We know that when bodies work together, people receive better care.

Stockport Together's previous journey on this path highlighted the huge benefits of health and care working together as well as the challenges of addressing silo working and the pressures of pooled budgets. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the proposals will deliver a more streamlined system that will give seamless care and healthier outcomes for my Cheadle residents?

Matt Hancock: That is the goal, exactly as my hon. Friend sets out. In particular, I am glad that she raised data sharing as part of the integration. It is critical that we have high-quality data sharing, with data protected for the individual but shared among those who need it for the purpose of joining up care. If someone goes to hospital, they will not have to give all their details over and over again, and their GP will know about it. Care homes, GPs and hospitals, for instance, will be able to care better for an individual without having repeatedly to diagnose. This is a very important agenda for the NHS, which it should approach with confidence as a core part of joining up care.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab) [V]: In my constituency of Bedford and Kempston, patients are being left in unimaginable pain as they struggle to access even emergency dental treatment. Dental practices are struggling to stay open with the impact of covid on their businesses, and those who have survived are struggling to cope with the backlog. Imposing targets is not working, so will the Secretary of State include oral health in his future plans and agree a sustainable funding solution with NHS dentists to end the crisis in oral healthcare?

Matt Hancock: The crisis has been very tough on dentistry. By the nature of dentistry, the infection prevention and control systems in place are a challenge. I look forward to working with dentists to ensure that this sort of integration can help them appropriately. I am happy to arrange a meeting between the hon. Gentleman and the Minister responsible for dentistry to discuss these concerns.

Robert Lorgan (High Peak) (Con): I welcome the proposals for more integration and collaboration between the NHS and social care. However, it is vital that these important reforms do not get in the way of investment in NHS capacity and the commitment to recruit 50,000 more nurses. Will the Health Secretary assure the House that they will not and that the Government remain committed to the badly needed new urgent care centres at Stepping Hill Hospital and Tameside Hospital?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. Stepping Hill Hospital is obviously vital to my hon. Friend's constituents. The urgent care centres are important too, especially in

ensuring that people can have access to treatment closer to home for smaller, yet urgent problems. We have also introduced 111 First and people should call 111 before going to an urgent treatment centre or an A&E to let them know they are coming and to check that that is the right setting for them. That is an important part of our wider considerations, which the measures in the White Paper will help.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab) [V]: Shamefully, the poorer people are, the younger they will die. That link between economic deprivation and health outcomes means that Barnsley is suffering one of the highest covid mortality rates in England. Health inequality is an incredibly complex problem, but it is avoidable. Does the Secretary of State agree that a key test of the reforms is whether they will tackle that injustice?

Matt Hancock: I do. Tackling health inequalities is incredibly important and is a vital part of our levelling-up agenda. The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the gaps in life expectancy across the country. I hope that a move to a population health approach, whereby the focus of the whole local system is on improving the health of the population, not just those who ship up needing support, can help us as a society to tackle health inequalities.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): A key element of the statement today is that it strengthens accountability to this House, which I very much welcome. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that this will mean that, as local Members of Parliament, we are better placed to represent our constituents in this place when it comes to communicating any concerns that they might have about unpopular local reorganisation of key services at their local hospital?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. It is important that, while the NHS continues to evolve and must evolve, it is there to serve our constituents. For a reform to take place, it needs to make the argument for why that is better for our constituents. Ultimately, when such a large amount of taxpayers' money is spent on a public service, it is right that there is accountability to Ministers, and through Ministers to the House, for the services that are provided—that is the essence of a democracy—while preserving clinical independence, for instance, for individual decisions, and for the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and decisions about appropriate advice on drugs. That is the settlement that the White Paper proposes and that I hope garners widespread support.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab) [V]: Integrated care systems have their roots in accountable care organisations, such as those used in America, in which individuals take out private health insurance. It is therefore hardly surprising that there is a great deal of concern about the introduction of integrated care systems here. Will the Secretary of State give a cast-iron guarantee that he will legislate to ensure that NHS patient data cannot be used to promote or sell private health insurance or services to patients?

Matt Hancock: I do not understand the logic of the hon. Lady's question. I have not seen the sorts of concerns that she raises about integrated care systems,

which, in the UK, have provided the joined-up care that people have been looking for for so long. I am happy to look at the details she raises on the provision of data, but the White Paper is about NHS provision, not the provision of healthcare through insurance, other than the national insurance that we come together as a society to pay in order to provide healthcare free at the point of use. That is a belief that I hold dear and is shared by the vast majority in the House and the country. I am happy to reaffirm that and reassure the hon. Lady.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con) [V]: As an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on obesity, I welcome this statement, particularly its promises relating to obesity policy, including limitations on unhealthy food advertising and new requirements for calorie information on food packaging. Will my right hon. Friend outline the likely timescales for the associated legislation and, in the interests of fairness and efficacy, will he ensure that there is a level playing field between advertising via British television broadcasters and advertising on often overseas online services, in terms of statutory extent and date of commencement?

Matt Hancock: Yes, these are very important measures and I am glad that they have my hon. Friend's support, not least because of his extensive knowledge as a practising GP who has done so much during the crisis—the whole House is grateful for his commitment and work. On the timing of legislation, unfortunately I am not permitted to go into any further detail ahead of Her Majesty's next visit to the other place, but the White Paper sets out the reforms that we hope to have in place by April 2022, and I hope that he can take from that some indication of our sense of pace.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) [V]: With one of the highest covid death rates in the world, and with NHS workers under such incredible pressure, this is hardly the best time to be talking about yet another NHS reorganisation. In his response to me two weeks ago, the Prime Minister committed to addressing the key underlying causes of the high and unequal covid death toll: primarily, socioeconomic inequalities

driven by 10 years of austerity. He said that he would be implementing Professor Sir Michael Marmot's recommendations, to "build back fairer." How do the White Paper proposals address those inequalities and their impact on our declining life expectancy and on the highest excess mortality rate in Europe?

Matt Hancock: I gently say that I disagree entirely with the hon. Lady's pessimism about the ability of improvements in the health service to assist in the closing of health inequalities and the provision of care. As a Greater Manchester MP, she will understand better than most the benefits that come from that sort of integration. The idea that we should fail to act on what the NHS has itself asked for because of the challenges it is facing is completely the wrong way round. I see it entirely the other way round; it is incumbent on us to act in order to deliver the improvements that the NHS is calling for.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con) [V]: During the last Parliament, I sat on a joint Health and Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, and I am pleased to be re-joining the latter Committee. That Committee commissioned a report on the future of adult care, which left open care insurance-type options to spread the financial burden, so as not to create an ever-larger NHS versus the critical local government role, and, crucially, with enhanced choice and flexibility for a 21st century care system. How will those aspirations fit into the plans that my right hon. Friend has described today?

Matt Hancock: The White Paper takes forward parts of those proposals relating to the integration between health and social care, and ensuring that it is those on the ground delivering health and social care who can decide the best way to provide that for their population. We are committed to taking forward funding reforms, as set out in our manifesto. Those funding reforms are not part of this Bill, but the Prime Minister has committed to bring those forward this calendar year.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and for answering 30 questions in just under one hour and 10 minutes.

Point of Order

12.49 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The petition calling on the Government to trigger article 16 to allow unfettered trade within the United Kingdom has been signed by 138,000 people as of today. These people are from every constituency of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and my own constituency of Strangford has the highest percentage of signatories. Can you confirm that this UK-wide demand upon the Government should be swiftly recognised in this House through a timely debate, and furthermore, that action to fill the shelves in Strangford and across Northern Ireland must be a priority not simply for this MP but for all MPs, and therefore for this House?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and for giving notice to the Chair that he was about to make it. As he knows, it is not for the Chair to schedule debates on petitions: that is for the Petitions Committee, and that Committee can also take other actions, so I suggest that the hon. Gentleman contacts the Petitions Committee as soon as possible. As an experienced Member, he will know that there are other avenues by which he can raise the matter, as he has so skilfully demonstrated just now.

We will now suspend for a few minutes.

12.50 pm

Sitting suspended.

MINISTERIAL AND OTHER MATERNITY ALLOWANCES BILL: BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Bill:

Timetable

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

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at 3.00 pm.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at 5.00 pm.

Timing of Proceedings and Questions to be put.

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

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

(b) proceedings on the Bill shall stand postponed while the Question is put, in accordance with Standing Order No. 52(1) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills), on any financial resolution relating to the Bill;

(c) on the conclusion of proceedings on any financial resolution relating to the Bill, proceedings on the Bill shall be resumed and the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

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

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

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

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

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

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

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

and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (15)(a) of this Order.

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

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

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

Consideration of Lords Amendments.

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

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

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

Subsequent Stages

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

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

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

Reasons Committee

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

Miscellaneous

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings in respect of any such debate.

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

Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Bill

Second Reading

12.55 pm

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Prime Minister believes that it is quite wrong for Ministers to have to resign in order to leave work after giving birth to care for a newborn child. The Bill before the House today will make an important and long-overdue change to the existing law. It will enable all Ministers for the first time to take paid maternity leave from their job for an extended period. Thanks to changes made in the ministerial code by the Prime Minister in 2019, there are now codified arrangements by which Parliamentary Under-Secretaries and Ministers of State can take maternity leave. Their roles will be covered by a redistribution of their responsibilities among remaining Ministers. Secretaries of State or other holders of individual offices such as Law Officers or the Lord Chancellor, owing to their constitutional role and the sheer volume and complexity of their workloads, have not been able to make use of this provision.

There has been a similar failing in the situation for Opposition office holders, where the statutory limit on the number of salaries that can be paid means that there is not the flexibility for them to take leave and for their cover to be paid. The Bill provides that it is possible for Members in those posts to take extended leave. It would apply to post holders of the Leader of the Opposition, the Chief Whips in both Houses, and up to two assistant Whips in the Commons.

I am very grateful to Her Majesty's Opposition for their constructive engagement in the preparation of the Bill and welcome their support for this landmark measure.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

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

Penny Mordaunt: If I may, I will make a little progress.

I particularly thank the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) for her engagement and her commitment to the work that we wish to undertake following the Bill to address the other issues that need dragging into the 21st century.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Secretary of State for what she is saying. This has been a particularly difficult time for new parents, new mothers and new babies. During this lockdown period, I have been blessed with two grandchildren, so I have an idea of what it means. It has been a difficult time. The term is a “lockdown baby”. Will the Minister confirm whether there is an extended time for maternity pay? Are there incentives for companies to extend maternity pay? We really need quality maternity leave because of the circumstances of the past year.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but it is slightly beyond the scope of this particular Bill. In fact, the beneficiaries of this Bill are indeed very narrow and I shall comment on that further in a moment. I know that my colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and elsewhere in Government are clearly looking at a whole raft of

[Penny Mordaunt]

long-overdue issues. I am sorry that the pandemic has delayed responses to consultation for very understandable reasons, but his points are well made. I am sure that, throughout the course of this debate and Committee stage, hon. Members will want to touch on the situation facing people other than the handful of individuals that we are concerned with this afternoon. On moving this Bill today, I do so with humility in recognition of that.

Sir Edward Leigh: I warmly support the Bill, but can Her Majesty's Government confirm that only a biological woman can have a baby? Will the Minister therefore explain to me why the Bill refers to "a person" and not to "a woman"? If we are going to adopt extreme gender ideology, why are the Government doing it by stealth and why can we not have a transparent debate on the matter? This insults the dignity of many women.

Penny Mordaunt: I hope to be able to go into detail about this later in the debate. I know that many Members will want to speak to this issue, and I will want to hear what they say, but I want to reassure hon. Members across the House that there is absolutely no intention of doing that. This is not a policy decision around language, and the Government will still use the word "women" in all documents, as is our policy. The issue is a particular drafting issue, and I can come on to the detail later, in Committee. I hope to be able to give all Members some comfort today about the language that we will be using. I hope that my right hon. Friend will allow me to leave it there for the moment, but his point is well made and very well understood by myself and the rest of Government. I hope that, by the end of today, people will be reassured on that front.

Although they are outside the immediate scope of this Bill, I know that there are considerable and long-standing concerns about the provision of support for hon. Members in this place who wish to take maternity leave. This has been highlighted by many colleagues across the House. There have been some improvements in this area in recent years, and I commend Mr Speaker and his colleagues and the House authorities for their continuing support for reform in this area, but clearly more is needed, and I hope that the cross-party work that follows this Bill may afford us some opportunities to address those outstanding matters.

Returning to the Bill, it would be reasonable to ask why the Government do not in such circumstances simply take on another Minister as maternity cover. The situation is that there are no fewer than three Acts of Parliament governing the issue of ministerial numbers and pay and, more pertinently, the relevant restrictions on them. Until now, the limits on the number of salaries that can be paid overall, and for individual officers, have left the Government with limited flexibility to appoint cover should a Minister want to go on maternity leave. In a nutshell, for someone to be appointed to cover, and for that individual to be paid, the temporarily outgoing Minister would have to resign. This Bill puts an end to that wholly unacceptable situation. Instead, it will enable a Minister to take up to six months' paid maternity leave to care for their newborn child, subject to certain conditions and at the discretion of the Prime Minister, while remaining a member of the Government.

This provision will be similar to that available to members of the armed forces and the civil service and, significantly, it responds directly to a recommendation made in 2014 by the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament. The Bill does not try to confer equal terms or provide absolute parity with maternity leave provisions for all employees and workers. Both adoption leave and shared parental leave are important provisions, but they are not included in this piece of legislation. They are complex issues that require further consideration in the wider constitutional context, but they are not impossible, and I will return to those issues shortly.

On paternity leave, the current statutory entitlement for all new fathers is two weeks. I am pleased to say that this absence can be accommodated within existing practices, should a Minister wish to take paternity leave. The Government recognise that new fathers may want even more flexibility to support their partner following the birth of a child, and I am glad to confirm that we will consider this as part of our further work. The House will also be aware that the Government recently consulted on parental leave and pay for employees, and we are due to respond to that consultation in the near future. This work will provide us with a valuable perspective on how the existing provisions function, and any future proposals for Ministers will be developed with these conclusions in mind.

Some Members hoped for this Bill to address other issues of parental leave. I mentioned earlier the significant improvements that have been made to make this House more family-friendly, and the provisions that are still needed. The Government agree that both Parliament and the Government should seek to lead from the front on working practices, providing as much flexibility as possible to office holders to aid the effective discharge of their duties. I am very conscious that this Bill relates to a subset of ministerial and Opposition office holders—a payroll of just 115 people. It is also solely concerned with maternity leave. I shall not go into the technical detail of why the other matters are not in the Bill, but let me be clear from the outset that we will bring forward proposals to address those outstanding issues. We looked at putting many of those issues in this Bill. That has not been possible, but we do want to address them swiftly and have been discussing with colleagues across the House how we might do so.

I also know that Opposition post holders—in fact, Members from both side of the House—have for a long time expressed concerns about provision for maternity leave under the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority scheme. IPSA is independent, and for good reason. In this particular respect, I am grateful for the engagement of my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee. I know that many Members will want to address these other issues, and I will reserve the bulk of my remarks on them until my concluding speech on Second Reading. In the meantime, I draw colleagues' attention to the Prime Minister's written ministerial statement committing the Government to present a report to Parliament setting out considerations and proposals on these issues.

The issues with the Bill also touch on the fact that a number of Lords ministerial posts are unpaid. The Prime Minister has undertaken that the Government should look at the use by successive Administrations of

unpaid ministerial posts. Clearly the Bill does not relate to anyone outside the ministerial pipeline or anyone outside Parliament. In bringing this Bill to the House, which I hope will gather wide support, I do very much recognise the context. The terms for those in the armed forces and civil service are the terms on which this Bill is pegged. They are far more generous than the public sector average, and many people will be in receipt of far less than that average.

I am sure that some Members will want to focus this afternoon on other issues that people are facing, as I have already set out. I just want to outline some of the detail of the Bill, but I will be very brief in doing so and will go into further detail later. Clauses 1 to 3 deal with the designation of a Minister on leave, setting out the mechanism that allows Ministers to take up to six months' paid maternity leave. Clauses 4 to 6 set out the arrangements relating to six months' paid maternity leave for certain office holders in Her Majesty's official Opposition. Clause 7 contains the usual final provisions.

The second part of the Bill makes provision for certain Opposition office holders—namely, those listed in the Ministerial and other Salaries Act 1975—to take up to six months' paid maternity leave. In contrast to the arrangements for Ministers, Opposition office holders who are to take maternity leave would stay in post. The Bill authorises a payment to a nominated individual, who, at the discretion of the Leader of the Opposition in the relevant House, is to cover the office holder's role on similar terms as those for Ministers that I have already outlined.

The difference in approach reflects the fact that Opposition office holders are not appointed by the Prime Minister and do not have statutory functions in the way that a Secretary of State or a Law Officer does. It is therefore more straightforward for an individual to provide the necessary maternity leave cover while the original office holder remains in post. The arrangements may last for up to six months, and the eligibility criteria are the same for those in relation to Ministers. The Bill leaves it to the discretion of the Opposition leader in each House to appoint individuals to these temporary covering roles. Only one person can be appointed to cover an office holder's post at any point during the period of leave. However, should the Leader of the Opposition wish to change the appointment, they have the discretion to do so.

Clause 5 builds on these provisions and outlines how the allowance payable should be calculated, how payments are administered and when payments should end. As with the provisions for Ministers, the person appointed to cover an office holder's role should receive a monthly allowance that is equivalent to the office holder's monthly salary. This financial arrangement should continue for as long as the individual is fulfilling the responsibilities of the role, but for no longer than six months. This allowance, as is the case with Opposition office holders' salaries, is to be paid from the Consolidated Fund.

The final provisions relating to Opposition office holders are set out in clause 6, which establishes the relationship between the appointed individual covering an Opposition office holder and existing legislation. As is the case with a Minister on leave, where the Opposition office holder is a Member of the House of Lords, she is not eligible to claim the so-called Lords office holder allowance provided under the Ministerial and other Pensions and Salaries Act 1991 while on maternity

leave. However, the individual appointed as maternity cover by virtue of these provisions is entitled to claim that allowance for the duration of the appointment. That is because the allowance is to reflect the work undertaken in the House, such as late-night sittings.

The Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 makes provision for both Members' and Ministers' pension schemes. Both Ministers and Opposition office holders are entitled to pensions under the Ministers' pension scheme. Given that there is no material change to their position, there has been no need to make provisions in the Bill to ensure that their salary remains pensionable during their maternity leave. However, the individual appointed to cover the post is entitled to the Ministers' pension scheme for the duration of their appointment, in relation to the allowance paid to them for the role.

Finally, clause 7 makes the usual provisions necessary for the Bill to operate in law, including defining its territorial extent, setting out its commencement arrangements and providing the Bill's short title. The Bill comes into force on Royal Assent and will thus be of immediate benefit to those wishing to take maternity leave, should there be anyone who is in those circumstances. As I said, I am very aware of the issues that the Bill has brought to light with regard to language. I know that there are time pressures on the debate, but I will address those issues in more detail in the course of the afternoon.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out in his written statement on this topic last week, the Government have undertaken to look at considerations and proposals for Ministers and Opposition office holders in the other areas not covered by the Bill. We are committed to building more widely on the progress that the Bill represents and will present a report to Parliament setting out those considerations. For the reasons I have outlined, I hope that all Members of the House will support the Bill, and I commend it to the House.

1.12 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the Minister, and I thank her for the discussions we have had in the lead-up to the Bill's Second Reading. I congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) on the impending birth of her baby, and I know that the whole House will want to send her and her family our very best wishes.

Let me say at the outset that the Opposition will be supporting the Bill, which is a small but welcome step in updating legislation in this important area. It is, of course, important that parents in the workplace should be supported in the challenging early months after the birth of a new baby, with the right to take paid maternity leave from their employment, whether they are in the Cabinet or in any other workplace. These changes should be made for the right reasons—because they are the right thing to do to support working parents, not because they are just politically expedient.

I welcome the Minister's assurances that the Government are prepared to work on a cross-party basis to look at further reforms to bring us into line with best practice in this area. Further changes are indeed needed, because the proposals in their current form do not include, as the Minister recognised, any provision for paternity leave entitlement, those seeking to adopt or those on shared parental leave. As things stand, we are very much playing catch-up when it comes to parental leave.

[Rachel Reeves]

If we are to encourage women from all backgrounds to become Members of Parliament and, indeed, Ministers, we must have modern working practices, so that it is a vocation that is open to everyone. A clear sign that further changes are needed, particularly when it comes to making Westminster a more family-friendly environment for working mothers, is the make-up of the House today. At present, 102 years after women first won the right to stand for Parliament and after reforms to sitting hours and the system of proxy voting, there are still just 220 female MPs compared with 430 men. That has to change if we are truly to reflect the country and all the experience and talent within it. I urge the Minister to work constructively with other parties and find parliamentary time to progress the further reforms that I believe many in the House would like to see.

Jim Shannon: I know that the Minister responded to my initial intervention, but the shadow Minister has referred to more reform, which I think is important. That reform has to look towards other elected representatives, including those in the Assembly and the councils. As an example, one of the ladies who works for me is a councillor, and she did not get the leave that she should have had, so I think this Bill is only the first stage when it comes to maternity leave. Does the hon. Lady agree that we can, and must, go further?

Rachel Reeves: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. Elected representatives, whether here in Parliament, in devolved Administrations or in local government, and indeed those in all workplaces, absolutely deserve maternity rights which in some workplaces, including those of elected representatives, just do not exist today. I would very much support further reform in this area.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I very much welcome what the Opposition are pushing for. Does the hon. Lady agree with me that this House has a position of leadership, in relation not only to the devolved Administrations but to the rest of the country, and that is why work towards paternity leave and, particularly, shared parental leave is so important?

Rachel Reeves: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The Paymaster General and I have been speaking about the further reform that is needed, and in a way, the case for this Bill has shone a light on the wider reform that is necessary. We should not just be reacting to events; we should be thinking towards the future and about the challenges of combining work and family life which all of us in this place—men and women—face.

I would now like to turn to some of the challenges that women in Parliament have faced over the decades, and to talk about why it is so important that we continue to modernise some of our, frankly, outdated working practices. Without the battles fought in Parliament by the women who have come before us, I do not think we would be here today, fighting for those further changes that will make us more representative of the people we seek to represent. Pioneers such as the indomitable Barbara Castle fought for years to secure equal pay for women. There was also the independent MP Eleanor

Rathbone, who successfully battled to see the Family Allowances Act 1945 become law. They both helped to build the foundations for a better, fairer society, particularly for women.

There are many other inspirational women MPs who have done so much for women's rights. However, that often came at a high price. None of the first four women in Cabinet—Margaret Bondfield, Ellen Wilkinson, Florence Horsbrugh and Barbara Castle—had children, and it is hard to see how in those early decades they could have combined their job, and the antisocial hours it involved at that time, with having much time for family life. The first woman Cabinet member to have children was Judith Hart in 1968, a full 50 years after the first woman took her seat in this place. As the then-Labour MP for Lanark, she found it very hard to combine long periods away from her family with her work in this place, and eventually made the difficult decision to relocate her family from Scotland to London.

The first woman MP to have a baby while serving as a Member of Parliament was the former MP for Welwyn and Hatfield, Baroness Hayman, who had her first baby in 1976. However, just 10 days after giving birth, she was forced to come into Parliament because pairing had been suspended, and there was certainly no proxy voting then. She had to leave her baby in the Whips Office in order to take part in crucial votes. I also remember seeing my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) in a wheelchair in this Chamber two years ago for a key vote, as it was just two days before the birth of her son. At least that unacceptable situation has been ended by the system of proxy voting which, because of cross-party support, now enables MPs who are new parents to nominate another MP to vote on their behalf if they choose to do so.

Despite the hurdles they faced, those remarkable women built the foundations for the work in Parliament taken forward by irrepressible campaigners such as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), Dame Joan Ruddock, and the late and very much missed Dame Tessa Jowell, who all tackled inequalities, injustices and rights for women in Parliament and in the country. In fact, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham has long supported the changes that we are discussing today. Under the last Labour Government, Ruth Kelly, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) had babies while serving as Ministers but had no formal provisions for maternity leave. The same has been true for Conservative Ministers in the past few years. They all watch with interest and contribute to this debate. It is fair to say that their experiences of combining their work as Ministers and their roles as new mothers were mixed, and I am very much looking forward to hearing my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford speak later in this debate.

I have already touched on Barbara Castle's achievements with the Equal Pay Act 1970, which came when there were just 24 female MPs and was a watershed in the fight for gender equality. We have also had the Equality Act 2010 from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham, the introduction of thousands of Sure Start centres, and the introduction

of child tax credits and of free nursery places, all of which have been a lifeline for so many women and families in our country.

However, there is still much work to be done on improving employment conditions for women and the culture in workplaces, both in Westminster and across the rest of the country. The decision a decade ago by the former Speaker to close a bar on the parliamentary estate and replace it with a children's nursery was undoubtedly a welcome move and has benefited many in this House and our staff, but it was not before time. I also recall that in 2015, when I was shadow Work and Pensions Secretary and expecting my second child, a Conservative Member suggested that as an expectant mum I should not be appointed to the Cabinet if Labour won the general election, as I would not be able to manage doing two things at once. I hope that he has since revised his opinions, and I am pleased that this Bill will allow Cabinet Ministers, for the first time, to have paid time off after the birth of a child.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I am sorry to hear the experience that the hon. Lady is recounting. She has been paying tribute to pioneering, so I wonder whether she will join me in paying tribute to Aileen Campbell, a good friend of mine and the first Minister in the Scottish Government to take maternity leave. At that time, the Scottish Government were able to find a way of having a substitute Minister. It is not quite the same as what the Government are proposing today. Aileen and a couple of other MSPs are, sadly, leaving the Scottish Parliament because of these pressures, so it is welcome that we are making small but steady progress along the way to supporting women in politics.

Rachel Reeves: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, which builds on the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that it is important not just in this place, but for other elected representatives, that wherever they are representing their constituents they should be able both to continue doing their job and to bring up a family. We need in this place and in other elected forums to be able to represent the whole country. We say that we represent Britain or our local community, yet too often we do not look like the communities we are meant to serve. I hope that with the sorts of changes in the Bill, and with those in devolved Administrations and councils, we will make ourselves more representative.

Although the measures in the Bill amount to positive change, there is understandable alarm about this Government's track record on workers' rights more generally. It is important that while we today make changes to help women in this place, we also think about employment rights and women's rights more generally. Just like this Bill, the Government's new employment Bill should be an opportunity to extend and safeguard workers' rights, not water them down. However, after a year of silence on that Bill, the Government have failed to deliver on their promise to enhance the rights of all new mums. Pregnant women have found widespread discrimination throughout this pandemic, with many left without basic maternity pay and instead put unlawfully on to statutory sick pay during the pandemic. Indeed, there is a stark contrast to be drawn between the Government's urgent passing of this legislation, which we support, and their inaction on behalf of

struggling pregnant women across the country. I hope that today the Government will reflect on what more they can do to help women in this country.

The Government should also be doing more to help the parents of babies born prematurely. Under the current rules, maternity leave of up to 52 weeks starts when the baby is born, but because a premature baby can spend weeks in hospital, mothers are effectively cheated of spending some of the leave with their new child. I raised this subject two years ago, as a Back Bencher, based on casework in my constituency and working with Bliss—the charity for babies born prematurely or sick that does such brilliant work. I called on the Government then to change the rules so that new parents of premature babies are not put under further unnecessary pressure; today, I again urge the Government to bring forward plans to ensure that parents of premature babies are given the time and flexibility granted to other parents to care for their baby once their baby is home.

At present, Ministers have no rights when it comes to maternity, paternity or adoption leave. If a Minister wants to take maternity leave, as the Paymaster General set out, the rules do not allow for them to continue to receive a Government salary along with the person providing their maternity cover. It is right that that should be changed to remove that barrier in a woman's career. The Bill would end that anomaly and mean that Ministers would not have to face being financially penalised or forced to stand down from their ministerial role to care for a newborn. The changes would bring Ministers into line with most civil servants by providing them with a period of six months' leave on full pay.

Last year, there was cross-party support for the change that now allows MPs who are new parents to use the proxy voting scheme, so they can spend precious time with their new child. The proposals before us today represent another baby step in what should be an ongoing modernisation of working practices to ensure that women do not get a raw deal at work due to failure to move with the times. It is a shame that it has taken the pregnancy of a member of the Cabinet—happy news though that is—for this Government to realise that improving the workplace rights of expectant parents should be a priority. This change will benefit family life, remove a barrier to career progression, and ensure that having a baby does not come with a financial penalty as well as the sleepless nights that none of us can prevent. However, we need to see far more progress by the Government on this issue to ensure that women and all workers are treated fairly in the workplace, including when they have children.

We are behind the times when it comes to adopting modern, family-friendly working practices in Parliament and in Government, and change is long overdue. I ask the Minister to make a firm commitment to review and explore, as a matter of urgency, further potential reforms that can be made with cross-party support to ensure that this “mother of Parliaments” is a Parliament that genuinely welcomes mothers. This should be the start, not the end of a journey by this Government to deliver more employment rights and to give workers in all workplaces and in all jobs the protection and support they need and deserve.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call Caroline Nokes, I want to set out the time limits that will apply. As Chair of the Women and Equalities

[Mr Deputy Speaker]

Committee, Caroline Nokes will have six minutes. She will be followed by another Front-Bench spokesperson. Then, from Cherilyn Mackrory onwards, a four-minute limit will apply, and that may be reduced later.

1.27 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: I appreciate being called in this debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is an honour to follow not only my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General, but the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), who made a number of incredibly important points, some of which I will echo. I want to put on the record my thanks to my right hon. Friend for having taken the time to speak to me ahead of the introduction of the Bill. It is incredibly important that we do this and that we get it right.

I start from the principle that no woman, whoever she is, should be forced to resign her job because she is pregnant and needs to take maternity leave. It is 2021, and that principle is, in my view, absolutely beyond question. I therefore support my right hon. Friend today because we have to solve the immediate issue, and we have to allow our right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General the right to take maternity leave. Like everyone else in this House, I wish her well as—fingers crossed—she earns the right to be the first Minister in history who is deemed to be a Minister on leave. But—my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General knows my thoughts on this—what a mess! It is well into the 21st century before we have had to face this situation, and why oh why did it cross nobody's mind that we might need to address this issue before it acquired the urgency it now has? Is it really unthinkable that a Secretary of State or one of our Law Officers can become—heavens above!—pregnant? Where is the Government Equalities Office in the horizon scanning, thinking about what other inequalities lurk in our procedures, our way of running Government, so that they can be ironed out sooner rather than later?

Although I regret that the legislation is coming only now, at least it is coming now. But does it go far enough? It is painfully evident that it does not. Where is adoption leave, and what about provision for shared parental leave? Can my right hon. Friend put my mind at rest that this position of Minister on leave is sufficiently flexible to allow a male Secretary of State who has become a new parent to take it up? I think there are challenges here, and while I recognise the fear that making this a more comprehensive Bill would risk delaying it, thus disadvantaging the one woman it is designed to help, I regret to say that I need significant reassurance that there will be swift action to address questions around adoption, surrogacy and the myriad issues that may well crop up in the future.

Returning to the theme, this Bill is designed to stop, quite rightly, one woman from having to resign, and indeed those who we hope will follow in her footsteps in Cabinet positions. My right hon. Friend will know that the Women and Equalities Committee published this week our report on the gendered economic impact of covid. It specifically highlighted the position of pregnant women who have been incorrectly put on statutory sick pay instead of maternity pay, and those who have been

denied furlough, when they could have been placed on it, because they were pregnant. One of the recommendations in that report urges the Government to introduce legislation in this parliamentary Session to extend redundancy protection to pregnant women and new mothers. I am sure my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) will say something on this later; she had an excellent ten-minute rule Bill on the subject.

My right hon. Friend the Paymaster General has found time for a Bill for one woman, but the Government have not found time yet for a Bill for thousands of others. I urge them to do so. The report also calls for a cross-departmental strategy for dealing with pregnancy and maternity discrimination. The mere fact that we are here debating this Bill demonstrates that even in Government, in the 21st century, maternity discrimination can prevail. While I recognise that this might be outside my right hon. Friend's remit, I hope she will take the message back to fellow Ministers that a great deal more work needs to be done. That could perhaps be in the long-awaited employment Bill, which might include provisions on such things as miscarriage leave and leave for parents with a sick child.

Finally—I do appreciate that this is a narrow Bill, and that I may be testing your patience, Mr Deputy Speaker—may I raise the issue of equalities impact assessments? There is a danger that legislation introduced at pace will overlook equalities considerations. We have seen that occur throughout the pandemic. Measures introduced with good intentions for good purposes have sometimes had impacts that had not fully been considered from an equalities perspective. Please can we try to avoid the same mistake here? By not including adoption leave or provision for surrogacy, are we perhaps inviting equalities challenges further down the line? I would like an assurance from my right hon. Friend that an equalities impact assessment will be done, and I would like that to be given to us from the Dispatch Box today.

We have to do this now. We could have done a great deal more, and when my r hon. Friend winds up, I hope that she gives me the reassurance I need that the Government recognise that the job is not yet done. There is still a great deal of work left for them to do on maternity rights, but this is a crucial step—for now.

1.33 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) [V]: I also welcome this Bill in principle and as far as it goes, which is not far enough, but perhaps it is a sign that this House and the UK Government recognise that they have some way to go to begin catching up with the world around them.

On issues of equality and of acknowledging and breaking down barriers, this House deservedly has a reputation for making progress very slowly. Today we are discussing something that should surely already be in place, not simply because elected office should not be a barrier to a family, but because attitudes and practices here have a material impact on the lack of proper treatment and the prevalence of issues such as maternity and pregnancy discrimination outside this place.

It was not until 1975 that statutory maternity leave was introduced in the UK through the Employment Protection Act 1975—later than in most countries in Europe. Indeed, with this Bill, welcome though it is,

progress continues to be too slow. Here, the perplexing basis for maternity leave is that the Minister must seek permission from the Prime Minister to take such leave, the implication being that the Prime Minister retains the power to say, “No, the maternity leave is not granted.” How very Edwardian in 2021.

The rest of the world has long since moved on to the position that maternity leave should be a right rather than a discretionary benefit. How we can expect people to appreciate that and act in that way if this place is so backward-looking? It should not be necessary for women to seek the potentially grudging consent of a boss to take maternity leave.

I was fortunate when I twice took maternity leave to have a supportive and encouraging boss. It was clear to me that I had the right and, importantly, the support to take the leave that was right for me and my family. I wonder how I would have felt if the ability to grant my leave was in the gift of my boss, given that we cannot always be guaranteed the supportive boss that I had. For me, that happened well before any involvement in politics.

Our representation is clearly not reflective of who we are. We are far less diverse as a political class than those we represent, and the lack of proper provision for maternity feeds into that. We cannot expect that lack of representation to improve unless we improve the structures that we work within. I wonder whether I would have wanted to stand for election to this place as a younger woman starting a family, considering the various challenges, including gaps in provision for MPs and Ministers.

We have heard about heavily pregnant MPs being wheeled through the Lobby recently, against all logic and surely against advice, because the arcane processes of this House were simply not set up to accommodate their needs. This House can and should be better than that. We have a duty to be better. We cannot simply go along with the make-do-and-mend approach that the UK Government have had for so long.

The posts of Ministers on maternity leave have been left vacant, and their responsibilities have been carried out as best as possible by colleagues who are also carrying out their own responsibilities. The one thing that has saved all that from crumbling is that no one fulfilling a Secretary of State role in the UK Government has ever tried to take maternity leave. That fact reveals a great deal about the relative importance of the issue in the minds of those at the very top.

We have rightly heard comments about the contrast between arrangements in the House and those outside it. That is important. The contrast between the speed at which the Bill has been progressed and the shocking delays in dealing with the pressing needs of pregnant women in the pandemic is stark and just not good enough. The fact that maternity allowance is just £151.20 a week, which is about half the national minimum wage for a full-time worker, is deplorable. The fact that it will increase by only 77p a week in April is frankly an insult. Those issues must also be addressed. I realise that they are not before us today, but they all fit together into a lack of care and direction from the Government.

The mechanism that the Bill identifies for repairing the current crumbling edifice of ministerial maternity cover should be uncontroversial. Any organisation needs to provide for such events, which routinely happen, so

I hope that no one would seriously suggest that, in a large ministerial team, there should not be contingencies to support maternity leave. However—I repeat myself in case we lose sight of the point—it is incredible that it has taken until 2021 for the UK Government and the House to address the matter.

The explanatory notes describe provision for maternity leave as problematic or “particularly difficult to apply” to a Minister in a very senior office, such as a Secretary of State,

“because the legal exercise of functions of such roles cannot be ‘covered’ by another Minister.”

I am afraid that I do not buy that. That is just a cop-out. It sounds like exactly the kind of excuse that has been used by backsliders on this issue ever since the idea of maternity leave in employment entered our thinking. It is followed by the statement:

“The result is that a Minister in such a role who wished to take extended maternity leave would need to resign their office.”

It is breathtaking to see that kind of language. It makes us check our calendars to make sure that we are in 2021. How can we expect improvements and proper treatment outside this place if that is how we run things here?

The explanatory notes reveal exactly the kind of thinking that we all know still goes on in recruitment to senior jobs, and that results in the glass ceiling for women in so many institutions. They display the unconscious bias that underpins so much systemic discrimination in the UK and around the world.

To signal that that kind of thinking has no place at the centre of political and economic power, the SNP has tabled an amendment to remove the notion that prime ministerial discretion should have effect in relation to maternity leave. Ministers, MPs—all of us—should feel secure in the knowledge that we work for an organisation where no guilt will be piled on us if we take time off for maternity or, in fact, for family reasons. We have to be clear that there is a need to look more broadly than this very narrow issue, that this long-awaited progress does not go far enough, and that the scope of the Bill is not great enough.

These things matter, not only because the arrangements put in place by this House for the UK Government are important for the proper operation of the Government, but because they act as a signpost to other companies and organisations in the UK as to what approach they are expected to take. We do not have to look far to see the issues out there. A survey of 20,000 women by *Pregnant Then Screwed* last summer found that 61% believed that their maternity leave was a factor in their redundancy decision. Given the example set by this House and the UK Government today, that is perhaps not surprising.

It is also unsurprising that the UK ranks poorly among OECD countries for how it deals with maternity. The UK has the second lowest-paying rate for maternity leave, with less than a third of gross average earnings replaced by maternity payments; despite lengthy maternity leave entitlements, full-rate equivalent paid maternity leave lasts just 12 weeks. That is why, as a statement of principle, we have tabled amendments that would extend Ministers’ maternity leave from six to 12 months.

Let me be clear that that does not mean that we support one rule for Ministers’ maternity leave and another for the general public; the amendments set out what the direction of travel must be for the whole

[Kirsten Oswald]

workforce. I hope that as part of the preparation for the wider review that I talked about, including the broader area of parental support provision, the Government will look carefully at that and ensure that equalities impact assessments are carried out before this business returns—quickly—to the House, so that these things can be addressed in the round.

That should include an examination of the challenges facing Members in their constituencies and their legislative roles when they become new parents. It is interesting that the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority this morning seemed to recognise that it, too, needs to look at that. When the Minister looks further, I urge her to look at the words of the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament, which said:

“The lack of formal maternity and parental leave for MPs is entirely out of step with wider society and gives the impression that the work of a Parliamentarian is not appropriate for those with caring responsibilities.”

That is the crux of the issue. It is completely unacceptable that this House and the UK Government have got to 2021 without putting in order their own arrangements for properly supporting maternity leave.

On the basis that we need to make progress on this issue today, the SNP is supportive of what the Minister has brought forward, but if the Bill is to pass largely as drafted, I will be keen to hear from her significant commitments to returning to this issue before the summer to correct some of the glaring omissions and the lack of principle, so that we can fix this issue and send the important messages that we must send beyond this place.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With a four-minute limit, I call Cherilyn Mackrory.

1.43 pm

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for her opening remarks and for ensuring that the Bill is being debated today.

Many will ask why this issue has not been addressed already. It is over 100 years since Nancy Astor entered this place, and we still have not quite got it right. The Bill is another welcome step towards ensuring that Parliament and a career in frontline politics are a realistic option for all women, whatever our time in life. It is vital that all obstacles of inequality are removed and that all important contributions can be made.

It is my hope that by passing the Bill, we will open the door a little wider for many young women considering entering Parliament in the future. Being an elected representative for their local community should be a viable option for as many people as possible, and the more obstructions that we can remove, the better. I want as many capable young women as possible to think that becoming a Minister is a viable option for them, regardless of their age or their fertility.

The Bill is highly unlikely to affect me personally, but as the co-chair of the APPG on baby loss, I have a special interest in the health of mother and baby. The Bill is a step towards improving the condition of both, with Government setting the example that the health of a mum and baby comes first. It is fundamental that in a free, modern and civilised society such as ours, we give a clear signal that this is paramount. The wheels of the

Whitehall machine must not stand in the way of the most precious time that any new mum has to bond with her newborn baby. This time is important not only for the physical and emotional recovery of mum but to the continuation of the physical and emotional development of the baby, and thus to the life chances of that child.

Unfortunately, the level of pregnancy and maternity discrimination in the UK is still astonishing, with an estimated 54,000 mothers every year being forced to leave their jobs because of how they are being treated during their pregnancy or maternity leave or after they return to work. These worrying statistics are from a report produced in 2016 by the then Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Equality and Human Rights Commission on the prevalence and the nature of pregnancy discrimination and disadvantage in the workplace. The covid pandemic has made this even more stark. At present, employers can lawfully make a woman who is pregnant or on maternity leave redundant if they carry out a fair redundancy process, and the only responsibility the employer must have in these circumstances is to make them an offer of a suitable alternative vacancy. All this can, and does, lead to a crazy amount of stress for a pregnant woman or new mum at the time when stress levels should absolutely be kept to a minimum for the sake of her own health and that of her baby. Sustained strategies such as these can lead to pregnancy loss, low birth weight, and post-natal depression.

The particular nature of our job does not help. I have been very upset to read and learn of some of the shocking abuse that female colleagues in all parts of the House have taken for daring to have a baby while being an MP. That is simply not acceptable, because MPs are also wives, daughters, sisters, grandmothers and friends. It is not acceptable for any new mother to feel that extra pressure, or to be told that they are skiving, not working hard enough or should not be having a baby while serving in office. Post-natal depression, if left unchecked, can and does lead to tragic suicide. Do we really want to wait for a female MP who has post-natal depression to be pushed too far before society sits up and takes notice? MPs are not alone in suffering from post-natal depression, and I would not wish for special treatment, but society does seem to think it acceptable to target its anger towards MPs.

I mentioned in my speech last October as part of Baby Loss Awareness Week that birth is always perilous for women. I hope that the Bill sends an important signal to society that women and the contributions they make are valued.

1.47 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab) [V]: I strongly support the Bill and everything that has been said so far by the Minister, by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) in an excellent speech, and by the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee. I also fully support everything said by the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory).

The Bill formally recognises that women now play an invaluable role in public life and that women have babies, and that we should support them and not downgrade them when they do. It is true that it has taken forever for us to get here, but better late than never. I do think we

must give the Government credit for bringing the Bill forward, because they could have tried the fudge, favours and verbal behind-closed-doors promises that were the best that women Ministers could have hoped for in the past. The Bill sends a big and important public signal of valuing women's work and recognising their commitment, including at the highest level. The Government have done the right thing by the Attorney General and women Cabinet Ministers; now they need to put right the completely wrong situation for the rest of the women in this country.

Women are doing an amazing thing when they have a baby. It takes a huge toll on a woman's body to carry a baby, and it is the most demanding thing to care for a new baby, and yet we punish them by cutting their income and making them insecure at work. Statutory maternity pay is only £152 per week—less than half of what people get on the national minimum wage—so the woman's income is clobbered just when she needs to be spending more. Honestly, if men had babies, do we really think that maternity pay would be so insultingly low? Not a chance. The law allows a year for maternity leave, but many women are forced to go back way before that, and before they feel they or their baby are really ready, because they simply cannot afford not to, or they fear—with justification—that they will be downgraded or even sacked if they take more than a few months.

We are here in Parliament to do the hugely important job of being an MP, but we have an additional responsibility as women in Parliament to fight to improve the lives of women in this country. Therefore, as I give the Attorney General my genuine and warmest best wishes for her second baby, I am counting on her, when she comes back, to be an outspoken champion in Government of the maternity rights of all women.

1.50 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who has blazed a trail on so many of these issues in the time that she has been a Member of the House. It is also a reminder that although she has been such a powerful advocate for women, we still have so many outstanding injustices to tackle, with the Bill tackling one of the most outstanding ones.

It seems staggering that in the 21st century we are still having to legislate for fair treatment and equality for women. We should not demur from grappling with these challenges as soon as they materialise. All of us here who are women Members of Parliament continue to encounter discrimination, whether on our own part or when fighting for constituents. Those challenges are reflected in our having a Minister for Women and Equalities, and indeed a Women and Equalities Committee. Of course, we must tackle the fact that not all unfairnesses and injustices can be dealt with by legislation; most today are behavioural and practical in their nature. However, by holding this debate, shining a light and taking action ourselves, we can give the best possible leadership to all employers in the country—and all women in the country, to show that we are on their side.

I very much welcome the Bill as an advance in women's rights, but I felt moved to table amendments because of representations that I have had from women about its

language. I fully understand the challenges that the Government faced in bringing forward this legislation. Clearly, the need to amend existing legislation made the job more difficult, and the use of language was not especially easy. None the less, I felt it important that we reflect on that.

The fact that we are holding this debate today explains why women are anxious about protecting their rights, and why they become very sensitive about language used. We see more and more how our sex is being dehumanised by non-gender-specific terms. A lot of women do not mind. Particularly for younger women, who perhaps have not gone through the fights that some of us who are a bit older have, it does not really matter, but for a lot of women it genuinely does cause distress. It is important that we in this place at least reflect on that, challenge ourselves and ensure that we do use the most sensitive language that we possibly can in tackling these issues.

We shall discuss my amendments in Committee in due course, but I must say that I find it difficult to be challenging my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General on this, because there has been no greater champion of equality than she. I was reassured by her opening comments that, whatever the language in the Bill, it does not reflect any more long-term view. However, the Government need to be sensitive about these issues, because in making a big leap forward in advancing rights, we do not want to alienate anyone with discomfort about the language used.

1.53 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to be part of the debate and the work that we are doing to bring forward this legislation. Let me congratulate the Attorney General, the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman), and wish her well in her forthcoming maternity leave. What is so powerful about this legislation is not just the clarity over her income but the clarity about her actual cover: she will be able to spend time with her child and not receive calls at three o'clock in the morning when the Attorney General is needed.

I welcome the Paymaster General's comment that we need to do more. It is that which I wish to speak on particularly, because, as she has recognised, the Bill benefits only a very small number of women. To benefit only a very small number of women at this time in this country's life is to fail to recognise the peril that may come from this legislation, which is not about its drafting but its scope. We are sending a message that maternity leave should be a perk conferred by an employer as a benefit—just as a company car would be—if we only pass this legislation.

The Paymaster General said that the Prime Minister believes it is wrong that a woman might have to leave work to care for a child, but in truth that is happening in workplaces across the country, and it involves thousands of women. During the pandemic, one in four women who are pregnant or a new mum have said that they have faced discrimination, and that they are losing their jobs or being furloughed. In that context, to work only with that small number of women is not just a missed opportunity, but potentially sets up a two-tier system for maternity leave in this country. As the people who make the laws, we send such a message to businesses regarding how they should treat pregnant women at our peril.

[Stella Creasy]

The Government are currently being taken to court by Pregnant Then Screwed because, when they calculated the self-employment income support scheme, they forgot about women who are self-employed and who took maternity leave. We have heard from many Members about our concerns for public life. It is not an accident that most women who enter public life, not just in this place but in local government and our Assemblies, tend to be older women who have already had children, or those who have chosen not to have them. Even in this Bill, we have yet to begin talking about fathers.

The Bill tells the lie that I was told two years ago when I was pregnant and asked for a locum to cover work in my constituency, so that my constituents would not feel short-changed by having a woman of childbearing age as their MP. However, as MPs, our employment status was too complicated to enable us to act. If we can pass a Bill in a day in this place to address that issue, we could do so much more to ensure that our public life is open to all women. It is a missed opportunity not just for local government, but for the staff who have worked with us in this building, who have terrible maternity rights.

Two years ago I fought for a locum. No other MP has been able to have that, even though I know colleagues across the House who have had terrible experiences of being pregnant and trying to get support. We cannot say, "Don't ask, don't tell." On that basis, let me be clear: the Government have made commitments today but, as the suffragettes said, this must be about deeds not words.

Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker, you may be looking and me and thinking that during lockdown I have been attacking the pies a bit, and you would probably be right. But I am also pregnant with my second child. I am early on in my pregnancy. I should not have to reveal that, but I am doing so today to be clear to pregnant women around this country that they will find champions in this place, and it is not enough for us to act only for that small group of women at the top of our society. We must act for every woman to be able to take maternity leave.

We must make sure that legislation such as that proposed by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) is given time in this House, and we must stop IPSA prevaricating, as it has done for the past two years. We must give every woman in this place the same rights that we are giving the Attorney General. Please, Paymaster General, it is time for deeds not words when it comes to maternity and paternity.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The very best wishes of the House to you, Stella, on your great news.

1.58 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con) [V]: I warmly welcome the Bill, which was a recommendation by the all-party group on women in Parliament under the then chairmanship of Mary Macleod. I send my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) all the very best wishes for her pregnancy. There can be few who would think it fair for a Minister to feel that there was no alternative but to resign from their job because they are pregnant. This Bill means that Ministers will not be forced into that position, which is welcome.

However, being forced to leave a job for being pregnant is exactly what happens to thousands of pregnant women who we represent. In righting this wrong for Government Ministers, will the Paymaster General also undertake to right it for women throughout our country? Codifying the protection of a pregnant woman's job is exactly what thousands of women need now. The people we represent want to know that Ministers are being treated no differently from them. Routinely identifying pregnant women for redundancy is too familiar a problem. Under this Government, record numbers of women are in work, and they are an essential part of our economy. We cannot ignore the fact that for thousands, current legislation provides protection only in theory but not in practice.

The Government's plans to extend tribunal time will not solve that problem. It is a situation that has become more acute, as we have already heard in the debate, over the last 12 months, so will the Paymaster General please add her support for the change that I am calling for in my ten-minute rule Bill? When it comes to modernisation, there is a tendency to take small steps. We do not just pass laws in this place; we influence people, so, please, any proposals for parental support need to be brought forward swiftly. Perhaps she can indicate when in her summing up.

As the Government get their house in order, so must the House of Commons. Bringing in baby leave was a positive step, but it was a small step made in isolation of the broader issues that parents face in this place. There is no clear process in this House for how we agree changes in the way we operate. "Erskine May" says nothing on pregnancy or support for parents, and there is no clear structure in place for us to make a collective decision that cannot be blocked by a small minority, and then that decision has to be acted on. If we are to encourage more people from different backgrounds to want to stand for election, as an institution, we have to change the way we do business. If we do not take action, others might do it for us, undermining our unique position as office holders, not employees. I fully support the Bill, but it demonstrates how much more there is to do.

2.1 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): It is an honour and privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) in this debate. There is no doubt that Parliament needs to be brought into the 21st century. In principle, this is a vital and long overdue Bill and I welcome it. It ensures that female Ministers will have similar maternity rights to other women at work. I very much welcome the further work and proposals that have been spoken about today.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who highlights that the Government must not make this a two-tier system in Parliament, with only those who have the most senior Front-Bench positions having these arrangements. That gives licence to employers to think that maternity leave is a benefit like a company car that can only be offered to some. It is a right, not a privilege.

It is important that shared parental leave is championed by Members in this House to encourage the take-up by men across the United Kingdom. Being a parent is a tough job, and men need to step up and take a more equal share in caring responsibilities.

There remains a significant barrier to women's involvement in politics, which has been spoken about today. As a single parent myself, without the support of my mother, I would not have been able to sit on those green Benches in 2017 when elected. Very few women have that privilege, which is why removing the barriers for new mothers in politics is of great importance to me.

In Chwarae Teg's report "State of the Nation 2021", the figures in Wales are stark: 86% of single parents are women in Wales and 40% of women are part-time workers. Many of these households are in great poverty. I hope that we will see swift changes, so we will not be holding women back and we will enable them to make their full contribution to society and the economy. I look forward to being part of that work.

Also on a serious note, I speak in support of the amendments tabled by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price). I thank the Minister for the comments she has already made on this. It does seem a bit of a misstep in the drafting of the Bill and can be seen as insensitive to many people. The fact that it refers to a "person" who is pregnant and does not mention "woman", "women" or "she" at any point is totally at odds with all other maternity rights and protection legislation. The use of "person" would be asymmetric with the rest of the law on maternity rights and protection.

I give the following examples because we need to be factual: in section 66 of the Employment Rights Act 1996, on suspension from employment on maternity grounds, all references are to "she"; in section 71, "ordinary maternity leave" refers to "she"; in section 73, "additional maternity leave" refers to "her" rights; and in the Equality Act 2010, section 72 onwards, where a woman is employed or holds personal or public office, it is all about maternity equality. I therefore ask the Minister to reconfirm that the wording of the Bill will not be rushed in through the backdoor at this very difficult time, without scrutiny, discussion or challenge. The Government can be better and can move quicker, as we have seen with the speed of the Bill's introduction. We all have to be better; we have to do more for new mothers, and not just those who have the privilege of being a Member of this House.

2.5 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con) [V]: Though it is a mission of Back-Bench parliamentarians to bring this Palace to life, the service and sacrifices made by Ministers in pursuit of the common good and shared endeavour should be recognised and celebrated. They are responsible for the actions, successes and failures of entire Departments, so it is perhaps inevitable that some will become overwhelmed by the sheer scale of that challenge. But it is easy, too, for ministerial office to consume the holder, defining their decisions, both privately and personally. That is precisely why this Bill is so important. In life, irrespective of how grand or important we are, what we do should never trump what we are, as individuals or as a people. When all is said and done, it is the metaphysical, the beautiful and the relational that cultivates grateful perspective and lasting joy.

Whether as mothers or fathers, sons or daughters, parenthood, as a fundamental feature of our humanity, matters. As such, it is right that we reflect on how we as

a nation, as a Government and as a Parliament support parenthood, opportunity and, in particular, as this Bill does, support mothers. How do we recognise and reward the service and sacrifice required to raise a child from birth to maturity, to shape the intricacies of a human soul with kindness, commitment, discipline and restraint? This Bill is a welcome start. It provides an example. For if we in Parliament get this wrong, how can we expect others to get it right?

That a woman at any stage in her life must be supported emotionally and financially from the moment her baby is conceived is surely the right thing to say, but also the right thing to do. There is a communal societal duty to support children, and indeed adults at every stage of life, from the first heartbeat before birth to the final breath. By formalising the process by which Ministers can take paid maternity leave while remaining in Government, the Bill will go some way towards eliminating any subtle or subconscious pressure placed on women in public life to abandon their pregnancy, or indeed to compromise the care they give in the early stages of life.

I pay tribute to the work of my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General, who has taken the Bill from its conception to, we hope, its legislative adoption. By the way, this is this Attorney General who had the courage to give up her lucrative career as a lawyer in order to enter Parliament; the Attorney General who had the will to refer the case of PC Harper to the Appeal Court; the Attorney General who is reforming the practice on disclosure; the Attorney General who successfully argued recently to increase the sentences of a rapist in the Court of Appeal.

It must be noted, however—it is too often the case with Government—that artlessness or heartlessness has allowed the capture of a well-meaning and just Bill by civil servants who have clumsily excluded the word "women". That can be put right in Committee and I will say more about that then.

The Bill can also be the beginning of a new focus on family. I recommend the work of another hon. Friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), whose manifesto to strengthen families provides a blueprint that the Government can follow to do just that. Among that report's recommendations, alongside sensible reforms to tax and benefits, is a suggestion that we should look again at the criminal justice system.

The Bill is an important step, but it is only a step on a long journey—a journey that affirms the role of women in public life and the role that women play in families and in wider society. It is also a Bill that is proud of motherhood and, my goodness, in the mother of Parliaments, should not we all share that pride?

2.9 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) [V]: I start by paying tribute to Becky Regan, the NHS worker who very sadly passed away last week after catching covid when heavily pregnant. Every life taken by this disease is a terrible tragedy, but the sense of loss is even more acute in this case, because Becky had just given birth to her fourth child. My thoughts are with Becky's family, friends and colleagues at this desperately sad time.

I mention Becky's case because the pandemic has been particularly challenging for pregnant women and new families. There are many areas where new and expectant mothers could and should be better supported.

[Wera Hobhouse]

This Bill must prompt wider conversations about the rights of pregnant women and new parents in the workplace. The conversation should cover not just Cabinet Ministers, but the millions of parents across the UK who are struggling with inadequate parental leave policies. It is shocking that the Government are only looking at this injustice now because a colleague in a high place has run into difficulties with the unacceptable provision currently in place. It is also typical of this Government to bring in legal changes that narrowly protect one colleague, rather than trying to do justice for everybody.

The principle of the Bill is long overdue. There is absolutely no question but that the Attorney General should take paid maternity leave and then return to her post. I recognise that this legislation must pass at pace in order for her to do so, but I am looking for a commitment from Government that this issue will be revisited with broader legislation as soon as possible. We need time to give it proper scrutiny. I would also welcome a commitment that further legislation will create proper legal rights for paternity and adoption leave, as well as maternity leave. No one, whether in high places or not, should be forced to choose between a career and having children. I hope that this Bill will prompt the Government into strengthening the employment rights of pregnant women and new parents across the UK.

The Bill will allow Ministers to take up to six months of leave on full pay. In contrast, far too many families in the UK are struggling financially. The basic rate of statutory maternity pay and maternity allowance is just £151.20 a week—only about half the national minimum wage. Proper paid maternity leave in the UK is among the lowest in Europe. We rank 22nd out of 24 countries. This Bill must be the start for change for pregnant women and new parents across the UK. It is our duty to do a lot better from now on.

2.12 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab) [V]: The thrust of the Bill is long overdue and much needed, and to that extent, it should be welcomed. For far too long, an artificial and arbitrary barrier has been put in front of women who wish to serve their constituents in government. It has been a case of naked discrimination hiding in plain sight. By allowing the Prime Minister to designate a Minister on leave, we will in some respects be bringing the world of public office in line with the world of work. It should go without saying that we should be an exemplar of workplace rights, but in truth, this place has all too often treated the many women elected to it as an irritant or an afterthought.

I still have many reservations about the Bill. Why, for instance, have the Government wasted this opportunity by making the Bill applicable only to Cabinet-level positions? If we want to see a Government and legislature that reflect our wider society, they must be a welcoming place for all those who work across them. The Government should revisit that aspect of the Bill and correct it immediately because, by continuing with such glaring gaps in the system, we are sending out a dangerous message to employees across the UK. We are saying that it is okay to think of women as secondary to the needs of the organisation, that a token effort is effort enough, that protecting the management is a job well

done and that women should be grateful for whatever small breaks are afforded them. That type of thinking leads us further down a path where women are de facto excluded from decision-making roles and positions of power, while needlessly snuffing out the aspirations of future generations.

It is all well and good speaking in abstracts, but for me, this Bill is also very personal. As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am both an expectant first-time mother and a first-time MP. When I stood for election, I did so because I wanted to do right by my constituents in Parliament and to stand up for a set of principles that should transcend party politics. And yet, as a Member of Parliament, with all the vast opportunity and privilege that that affords me, I am scared. I am scared about taking informal maternity leave when my baby arrives in two months; it is informal as there is no formalised maternity leave for Back-Bench MPs. I am scared that it will be used against me politically and, most depressing of all, I am scared that, beneath the warm words of good luck and congratulations, some Members will take a dim view of my taking maternity leave at all.

Today we need to fix immediately the fundamental failing of the Bill before us, even while accepting its fundamental necessity. We must view this as a chance not to fix a problem for a Minister but to right a wrong for countless women—Members and staff—and start changing the culture around maternity rights in this place. We can send a signal to all employers that this is not just the right thing to do here; it is simply the right thing to do. That is where the majority of the country is. It is time that Parliament starts to follow in the nation's footsteps and recognise the huge benefit that women bring to this workplace and countless others.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for her speech, and I would like to offer, on behalf of everyone here, our sincerest congratulations and warmest wishes to her.

2.16 pm

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con) [V]: Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to start by echoing your congratulations to the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark) and to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) on the impending birth of their children.

This debate is so timely, and it covers so many important issues. That fact is that people take notice of what we do in this place. We should be leading—we should be a leader—and I am afraid that, at times, we are not. No one should have to resign from their job—a job that they have worked hard for over many years to obtain—simply because they have had a child. I glad that this legislation will finally stop a scenario where women are effectively excluded from taking a role in Government for fear of having a child.

I was saddened to hear from the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) that we are losing a lot of good politicians in Scotland, due to them having to make these exact decisions. It makes our politics less. It means that we lose that quality and that insight. We lose those experiences that are so vital in debate, that help us to understand those perspectives when we add them to our discourse and that ultimately make our politics better.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) said, we still have a lot of work to do, and I do not think anyone would deny that. We need to ensure that we use this opportunity to close the gender gap. As the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) pointed out, this place is still skewed towards having too many male Members. We have to ensure that we take practical steps to at least enable a fair roll of the dice, so that people can get involved in politics.

This is not abstract. For communities like mine in the Black Country—in Wednesbury, Oldbury and Tipton—what we are talking about today is not disconnected. If we want to ensure that people can aspire to achieve, take an active role in our politics and see people such as themselves involved in our public life, we need to ensure that having a family does not prevent them from getting involved in politics at all levels. The Bill goes some way towards doing that, but as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, we must not forget about local government. One of the benefits of the Bill is that it has triggered wider discussion, and I hope that we will talk more widely about how we can extend this across all our politics and all levels of government.

As we talk about levelling up—something from this Government that I have been very proud to champion—we have to ensure that we do not exclude people based on their gender. At present, it would seem that in some ways that is happening. We need to ensure that we have a system that enables everyone to engage in our public life and our politics. As many right hon. and hon. Members have pointed out, we also need to end the stigma—the idea that it is somehow wrong for someone in public office to have a family, that we are not human beings and that we do not act as normal people do. This legislation goes some way towards doing that.

I very much welcome the comments of the Paymaster General, my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), but I ask her to remember this: men have an equally important role to play. As we continue this debate and as the Bill opens up those lines of discussion, we have to ensure that men can play an equally important role in the upbringing of their children, because we know that the role of a father, as well as a mother, is so important. As someone who did not have a father growing up, I can assure my right hon. Friend that it is vital that we enable children to have that full family. I fully support the Bill and commend my right hon. Friend.

2.20 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I welcome what the Government are trying to do with this legislation. I know that it is for a specific case that has come about relatively recently, but I support the idea that we should do everything we can to ensure that public life is open to all. The current rules are antiquated, so this Bill is absolutely a step in the right direction. I am particularly glad to see the inclusion in the provisions of those who, sadly, have stillborn children.

It is quite right that we are looking at this issue, although, as the Minister said, the beneficiaries are narrow. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) said, it opens up a real question around the leadership of this House and what we want to do for the future. I was particularly glad to hear that the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) supports

the legislation, and that following this Bill the Government are looking at proper cross-party working on paternity leave, adoption leave and shared parental leave.

There was one thing in the Minister's opening remarks with which I disagreed: that this legislation affects the 115 people currently in positions in the Government. It does not, because it does not cover shared parental leave or paternity leave. I really hope that those matters will be considered as quickly as possible. I have several friends in couples where both partners are working, and who are in very difficult positions at the moment. For example, one partner—now often the woman—is earning a higher amount of money but might actually want to go back to work sooner than the man, and they cannot do that because there are not equal rights, in the same workplace, for men and women on shared parental leave. It is a real issue that is affecting people across the country right now. We in this House have a responsibility to put it at front and centre, and to lead the way on these issues.

The Bill is a step in the right direction. I echo some of the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West, particularly about the importance of men's role in bringing up children. We are not going to crack the issue of shared parental leave and men taking more responsibility for the children they have until we move beyond the narrow debate that we are having today, and broaden it out to the issues that affect families—yes, in ministerial office, but right across the country as well.

Some important issues were raised from the Opposition Front Bench, particularly around caring for newborn children. It is hugely important that people's careers, particularly at ministerial level, are not held back by outdated practices. I would like my right hon. Friend the Minister to reflect on some of the concerns raised by me and other Members across the House. We really want to see these issues, particularly around shared parental leave, brought to the fore. We want to ensure that people—whatever their gender—are there and doing what they can to support the upbringing of their children.

2.24 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP) [V]: The SDLP certainly welcomes this move in the right direction but, like others, we have some disappointment that the principle of a woman being able to take maternity leave has required speedy legislation to be put right. This should have been addressed earlier; the gap has been apparent for a while and it should have been addressed more comprehensively and systematically. This should not hinge on the situation, the pregnancy or the career of any individual having to be so intrusively and widely discussed. The swift action to correct the situation when it affects a member of the governing party's top team feels like a contrast with the response to the rights and needs of other pregnant women and mothers in wider society.

The fact that this legislation is “just in time”, to borrow a topical phrase, is an illustration of the archaic nature of some aspects of this institution, and of the reforms that are needed to ensure that political and Government structures are fit for purpose and have equality at their core. It would be glossing over a wide range of complex structural and cultural issues to imply that fixes such as this will magically open up political

[*Claire Hanna*]

opportunity to many more parents, but if correctly done, this Bill could address one of the chill factors for those who either have or are planning families, and it would be a small but visible example of Parliament actively enshrining fairness. Whatever a woman's job might be, taking a reasonable amount of time off to have a baby should not be a perk and should not be something that has to be negotiated; it should be a right.

As others have mentioned, MPs are not employees but officeholders, and as a result are excluded from some standard maternity rights. Many self-employed women face similar penalties in relation to maternity-linked lost earnings in terms of the self-employed income support that has been available earlier this year and last year. I want to highlight the fact that we need to stop thinking about childbirth and motherhood as some sort of random occurrence or curiosity, but rather as reality—and happy reality for a very large part of the working population. It is also worth saying that the devolved institutions and councils, including the Assembly, where I previously served, are not doing very much better in this regard, and I hope that the discussion we are having today catalyses change there too.

The debate has been genuinely informative, particularly the engaging potted history of trailblazers in this regard from the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). I want to commend other Members, including the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), and I hope that the Government will apply rigour and adopt her proposals on non-discrimination for new mums. I also commend the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who has been relentless in her campaigning for the rights of other parliamentarians.

The terms and conditions that are offered in the Bill contrast favourably with those offered to other public servants, and this highlights the paucity of offering for NHS staff doctors, for example, who are entitled to only eight weeks' full pay, or for teachers, who, certainly here in Northern Ireland, are entitled to only four weeks' full pay. Of course, the situation is much worse for people in other sectors, and tragically so for people in the gig economy. That is the sort of levelling-up agenda that we need the Government to actively pursue. We concede that the Government have moved fast because they want to, but they need to deploy the same speed and core purpose to raising standards for all working parents and, of course, to broadening this out to adoption and to paternity leave as well. We need to make this place not a place apart but a modern workforce reflecting the whole population.

2.28 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: I congratulate the Attorney-General on her pregnancy and on being the first Cabinet Minister to take maternity leave. It is 20 years ago this summer since I was the first Minister to take maternity leave, and it is quite astonishing that it has taken two decades for a Cabinet Minister to be able to do the same. Three male Prime Ministers and a Chancellor have had new babies in recent years, but no women in the Cabinet have done so until now. So this is a step forward, and of course Ministers should be able to take maternity leave

and have maternity cover, and if we want it to be normal across the economy and society, we have to show that it is possible in Government.

I welcome this legislation, but it is limited. Even within Government, it does not provide for fathers to do their bit in the family in those early months or cover adoption leave. It does not cover parliamentary issues and, really importantly, it does not cover councillors, with the Fawcett Society saying that just 7% of councils have a maternity policy in place. Of course, importantly, it does not deal with the ongoing and unfair discrimination that still happens in practice against women in so many different workplaces across the country, because the systems for protecting maternity rights are still too weak.

When I needed to take maternity leave as the Minister for Public Health in 2001, I asked the Health Secretary what I should do. He did not know, and said, "Ask the Prime Minister." He did not know, and said, "Ask the Cabinet Secretary." He had absolutely no idea, and as Ministers are Crown appointments, he said it was really a matter for the Queen, but nobody thought we should be asking Her Majesty. We then tried to work something out that was similar to civil servants' arrangements. We did not get it all right, and the lack of proper cover arrangements caused difficulties, and while the Health Department was really supportive, that informal approach proved inadequate a few years later when I took maternity leave again. The Communities Department was not as supportive, and I had to struggle to get basic arrangements in place.

When we were drawing up those arrangements, no one had thought about this before. That was bad enough 20 years ago, but we have no excuse for a short-term, reactive approach now. The rushed and limited nature of this Bill shows that Government are still doing the same, despite the fact that many Ministers and many parliamentarians have needed to take maternity leave since then. This kind of reactive approach is, I think, still discouraging women from coming forward into public life, and that is bad for democracy. It still risks being discriminatory, particularly for councillors, but perhaps most importantly of all, it shows that at the heart of government, the civil service and Parliament, maternity arrangements for everyone still are not really being taken seriously enough.

It is great that the first Cabinet Minister is taking maternity leave and it is good that the Government have brought forward legislation to make it happen, but it is time we had a more comprehensive approach to make sure that maternity and paternity leave can be a normal part of everyone's lives. We need a timetable from the Government about when they are going to address some of the political and Government issues in relation to Parliament, but also to look at councillors. Most importantly of all, we need action against the maternity discrimination that is still taking place, often highlighted during the covid crisis, but also deeply rooted in too many workplaces right across the country, so that many more women can properly be able to keep on working and support their families, and many more fathers can support them in doing so as well.

2.32 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) [V]: It is an honour and a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) and the right hon.

Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). I welcome this Bill, but, as others have said, it does not go far enough to tackle maternity discrimination. That said, I am delighted for the Attorney General, and I wish her every blessing with her pregnancy.

I want to focus my concerns on one aspect of this Bill that has been mentioned already: why does this Bill make no mention of women? It is women who give birth and women who benefit from maternity leave. Is this a reflection of the ideological language that is now seen across schools, universities and the NHS, which bans use of the word “woman” and use of the word “lesbian”? Why must we deny the fact that there are two sexes, and why must we deny that biological sex exists? Why are the Government not complying with the Equality Act 2010? That legislation refers to pregnancy and maternity, and uses the day-to-day language of centuries: woman, she and her.

If this is an innocent mistake, then let us put it right quickly and easily by replacing the word “person” with “woman”, but if it is not, let us talk just for a moment about the erasure of women. Most women do not even know that this erasure of their sex class is going on, and when they find out they are appalled and they cannot believe it. Those of us who try to warn of the consequences of the erasure of biological reality and the reality of womanhood from legislation are often pilloried. Many politicians are now so in thrall to those who wish to erase women for the purposes of advancing gender identity theory that they call those of us who advocate for women’s sex-based rights transphobic, even when we have never done or said anything against equal rights for trans people in our lives, and even when some of us were trans allies before it was fashionable to be such.

It is not transphobic to advocate for women’s sex-based rights under the Equality Act 2010. It is possible, and right, to support both trans rights and women’s rights. Neither should be sacrificed for the sake of the other. We can have an inclusive society for everyone without doing that. Sex is a protected characteristic for a very good reason: discrimination against women is rooted in their biology. That is our lived experience. We must find a way to be inclusive without erasing women’s biology and women’s lived experience from the statute book, so why is this Bill doing that? Women are not “chest feeders”, a phrase we heard earlier this week: women have breasts, and women feed their children with their breasts. Lesbians are same-sex attracted: we are attracted to women’s bodies, not men’s bodies, and to say we must be attracted to men’s bodies is homophobic. These things need to be said, and they need to be said in this mother of Parliaments, so let us put this Bill right and reflect the reality and the law, as set out in the Equality Act and supported by the CEDAW convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

2.36 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: First of all, I add my congratulations to the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman), and the hon. Members for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and for Enfield North (Feryal Clark).

As so many other right hon. and hon. Members have said in this debate, I find myself both supporting and welcoming this Bill, and at the same time being astonished

at its shortcomings. Before being elected, it would never have occurred to me that representatives in this place did not have the basic provisions for parental leave that I had taken for granted during my career. Indeed, my daughter is now 24, and I was taken aback in 2017-18 when one of the first changes we discussed in the House after my election was about proxy voting for Members who were pregnant, and about maternity and paternity leave. I discovered that parents in the House did not enjoy the same rights that I had had more than two decades before, so while I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues support this Bill, we are disappointed yet again that it lacks provisions for paternity leave and other parental rights. It does not, for example, address rights for adoptive parents, and how someone becomes a parent should not determine what leave they are entitled to.

This was, as I say, a missed opportunity: an opportunity for the Government to bring parental rights up to date, and to introduce not just measures for Ministers, but measures that apply to all MPs. This place should not just pass legislation, but set a tone for so much in our society. Gender equality is something on which we should be taking a lead, not running to catch up, as we seem to be. Work practices such as shared parental leave are vital to creating new cultural norms and achieving that gender equality, but how can we expect that to happen if we do not, as I say, set the standard ourselves? As the hon. Member for Walthamstow pointed out, if we get it wrong here, that will be reflected across the country. That is why I have signed, and support, the hon. Member’s amendment requiring the Government to produce an equalities impact assessment of these proposals. As has been mentioned, even well-intentioned legislation can, if it is rushed through, fail to recognise pitfalls. So please, let us not fall into one or fail on that account.

It is vital that the Government recognise that the Bill cannot be seen in a vacuum. It is certainly an important measure, but we must also send a message across the country and ensure that it is the correct message. It must send out a national call to action to protect the rights of all parents in all workplaces during these most difficult and challenging times.

There is still much more we need to do for parents. We need to increase statutory paternity leave, ensure that parental leave is a day one right and address the continuing inequalities that same-sex couples face. Organisations and employers must be required to publish parental leave and pay policies.

Like so many—indeed, all, I believe—of the speakers we have heard so far, I welcome the Bill. It has simply been too long delayed and does not go far enough.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am afraid that we need to move on to the Front-Bench spokespeople after the next speaker.

2.40 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: I too would like to start by congratulating the hon. Members for Enfield North (Feryal Clark) and for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) and wishing them all the very best in their pregnancies.

[Alison Thewliss]

Like many others, I come to this Bill with a sense of frustration. The progress is welcome, but the Government have missed an opportunity to put many other things right. I would not argue for a second that Ministers should not get maternity leave, but the Bill does not go far enough. I agree with the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) that it should deal with, for example, adoption. It is also a bit of an insult to working parents across these islands, who have found their own maternity and paternity leave compromised during the pandemic. It is a sign that the Government move fast when they want to, but not for everybody who needs that.

At the start of the pandemic, I asked the Chancellor how he intended to protect the rights of those who were pregnant. Some had been asked to take statutory sick pay or holidays or to start their maternity leave earlier than they should, thereby losing out on time with their baby and on the pay they needed. When I raised the matter, a cloud of bemusement swept across the Treasury Bench. It was clear that it had not even occurred to Ministers. The account by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) shows that not much has changed when it comes to male Ministers not taking account of maternity.

Almost a year from the start of the pandemic, Pregnant Then Screwed has been forced to take the Government to judicial review to tackle what appears to me to be blatant discrimination in the calculation of the self-employment income support scheme. I wish Joeli Brearley and her team all the very best in their challenge, but it should not have come to this. The UK Government have repeatedly been told about the flaws in the scheme. As with so many other issues, they have chosen to ignore those flaws and the women who have been excluded from the support schemes and disadvantaged. They must take action to put that right, regardless of what happens with the judicial review. It is simply not fair that women are losing out because they took time out of their business to look after their babies.

Bethany Power has also found that women on furlough have been told that they will lose their accrued annual leave as part of what has happened to them. The Government must correct that as soon as possible, because it is simply not right that women are losing out on their holidays because of how things have been calculated.

NHS exemption certificates should be extended for 12 months, because women have not been able to access the dental care they would usually get in the year after having their baby. That unfairness must also be addressed. They have been not been able to access the service because in many cases, dental services have been suspended.

There are so many more things I could say about maternity provision in this country, and so much more needs to be done. Maternity Action has been campaigning for a very long time to get those issues addressed. The Government are letting women down. Maternity should be a special time they get to spend with their wee one. It should not be a time of stress, poverty and wondering how to make ends meet. Too many women are still losing their jobs and being failed by their employers, but are not able to challenge that because of the structures the Government have put in place.

I urge the Government to act now on all those issues, and take them as seriously as they are taking this one case for one Minister. They should ensure that nobody gets left behind when they take maternity leave.

2.44 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in the Second Reading debate on this Bill, in which we have heard contributions from so many trailblazing women. The two speeches that stood out for me were those from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), who have really led the way in pioneering the idea of women being both parliamentarians and mothers. I also wish to put on record my best wishes and congratulations to my hon. Friends the Members for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), who have announced their pregnancies during this debate, and to the Attorney General, on her pregnancy. I hope she will be the first Minister in UK history to take full paid maternity leave.

We still have a long way to go, of course, and many of us are finding it difficult to understand how in 2021 Ministers are still having to make the decision between resignation or demotion when choosing to have children. Employment rights should not end at the doors of Parliament. Working mums in the Cabinet deserve the same maternity rights as working mums in any other job across the country, but, unfortunately, it is a sad fact that so many women across the UK still lack those basic rights. It is only when brave and formidable women, many of whom have taken part both virtually and physically in the Chamber today, have fought tooth and nail for progress that things have moved forward. Last year's cross-party support for the proxy voting scheme came about only through the efforts of women MPs such as my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who was forced to work in a wheelchair because of the lack of proxy voting provisions.

Labour has a proud history of fighting for equality, from the Equal Pay Act 1970 to the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the introduction of the national minimum wage. All of those progressive pieces of equality legislation were delivered by Labour Governments. Labour's Sure Start centres were a vital step forward in providing that lifeline of support to struggling parents and children right across the country. Regrettably, deep cuts to local councils over the past decade have hollowed out those services, leaving cash-strapped local authorities without family-centred support. Clearly, an awful lot of work remains to be done, but Members from across this House can agree that no one should be dissuaded from standing for elected office or becoming a Cabinet Minister by outdated employment practices. If we are to create a truly representative Parliament, encouraging women from all backgrounds to run for office, we must start by ensuring that no one is forced to choose between family and running for office. Rights and protections for elected women seem to be stuck in a different generation, and it is a scandal that councillors in local government are not guaranteed any rights to take any kind of parental leave. I am relieved that the Government have been spurred into action, but it has taken the pregnancy of a Cabinet Minister to get us to this point.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I have been following this debate with interest. Unfortunately, I was unable to speak in it, because I was in Committee. In a couple of months, it will be 12 years since I was the first Minister to have maternity cover; I took six months of maternity leave and I had a named cover. It is great news that we are finally getting something sorted now, so that maternity is much better organised, particularly for Cabinet Ministers.

Cat Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for that and for her support when I was expecting. It just goes to show that this is a debate that has had to come forward in baby steps. If we have learnt anything from the covid-19 crisis, it is that acting at a point of emergency is no way of bringing about good governance. With more lead-in time and perhaps more detailed consultation, this Bill could have included the right to paternity, adoption and premature baby leave. Although I welcome the Government's commitment to bring about these changes, I am disappointed that we are unable to make those significant strides forward today and I look forward to working with the Government on bringing them about in the future.

As the Centenary Action Group highlighted, this legislation must not be seen in a vacuum but instead as an opportunity for a call to action to protect parents in the workplace in these difficult times. In particular, covid-19 has already disrupted mothers' careers more than fathers' careers, with nearly 70% of women with children likely to have quit their jobs due to not being able to balance childcare and work, which compares with 16% of fathers. Women are more likely to be working in shut-down sectors, to have been furloughed and to have taken on more caring responsibilities while working from home. Citizens Advice has reported worrying cases of women being selected for redundancy due to the stringent health and safety measures required to keep them in work. We know that women, particularly black, Asian and minority ethnic women and disabled women, are over-represented in precarious labour, including part-time and zero-hours contracts, leaving them more vulnerable to redundancy. It is disappointing that the Government have yet to act on their commitment in the December 2019 Queen's Speech to strengthen the legal protection against redundancy for pregnant women and new parents. I would be grateful if in her closing remarks the Minister provided an update on the employment Bill.

Following the announcement by the Prime Minister and the chief medical officer last March that pregnant women are clinically vulnerable, employers unable to make the necessary changes to ensure workplace safety were required to send them home on full pay, but we know that many pregnant women were unlawfully put on statutory sick pay, which has affected their maternity pay and other entitlements. I hope the Minister will address that in her closing remarks, and that she will confirm that the Government are committed to cross-party working to fill the gaps that remain in the Bill. Indeed, the Bill is already out of date, given that it does not include paternity, adoption or shared parental leave. Their inclusion would add great value to the legislation. Will the Minister also commit to working with me and my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow on a wider discussion about the difficulty facing pregnant MPs, as well as councillors and representatives in the devolved bodies?

Turning to the wider situation of pregnant women across the country, the speed at which the Government are acting to make sure that the Attorney General can rightly take maternity leave is in stark contrast to their failure to support pregnant women facing discrimination and hardship throughout the pandemic. Will the Minister update the House on the Government's progress in providing vital protections for pregnant women at work?

2.51 pm

Penny Mordaunt: I start by offering my congratulations to the hon. Members for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and for Enfield North (Feryal Clark) on their announcements today. I am sure the whole House sends all our good wishes to them. I am also sure that my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General would want me, on the record, to thank all Members for their kind remarks about her and her—hopefully—impending maternity leave. I thank hon. Members for their kindness today and their contributions to this Second Reading debate.

The Bill before the House today is specific and limited in its aims. It will make an important and long overdue change to the law, enabling Ministers for the first time to take paid maternity leave from their job for an extended period. We have heard Members from all parts of the House welcome the measure.

Meg Hillier: I have listened to as much of the debate as I could this afternoon. Ministers have had maternity leave. We took it and said that it was something that women should have. We led on that. I was lucky enough to have as Home Secretary Jacqui Smith, who championed proper maternity cover. It is absolutely right that we pass this Bill and put the provision on a proper footing, especially for people such as the Attorney General, but I think it is worth putting it on the record that it is not completely unprecedented.

Penny Mordaunt: I am glad I took that intervention. This afternoon, we have heard from the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves)—for whose support for the Bill I am grateful—as well as the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) about the trailblazers who have gone before us. We have heard about the battles and trials that colleagues past and present have gone through in order to get maternity leave and to improve the situation for their colleagues in the future. We all appreciated the speech from the hon. Member for Leeds West in which she cited many colleagues who have made a substantial contribution. As well as those Members past and present who have battled to improve arrangements, we should remember that what we are doing today, although it is narrow in immediately affecting only a few individuals, will also benefit those who come after us. That is important.

The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) referred to the wider context. It is of course vital that we get this right for everyone in the country, and I know that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is looking into these issues. It is not only a matter of fairness and justice but a matter of economic empowerment. If we are to get the country back on its feet after the year we have had, we have to support women and enable them to do that.

[Penny Mordaunt]

I also thank Her Majesty's Opposition and other parties in the House for the cross-party support and commitment that we have for the other work that we know needs to be done. I know that this is a very narrow Bill. The technical consultee is the Leader of the Opposition, but he will clearly wish to delegate to other Front Benchers and, potentially, to Back Benchers as well. I hope that Members on both sides of the House will contribute to the work that will follow. It is vital that we get those other issues addressed and, although I cannot give a timetable on legislation because we do not know what legislation would be required, I think we should be bringing this back to the House before the summer recess in order to address those other issues.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) for the powerful report that her Committee has produced and for her support. I hope that her Committee will be able to play a role in the future work that looks at the wider issues, not just for Front Benchers but for all Members, particularly those who sit on the Back Benches.

The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) clearly referred to the Prime Minister's power to enable people to benefit from the new provision that we are introducing today. Unfortunately, the power still has to sit with the Prime Minister. I know that the optics of that are not ideal, but I am afraid that this is hinged on the royal prerogative and that must be the case. Hon. Members mentioned various other amendments that have been tabled, and I will address those in Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) focused on how maternity leave is a vital time. The Government very much recognise that, which is why we have the piece of work that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) is undertaking on early years. The right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham, who has been such a stalwart in campaigning on these issues, outlined why, as well as the main issues that the Bill focuses on, it is vital that we get this right for women outside the House too.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) for the helpful amendment that she has tabled. Again, I will explain in Committee why it has not been possible to use that language in the Bill with regard to Ministers—we have been able to use language to describe Opposition office holders—but I understand how offensive the word “person” or “persons” can be in this context. I hope that we can make some changes, if not to the legislation then to the explanatory notes, that will address some of her issues. I will come on to the detail of that in Committee.

Again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Walthamstow. I am sorry that she framed this measure as a perk. Just to clarify, this is not about rights purely for Cabinet

Ministers—well, they are not rights; it is a provision. The article in *The Guardian* today also misrepresented that. This is a provision not just for Cabinet Ministers but for all Ministers and those Opposition posts. Only Cabinet Ministers are prevented at the moment from taking maternity leave, so that is what the Bill tries to address.

I hope that I can give the hon. Lady some assurances on the work that we want to take forward with regard to the Women and Equalities Committee and IPSA. Although, clearly, there will be other consultees involved, as well as the Government, with regard to IPSA she is absolutely right that we have to address the remaining issues both for Ministers and for all Members of the House. She has certainly set us a timetable today to try to get that resolved, and I hope to give some clarity on that later. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. It is vital that we get these issues right. I also want to give some assurances on the issues that have been raised about fathers. This is absolutely vital. I was brought up by my father in my teenage years. Fathers are critical. We will bring that forward in our future work. We will look at paternity leave, shared parental leave, adoption leave and a raft of other issues to ensure that all Members of this House, at whatever stage of their career and whatever Bench they sit on—Front Bench or Back Bench—can have the flexibility they need to thrive in their careers, and have and raise a family. I look forward to the future debates on that subject.

3 pm

The Deputy Speaker put the Question (Order, this day).

Question put and agreed to.

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

Further proceedings on the Bill stood postponed (Order, this day).

MINISTERIAL AND OTHER MATERNITY ALLOWANCES BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

- (1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—
 - (a) any sum that is to be so paid under that Act, and
 - (b) any increase attributable to that Act in the sums that are to be so paid under any other Act;
- (2) the payment out of the Consolidated Fund of—
 - (a) any sum that is to be so paid under that Act, and
 - (b) any increase attributable to that Act in the sums that are to be so paid under any other Act.—(Michael Tomlinson.)

Question agreed to.

Ministerial and other Maternal Allowances Bill

Proceedings resumed (Order, this day).

Considered in Committee (Order, this day).

[DAME ROSIE WINTERTON *in the Chair*]

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): I should explain that although the Chair of the Committee would normally sit in the Clerk's chair during Committee, in these exceptional circumstances, in order to comply with social distancing requirements, I will remain in the Speaker's Chair. However, I will be carrying out the role not of Deputy Speaker, but of Chairman of the Committee. We should be addressed as Chairs of the Committee, rather than Deputy Speakers.

Clause 1

PAYMENT OF MATERNITY ALLOWANCE: MINISTERIAL OFFICE

3.2 pm

Kirsten Oswald [V]: I beg to move amendment 3, in page 1, line 5, leave out "may" and insert "must".

The intention of this amendment is to make paid maternity absence mandatory for qualifying Ministerial office-holders.

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

Amendment 15, in page 1, line 5, leave out "a person as".

Amendment 16, in page 1, line 14, leave out "person" and insert "minister".

Amendment 18, in page 1, line 14, leave out "person" and insert "woman".

Amendment 17, in page 1, line 16, leave out "person" and insert "minister".

Amendment 19, in page 1, line 16, leave out "person" and insert "woman".

Amendment 4, in page 2, line 1, leave out "6" and insert "12".

The intention of this amendment is to extend the period of paid maternity absence from 6 to 12 months.

Clause 1 stand part.

Amendment 5, in clause 2, page 2, line 7, leave out "6" and insert "12".

The intention of this amendment is to extend the period of paid maternity absence from 6 to 12 months.

Amendment 6, in clause 2, page 2, line 10, leave out "6" and insert "12".

The intention of this amendment is to extend the period of paid maternity absence from 6 to 12 months.

Amendment 7, in clause 2, page 2, line 19, leave out "6" and insert "12".

The intention of this amendment is to extend the period of paid maternity absence from 6 to 12 months.

Amendment 1, in clause 2, page 2, line 20, at end insert—

“(4A) Within three months of the passing of this Act, the Paymaster General must lay before both Houses of Parliament a draft of regulations to make provision for continuity of any paid maternity leave in the event of a Minister on Leave ceasing to hold the designated ministerial office whilst on maternity leave.”

This amendment would require the Paymaster General to act to ensure a commitment to continuity of provision of maternity pay which a Minister on Leave would be entitled to in the event of ceasing to hold the designated ministerial office whilst on maternity leave, or in the event of being moved to a position which results in monies being recouped.

Amendment 8, in clause 2, page 2, line 21, leave out “6-month period” and insert “12-month period”.

The intention of this amendment is to extend the period of paid maternity absence from 6 to 12 months.

Amendment 9, in clause 2, page 2, line 21, leave out “6 months” and insert “12 months”.

The intention of this amendment is to extend the period of paid maternity absence from 6 to 12 months.

Clause 2 stand part.

Clause 3 stand part.

Amendment 10, in clause 4, page 3, line 20, leave out “may” and insert “must”.

The intention of this amendment is to make paid maternity absence mandatory for qualifying Opposition office-holders in the House of Commons.

Amendment 11, in clause 4, page 3, line 22, leave out “may” and insert “must”.

The intention of this amendment is to make paid maternity absence mandatory for qualifying Opposition office-holders in the House of Lords.

Amendment 12, in clause 4, page 3, line 24, leave out “may be made only at a time” and insert “must be made”.

The intention of this amendment is to make paid maternity absence mandatory for qualifying Opposition office-holders.

Amendment 13, in clause 4, page 3, line 32, leave out “6” and insert “12”.

The intention of this amendment is to extend the period of paid maternity cover from 6 to 12 months.

Amendment 14, in clause 4, page 3, line 38, leave out “6” and insert “12”.

The intention of this amendment is to extend the period of paid maternity cover from 6 to 12 months.

Clause 4 stand part.

Amendment 2, in clause 5, page 4, line 6, at end insert—

“(2A) Within three months of the passing of this Act, the Paymaster General must lay before both Houses of Parliament a draft of regulations to make provision for continuity of any paid maternity allowance in the event of an Opposition office-holder ceasing to hold an opposition office whilst on maternity leave.”

This amendment would require the Paymaster General to act to ensure a commitment to continuity of provision of maternity cover which an Opposition office-holder would be entitled to in the event of ceasing to hold an opposition office whilst on maternity leave, or in the event of being moved to a position which results in monies being recouped.

Clause 5 stand part.

Clause 6 stand part.

Clause 7 stand part.

New clause 1—*Equalities impact assessment*—

“(1) Within three months of the day on which this Act is passed, the Prime Minister must complete and lay before Parliament an equality impact assessment of the provisions of this Act.

[The First Deputy Chairman]

(2) The equality impact assessment must include consideration of the implications of this Act for participation in public life.

(3) Within three months of the date on which the equality impact assessment is laid before Parliament, the Prime Minister must make an oral statement to the House of Commons on the action which the Government intends to take as a consequence of the assessment.

Kirsten Oswald: I am pleased to move the amendments that stand in my name, and also to confirm my support for new clause 1 in the name of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and others.

In the time available to us—which, as I think has been acknowledged many times from those in all parts of the House, does not allow for full consideration of the Bill's defects and omissions—it is important that the Committee sets out clearly what it believes the direction of travel should be on this issue. The general principle of the House addressing issues of maternity leave is important, although the devil will clearly be in the promised detail, and we will all be watching for the progress that has been discussed by so many Members.

As it stands, this halfway house of a Bill provides for maternity leave in specific circumstances, but as the Minister herself noted, only with the by-your-leave of the Prime Minister, and only for a maximum of six months. That is not really what we should be endorsing as a long-term solution to the present inadequate situation. Indeed, it should not even be a medium-term solution. That is why the SNP tabled these amendments, and why we are happy to support new clause 1 in addition.

It is inconceivable that if an equalities impact assessment had been done, the Bill would have seen the light of day in its current form. I look forward to such an assessment being completed before we return to this issue. As the hon. Member for Walthamstow said, we have barely scratched the surface of the issues that we need to address if policy is to deal with the proper engagement of those in public life with family life.

Amendment 2 was tabled because the approach adopted in the Bill is wrong. It is unhelpful to those of us who want to address the significant structural issues that exist. I know that there are many on the Government Benches who would like us to revise our approach, who see the international standards on human rights as inconvenient and who perhaps hanker after days when this House and the Government it supported decided who deserved which treatment or benefit and who did not. But we have moved beyond that, as is recognised in the European convention on human rights statement at the head of the Bill. As a matter of principle, we recognise that women should not be discriminated against in the workplace, including on the grounds of pregnancy or maternity.

The Bill, as drafted, envisages that the Prime Minister would—in theory—be entitled to withhold maternity leave from a woman even when she was within 12 weeks of the expected week of birth or within four weeks of having given birth. As a matter of principle, that is wrong. No appeal to how reasonable Prime Ministers would deal with this is satisfactory enough for us to accept such a defect in the Bill. The right to maternity leave is important because it shows the value that society

places on our right to family life. That is more fundamental than the role we play in the workplace, no matter how important or exalted our role may be.

There is a macho view that seems to value the idea that we should all work right up until the days of giving birth, particularly if we are in high-powered jobs, and the understanding is that we should return just as quickly. That is to misunderstand the importance for most families—for parents and children—of that vital transitional period from pregnancy through to early parenthood. As one Member said earlier, it also misunderstands the colossal impact of pregnancy and parenthood on life more broadly. I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) said about the importance of supporting new parents in the early years, and this House has a role to play in setting an example.

While there may be mothers and families for whom a speedy period of maternity leave works, and they are entitled to choose that route if they wish, it is absolutely not our job here to put into place or to perpetuate policies that make that seem the norm. That can only be detrimental to families across the country. We really need to look forward. We need to accept that things are simply not good enough here for Ministers, MPs or, as we have heard, members of staff.

More broadly—this cannot be emphasised enough—we cannot leave this debate thinking that maternity leave is all working well away from this place. I mentioned earlier the terrifying statistic that over 60% of women who took part in the Pregnant Then Screwed survey last year believe that their redundancy is because of their maternity leave. That is a shocking statistic, and it should cause us to reflect seriously on the situation affecting these women.

The poor state of statutory pay must not be left behind in this discussion either. We cannot just deal with one person, however sensible it is to put this provision in place, and leave everyone else hanging on by their fingertips because of the impossible financial provisions that they have to deal with. The effect of that kind of financial pressure and the lack of support can be seen in how many women do not take up their full entitlement to maternity leave. In its recent report, “The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave”, the Petitions Committee noted:

“It appears then that current entitlements are only generous to those who can afford to use them.”

We should reflect on that point. Covid and the precarious nature of so many employment relationships at present bring into sharp focus the need for proper provisions for maternity leave, parental leave and the support that families need at this particularly difficult time, which will also be so vital as we move forward out of the pandemic.

The Petitions Committee also highlighted research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions in 2008, which suggested that less than a quarter—23%—of mothers taking maternity leave took the full 52 weeks. Only 45% took 40 weeks or more, and I suspect it is unlikely that the situation has improved significantly since then.

The reason for tabling amendment 3 is that an organisation of the scale of the UK Government should not add to that pressure by adopting a standard that

says to women, “Your maternity leave is a benefit that may or may not be conferred by your boss,” who in this case is the Prime Minister. Through legislation, we should aim to reflect the standard that we expect Government to meet, which is that women are entitled to their maternity leave and organisations need to put in place proper mechanisms for supporting that.

On the wider front, this House needs to act on the continued abuse of pregnancy as an opportunity to disadvantage in the workplace, whether financially or even by removing people from their posts. That issue also affects those taking parental leave and those with family and caring responsibilities, particularly for young children, which Members on all sides have called on the Minister to look at.

That brings me to the second issue raised in the amendments tabled by the SNP, which is the duration of leave. A simple click on the gov.uk website would have told the drafters of the Bill that statutory maternity leave in the UK is 52 weeks, split into two chunks of 26 weeks. It is not clear to me why the starting point for the arrangements for designating a Minister on leave was taken to be six months instead of 12 months, and it does not speak well of what we are saying to the outside world.

Perhaps the only way to solve that mystery is to notice that there might be a pattern to the Government’s behaviour. In order to win support, they talk about the new freedoms that the UK apparently now enjoys, casting them as an opportunity to set our own standards, free from outside interference, and to set them standards higher. However, when a choice needs to be made as to whether to go for higher or lower standards, the instinct of the UK Government is to go low—to reduce standards, or to fail to act as they should.

That has been clearly shown by the dither and delay following the Government’s defeat in the High Court on the subject of personal protective equipment and health and safety protection for limb (b) workers. That growing part of our workforce, who find themselves with significantly fewer rights than their directly employed colleagues, now find that the Government are failing to act. Many of these precarious workers may find it even more challenging to deal with issues of maternity.

Those of us who are committed to maintaining high standards, whether in the field of employment, the environment or consumer rights, need to be on our guard here, or slowly but surely, hard-won protections we have enjoyed for many years will be reduced or swept away in pursuit of the so-called flexibility that we are now being told is what the UK needs as it pursues life beyond Brexit.

The amendments are about setting a marker. We can see, working from the most vulnerable members of our workforce right up to the Cabinet table, that change can be seen as an opportunity to roll back the clock and reduce and reset established rights. The Scottish National party does not consent to that process.

I will comment briefly on the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow. Her amendment 2 seems to offer appropriate clarification of an aspect of support for Opposition Members. It addresses the issue of someone being disadvantaged as a result of change in circumstance while on maternity leave, which strikes me as an important principle. While on maternity leave,

we should not be concerned about the impact of changes at work, so I am happy to support that amendment. I ask the Minister to look at embedding the principle of no detriment in future action in this area.

There is no doubt that an equalities impact assessment is a vital way of dealing with some of the issues with the Bill. The recent Petitions Committee report that we have spoken about highlights some of the issues that need to be addressed when introducing reforms in this area. Recognising that the eyes of the country will be on the changes, we need to avoid creating a two-tier system. We cannot have a good system for Ministers and holders of other high-powered posts and a second-rate system for everyone else.

An equality impact assessment might have thrown up the need to address some of the wider issues in order to avoid that two-tier perception. It would also have highlighted that parental leave more broadly is vital to shattering the glass ceiling, and that too many barriers are still in place relating to caring responsibilities. When this Bill comes back, as the Minister has promised it will, it needs to address those issues.

If we had the equality impact assessment, we might also have noted that wider action is needed to increase the uptake of maternity leave to closer to the one-year statutory limit, because so many parents cannot afford to take the leave to which they are entitled. To address that gap between entitlement and uptake in the wider workforce, it is clear that maternity pay needs to increase, with the SNP proposing 100% of average weekly earnings for the first 12 weeks, then 90% or £150 for 40 weeks, whichever is lower.

3.15 pm

The impact assessment would have surely also addressed the need to reform shared parental leave to increase uptake by fathers, only a very small proportion of whom currently take up their entitlement. It would have also highlighted that perhaps the best way to increase the uptake of those rights is by increasing the statutory weeks allowed and increasing the weekly rate of paternity pay.

Overall, the Bill has served two functions thus far. First, it has brought provision for maternity arrangements for Ministers and others up to date and to where it needs to be in some ways, but it seems to be widely appreciated that that can be only a stopgap measure because of the restrictions that still exist. I am pleased that the Minister seems to be committing to bringing back something further before the summer; I would like to hear that commitment loudly and clearly. Secondly, we must acknowledge that the Bill has shone a light on how many issues need to be addressed broadly in this subject area in this House and across the workforce in all our communities. That is perhaps the most useful thing that it has done.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I shall not detain the Committee unduly, given that I made many of my points on Second Reading. However, I would like to highlight how the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) illustrated beautifully how all our maternity rights legislation refers to “women” or “she” and reflects the female sex, which again makes the Bill something of a vagary.

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for her references to my amendments and for engaging constructively to try to work through to a solution, notwithstanding the constraints of the legislation with which she is working. My amendments would replace the word “person”, which is causing so much anxiety to women outside this place, with a word that reflects the position in employment law—in this case, “minister”. That would be consistent with the rest of the Bill, because for the Opposition positions the Bill refers to office holders. I am really grateful to my right hon. Friend for seeing whether that might be a solution. It is not ideal—I would much prefer to see “woman” placed in the Bill—but needs must, and we must pass the legislation so that we can send the Attorney General, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman), Godspeed on her way to enjoy her pregnancy and her childbirth.

I am not minded to press the amendment if it is not a suitable way to deal with this issue. It was tabled in a constructive spirit, to try to take the heat out of something causing distress to women. However, we must ensure that this is not repeated in future legislation regarding maternity rights. If there were an opportunity to vote on replacing the word “person” with “woman”, I would be in full support of it.

Stella Creasy: I rise to speak to a number of amendments. Before I do so, I will acknowledge some Members across the House who have done such amazing work in raising issues of equality when it comes to pregnancy and maternity in this place. I believe there is a high degree of cross-party consensus that we need to act.

I also put on the record my support for the many men who have spoken today about the importance of fathers. Let me be clear: there will be no equality for pregnant women and new mums until fathers are able to step up and equally do their bit. It is not a zero-sum game; it is about parents being able to support each other, and the importance to women’s equality of not being left literally holding the baby.

Let me put on the record my thanks for the work of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman); my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who was a trailblazer in her time and continues to fight for women’s rights; my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper); and, indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), who spoke bravely and set out her own fears for what would happen. That is one of the tests we must face in this place.

I take the point that the Paymaster General is making when she says that this is not a perk, but I think it is quite difficult to make that argument when faced with another Member of the House who is in exactly the same position as the Attorney General but will be unable to access the maternity leave that we have all agreed it is important that new mums should be able to access.

I want to put on the record my support for the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). If Members have not read her books, trying to

correct the record of the absence of our understanding of what women parliamentarians have done, they really should.

I also want to mention the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). I said in my earlier contribution that one of the things I thought was missing from the debate was a recognition of the legislation that she has proposed to try to help women facing redundancy in pregnancy, and to make real the promise, which I think we all expect for our constituents, that we will not make someone who is pregnant redundant. As we know, even before the pandemic, 50,000 women a year were facing that situation. I think about the narrow scope of this Bill and contrast it with what her Bill could do for thousands of women in this country. If she is able to bring it forward, she will have my support.

I also want to thank the current Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), who is doing an amazing job. She spoke today about the importance of equalities impact assessments. New clause 1 is about exactly why that matters. Obviously, we usually expect those assessments to be done for any form of Government legislation, because we recognise that we cannot be blind to the consequences of legislation for different sections of our society.

We have an Equality Act in this country and we protect certain characteristics for a reason, because we know that not everyone in our society faces a level playing field. Pregnancy is a protected characteristic for just that reason—to enable us to say, “Actually, in our society in 2021, women who are pregnant in our communities face discrimination.” We recognise that if we address the challenges that they face and remove those barriers, we shall all benefit. This legislation seeks to do that, and I recognise that. That is why I will support it, and why I think it is the right thing to do.

However, as the Paymaster General herself said, this legislation does that for a maximum of 115 women. In a society of 70 million people, that cannot be enough. That cannot be the message that we send from Parliament. That is why it is important that we have an equalities impact assessment of this legislation, and that we recognise that it does not take place in a vacuum, but in an unequal society where women who are pregnant face discrimination. We see that in our public life. We have already talked about this place briefly, and I do want to return to that, because I think it is important.

I acknowledge that the Paymaster General has recognised the timetable that I am setting her. I want to put that on the record, because I think that should be part of an equalities impact assessment where I believe the discrimination is against those of us who are pregnant, and there are human rights elements of this. But we cannot be blind, either, to the message that this legislation, in the way it is crafted, will send to our sisters in local government and regional Assemblies, or indeed to our sisters who are employees of this House.

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Stella Creasy: Happily. In fact, if I did not give way to the hon. Gentleman, I would feel that I had missed out.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for what she is saying, because I wholeheartedly agree. An example of that is a young girl who works for me. She is my PPS but also a councillor. She was able to get maternity leave because she works for me in this place, but not for her role as a councillor. I want to quote quickly from her. She cried, for she felt pressurised to return to the council after a couple of weeks, not by any person in her group but because she knew that no one else could take over from her, vote for her or speak for her. Today we have an opportunity to get this right for Ministers and for MPs, but I believe we must do the same for the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and every council. This is about equality, and we need that for everyone.

Stella Creasy: I always knew that the hon. Gentleman and I would eventually find common cause, even if we have disagreed on other human rights issues. He is right; we have a leadership role to play. Indeed, I would argue that this is leading legislation, because we know that in other Administrations there are not formal maternity provisions. That is why it is so frustrating that we are missing this opportunity to go further and help our colleagues.

Meg Hillier: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate her on her happy news. I have had the interesting experience of having three children: as a councillor, where I took six months' leave; as a member of the London Assembly, where I was the first then to take six months' leave; and as a Minister and a Member of this House, where I took six months' leave. It can be done, but there is an important element to consider.

Proxy voting, for example, which has an important role to play, can be seen to tether a woman to her job during her six months' maternity leave and make sure that she has to follow every twist and turn of her job. We need to be careful in this debate that, while, of course, this Bill is a good move and while there are still many other measures that need to be put in place, we reflect and recognise that maternity leave is there for a reason. It is there so that we can bond with and nurture our child and come back to work at the point that we are ready to do so, with our child and our situation in a good place. It is important to make sure that, with some of the mechanisms that could be proposed, we are not unnecessarily tethering a woman to her job.

Stella Creasy: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The challenge that she is speaking to is the same as the one that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke to with regard to his member of staff. The Bill is not just about pay, but actual cover. As I said earlier, it is the commitment that the current Attorney General will not get an immediate phone call saying, "We know you are on leave, but we need you because of X." Somebody else will be formally overseeing that role.

It is not by accident that when I was pregnant, I thought about what I wanted to do for my community. It was not about money, but about being conscious that if I had been awake for two or three hours at a time, I probably would not be as useful to my constituents as someone who could focus fully on the job. As I discovered with my first child, those pockets of sleep for two-and-a-half

to three hours—the point at which I saw coffee as a medicinal substance to keep going—were in the first few weeks and months after childbirth.

It is absolutely right that we work to protect the family life of any woman giving birth, so that she has that time to bond with her child and to properly take time out, but we cannot do that in this job if there is nobody fulfilling the role that we are doing. It is the same for a local councillor and the same in our Assemblies. That is the challenge that we are facing here, and why it is so important that we assess the impact of this legislation.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I am listening intently to the hon. Lady's speech. She is making some excellent points. Does she agree that today, what she is asking for is even more crucial? Given social media and emails, Members of Parliament are arguably never off.

Stella Creasy: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. At this point I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie), who found herself being abused because she was on maternity leave. She was also abused by members of my own party. I remonstrated with them, pointing out that that was not the progressive approach to take.

My concern about the hon. Member for Stroud, and why the legislation is a missed opportunity, is that she sought to get cover. She was an MP who, like me, tried to get a locum. I had a fantastic locum. In fact, my locum, Kizzy Gardiner, was too good. People in Walthamstow were desperate to keep her, because she was an absolutely fantastic example of why maternity cover matters. Nobody in my constituency batted an eyelid about having someone else not just doing casework, but out there representing our community, working with groups, going into local schools before lockdown happened, and then when the lockdown happened, leading on that role. Watching the hon. Lady being abused and attacked, and watching her also trying to cope with those first few weeks of having a new baby alone, fired my enthusiasm on this. We cannot sit around in this place, watching as other people get those issues right, but failing to take action ourselves.

It is not by accident that the number of times pregnant women end up in this place, or in local government or in the Assemblies, are few and far between. That is one issue that an equalities impact assessment can take a look at. We all talk about wanting to get more diverse people into our politics. Sometimes the barriers to that are blindingly obvious. I know from talking to colleagues in local government just how frustrated they are. I know from talking to colleagues in other devolved Administrations just how frustrated they are.

When we pass legislation in this House, such as this Bill, we cannot be blind to the message that we are sending about how we have determined who is important enough to have that leave. If we think that is not something that should be bestowed as a discretionary pleasure, or as a benefit like a company car, then we also have to recognise the consequences of behaving like that, not just here but in other places as well. If we want to ensure that there is no trade-off between family life and public life for either men or women, we must look at the message we are sending. The honest truth is that this legislation, as it stands, sends a message that a two-tier system is acceptable.

[Stella Creasy]

Consider for a moment what would happen were we to look at local government and say, “Well, it’s okay for just cabinet members in local government to have maternity leave”. We would be horrified for young female councillors, or indeed for young men who want to be good fathers and spend time with their children, and want to be supportive partners, yet that is exactly what we are doing here. Frankly, in no other workplace would this be acceptable. If someone came to us in our constituency offices and said, “This is the experience in my workplace”, we would say, “Well, that’s clearly breaching various regulations. We must support you. We must get you trade union representation.” I am very proud of the trade unions, which I know have made representations on this issue already.

3.30 pm

An equalities impact assessment would allow us to look at what the consequences of only acting for 115 women are, and what that means for the broader conversation about public life in this country, because we know the pace of change is agonisingly slow. We celebrate a third of women in this place—a third. In my time—I have been here for 10 years; I am heading towards grandee status—at that rate, we will never get parity, and we will certainly never get women to come in at younger age if we do not tackle these issues.

We also cannot be blind—an impact assessment would allow us to look at these issues—about what message we are sending to workplaces across this country. There is a tsunami of mum unemployment taking place in this country because of the pandemic. The reason we protect certain characteristics and the reason we say that pregnancy, separate from sex or gender, is something that we protect is that we know that, if employers—bad employers—are given the opportunity, the first ones out of the door are the employees they think are more complicated. What an economic fallacy. We know that countries that make sure that it is easy to have combined family life and work life are more prosperous. They are more resilient and they are better able to cope with the modern world. So a failure to recognise the message we are sending to employers has ramifications far beyond this place.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission’s written evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry said that maternity and pregnancy discrimination was one of the

“most urgent, immediate threats to equality”

of the pandemic, yet in this place, if this is the only piece of legislation we have discussed in the last year that even touches on maternity, what message are we sending to those thousands of women who are facing these issues right now? They are in every one of our constituencies. Every one of them would say, “Hang on a minute. I just want what you have” to a Minister and “I just want to be able to take paid maternity leave and be confident I can still go back to a job at the end of it.” That should be a simple ask, but this legislation would allow an employer to say, “Hang on a minute. Actually, are you senior enough in your position for us really to provide that?”

We know there is a piece of work to do with employers: 40% of employers say they would avoid hiring a woman of childbearing age—that is not an ancient statistic;

that is a recent one—and 40% of employers claim they have seen at least one pregnant woman “take advantage” of their pregnancy. What environment are we asking women to go into when we are saying that that is unacceptable for Ministers, and I completely agree, and why are we not saying that for every woman in this country? Why are we not saying that the use of non-disclosure agreements, something the right hon. Member for Basingstoke has so powerfully revealed, to hide pregnancy discrimination is unacceptable? Yet this legislation does not touch on any of those issues, but it sends messages about what is acceptable. That is why we need to have an equalities impact assessment.

I pay tribute to Joeli Brearley and Pregnant Then Screwed because, as a small operation, they have had a mighty impact on our understanding of just how much women who are pregnant and new mothers are suffering during this pandemic. The work they have done to uncover the inequalities and the impact of legislation, or lack of impact, has been absolutely staggering. Frankly, it is a source of shame to me that our Government are being taken to court by them because of our failure as a legislature to introduce a system on self-employment support that recognises the very simple principle that, during the three years that they calculate that self-employment support, some women might have taken maternity leave so their income will have varied.

The failure to be able to deal with that and the fact that it has ended up in court, where we all know the Government will be banged to rights on it—we will end up paying court costs for it, and 80,000 women are affected: self-employed people who are terrified about what income they might have in the current pandemic at the best of times—speaks to the challenges that we have and speaks to the absence of any alternative legislation from this Government, as opposed to this piece of legislation. [Interruption.] I can see the Paymaster General nodding. I hope that she will go back to the Treasury and pointedly highlight just how embarrassing it is that we cannot even recognise that maternity leave should be part of a calculation, and ensure that we do not discriminate against women accordingly.

The UK has some of the poorest maternity and paternity leave policies in Europe. UNICEF says that we are one of the least family-friendly countries in Europe. To all those in this House who wax lyrical—this might come up today—about the importance of family and the importance of motherhood, I say what I have said before: it is deeds, not words, that matter. They cannot sit here and tell me that they are obsessed with the word “motherhood”, and then fail to act to support us being better at providing paid maternity and paternity leave. Our economic competitors beat us time and again. We treat fathers as an afterthought—something that this legislation takes no account of. An equality impact assessment would allow us to explore these issues.

Patrick Grady: The hon. Lady knows that she has the support of the Scottish National party for her amendments. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) wanted to make sure that her support in particular was recorded.

Until the pandemic, the only times that I acted as a proxy were actually for new fathers in our group; we have not had a new mother, at least in the time that I have been here. I have heard the case made on many

occasions that the best stride that could be made for gender equality would be equality of parental leave. If that parental leave could be shared between both parents of a child, it would be an incredible way of helping to break through the glass ceiling—if the entitlement was there for everyone. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that this Bill and the clauses that we are debating just now do not make that distinction.

Stella Creasy: I completely agree with my colleague from north of the border. People's ability to take shared parental leave is so important. Again, parental leave is not covered in this Bill, but an equality impact assessment could look at the consequences of failing to include it. That matters because the Bill talks about ensuring the income of a Minister, and, to put it bluntly, the biggest barrier to people taking up parental leave is that it is only open to those who can really afford to do so.

The gender pay gap is at the heart of some of these challenges. That is because for most women and their families, it is actually better for them to take time off with the baby than for their partner to do so. That means that they take the hit on their career and on their incomes, and we do not get the fathers' involvement in children that we all want to support. Why are we sending the message that we are not even talking about ministerial paternal paid leave and therefore ensuring that fathers can be part of it? The Paymaster General said that it is already covered in existing provisions. That is because it is only two weeks. In the first two weeks post birth, parents are lucky if they see daylight and are able to go outside—or, indeed, to wear clean clothes, if I remember correctly—so having more time with their child is crucial.

I want to look particularly at what this legislation means for Parliament. The Paymaster General has pointed out that she gets this and she understands that we have to go much further, and I believe her. She talked about a timetable. Let me be clear why that timetable matters. I said earlier that I have a direct discrimination case, and I think that an equality impact assessment could look at this issue. She will have seen that the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority has come out today and said, "Yes, we're going to consult", and it is having a meeting again today. That is all very welcome. I recognise that the new chair of IPSA takes a very different approach from the previous administration. I have worked on these issues for the last two years and I wrote to IPSA before the last election, begging it to come out and say that it was at least looking at these concerns so that nobody of childbearing age would be deterred from standing in the election, but it refused to do so, so it is welcome that there is movement.

But, as ever, the pace of change is glacially slow—for me, literally, because yet again I find myself in a position where I cannot be confident of what I can say to my community to answer the question posed by the member of staff of the hon. Member for Strangford: "What cover will there be?" I cannot even look my own staff in the eye because of the lack of cover that we offer staff in this place. If nothing else, that makes us terrible employees.

This legislation gives the lie that this is an independent matter. I have been told for the last two years that MPs' employment status meant that it was impossible. Indeed, it says on the IPSA website:

"MPs as independent office holders are not employees and are therefore not eligible for statutory maternity, paternity or adoption leave."

Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend will know that a Minister is on the payroll of their Department, so in that sense they are more of an employee. There is a really interesting issue here that we will need to consider carefully, and it is that MPs are not employees. We have a payroll, but we are not employees; we are obviously answerable to our constituents. That is one of the fundamental differences. For my part, when I was on maternity leave, I had a clear plan and support. Like my hon. Friend, I asked for some cover—some extra money for my staff—but it was not possible. There are certain things that an MP does that cannot be replicated by anybody else, as we know. This has obviously been well rehearsed. This is a complex area, and she is making some interesting points.

Stella Creasy: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution. She hit the nail on the head when she said that it was not possible for her to have that support, so she had to put in place a system for herself. In what other workplace—

Meg Hillier: I just want to make it clear that I was not unhappy about the system that I put in place for myself. It was very clearly worked out: I had colleagues who were able to step up if my staff needed any extra support, and they had the right to be signatories. However, this was during the expenses scandal, and because my name was above the door, there were some things that it would have been very difficult to pass on to somebody else. So despite the great support I had, it was difficult, and I would have liked to be able to pay some of those staff a little bit more for the extra responsibility they were taking. That was the bit that I had the most issue with at the time.

Stella Creasy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for sharing her experience. I think that speaks to the challenge of this legislation, in terms of the impact it will have in this place by setting up a two-tier system. For a member of the Cabinet or a Minister, it will now be clear what will happen and what their rights are. They can be confident and relaxed. I return to the honesty of my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North in talking about how scared and worried she was and about the lack of clarity in the lack of parity on these issues, so that she felt she would be put at risk of people saying she was not pulling her weight or would not be able to support her constituents, or that she would be dragged back into work. We have a duty of responsibility and care to her, because she is in the same position as me, but a bit further on.

I want to be clear that this legislation recognises the Minister's absolute right to a family life. That is an article 8 human right, and we need to protect that. We need to act to ensure that no one is discriminated against in that regard. The lawyers I have consulted tell me that it is arguable that this legislation breaches the human rights of those of us who are not covered by it but who are in the same position in seeking to do a job in this place, because article 14 says that we should not be discriminated against in terms of the rights that are accrued in the workplace. So for me, there is an arguable case here.

[Stella Creasy]

I do not want to be in the position of taking the Government to court. Frankly, I want to be in the position, especially now in the early stages of pregnancy, of being able to sit down and sleep for hours on end, and in later pregnancy probably just to sit down in general, but I know that it is vital for my constituents to have clarity about who will be covering the role that I do. The previous locum I had was fantastic, but we had to write the job description. We had to sort it out. In comparison to what the Attorney General and any other Minister will have, that is not parity. It is a form of direct discrimination because it affects the ability to have family life. I have been very clear with the Minister—

Meg Hillier: I wonder if my hon. Friend could clarify that last point, because I think we all approach our jobs slightly differently. Certainly, it was not at all an issue for me when I was laying out everything I did that would need cover. The description was really what I did already, so it was not a very difficult challenge. I would be very reluctant to have IPSA or somebody else write the job description for somebody who was providing support, whether it was my existing staff or anyone else. I would be interested if she could clarify that point.

Stella Creasy: I do not want to test the patience of the Chair of the Committee by going into what the different schemes might be.

The point we are making here is about parity, and the lack of parity as a result of bringing in this system. If we have clarity on the cover for the Attorney General and clarity about the amount of money that will be paid, it would be right to look at whether we should offer the same thing for Back-Bench MPs, and indeed set the standard for local government and the regional Assemblies, perhaps offering to work with them in terms of our experience.

My simple point is that this legislation blows a hole in the argument that has been given for the past two years that we could not look at these issues because it was all too complicated. As the Paymaster General set out earlier, the complications around ministerial employment have been overcome in a day because of the guillotine of having a clear deadline set by one Member of Parliament. One of the challenges that has created for some of the drafting is that this maternity right is following not the person who might be pregnant but the position that they hold.

My argument is that there is direct discrimination in this place because this says to my constituents that they are not as important. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch was able to get cover, and I know that Kizzy, my locum, was invaluable for my community in ensuring that they got 100% of the service 100% of the time. I believe the residents of Walthamstow are owed that. That is why I will continue to fight for this, but I also recognise that it is for every MP to make that decision for themselves. The point is that we are now making sure that that decision can be made, but only by a select few. That has an equalities impact, and we should know that and recognise its impact on public life.

3.45 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I hope she will forgive my ignorance in some of my questions to her, but my understanding is that Members of Parliament are able to take maternity leave and their salary is paid for by the state, and that continues to be the case. My understanding is also that IPSA will provide contingency funding to support the offices of Members of Parliament, to allow them to have that leave and make provision for them to do so. Am I incorrect in my assumption?

Stella Creasy: The honest truth is that we do not know, because the only other MP who sought to take advantage of that system was discouraged and deterred, and was not able to do so. What I would say is that right now, it is not clear to me as a pregnant woman what support I would get. There is a conversation about pre-approved support; right now, I am one of the most expensive MPs in London because of the contingency application for maternity cover. I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree that it is not appropriate to see maternity cover as an expense that might be reported to the public in that way. There is not parity, in the way that there is parity and clarity about what the scheme is for—

Chris Loder *rose*—

Stella Creasy: I will happily give way, but I hope that explains the issue to the hon. Gentleman.

Chris Loder: I hope the hon. Lady will forgive me, but I am afraid I do not concur with what she has said. I think we are in one of the most fortunate situations in the entire nation. This Parliament has the ability to call on the taxpayer to support those who need to take maternity leave, to take care of their children and to physically recover from pregnancy, so if the hon. Lady will forgive me, I think she is wrong. We as a Parliament, as a state and as a nation are in the fortunate position that we do support our MPs, and we must be careful to not put out there that we do not, when there are many people who are struggling. I agree with the hon. Lady's earlier point that across the nation, there are employers who do not necessarily fulfil their obligations, but I think we have to be careful about giving the impression to the nation that we in this place are hard done by, because I am afraid I do not agree.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Just before the hon. Lady responds, I think it is quite important to note that this Bill is about Ministers, and we must not stray too far into the position of Members of Parliament as well.

Stella Creasy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. If he will forgive me, as somebody who has actually been through this process and actually understands what is available and what is not clear at present, I would gently encourage him to talk to his colleague the hon. Member for Stroud about her experiences.

It is really important that we are honest about the lack of clarity. As I have said, there is not a formal maternity leave scheme or formal maternity cover. Unless the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that if an MP disappears for six months, nobody would notice because they do not do anything, then there is work to be covered. The

point about this legislation is that it recognises that. It is not about the pay—that is a red herring in this environment. It is about having somebody to cover the work we do outside of this room: the campaigns we run, the constituency events we attend, and the casework we do. For me, it was not acceptable to ask my staff to fill in everything that I did for six months, and expect my constituents to have a reduced service as a result, rather than to have somebody cover those roles.

I am very conscious of time and I do want to press on, but I would gently encourage the hon. Gentleman to look at what is actually being provided at the moment. It is not the same as what we are providing in this legislation, and that is my point: we want parity, because every woman should have six months' paid cover so that they can actually take time off. Perhaps he might want to speak to my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who was back doing casework three days after a caesarean section because, although people thought she could take maternity leave, the reality was that she could not. I know that it is not a situation in which the hon. Gentleman has found himself, but I hope that he can understand, through listening to those of us who have, why we need change. Certainly, I hope that he will join me in supporting paid parental leave for our male colleagues because that is really important. I have talked to many colleagues who find that this place takes them away from their families when we want to bring them together.

I want to highlight the other amendments that I have tabled. I recognise the cross-party support for new clause 1—I think the Paymaster General does, too—and the call for change and for us not to be blind about the messages we send from this place about the importance of paid maternity cover and ensuring that everybody can access it.

Amendments 1 and 2 are probing amendments to recognise some of the questions the Bill raises about the practical technicalities and what would happen. The Bill seems to take account of the idea that somebody might be demoted while they are on maternity leave and I am sure that the Paymaster General will want to clarify that. Although the Bill provides that no Minister would be in a financially difficult position if they were removed from their ministerial post while they were on maternity leave, it does not make the same provision for the small number of Opposition office holders. Will the Paymaster General clarify what would happen in that case? We all want to ensure that when any woman takes maternity leave, she can do so with confidence and certainty about her financial and logistical position.

There are still battles to be won, but I want every pregnant woman in this country who is facing problems right now to know that there are voices in this place that are prepared to stand up to those who tell them not to worry and to be grateful for the fact that somebody might employ them at all; not to worry about going home and being stuck with their children, and that equality does not matter to our economy. I know that there are voices and champions for the importance of not discriminating against pregnant women and new mums across the House, but it is time that we saw ourselves as we are now, and we are looking through the wrong end of the telescope if we do not understand the impact of the Bill on the messages that we send.

I know that the Paymaster General realises that we need to do the research. She is honest about how small the number of women affected by the Bill is. If she will not accept the amendment, I am keen to hear from her—because I do not want to have to take the Government to court—a clear timetable for action, a clear commitment by the Government to make parliamentary time so that we can resolve the issues in this place and support women of child-bearing age and their partners in local government and across the Assemblies as appropriate, for public life if nothing else. Deeds not words.

Sir John Hayes [V]: In George Orwell's novel "Nineteen Eighty-Four", protagonist Syme explains the objective of Newspeak:

"Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thought-crime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it." Although there are those who do not understand or will not recognise this truth, language matters. It is through language that we understand, express, consider, challenge, think and articulate. Through language, we breathe life into sentiment. So we must ask ourselves a question. How did we get to a place where a Conservative Government bring a Bill before us that seeks in effect to abolish two beautiful words that have been used for centuries and embody goodness and truth: "mother" and "woman"? The Bill as drafted does just that. It rules those words out of law.

Is it now considered embarrassing to be described as a woman and to admit to being a mother? That seems to contradict the whole purpose of the Bill. After all, the Bill is about recognising the significance of motherhood and extending that recognition to those in the service of the Crown. Are we now acknowledging as a Parliament that the concepts of motherhood and womanhood are so radical that they must be censored?

You know as well as anyone, Dame Eleanor, that when tabling amendments, one is often seeking to make small, sometimes complicated technical changes to legislation. Today, with my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), my motivation is much more straightforward: to affirm the existence, worth and eternal value of womanhood and motherhood. By the way, if the need arose, I would do the same for men and fatherhood. By saying the words and including them in the Bill, we will cement the virtues that the Bill embodies in law.

As drafted, the Bill, in effect, extinguishes the ordained particular characteristics of human types. I do not know whether that is as a result of artlessness or heartlessness, but whichever it is, it anonymises and dehumanises. That is why I have introduced the two amendments that stand in my name, and I am grateful to Members from across the House for supporting them.

My speech will be uncharacteristically short but characteristically straightforward, because this is a matter of common sense—the common sense that prevails beyond this place and, clearly, beyond the wit or will of the people who drafted this legislation. Never underestimate the power of language, for there are those—those who are extreme and immoderate—who understand its power very well and those, as the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said, who seek to obscure the biological differences, which are,

[Sir John Hayes]

frankly, the very reason all of us are able to contribute to this debate, because we would not be here without them.

It is sad to see the attempts that have been made to blur the picture, muddy the waters and cloak this matter in denial. It is sad to see the descriptions of “drafting difficulties” and “legislative complications”, which were described to me today by one parliamentary lawyer, a distinguished one too, as entirely “clueless” and “baseless”. This is a matter not of drafting procedure, but of principle. Electors of all political persuasions and none, across our kingdom, from Caithness to Caerphilly to Cornwall, from Antrim to Arundel, from Kent to Kendal, expect us to do what they would anticipate is that common sense—to affirm womanhood and motherhood in this legislation, which is, after all, about maternity.

As Orwell understood, semantics matter, because through them, via meaning, we find truth. In the pursuit of truth, and in solidarity with every woman and mother in South Holland and The Deepings and beyond, I am proud to put forward the amendments that stand in my name, and I shall be seeking to divide the House on them at the end of this Committee stage, with your indulgence, Dame Eleanor.

Cherilyn Mackrory [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General for bringing this Bill before us today. It is highly unlikely to affect me personally, as my daughter is six and I have a very supportive family, but even with a six-year-old being a full-time working mum is a huge juggling act. I have massive admiration for mums in general, for all working mums and absolutely for any colleague who has a baby while doing this job. But why do I feel like that? Why do I not have the same feeling for my male colleagues who welcome a newborn? There have been a few of those this year.

I am sorry to say that despite how far we have come and despite how much more hands-on dads and partners are these days, the majority of the domestic load around babies and small children is still being carried by women. I will quickly caveat that by saying that all families are different and there are many families where that is not the case, but by and large women are still in charge of this mental load. We must explore in this House, and in debate more widely, the evolving role of fathers and partners, and how we can possibly improve the equality of pregnant women without looking at families as a whole. Looking into the debate on maternity leave as a whole means looking at the impact on our work and family life. Do we value family life at the expense of work? Do we look at work at the expense of family life? At the moment, I do not think we have that balance right, and covid has emphasised that. Society is starting to look at this a lot more, and Government will be well placed to encourage a society that promotes family life. Stable families, whatever shape they take, are good for society and improve life chances. We should promote best practice by companies, and ensure by doing it in this place that we lead by example. It starts with maternity leave, but goes on to much more.

4 pm

As I said on Second Reading, as co-chair of the all-party group for baby loss I have a special interest in the health of mother and baby. The Bill is a step

forward in improving the condition of both, and the Government are setting an example in that the health of mum and baby come first. Unfortunately, one in four pregnancies end in tragic loss. According to the Office for National Statistics, the stillbirth rate in England in 2018 was the lowest on record, but was still four stillbirths per 100,000 births. If my maths is correct, that equates to 2,500 stillborn babies. I am pleased to see that stillbirth is considered in clauses 1(4) and 4(7). In the event of a stillbirth, or if the baby is born alive and later dies, even after a few seconds, or if this happens after the 24th week of pregnancy, you are entitled to all maternity rights. If you are already on maternity leave, you do not have to take any action, but if the birth happens before you intended to start maternity leave or before you gave notice of maternity leave to your employer, the maternity leave will start the day of the birth—and so on and so forth. However, what happens if the baby dies before the 24th week?

My baby died at 21 weeks. Without going into the painful details again, little chance of quality of life was given for my daughter, so we were given very little choice but to terminate and then to deliver. In the fog of that weekend, I remember asking what would happen if I chose not to terminate. I was told that my baby would probably die within minutes of being born and that it would be more traumatic for me and for my baby; the midwives would have to stay with her and no one knew how long it would take. The point I am trying to make is that it was within my rights to refuse a termination but to deliver early. Had I taken that option, in theory I would have been eligible for full maternity leave, but because I terminated I was not. My baby, if I had not terminated, would have had a birth certificate and a death certificate. She has neither.

I am not asking for a change in the law, but I do expect the Government and employers to recognise that a loss, even before 24 weeks, as the result of a termination that we did not want to happen, is just as painful as a full-term stillbirth. I genuinely cannot say whether I would have wanted to take full maternity leave. What on earth would I have done for months on end, with no new baby to take home? But it might have taken the pressure off. Luckily, I had an understanding employer, but I still had to keep producing doctor's notes and sick notes every few weeks until I had recovered physically from the birth and while I was still grieving. Every time the deadline approached, I felt the pressure of wondering whether I should ask for another sick note, or go back to work.

Moving on from that, I want to discuss the amendments standing in the names of my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). It is important to me that hard-fought rights achieved by women who have gone before me are not removed from the statute book. Otherwise, some women may feel that with this Bill we are taking one step forward and one step back simultaneously, on the same day. I am pleased to hear that my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General will address this—she mentioned the explanatory notes, and I look forward to hearing more—but it is important that compassion dictates how we draft legislation. I do not believe that we should allow one group of people to be pitted against another.

I am privileged to be assisting my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) in her work preparing the forthcoming early years review. In the review, we have referred to “parent” or “carer”, as that reflects the nature of families today. However, as it stands, it is a biological woman who is pregnant and gives birth, so it is probably best that that is represented in a Bill that is devoted wholly to provision for maternity—the act of becoming a mother. It is not necessarily a debate we want to have today, and many right hon. and hon. Members who are not present would want to participate in such a debate on all sides, but it will come. I am sure that the mother of all Parliaments will debate the subject robustly and that a compassionate way forward will be found. I have absolutely no doubt about that.

The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) is correct to say that we will not have total equality for pregnant women without the support of the men in this House, the support of all employers and the support of society as a whole. Pregnancy should not be seen as a nuisance or an annoyance but a normal part of life. When it goes well, it should be celebrated as a precious time of life.

Mothers in the UK are currently only entitled to the equivalent of 12 weeks’ fully paid statutory maternity leave, and I am afraid to say that our statutory offering falls behind many comparable economies. Thus, a third of our children are in childcare between the ages of nought and three, and that rises to about three quarters between the ages of three and six. Meanwhile, in countries such as Sweden and Norway, women are allowed 35 to 45 weeks’ fully paid maternity leave, and men are allowed around 10 weeks’ paternity leave. In Estonia, women get 85 weeks’ fully paid maternity leave.

Many UK companies do much better, and some women can take up to a year fully paid or anywhere in between. Despite that, many women are being laid open to discrimination. While the law does recognise that pregnant women and women on maternity leave are at risk of experiencing discrimination, the concern raised by many is that it does not go anywhere near far enough. I know savvy women who have fantastic maternity provision written into their contracts, but women should not have to do this. The onus should not necessarily be on the woman, confident or otherwise, to negotiate such a contract.

Unfortunately, the level of pregnancy and maternity discrimination in the UK is still astonishing, with an estimated 54,000 mothers every year being forced to leave their jobs because of how they were treated during their pregnancy or maternity leave or after they returned to work. Over three quarters of women and new mothers each year experience some form of pregnancy or maternity discrimination at work, and I return to how this affects stress levels in pregnancy. We must not underestimate the fact that sustained stress levels within a pregnancy are hugely risky for the mum and the unborn baby. It can lead to pregnancy loss, low birth weight and post-natal depression.

As I said earlier, this is not helped by the particular nature of what we do in this place. I was upset to hear from Members on both sides of the House about the abuse that female colleagues have received when they have taken time off to spend with their newborn. I fully believe that MPs come into this House to do their best

for their constituents, and I would like to remind the House and wider society that MPs are human beings. MPs are pregnant, as we have learned today, and I congratulate all involved. MPs are new mums. They are wives. They are daughters. They are sisters. They are grandmothers. They are friends. They are mums.

It is unacceptable for any new mother to feel the extra pressure of being told that they are skiving, they are not working hard enough and they should not be having a baby while serving in office. Female MPs in particular are at the receiving end of awful abuse these days, and it has stepped up even more for those who are pregnant and new mums. We should not accept this—there should be zero tolerance—and I hope that in this House, we are united in feeling that way.

Post-natal depression, left unchecked, can and does lead to tragic suicide. Do we really need to wait for a female MP who has post-natal depression to be pushed too far before society takes notice? Will that be the next horrible headline we read—that one of our colleagues in this place has not been able to cope with all the pressure put her way and feels like she is not being a good enough mother or a good enough MP, because she is trying her best to do both? MPs are not alone in suffering from post-natal depression, and I am sure none would wish for special treatment. When post-natal depression hits you, you do not even realise you are in it until somebody points it out to you. MPs are a special target for anger from some, and it is completely unacceptable.

As I said in my speech last October, birth and pregnancy have always been perilous for women. That remains the case, yet we no longer talk about it, and that needs to change. At every opportunity that I get in this place—whether it is a maternity Bill or legislation on employment rights or other women’s rights—I will stand up for women who have lost their children and not talked about it or who feel so much pressure that they end up suffering from post-natal depression, which pushes them to the edge. We can only do this as a society when we back each other up. The Bill sends an important signal to society and women that the contributions we make to this Parliament as female MPs are valued at every stage of our lives. The Bill will give hope to young women who want to go into politics that their contribution, whatever stage in their life it is at, is valuable. It is important that we make a move, and I look forward to working with colleagues to improve conditions for all mums and mums-to-be.

Wendy Chamberlain: I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in Committee, having been unable to do so on Second Reading. I start by wishing the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) and the hon. Members for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and for Enfield North (Feryal Clark) all the best in their pregnancies. Indeed, it is particularly poignant for me to speak in this debate today because I am currently receiving updates on my stepson’s partner, who is in the early stages of labour; they are on the way to the hospital as we speak. Step-grannyhood awaits. I am not quite prepared for that.

The Bill corrects what is fundamentally a clear unfairness in relation to ministerial appointment legislation. Clearly, as we heard on Second Reading, there is support from all sides of the House for ensuring that Cabinet Ministers

[Wendy Chamberlain]

can take maternity leave, and rightly so. However, like many Members across the House, I find it worrying that this huge hole in legislation has been spotted only now. Sadly, I think that speaks volumes about this place, the current Government and—dare I say it?—previous Governments, in which my party took a part.

While today we may be updating antiquated rules, the Bill takes us not so much up to the present day as into the 1990s. Of course, a particular element of maternity leave is ensuring that a new mother can physically recover from the birth. I was a police officer for 12 years, and it was critical that we took time off work. That is why all mothers should take at least two weeks off work in the first instance. It was therefore incredibly saddening to hear of the experience of MPs who have been forced to attend this place either immediately prior to giving birth or shortly thereafter.

In 2021, there is wide acceptance of the fact that, no matter how a person is becoming a parent, they should be entitled to leave, whether it is maternity leave, paternity leave or adoption leave, to give the child that is coming into their family—the child should be at the centre of this—the very best start in life that they can. We should therefore expand the scope of the Bill beyond maternity leave, because that is clearly the direction of travel that we see in society. This must be a legislative first step, and I welcome the Paymaster General's comments on Second Reading that it is. I look forward to hearing the timetable accordingly.

I worked for a number of different organisations throughout my career before I came into this place. I have seen a variety of policies on parental leave, and I have seen them change over time. In fact, when I was a police officer, they changed between the births of my children; when I had my daughter, I had six months' leave, and when I had my son, I was able to take longer. However, I would have really struggled financially if it had not been for my mother, who was able to help us cover childcare. There was just no way that, as a family, we could afford the multiple days.

Stella Creasy: The hon. Lady is making an incredibly powerful speech. May I be the first person to congratulate her on her forthcoming step-grannyhood? I am sure she will be super-gran. One statistic that is very important in this debate is that a third of women get into debt when they take maternity leave. She talks about the financial penalties that she faced. Does she think that one of the things that we would need to look at if we were to have an equalities impact assessment is the different access to maternity leave and the time that people can have, due to the financial consequences for them of taking it because we have such poor maternity leave in this country?

Wendy Chamberlain: Absolutely; I agree. Continuing on my experience of maternity leave, I had to get my mother to help so that we could afford the childcare, but my husband was a police superintendent at the time of the birth of our son, and his two weeks' paternity leave operationally did not really happen because there were a number of things going on. It just did not work for us as a family, and he certainly did not get the quality time he deserved.

I empathise with the comments made by the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) about the role of fathers. I simply would not be able to serve in this House if it were not for my husband taking the lead at home, although I have warned the children that I am checking Satchel One for progress on online learning on a regular basis.

The global drinks manufacturer that I worked for prior to my election introduced a parental leave policy in early 2019, which means that, regardless of whether it is maternity, paternity or adoption leave, employees are entitled to parental leave equating to six months' full pay. I agree with the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) that this has been transformative, not just for mothers but for fathers too. The biggest impact, I would argue, has been on men. For instance, the director of the global learning unit that I was part of, a man, took his full parental leave allowance, and that sent a very important message. It meant that many men on the supply and manufacturing side of the business in more operational roles felt empowered to be able to take that same leave. That is incredibly important.

4.15 pm

Many other organisations and businesses have been moving in the same direction, so it is disappointing that the Bill excludes any parent who has not given birth. Indeed, the Prime Minister himself became a parent again in the past year. Much has already been said about the fact that Members of Parliament cannot take parental leave because we are appointed. Although we as mothers could take leave by employing a locum—the hon. Member for Walthamstow spoke at length about this—that option is not available to male MPs. I listened intently to the contribution by the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) on the importance of fathers. By correcting the unfairness in terms of maternity leave for Cabinet Ministers, we are not only leaving other holes in legislation but potentially creating a perceived advantage for those in ministerial positions over the general public. I agree with the comments of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on councillors, the Welsh Parliament—the Senedd—and the Scottish Parliament. A number of MSPs, despite the fact that they are travelling to Edinburgh and Holyrood as opposed to Westminster, are deciding, come the Scottish elections in May, not to stand again, and have publicly said that the pressures of having children and being a parent have played a part in their decision.

Patrick Grady: As I said, one of those deciding not to stand is Aileen Campbell, whom I consider a close friend. She was the first Scottish Government Minister to take maternity leave, and Fiona McLeod, an outstanding Minister, was appointed to cover for her. The hon. Lady is talking about the difficulties that Members have in this place. Her former leader, Jo Swinson, was very negatively impacted, because not only was there no proxy voting at that point, but her pairing was shamefully broken, either accidentally or on purpose. That shows the amount of work that still needs to be done in this place despite the points that are being made about the wider consequences for society.

Wendy Chamberlain: I agree. It is interesting that the Government are now much more supporting of proxies than they have been. The challenge around the pairing arrangements is not only the risk that they might be

broken—that was certainly a very bad experience for Jo Swinson—but that the role that we play in this place is potentially much more visible than it has been in the past through apps such as CommonsVotes. People in our constituencies judge us, and rightly so, on our voting records, and pairing does not give people the opportunity to have their views recorded.

Stella Creasy: I have constituents who say, “I turned on the television and I couldn’t see you in the Chamber”, and I say, “Yes, that’s because I was working.” It is important to remember that only a third of what we do as Members of Parliament takes place in this room—there is also all the build-up to legislation, all the casework we do in our communities, and the role we play as an advocate for our localities. When we are considering the cover required, thinking only about what happens in this place and the end point of voting is a missed opportunity. We have to recognise what would happen in our communities if our role there was not played. Does the hon. Lady agree that we should not sell ourselves short with the idea that if we disappeared for six months people would not notice?

Wendy Chamberlain: I do agree. That would not only sell ourselves short but sell short the work done by our staff in our constituencies. Owing to the pandemic, it has been difficult for parliamentarians who came into this House in December 2019 to know what case workloads might normally look like, but I have experienced a very high level over the past year, and my staff have played a key role in relation to that. We need to be there to support our constituents. Constituents have said that they have had a better understanding of the role of MPs and what they can do as a result.

I do not want it to be thought that I do not agree with Cabinet Ministers being entitled to full pay and maternity leave. I absolutely support that; it is entirely right and in keeping with best practice, but it also potentially speaks to huge unfairness, on which other Members have touched. Secretaries of State will receive about £1,300 a week if they receive full maternity pay for six months, but millions of people around the country are eligible only for statutory pay, which after the first six weeks is just £151 a week—close to a 1,000% difference.

On Second Reading, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) spoke eloquently about the deficiencies in maternity pay and allowances. It does seem odd to me for the Government to say, “This is the standard we are going to give to a Cabinet Minister,” and on the other hand say, “The statutory minimum is the standard by which you should treat your employees.” That seems a case of “Do as I say and not as I do.” The organisation that I worked for previously is now giving six months of parental leave, regardless of whether that is maternity, paternity or adoption leave. That is a big organisation.

Meg Hillier: So many others have spoken about the real difficulty for so many women out there who do not get a good package of maternity cover. Does the hon. Member acknowledge that as MPs we get a good financial package and that we are paid all the way through? As the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) highlighted, we get a good deal in that respect and we must ensure that we recognise that.

Wendy Chamberlain: Again, I agree. We are not only paid on maternity or paternity—if Members choose to take time off—but we do not receive sick pay because we continue to be paid at that time as well. I acknowledge that during this period a number of people in my constituency and across the UK are really struggling because statutory sick pay provisions are nowhere near adequate.

I worked for a global organisation, but I am conscious of the impact of parental leave on small businesses. That is why the statutory support needs to be so much better. We would view it as unacceptable if the Bill said that the Attorney General would receive only basic statutory maternity rights, and yet fundamentally that will be the case for millions of people.

Hon. Members have touched on MPs’ staff and IPSA contracts, where I also have concerns. Many MPs employ staff who have worked for other MPs, especially after the churn of an election—indeed, I did that in January 2020—but to qualify for full maternity pay on an IPSA contract, a staff member needs to have worked for over a year. If staff members change MP, even if they have worked for a long time in Parliament, they effectively start a new employment and are penalised as a result. Although, like the hon. Member for Walthamstow, I was pleased to see in my mailbox this morning correspondence from IPSA on this issue, it was specifically related to MPs. I urge IPSA to consider MPs’ staff as part of the review. My first 15 months have certainly taught me that having excellent staff and supporting them is critical to success in this place.

I want to reflect on the work I have done with 50:50 Parliament since my election. I have spoken at a number of its events—obviously enabled by being online during the pandemic—and the common theme in the questions that come from women interested in or considering standing either in this place, at local authority level or, indeed, at the Senedd or at Holyrood are around how to manage family time and find a work-life balance, and having children as part of that. I continue to urge the Paymaster General to regard this Bill as a first legislative step. We have a real opportunity to send out a strong, positive message about diversity in this place, but someone who has served as a Cabinet Minister for less than a year is to receive full maternity pay. As I say, that is right, but we have an issue to address when a staff member who might have worked in Parliament for years would receive only statutory pay.

It is now a month before the Attorney General’s maternity leave, and it is worrying that the Government have only now realised that this is an issue. Obviously, the business changed last week to allow us to debate the Bill today. That tells me that equalities are not at the heart of the Government’s thinking. I always think about an inclusion lens: everything that we consider in this place should be looked at in the light of inclusion and therefore we will see the issues before they are pointed out to us latterly.

Stella Creasy: I agree with what the hon. Member is saying. Does she agree that it is concerning that normally an equalities impact assessment would be produced as standard and yet we do not see that because this legislation is being pushed through Parliament at short notice? We are all aware that the Government have had a deadline to work to, but they will have known of that deadline

[Stella Creasy]

for some months, so there could have been time to do some of the work we are asking for in the amendment, with our better understanding the consequences of the legislation as a result.

Wendy Chamberlain: I entirely agree. Indeed, earlier I joked that this legislation brings us not into the 21st century, but into the 1990s. When I was a police officer, doing equality impact assessments, whether for operations we were carrying out or for anything else that was planned, was very much part of that. So it is disappointing that we are not seeing that in this place.

That lack of focus on equalities has become apparent over the past year, during the pandemic, and it is really disappointing. The hon. Member for Glasgow North mentioned my Liberal Democrat colleague Jo Swinson, who worked not only on parental leave but on gender pay gap reporting, which was one of the first business requirements to be jettisoned during the pandemic, and as yet there are no plans for its return.

When we watch the frequent Downing Street press conferences, it is usually a man we see at the lectern. These are potentially disappointing messages that the Government are sending out. In contrast, the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women, and I note the recent findings of the Women and Equalities Committee in that regard. Again, the hon. Member for Walthamstow spoke powerfully about this earlier. I, too, commend the work of Pregnant Then Screwed and wish them success in their case, but obviously I am saddened that it has got to that stage.

The Government talk a lot about levelling up, but clearly there is work to be done to get their own house in order when it comes to gender equality, both internally and in relation to the impact of their policies across the country. That is why I was very happy to co-sign new clause 1, tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow, which calls for that equalities impact assessment for this legislation, as she described so eloquently.

There has been progress over the past 10 years. Thanks to the efforts of Jo Swinson, we now have shared parental leave, which has been an incredible success, and I know that many people across the country have taken up that opportunity. I know that more businesses and organisations have been improving the amount of fully paid maternity leave on offer, going beyond the statutory levels. That was the case with my previous employer, and indeed in the police service. However, it is very important that, as we consider the Bill, we think about how we can move forward, particularly in relation to covid. Given covid's impact on businesses, with business margins tight, there is a concern that one of the first things to go will be provision that is above statutory levels. I am very concerned about that. Having had 10 years of progress, we cannot afford to have a lost decade when things go backwards as a result of covid. I therefore urge the Government to carry out an impact assessment on this issue. I hope the Paymaster General will address that point later.

To conclude, the aims of this legislation are very welcome but there is much more to be done. I hope that today's debate will be the beginning of a conversation on how we modernise parental leave laws, how we encourage business to engage with that, how we recognise

family life in 21st-century UK, and how we ensure that the legacy of covid is one of more flexible leave entitlements, rather than a reversion to statutory limits. Ultimately, however, the sadness of today is the Government's failure to address the issue sooner. Perhaps they could have done that by carrying out an equalities impact assessment sooner. Sadly, that means we are talking today about one woman and the specifics of her case, and that should never have happened.

Mr Holden: It is a pleasure to follow North East Fife's super gran, and to reflect on the views of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) that there will be no equality until fathers are able to step up. I will move on to speak about that a little later. My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) has dealt with her amendment sensibly and I have a huge amount of sympathy with the points she has made, so I hope that it will be properly addressed by the Minister.

I want to say a little about the equalities impact assessment proposed in new clause 1, because it has raised broader issues about paternity leave, adoption leave and shared parental leave. It is clear from today's debate that fathers have been a bit of an afterthought. A report published by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in December 2020 found that 73% of men feel stigmatised over taking just the two weeks of paternity leave, never mind any longer, and 95% of men said that their workplace culture prevents them from taking extended paternity leave and that really needs to change. In fact, a report by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has found that the proportion of fathers taking paternity leave actually fell between 2018 and 2019, from 32% to 31%, and that just 1% of parents take shared parental leave, according to the most recent figures available.

We have a huge leadership role to play here. The Minister indicated on Second Reading that this issue will be rectified later, and I look forward to her re-emphasising that commitment shortly, because at this important stage, messages from the Dispatch Box are necessary to show all of us that fathers are important, and that equality for mothers and fathers will not be achieved until we allow them to step up.

4.30 pm

Cat Smith: The haste with which the Bill has been brought forward is perhaps reflected in some of the amendments that we see on the amendment paper. I would like to address the amendments tabled by the SNP. I think they have been tabled with the best of intentions, but if, instead of giving women the option of taking maternity leave, we make it a requirement, we would remove the element of choice, which is incredibly important for women when it comes to if and when we have children, how many we have, and how we balance work and motherhood. Similarly, the amendments that would increase the requirement from six months to 12 months would make us lose some of that flexibility, which is incredibly important.

The amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) and the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) have been addressed by the Minister already. Indeed,

the language is already in the legislation, in the sense that it talks about the offices held, rather than the women who are pregnant. That is why the legislation is written as it is, and in that regard I am very much satisfied.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) has tabled a couple of amendments. She made a point about the equality impact assessment. Perhaps less haste would have led to better legislation that included fathers, adoption, paternity leave and flexibility around premature babies. That would lead to an improvement in representation in public life.

I will keep my remarks short. In conclusion, the Opposition support the Bill unamended. The Bill is the right thing to do for pregnant women, and it is imperative that it makes progress with haste, for fairly obvious reasons. It is not perfect, but we should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good, and it is, of course, the next baby step in progress towards true equality.

Penny Mordaunt: Before I turn to the nitty-gritty of the amendments, I will address wider points that Members have made. I thank all Members for their contributions and their thoughtful remarks in this important Committee stage.

In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) for coming to the Chamber today, and for her interventions. Her experience is incredibly valuable. One of the key points that she reminds us about is the different status that a single person may have for different aspects of the jobs that they do here. The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) spoke about the peculiar employment status of a Member of Parliament, which is distinct and different from that of a Member of Parliament who is also a Minister. A Minister is also an employee, and there are slight differences there. That is one of several reasons why this is a highly complex issue, but that does not mean it cannot be tackled.

In addition to the issues that have been raised regarding Members of Parliament and the challenges they face, there are still outstanding issues for Ministers in relation to shared parental leave, an examination of paternity leave—although, as I have outlined, there is provision there at the moment—and adoption leave. Sickness and bereavement is a grey area. We also have an additional issue for our colleagues in the other place who may be unpaid Ministers. That needs to be resolved, but it obviously plays back into the issue of maternity leave. These are very complex matters, and I reiterate again my gratitude to Her Majesty's Opposition for their engagement on this.

Let me turn to IPSA. Clearly, it is an independent body, and in the work that follows today we will have to respect that independence, but the Government are none the less absolutely determined to bring forward proposals collectively.

Stella Creasy: Over the past two years of seeking progress on this matter, and trying to ensure that Members have the options and the support that we are giving to Ministers, one of the things that I have been told is that IPSA has asked Parliament to offer a view. Indeed, this rather anarchic approach to what our employment status is has had an effect. Will the Paymaster General therefore commit to our having parliamentary time for a debate

on this? It does not need to be a Government-led debate, but we do need parliamentary time for it, and that is in the gift of Parliament. That way, if IPSA, on a very short timetable, asks the House to take a view, we will get that view, so that we can resolve the matter.

Penny Mordaunt: Although time on the Floor of this House is not in my personal gift, I hope that what I am about to set out will demonstrate to the hon. Lady that we are not just doing this as an exercise. These issues must be resolved. Yes, this is a matter that immediately affects Members in this place, but resolving this is also vital if we are to meet our ambition of ensuring that everyone who wants to sit on these Benches and is elected to do so has the working practices that they need to thrive, live their life and raise a family. That is very well understood.

We respect the independence of IPSA, and while we have to work with it—the Government have committed to supporting it—and the House authorities, all Members of the House will want to contribute to this important analysis. We want to look at custom and procedure. We also want to examine what legislative change may be required, particularly with regard to Ministers, which is the most complex issue. Recommendations by and to IPSA will be made through the usual channels. There has been quite a large amount of discussion about this already, with the help of the Opposition. As I have said, the Government will support IPSA on any of that work, and on any of the issues that we are all seeking to address. Its independence will be respected in line with its statutory footing.

Many colleagues who spoke on Second Reading are concerned about the impact assessment. We have undertaken to carry one out, but I add this caution: if Members want an impact assessment of this piece of legislation, that is very easily done, and will be really great for a very small number of people, but of no use whatsoever in advancing anyone else's rights or opportunities. We want—we have set this out in a note that we have shared, I think with the office of the hon. Member for Walthamstow, and certainly with the Opposition; I would be happy to share it with other colleagues around the House—to undertake an impact assessment that looks at current legislation on the issues we have discussed this afternoon in relation to Members of Parliament. We will also take into account work already done, or in progress, by the relevant Select Committees, particularly the Procedure Committee and the Women and Equalities Committee. As I have said, I would be very happy to share that note with hon. Members. Perhaps the best place for it is in the Library.

There are a couple of other issues that I want to address before turning to amendments.

Stella Creasy: It is incredibly welcome that the Minister is talking about doing a much wider impact assessment. For clarity—this issue has been raised today—looking at the wording of it, can she confirm that it will look at the impact on not just Members of Parliament, but their staff? We are drawing this distinction between parliamentary staff and people who work in Parliament. We need to look at everyone, so that we can be confident that every single woman and potential partner of a woman in this place will get the support they need.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady raises a very important point, and I think Members would feel very uncomfortable looking at their terms and conditions but not those of their staff. Again, that is a matter for this House and for IPSA, but the Government's view is that we need to look at this in the round. If we are to make changes, let's do it properly and ensure that all Members of this House and the Committees can contribute.

I thank the hon. Lady for what she said about how we can help mitigate the abuse that Members of this House have faced, and I hope will not face in future, when going on maternity leave. It is appalling what hon. Members on both sides of the House have been through, and I commend her for calling out that abuse when it is taking place in her own party; when others call out abuse from within their own parties, that is quite right, too. We need to support colleagues as they take maternity leave.

I turn to the amendments, and I apologise for the dry nature of what follows. It is the necessary part of putting a Bill through Parliament, and those tuning in at home might wish to put the kettle on at this point.

Clause 1 provides the basis on which a Minister can take paid maternity leave by setting out how and under what conditions a person can be appointed to the position of a Minister on leave. The concept of a Minister on leave is a very important one. As the Bill makes clear, the role of a Minister on leave is outside the restrictions in place at any one time, as set out in the Ministerial and other Salaries Act 1975, and outside the upper limit on the number of Members of the House of Commons who can serve as a Government Minister at any one time, as set out in the House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975. It is through this mechanism that the Government can ensure that the twin aims of this part of the Bill are met—namely, that Ministers are able to take paid maternity leave, and can remain part of the Government, without needing to resign from office.

Clause 1 makes it clear that it is within the Prime Minister's discretion to designate a person a Minister on leave, subject to a number of conditions. Those conditions are set out in detail in subsections (2) and (3), which make it clear that a person can be designated a Minister on leave only if they are pregnant or have recently given birth, if they are already a Minister holding ministerial office, and if they cease to hold that ministerial office at the point of designation as a Minister on leave. Subsection (5) provides clarity about the ministerial offices that fall within the scope of this Act by reference to the Ministerial and other Salaries Act 1975.

Meg Hillier: I agree with the right hon. Lady that the clause uses a dry way of saying something that I think is actually really important, which is that in all of this discussion we need to remember that prime ministerial patronage is limited by that Act for good reason. While that should not be the enemy of improvements for women who are going on maternity leave, I do think that it needs to be considered. If we think of recent Parliaments, in which majorities have been very small, it is quite an increase, percentage-wise, to the payroll if more people are added to it. I am grateful to the drafters of the Bill for having thought this through, and I hope that in any future work she does, that is seriously considered as part of the mix, so that the House at least debates any decision to change that.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for putting that much more succinctly than the clauses do, and she is absolutely right. That is part of the reason why this is so complicated. We tried to put this and other issues in the Bill, but that has not been possible.

Mr Holden: Has there been any consideration of unpaid Ministers in the House of Lords? They get a daily allowance normally, but they do not receive a salary. Has that been taken into consideration at this stage of this legislation?

Penny Mordaunt: It is not part of the scope of this Bill, but the Prime Minister has said in his written ministerial statement that it is one of the issues he wants this future piece of work to look at. I think it is fantastic that we have more women in the House of Lords, and we want those women to be able to hold ministerial office. If they need to take maternity leave, they should be able to do so.

4.45 pm

Subsection (3) of clause 1 deals specifically with the condition relating to pregnancy or maternity that must be satisfied for a person to be appointed as the Minister on leave, namely that they are at the time of designation either pregnant and within 12 weeks of the expected due date of the child, or have given birth to a child in the preceding four weeks. These conditions are designed to take account of the wide range of possible scenarios that can occur in relation to childbirth, including where the child is born prematurely or after their expected due date. These conditions are there to ensure that no Minister can lose out on benefiting from the arrangements set out in the Bill on account of the particular facts of their pregnancy and childbirth, and are partly based on the existing statutory framework relating to maternity leave.

Subsection (4) also makes it clear that a person can be designated as a Minister on leave, and benefit from the provisions in the Bill, even in the terrible situation where the child is stillborn. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) for raising this issue, and the work that she has done on it. In common with maternity legislation as it applies elsewhere, such a tragic event cannot be viewed as a reason to remove the financial security provided by provisions relating to maternity leave.

Subsection (6) sets out how the designation of a Minister as a Minister on leave can be brought to an end. The Bill envisages two scenarios under which the designation can be terminated—the designation terminates automatically six months after the appointment, or earlier, at the point at which the Minister on leave ceases to hold that office. In the latter situation, the designation can be brought to an end by the person in question being appointed to a different ministerial office before the end of the six-month period. That includes situations in which the person is reappointed to their previous role in Government, or to a different role altogether.

Clause 1 outlines the role of a Minister on leave. These arrangements are vital in ensuring that Ministers can take paid maternity leave by providing the mechanism for designations, which the Prime Minister can exercise in respect of Ministers that he has appointed under the royal prerogative. Without these mechanisms, the primary

purpose of the Bill would be frustrated, and I therefore strongly and wholeheartedly recommend to the House that clause 1 stand part of the Bill.

I now turn to the amendments tabled to the clause. Amendment 3 stands in the name of the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald). I thank her for her commitment and strong advocacy on this issue, and for engaging with me and officials over the past few days. The hon. Member has suggested through her proposed amendments that maternity leave should be mandatory for any new mothers in the Government's ranks, and I certainly agree that we must do all we can to ensure that new mothers feel able to access this new provision. However, to make it mandatory would cut across the prerogative of making ministerial appointments, as we have discussed, and further would serve to remove the mother's choice about taking leave. The Bill as it stands has been mindful of the constitutional position of Ministers: they are office holders, appointed by the sovereign on the advice of the Prime Minister of the day, under the powers of the royal prerogative. The Bill cannot, and does not, give a right on the part of the Minister wishing to take maternity leave to be appointed as a Minister on leave. Any appointment to such a role must remain a prerogative power on advice of the Prime Minister. Civil servants have taken great glee in telling me over the last few days that Ministers have no rights. The amendment would serve not to only undermine the role of the prerogative power but to constrain a ministerial mother's ability to choose what leave she takes following the birth of a child. The current provisions have been drafted to preserve both. The Government respectfully ask that it is withdrawn.

I turn to the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), beginning with amendment 15. I fully understand my hon. Friend's concern about the terminology in the Bill, and I am grateful for the practical and constructive suggestion that she has made in the amendment. One of the primary concerns of those drafting legislation is to achieve clarity, so that there is absolutely no ambiguity about what the law does or does not require or how it operates in any particular situation.

As I did not have time to do so on Second Reading, I would like to address the points raised by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) and the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi). The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West and my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock described very clearly how women and others are feeling about the word "woman" and other words being deleted from our documents and our public life, with descriptions of what it is to be a woman. I am very sensitive to that.

I note that exactly the same Members who asked questions and raised concerns about those issues have also raised concerns about the provision in the Bill for a trans man to make use of the provisions. It is not the case that this is a trade-off between one or the other, and it is a mistake to frame the concerns that have been raised around language in that way. It is about respecting women and women's rights, and that is completely compatible with respecting trans rights too. I always think that if you want to protect your own rights, you should protect someone else's, and that will help.

On the specific point that the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West raised with regard to the Equality Act 2010, I have tested that with officials and

it will not work for this legislation, but I have taken into consideration the suggestions that she and my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock made.

The hon. Member for Gower listed some Acts that she says have used the word "woman". They predate the convention that we are now operating under, which was introduced by Jack Straw in 2007. The intention of the guidance on using gender-neutral language was to avoid demeaning women by implying that only men could undertake certain roles, and that drafting convention has remained. It is not the case that we could legally and correctly use the word "woman" in this piece of legislation, nor could we do so with the term "Minister", because the designation of a person happens after they have ceased to hold their existing ministerial office.

Although we have been able to put in the legislation the words for the Opposition postholder, we have not been able to use the term "Minister" in the legislation. However, we can put the word "Minister" into the explanatory notes accompanying the Bill. Although that is still gender-neutral language, it is a much less jarring term than "person", and I hope that in doing so, we can address the very legitimate concerns that have been raised about this, while ensuring that the Bill is legally sound and not subject to legal challenge and is in line with the drafting conventions that we subscribe to.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock for the constructive suggestion that she has made in amendments 16 and 17, but I do not think that the clarity of the Bill would be aided by their inclusion. The amendments in question offer only a partial alteration of the Bill's terminology, rather than a wholesale one. I do not believe that her amendments would have achieved their aim. They would instead have introduced unnecessary uncertainty and inconsistency into the Bill. The use of the terminology in the Bill is now common practice. The current drafting of the legislation is legally accurate, and it covers all women who are pregnant or who give birth. I respectfully ask my hon. Friend not to press her amendments.

On amendments 18 and 19, which stand in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), let me say that it is not new practice to use gender-neutral language when drafting legislation. I have with me today several Bills relating to women and women's issues that have used gender-neutral language. In general terms, that is to correct the tendency to use particular pronouns that appear to assume that someone of a particular gender would be doing a particular job or performing a particular role.

Legislation is now typically drafted without reference to gender, and I fully recognise that certain phrases can jar in the public consciousness and leave us open to legal challenge. As I have said, this is not a new convention and it has the specific example of the clauses before this House today. It is not a new approach and there are plenty of examples of other Acts of Parliament and statutory instruments since that change in 2007 that use the word "person", including in the context of maternity. Section 3 of the Pensions Act 2014 and section 30 of the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Act 2019 are just two examples. I do not think that the clarity of the Bill would be aided by the amendments, which, taken together with the others standing in my right hon. Friend's name, would offer only partial alteration

of the Bill's terminology. The current drafting is legally accurate and clearly covers all women who are pregnant or give birth. I appreciate the strength of feeling he has on this.

Finally, in respect of clause 1, amendment 4, which stands in the name of the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire, would have the effect of enabling Ministers to take up to a year of maternity leave on full pay. As I have discussed, we are pegged to the civil service scheme, so I ask her not to press her amendment, and to bear in mind the context of the Bill.

Let me quickly address clause 2, which sets out the rate of ministerial maternity allowance and how that should be calculated, and what should happen with respect to the allowance in the event of the period of maternity leave coming to an end before the six-month period has elapsed. Subsection (2) merely confirms that if a Minister was unpaid in their role before going on maternity leave, no maternity allowance is payable. Obviously, it would not make sense that someone who did not receive a salary should then receive a payment. In such circumstances an unpaid Minister may nevertheless be designated a "Minister on leave" so as to remain a member of this Government while on leave, while not counting towards the headcount limit of 95 Ministers from the House of Commons, as prescribed by the House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975. While the Bill provides for a full six-month period of leave should the new or expectant mother wish to take it, the Bill also provides for flexibility for a shorter period of time.

I turn to amendments 5 to 9, which stand in the name of the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire. As I mentioned in respect of clause 1, I commend her advocacy. Her amendments would have the effect of enabling Ministers to take up to a year of maternity leave on full pay. She knows that that is significantly more generous than the maternity entitlements enjoyed by the vast majority of women in the UK.

Let me turn to amendment 1 in the name of the hon. Member for Walthamstow. If a Minister on leave were to cease to hold the office before the six months had lapsed, clause 2(3) already provides that she would receive the remainder of her allowance as a lump sum. The only circumstances in which that would not happen is if the Minister on leave were appointed to a new ministerial office, in which case she would once again receive a ministerial salary; or, in the tragic event that she died, it would be the case that financial assistance for her dependants would be provided through the ministerial pension scheme.

Let me turn to clause 3. Bear with me; I am trying to respond to all the amendments. Amendment 10—

5 pm

Debate interrupted (Order, this day).

The Chair put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Order, this day), That the amendment be made.

Question negatived.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): Lest there be a lack of clarity, let me explain that although the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), who moved amendment 3, is not here in the Chamber—and, therefore, if her voice were to call "Aye" obviously it could not be heard here in the Chamber—I am satisfied that she is well represented by her party's Chief Whip, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), who audibly did not call "Aye". The hon. Lady had also previously informed me that, had there been time, it had been her intention to withdraw amendment 3, as she was satisfied that the matter had been fully discussed and that was her intention in tabling the amendment.

The Chair then put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Order, this day).

Clauses 1 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment (Standing Order No. 83D(6)).

Bill read the Third time and passed.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My apologies for not giving you specific notice of this point of order. We were of the view that the Prime Minister would be coming to the House on 22 February to make a statement on the roadmap out of lockdown. Various Secretaries of State have intimated that that is now the week commencing 22 February. With the two-week notice period required to allow schools to open, that would be pushing it towards Easter. I wonder whether you had had notice from the Prime Minister as to when he will make that statement.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As he and the House know, it is not a matter for the Chair and it is not a matter for me when the Prime Minister comes to the House to make any particular announcement. The Leader of the House indicated that there would be a debate on Monday 22 February about covid matters. At present, that is the timetable set out for proceedings of the House, but of course it is up to the Government either to stick to that timetable or to change it as they will. I am sure that if any change is made, proper notice will be given.

Covid-19: Faith Groups

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Tom Pursglove.)

5.5 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting this debate. I hope that it will draw attention to the extraordinary scale and value of faith groups' contributions in response to the pandemic, and that we will consider how to make more of the potential of faith-based groups working alongside local and national Government.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on faith and society, established in 2012. Our aim is to support faith-based contributions to communities, to help make those contributions better known and, where we can, to help remove hurdles to realising their full potential. When we started, we held a series of meetings with faith-based groups contributing to welfare to work, to health and wellbeing and to work with young people—recognising that most youth work in Britain now is undertaken by faith groups—and groups working on international aid.

It quickly became clear from those discussions that the groups often had a problem with their local council. Councils suspected that the groups were only really interested in trying to convert people, or that any service they provided would be biased in favour of their own members. In any case, from the perspective of a hard-pressed council officer, faith groups are difficult: if they work with one of them, will they offend the others? After all, these are rather odd people; they believe in God—far simpler not to get involved with any of them.

As a result, however, communities miss out on really valuable contributions that the groups could be making, so we came up with the idea, which was suggested by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), of a faith covenant. The covenant sets out ground rules for co-operation between faith groups and local councils to make clear what each should expect of the other, to try to build up confidence on both sides and support them to work together.

The first council to draw faith groups in its area together to sign up to the covenant was Birmingham City Council. It happened at Birmingham central library in December 2014, and it was a good start; Birmingham is the biggest local authority in Europe. Another dozen councils have signed up since then, covering between them about 10% of the UK population. FaithAction, the APPG's secretariat, is increasingly drawing those councils together to network and learn from one another, together with faith groups in their areas.

However, in the last year, things have moved on to a different level. It came home to me that something unusual was happening on the morning of Good Friday last year. While sitting at home going through emails, I found two from constituents saying, "I don't have any food. What should I do?" We have all become familiar with referring people to food banks over the past 10 years, but I knew that they would all be shut over the Easter weekend, so I did not know how to answer those constituents. But then I found an email from the Mayor of Newham, Rokhsana Fiaz, saying, "If you come across people without food over the holiday weekend, you should email the vicar of Ascension Church, Royal

Docks, before 10 in the morning for a food parcel to be delivered later in the day." I did not have any better ideas, so I gave it a try, and both my constituents received their food parcels.

My local council has never worked in partnership with faith groups before; something unusual was going on. In my constituency, Bonny Downs Baptist Church, Highway Vineyard Church, Ibrahim Mosque, Manor Park Christian Fellowship and City Chapel have all done a superb job, supported by Newham Council. Similar reports started to come in from elsewhere; the Bishop of Durham told me that a lot of the covid emergency response in his diocese was from faith groups.

Over the summer, with support from the Sir Halley Stewart Trust, the Trussell Trust and the Good Faith partnership, the all-party group commissioned the Faiths and Civil Society Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London to research those council-faith group partnerships. Questionnaires were sent to all 408 UK local authorities and 48% of them filled them in and returned them. Fifty-five in-depth interviews with council leaders and faith-based projects were conducted across 10 local authority areas. Our report, "Keeping the Faith" was published in November, and I thank Professors Chris Baker and Adam Dinham of Goldsmiths and Greg Smith and the research team for all their work. They found a big increase in the number and the depth of partnerships between local authorities and faith groups. More than two thirds of the councils surveyed reported an increase in partnership working with faith groups and 91% described their experience with faith groups as "very positive" or "positive". It has become clear that what anecdotally appeared to us to be happening when the pandemic began is a reality across the country.

Faith groups and faith-based organisations have been integral to the civil society response to the pandemic, opening up buildings and food banks, running networks, sharing information, befriending, collecting, cooking and delivering food and providing volunteers. Across the UK, nearly 60% of councils have been working with church-based food banks during the pandemic; 24% have been working with mosque-based food banks; 11% have worked with food banks in Gurdwaras, and 10% with food banks in Hindu temples. Suddenly what our all-party group had been promoting had come about.

It has been a very positive experience for councils. One council officer told the researchers:

"My personal admiration for faith groups has gone through the roof, just in terms of their commitment there. We as a local authority didn't know what we were getting into. And they have got involved with smiles on their faces and they've done it professionally."

The researchers put to the councils a list of characteristics and asked them to characterise their experience of their partnerships "to a great extent", "to some extent", "not very much", "not at all" or "don't know". Positive characteristics scored very highly. On

"Adding value because of their longstanding presence in the local community",

60% of councils said that was the case to a great extent. On

"Improving access to hard to reach groups",

40% said that that was the case to a great extent and another 39% said that that was the case to some extent.

[Stephen Timms]

The researchers also asked about negative aspects that are said to characterise faith groups. Asked about:

“Expressing socially conservative views which sit uneasily with our equalities obligations”,

2% of councils said that that was the case to a great extent. On

“Causing us concern about the possibility of proselytization in the context of partnership working”,

only 1% felt that that was the case. Those old fears of the pitfalls of working with faith groups simply did not materialise last year. Almost all the councils want to build on those new partnerships in future.

The report recommended that the Government appoint a faiths commissioner, working across government, to help faith groups relate to government and to make the fullest contribution that they can. We would like Ministers to encourage nationwide adoption of our faith covenant and of a framework that reflects shared values to foster trust and promote effective collaboration. We would like support from the Minister’s Department to go to each UK local authority, with examples of good faith group partnerships, to build an understanding of what works well in practice. We have proposed a new faiths advisory council, chaired by the new faiths commissioner and attended by Ministers and senior civil servants to look strategically at how faith groups can best help in post-covid Britain.

I would like to thank the House of Commons digital engagement team led by Ben Pearson. Last Friday, it issued a call for evidence ahead of this debate. They had 235 responses reporting how churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and Baha’is have fostered community spirit, provided pastoral support and delivered key services. Canon Hilary Barber of Halifax wrote that the local authority has commissioned faith communities to run food banks and night shelters and is working jointly to promote protecting the NHS and uptake of the vaccine. Amarjit Singh Atwal, in the east midlands, wrote:

“The community established a food bank”

for

“rough sleepers. Before the pandemic it was an average of 80 meals a week. During the pandemic this increased to 300 per week. The community also provided PPE to the local health trust.”

Nick, from Christians Against Poverty, wrote of supporting “families with debt problems over the last year, albeit by telephone rather than face to face...working successfully to get families debt free.”

I pay tribute to John Kirkby, the remarkable founder of Christians Against Poverty, who announced yesterday that he is to step down after 25 years.

I hope the Minister will join me in thanking faith groups for their efforts in supporting communities during the pandemic. I welcome his responses on behalf of his Department to the recommendations in our report—appointing a faith commissioner, promoting the faith covenant, developing and distributing a toolkit, and establishing a faiths advisory council. There is still a widely held view that religious faith is on the way out, irrelevant, maybe harmful to community wellbeing. The reality is that in this decade, and as has become so clear in the past year, it has been the faith groups that, uniquely, have had both the motivation and the resources to step forward and help. Those have not been found

anywhere else. We need to learn the lesson from that and enable faith groups and faith-based organisations to make their full contribution in the years ahead.

5.16 pm

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on calling this important debate. I welcome the new Minister, who is uniquely qualified to be dealing with the overall subject of housing.

The right hon. Gentleman said that it was thought that faith groups would try to convert people. That certainly has not been the case in my constituency over the course of the pandemic. I am sure the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) will agree that our Sikh temple, the gurdwara, has had what in years past would have been described as a very good war. During the first lockdown, its langar delivered 64,000 free shared meals to individuals and to the local hospice and nursing homes. At the peak, it was doing 1,300 meals a day. When the European lorry drivers were trying to get home for Christmas, it did 800, 1,000 and then 1,500 meals a day. So far in this lockdown, the gurdwara has provided over 25,000 meals, and when the local hospital ran out of scrubs for the staff, it got fabric from Malaysia, had it sewn in Leicester and then distributed the scrubs.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I can certainly attest to that. My father, who served as a president of the Gravesend gurdwara, constantly told me about the amazing work that the gurdwara does. This time round, absolutely incredibly, the Gravesend gurdwara teamed up with Khalsa Aid, a charity based in Slough, to go out and feed thousands of stranded lorry drivers on the M20. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that that amazing concept—working together for the betterment of all—illustrates that faith can be a source of so much good?

Adam Holloway: I do agree. The hon. Gentleman is being modest. He also played his part in the gurdwara when he lived in Gravesend.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that, while the Church is filled with imperfect people, of whom I am one, those imperfect people want to do all they can to help others. From schemes such as ringing elderly constituents regularly, delivering shopping or prescriptions, or holding distanced meetings, the love shown by those making up so many denominations, Churches and faith groups has been heartwarming. It reminds us of the scripture text in John chapter 13, verse 35:

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”.

Adam Holloway: Indeed, and by thy works shall we know you.

The Gravesend Methodist church, in fact all the churches, found that many of their volunteers disappeared early on, because they were more elderly and often in vulnerable groups. So we saw the Gravesend Methodist church, under Minister Tony Graff, enable Vicki Clarke and Chris Ward to look after the homeless. Every Christian church—that I know of, anyway—handed

out food to people, including the City Praise Centre and Terry with his van. I thank all of them.

There are not many MPs here in Parliament at the moment—there are an awful lot of workmen, I notice—but I say again to the right hon. Member for East Ham: thank you for calling this debate, because I know that an enormous number of Members of Parliament who are not here today are extremely grateful to the faith groups for what they have done during the past few months.

5.20 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): I would like to pass on my thanks to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for bringing forward this debate. I would also like to pass on my delight at the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), joining the Front Bench.

The response of all faith groups across my constituency of Bury South to the covid pandemic has been truly humbling. They have selflessly mobilised to ensure that those in need have been cared for, but I want to focus specifically on a group I have been intimately involved with since its inception last year. The Jewish Strategic Group was founded in order to collaborate and co-ordinate the Jewish community's response to the covid-19 pandemic. It is expertly chaired by Mark Adlestone and co-ordinated by Marc Levy of the Jewish Leadership Council and comprises organisations including the L'Chaim food bank, Hatzola, Misaskim, the Hershel Weiss Centre, Maccabi and many others who selflessly and effectively operate in my constituency.

On a national level, I also pay tribute to the Jewish Leadership Council for the social care assistance fund that has financially supported so many charities not only in my constituency but in the Jewish community across the country. This has included organisations such as the Fed, the Friendship Circle, Jewish Action for Mental Health, Chai Cancer Care and Jewish Women's Aid. In addition, its emergency community fund has helped to support individuals whose earnings have been affected by the pandemic. Once again, I am grateful that those living in Bury South were able to benefit from this initiative. I am sure that Members across the House will share similar experiences of faith communities coming together to support those in society who may be struggling, and I am delighted to have been afforded this opportunity to highlight their invaluable contribution.

5.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Eddie Hughes): I would like to offer my thanks to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for securing this debate and giving us the opportunity to discuss the response of faith groups to the covid outbreak. I would also like to thank him for giving us the opportunity to send colleagues off with a sense of optimism and perhaps renewed faith in humanity. I do not agree with the idea that people think we are odd; I think we do good work collectively. We have had some great contributions, and it is lovely to see my friends here, including the hon. Members for Slough (Mr Dhesi) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I was also delighted to hear the contribution from my

hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway), whose comments about the Sikh community I completely echo and endorse. I am looking forward to calling upon his experience to help and support me in my role as the Minister for homelessness. Just before lockdown occurred, I had the opportunity to visit Israel with my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford)—

Christian Wakeford: We are not sharing those stories.

Eddie Hughes: Indeed. That visit was made thanks to the Conservative Friends of Israel and it was an opportunity to learn more about that country, the Jewish people and so on. I am not at all surprised by the excellent examples that my hon. Friend gave of their work in this country during the pandemic.

Mr Dhesi: I, too, am glad that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham was able to secure this debate on the response of faith groups to the covid-19 outbreak. In Slough, although Slough Borough Council and the Slough Council For Voluntary Service created an umbrella organisation, the One Slough initiative, which is doing so much for our community, I have been so impressed by the faith groups in particular—our churches, mosques, the Hindu mandir, the Sikh gurdwaras and others—who did much-needed work to prepare and deliver food and much-needed supplies to people's homes. Does the Minister agree that that illustrates that faith and faith groups can be so inspirational, and that faith is once again the source of so much good in our communities?

Eddie Hughes: Of course, I completely endorse those comments. The pandemic has given us the opportunity to see what good work these groups do, serving people of all faiths and none, regardless of what faith it is.

Christian Wakeford: I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) and the Minister. The religious communities have not only gone above and beyond; they have helped others while missing their own festivals. They deserve much more than we can possibly give with our kind words in the Chamber.

Eddie Hughes: Once again, I completely endorse those comments. I will comment briefly on the festivals that have been missed.

I, like many people, have never needed my faith more than over the previous 11 months. As a Catholic, one of the things I missed most during the first lockdown was going to church. We missed the solace of places like St Peter's, a beautiful church in Bloxwich. We missed the breathing space we get from praying alone. We missed attending mass as a community. It was particularly hard for all of us over Easter, Passover, Eid, Vaisakhi and many other festivals, and it is with a heavy heart that I realise things still will not be the same this year. However, it is certainly right that places of worship are now open for regular communal worship. I know that the right hon. Gentleman's constituency of East Ham, which like mine is among the most deprived in the country, has been one of the hardest hit during this crisis and, just like my constituency, East Ham has a strong and diverse faith group.

[Eddie Hughes]

In Walsall, the difference made by faith groups in response to the pandemic has been nothing short of remarkable. Even when places of worship were closed, faith groups and organisations found new, alternative ways to reach people. When I visited the Guru Nanak gurdwara in Willenhall in May last year—it now seems a long time ago—I incorrectly advertised that it was offering food seven days a week. At that point, it was delivering two days a week, already a huge feat, but soon after my blunder that became the reality. It decided to step up to seven days a week, with delivery three days a week and collection four days a week. Free food available to absolutely anyone, irrespective of their faith—fantastic. I also had the opportunity to join members of the Muslim community packing and delivering food boxes for vulnerable people. I thank Pound 4 Pound boxing club for organising that event.

Those are a few examples from my constituency, but in panning out from Walsall North, I do not know where to begin. Throughout this exceptionally challenging time, faith groups have played a vital role in providing leadership for many and in bringing communities and generations together. Across the way, our neighbours at the Guru Nanak gurdwara in Wolverhampton hosted a covid-19 testing pilot in November, supporting the NHS to identify undiagnosed cases to protect those most at risk from the virus. In January, imams in mosques across the UK delivered sermons at Friday prayers to address concerns surrounding covid vaccinations and reassure worshippers that it was safe to receive them.

During the pandemic, churches, mosques, gurdwaras and temples have opened their doors wide to provide essential support for the most vulnerable people in their communities, and not just those of faith. This year we have seen with our own eyes how faith groups have an ability to mobilise resources that some other civil society actors simply do not. The APPG's report "Keeping their Faith" rightly picked that up. It is fair to say that that has surprised some people in the last few months. I was not surprised, perhaps because in my previous role as deputy chief executive of YMCA in Birmingham I saw at first hand the transformative power of inclusive faith-based organisations in people's lives.

To turn to the APPG's report, the statistics are impressive. While council capacity for engagement has reduced during the pandemic due to building closures and furloughed staff, 67% of local authorities have reported an increase in partnership working with faith groups since the start of the pandemic. Like the right hon. Member for East Ham, I noticed the striking statistic that 91% of local authorities described their experience of partnerships with faith groups as very positive or positive. The report shines a bright light on what can be achieved locally between faith groups and local government as this pandemic continues, but more than that, it is timely. It comes after the report from my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) that delves into levelling up our communities and will complement the important review that is under way on how Government can engage with faith communities, which is being undertaken by the independent adviser, Colin Bloom.

The APPG has shown that faith communities and local and national Government can work together effectively. My colleague Lord Greenhalgh, our Faith

Minister, has seen the impact of that partnership at the national level through the places of worship taskforce and the regular faith leadership roundtables that he hosts. Collectively, the Government, alongside faith leaders, were able to advise thousands of places of worship on how to keep congregants safe while still facilitating significant elements of faith practice.

We have achieved a great deal in the past year under incredibly difficult circumstances. I am in full agreement, as is the Faith Minister, that we should capitalise on these positive outcomes. We do not want to lose all this good work and the momentum that has been created. It is a great shame that potentially the lack of understanding of what could be collectively achieved has held some councils back from working with faith groups. While it has taken a pandemic for new relationships to grow, I, for one, will be building on the incredible work that has happened in my own constituency.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to a number of recommendations, including the faith covenant published by the APPG in 2014 to encourage collaboration between faith groups and local authorities, engendered to build mutual understanding between them. Such initiatives can help to encourage collaborations that bring about huge benefits for communities. I encourage all councils to look at the faith covenant and take up the challenge to work constructively with faith groups.

Each report that I have mentioned is seeking to find ways in which government, local and national, can better utilise, engage and work alongside faith communities—an aim we fully support. I know that the right hon. Gentleman has been pushing this cause for years, looking for a step change in how government, local and central, can work together with faith groups and learn from each other to inform policy decisions and effect real change locally. This report and the actions it highlights have opened doors and changed perceptions. Together with the review by my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes and Colin Bloom's report, we will have the beginnings of a framework for how new, meaningful partnerships can be brought together.

At this time, when our NHS is rolling out the country's biggest ever public health programmes, faith groups are again at the forefront of that effort. It is the diligence and care that allowed communal worship to restart last year that now allows places of worship to transform into places where large-scale vaccination can take place for the benefit of all of us. Everyone involved in this debate knows that effective vaccines are the best way to protect people from coronavirus, saving thousands of lives and helping us to forge a path out of the pandemic. I thank faith communities for all that they are doing on the vaccine, but also challenge them to keep doing more.

Once again, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for inviting me to speak at such a critical time about such critical work. Faith is a vital part of our identities and it motivates us to play a key part in our communities. The reports we have discussed point us to look ahead and establish new relationships with faith groups. I look forward to Colin Bloom's report this year as an important further contribution to that debate.

Question put and agreed to.

5.34 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 11 February 2021

TREASURY

Normal Minimum Pension Age: Consultation

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

The normal minimum pension age is the minimum age at which most pension savers can access their pensions without incurring an unauthorised payments tax charge (unless they are taking their pension due to ill health). The normal minimum pension age is currently age 55. This minimum helps to ensure that tax relieved pension savings are used to provide an income, or funds on which an individual can draw, in later life. In 2010 the minimum pension age was increased from age 50 to 55. In 2014, the coalition Government announced that the normal minimum pension age would increase from age 55 to 57 in 2028.

Since the normal minimum pension age was introduced, life expectancy at birth for both men and women has continued to increase, according to the latest data from the Office for National Statistics. It has continued to increase since the announcement in 2014. Increasing the normal minimum pension age reflects increases in longevity and changing expectations of how long we will remain in work and in retirement. Raising the normal minimum pension age to age 57 could encourage individuals to save longer for their retirement, and so help ensure that individuals will have financial security in later life.

The Government therefore reconfirm their intention to legislate to increase the normal minimum pension age to age 57 on 6 April 2028 and are today publishing a consultation on how to implement the increase. The consultation is available at

www.gov.uk/government/consultations/increasing-the-normal-minimum-pension-age-consultation-on-implementation.

The increase to age 57 will not apply to those who are members of the firefighters, police and armed forces public service pension schemes. This reflects the unique nature of these occupations. The consultation also sets out the proposed protection regime for some other pension savers. The Government do not intend for this increase to apply to individuals who already have unqualified rights to take a pension at an earlier age. Protected pension ages will be specific to an individual as a member of a particular scheme, so protection will not apply to other schemes where there is no existing right held.

People in the UK are living longer, and the proportion of over-50s in the labour force is continuing to increase. The Government recognise the importance of supporting over 50s to remain active in the labour market and are committed to supporting them to find and retain employment. The Government are working with employers via the business champion for older workers to enable over-50s to retain employment and are aiming to provide early and targeted employment and skills support to help individuals move back into work, including into new sectors.

This consultation on implementing the increase in normal minimum pension age will run for 10 weeks.

[HCWS780]

DEFENCE

Reserve Forces and Cadets Associations: External Scrutiny Team Report

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

I have today placed in the Library of the House a copy of a report into the condition of the reserves and delivery of the future reserves 2020 programme compiled by the Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Associations external scrutiny team. I am most grateful to the team for their work and I will respond to the report shortly.

The attachment can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2021-02-11/HCWS779/>.

[HCWS779]

PRIME MINISTER

Intelligence and Security Committees Northern Ireland-related Terrorism Report

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): On 5 October 2020, the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (ISC) published its report entitled "Northern Ireland-Related Terrorism" (NIRT). Our thoughts remain with those who have been impacted by the enduring threat of violence in Northern Ireland, in particular the friends and families of those who have lost their lives.

Today, the Government are publishing their response to this report.

I remain grateful to the Intelligence and Security Committee for its continued independent oversight and scrutiny. I would like to thank the former Committee for their work in the last Parliament, and I look forward to working with the appointed Committee in the future.

Copies of the Government responses have been laid before both Houses.

[HCWS781]

TRANSPORT

Light Dues 2021-22

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport

(Robert Courts): A strong and growing maritime industry is vital to the economy of the United Kingdom and it is critical that we treasure and protect this vital artery if we are to remain a world-leading maritime centre.

The work of the General Lighthouse Authorities, which provide and maintain marine aids to navigation and respond to new wrecks and navigation dangers in some of the busiest waters in the world, is crucial to underpinning that vision whilst maintaining our vigorous safety record and continuously improving safety standards.

Light dues, which are paid by the shipping industry such that the General Lighthouse Authority's costs are met without the need to call on the UK Exchequer, have reduced by 40% in real terms since 2010.

The unprecedented covid-19 pandemic has, however, added additional operational costs and resulted in a significant reduction in light dues income reflecting the major impact it has also had on the industry.

To ensure the General Lighthouse Authorities have the funding they need to complete their vital maritime safety work I have, therefore, made the difficult decision

to increase the light dues rate by one penny to 38.5p per net registered tonne for 2021-22.

Light dues will continue to be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that the General Lighthouse Authorities are challenged to provide an effective and efficient service which offers value for money to light dues payers.

[HCWS778]

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