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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 17 March 2021

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The House met at half-past Eleven 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

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Liverpool City Region Freeport

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): What discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) Ministers of the Welsh Government on maximising the potential economic benefit to north Wales of the proposed Liverpool city region freeport. [913409]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues and Welsh Government Ministers about freeports. North Wales and the Liverpool city region are interdependent, and Liverpool freeport can bring significant economic benefits for the whole region.

Mr Jones [V]: As my right hon. Friend has said, Liverpool freeport is potentially of huge benefit not only to the city itself, but to north Wales, which is part of the same economic region. Does he agree that there is considerable potential synergy to be found, for example, between the Deeside enterprise zone and the new freeport, and will he urge the Welsh Government to grasp the opportunity and work with Westminster to maximise that synergy?

Simon Hart: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend's assessment of the situation. Local authorities and port authorities are keen on this initiative, and these schemes can produce up to 15,000 jobs each. It is therefore disappointing that the Welsh Government seem to be still dragging their feet and allowing the initiative to flourish everywhere other than Wales, which is costing jobs and livelihoods.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: A freeport at Liverpool will sap and displace trade, investment and jobs from Holyhead in north Wales. Liverpool will get £26 million of investment, whereas we are only being offered £8 million for one UK freeport in either north or south Wales. How will the Secretary of State ensure that Wales gets its fair share of £26 million for its one UK freeport, and how will he prevent jobs from being lost and moving from north Wales to Liverpool?

Simon Hart: The best way of avoiding that outcome is for the Welsh Government to get behind the scheme and support a project that is endorsed by local authorities and port authorities in Wales, and to encourage jobs and livelihoods in that way. Every single day that they leave it—on the basis of the “not invented here” syndrome—will cost jobs and livelihoods. My message to the hon. Gentleman is, get hold of the Welsh Government and encourage them to come to the party.

The Union

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of the strength of the Union between Wales and the rest of the UK. [913410]

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to strengthen the Union. [913417]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): As the vaccine roll-out has shown, our four nations are safer, stronger and more prosperous together, and I look forward to the people of Wales giving a resounding endorsement of the Union at the Senedd elections in May.

Anne McLaughlin [V]: I find that very interesting, because the Labour First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford, told the Welsh Affairs Committee a few weeks ago that devolution is under aggressive attack by a Tory Government who have “outright hostility” at the heart of their governance. With independence currently polling as high as 40% in Wales without an official campaign, will the Secretary of State respect the democratic rights of people in Wales and Scotland to have a post-pandemic independence referendum in the event of pro-independence majorities in May?

Simon Hart: I think the First Minister has been pretty reckless in trying to inject an air of uncertainty into these discussions, and most of us realise that he is only doing so because his only chance of remaining as First Minister post May is to do some kind of a deal with Plaid Cymru; and we know what the price of that would be.

Andrew Bowie: Will my right hon. Friend explain what benefits to Wales being a member of our United Kingdom brings?

Simon Hart: We could spend the rest of the morning listing the benefits, but I refer my hon. Friend to the Budget only a few days ago, with £4.8 million for the Holyhead hydrogen hub, £30 million for the global centre of rail excellence, the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund and £450 million community ownership fund. I could go on and on, but the benefits are numerous.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC) [V]: Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mr Llefarydd—agus beannachtaí na Féile Pádraig oraibh! Pob bendith arnoch chi heddiw, ar ddydd gŵyl Padrig.

Asylum seekers will—

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say to the right hon. Lady, let us just stop; I do not mind the beginning, but to start extending the sentence in Welsh goes against the rules of the House.

Liz Saville Roberts: The first part was in Irish, the second was in Welsh and it was wishing everybody a happy St Patrick's—

Mr Speaker: Order. I have no arguments with it whatsoever, but unfortunately the House makes the rules; I am only here to ensure that the rules are kept.

Liz Saville Roberts: Thank you; diolch yn fawr.

Asylum seekers will leave the squalid Penally camp this weekend, thanks to months of campaigning by Plaid Cymru police and crime commissioner Dafydd Llywelyn, and others. The camp is in the Secretary of State's constituency, but he only became aware of the Home Office plans on 12 September last year, days before people moved in. Despite months of resistance from his own Government, I am afraid to say that he now scrambles to change the narrative, and he recently dismissed the Welsh Government's "little status"—those are his own words. Given the "little status" of the Wales Office, how does he continue to justify its existence?

Simon Hart: As brass neck goes, that is quite an exceptional example of it, as far as Penally is concerned. It seems that Plaid's commitment to a nation of sanctuary extends only as far as its not being in its patch, as we have discovered from the reactions of the right hon. Lady's party colleagues. The fact of the matter is that this has been a difficult situation for a number of people involved. It is being resolved, thanks to collaborative efforts between the Home Office and the Wales Office, demonstrating the value of both.

Liz Saville Roberts: On Wales as a nation of sanctuary, Penally is closing while Napier remains open.

Today, work begins on reducing Wales's voice in Westminster from 40 MPs to 32. At the same time, the levelling-up fund will make local authorities' ability to bid for funding dependent on—wait for it—the number of MPs in their areas. The Secretary of State has been gifted a role in overseeing all this, while our Senedd—the Parliament with competence over economic development—is sidelined. How does he condone taking such power away from the people of Wales in the name of pork barrel politics?

Simon Hart: The right hon. Lady needs to read up on the notes on the subject. What she has described is nothing resembling the truth. The levelling-up fund is a fantastic opportunity for Wales, as is the community renewal fund. It involves local authorities and local stakeholders in a way that she should welcome. It is the true definition of devolution. It does not get wedged in Cardiff; it goes to local authorities and local communities across Wales, and she should welcome that. The fact is that we have extended the hand of friendship to the Welsh Government. We want this to be a collaborative approach, and we very much welcome that being the case. This will involve local communities in a way that they have never been involved before, and she, of all people, should welcome that.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): Vale of Glamorgan received a tiny amount of European aid over the past 20 years despite having areas of significant deprivation. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that the levelling-up fund and the community renewal fund will apply to Vale of Glamorgan—we have been ignored up until now—and that exciting projects such as Barry marina, St Athan train station and the Dinas Powys bypass could now become possible because of Union support?

Simon Hart: Who would ever dare ignore the efforts of my right hon. Friend? He is absolutely right that the local authority in his area will now have a chance to bid in a way that it never could before, and to bid with the strong and vigorous support that he provides. I think this is going to be a golden age for the vale.

UK Community Renewal Fund

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): What assessment he has made of the economic effect of the UK community renewal fund on Wales. [913412]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): Wales will be better off as a result of the UK community renewal fund. Compared with its European predecessor, the new fund will be better targeted and better aligned with our domestic priorities, and will put decision making squarely into the hands of local authorities.

Wendy Chamberlain: According to the community renewal fund's prospectus, the devolved Administrations will have a place within the governing structures, but when the Scottish Affairs Committee took evidence from academics a fortnight ago, we heard of confusion as to what role they would realistically play. So will the Minister set out exactly how the devolved Governments will be involved in the decision-making structures for how funds are released?

David T. C. Davies: Devolved Governments will be involved in the decisions, but so will the local Members of Parliament and local authorities, and I would have thought that the hon. Lady would support that. Only this morning, I read a fascinating article on that well-known website Liberal Democrat Voice, in which the leader of her council—a Liberal Democrat himself—called on the UK Government to step up and empower local authorities. That is exactly what we have done, so I look forward to being praised in the next edition of Lib Dem Voice.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The Tories have repeatedly claimed that Wales would not be worse off when EU structural funds come to an end, but the community renewal fund of which the Minister spoke is a shocking betrayal of that commitment. The fund's value—£220 million for the whole of the UK—is a just a fraction of the £375 million a year that Wales was promised. Why are communities in Wales once again having to foot the bill for the Tories' broken promises?

David T. C. Davies: I am sorry to say that the hon. Gentleman, whom I greatly like and respect, perhaps has not been told that not only will the fund be there to enable access to the shared prosperity fund, but we will

continue to receive European structural funding for the next three financial years at least. I looked this morning at the figures for European structural funds for Wales, and we will receive more on average next year than we have received previously, so there will actually be no loss of funding whatsoever as a result of coming out of the European Union.

Manufacturing Industry

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to support the manufacturing industry in Wales. [913413]

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to support the manufacturing industry in Wales. [913420]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): We have provided £2.75 billion in direct support for businesses in Wales during covid. The job retention scheme has been extended until September, and we are introducing a new super deduction to cut companies' tax bills by 25p for every £1 they invest in new equipment.

Mark Tami: A recent report by Grant Thornton stated that Brexit could cost Flintshire and Wrexham as much as £300 million a year. Manufacturing is vital to the future of north Wales, but numerous companies are telling me of the difficulties they are having exporting. Instead of saying that everything will be fine, when are this Government going to sort these problems out and get this moving?

Simon Hart: I draw the right hon. Gentleman's attention to the additional £5.2 billion we have provided to the Welsh Government and the £2.75 billion to businesses in Wales, with £1.5 billion in bounce and back loans and £503 million in coronavirus business interruption loans. This is all about jobs and livelihoods in the part of Wales that he represents so vigorously, and he should welcome that, as he should welcome the £20 million announcement this morning for the south Wales industrial cluster. There is good news, and he cannot dwell on the past in order to make political capital.

Chris Elmore: On 10 February, the Prime Minister said from the Dispatch Box that there would be a world-leading battery plant in Bridgend, but I think he meant the Vale of Glamorgan. It has been moved to Blyth because of investment from the Tory Government. The Secretary of State then decided to take to Twitter to praise the Prime Minister for announcing that the mythical battery plant was going to be in Bridgend. Could the Secretary of State set out when he will deliver a world-leading battery plant for the Bridgend county borough or, indeed, for the neighbouring Vale of Glamorgan, and when he will start bringing inward investment into the Bridgend borough? That would all be very welcome, because my constituents deserve a lot better than what the Secretary of State is currently not delivering.

Simon Hart: I think that the hon. Gentleman's question was probably intended for the First Minister in Cardiff, but I will do my best to answer it anyway. As he well knows from the Prime Minister's statement, there is

considerable investment going into Wales. There are some really encouraging job prospects, particularly around gigafactories and the like.

Chris Elmore *indicated dissent.*

Simon Hart: The hon. Gentleman can shake his head as much as he likes, but he fails to grasp that there are many millions and billions of pounds going into exactly these kinds of technology improvement in Wales.

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con) [V]: Bridgend has lost the Ford factory, and we did not get the investment from Ineos that we were hoping for. For Bridgend and the wider area to move forward, the town needs regeneration in order to increase the attractiveness of the overall area for investment. Can my right hon. Friend outline what the Government are doing to help towns such as Bridgend?

Simon Hart: Absolutely. I start by reminding my hon. Friend—not that I need to—that Bridgend is a priority 1 area for the levelling-up fund, which means that it has potential access, with his assistance, to significant sums. Each local authority will get £125,000 of capacity funding to make those bids to the central fund. I hope he will recognise that there is a real focus on exactly the kind of town and area that he represents as part of the levelling-up project, which will produce jobs and livelihoods in a way that has perhaps been difficult in the past.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Highly skilled workers in the aerospace industry across Wales, such as those at AIM Altitude, are now facing redundancy or even factory closure, as this sector will take years, not months, to recover. While overseas competitors are giving their companies support so that they can up production when the sector recovers, the UK Government still have not brought forward a specific aerospace package some 12 months after the pandemic started. Is the Secretary of State just going to sit there and watch these industries fold, or can he persuade his Cabinet colleagues to put in the long-term support that these high-value industries need?

Simon Hart: The hon. Lady's comments are not reflected by large companies, such as Airbus, whose judgment I trust in these particular circumstances. I simply repeat what I said in answer to an earlier question: the UK Government have provided £5.2 billion for the Welsh Government; £2.75 billion for businesses in Wales; another £1.5 billion in bounce back loans and £500 million in CBILS loans. If that is not an indication of how committed we are to this particular sector, which I absolutely recognise is going through an especially difficult time, I do not know what is.

Nia Griffith: But if we are going to retain these industries and rebuild for the future, then we need a comprehensive UK-wide plan. However, this Government have just shelved their industrial strategy, scrapped their advisory council and are now preparing to rip up their industrial policy, so when will the Secretary of State and his Cabinet colleagues develop a forward-looking, far-reaching UK industrial policy that will build on our fantastic skill base to guarantee the new green jobs of the future?

Simon Hart: I disagree with the hon. Lady's comments. She has referred to some process issues. We want to get process and bureaucratic issues out of the way and actually deliver money and prospects, jobs and investments to the places that need them the most. That is what the Government are committed to doing, and we have widespread support from industry in that ambition. As I said in answer to an earlier question, only this morning a further £20 million has been announced for the South Wales industrial cluster. Rather than talk about process, bodies and bureaucracy, we are actually doing real things.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab) [V]: Can I wish everybody celebrating a happy St Patrick's Day today?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) has said, the Secretary of State will be more than aware of the complex challenges that coronavirus has presented to the aviation sector and the entire manufacturing supply chain. I hear what the Secretary of State says about Airbus, but sadly, General Electric and British Airways in my constituency of Pontypridd have had to make significant staffing cuts. This sector is crying out for financial support, but its pleas are falling on deaf ears, so will the Secretary of State therefore please update the House on his recent conversations, specifically with the Chancellor, on a sector-specific support package for Wales's aviation industry?

Simon Hart: The Chancellor has, I think, made it very clear how he is supporting every sector that has been so adversely affected by the coronavirus. In fact, I do not think there is a Government in the world who have done as much in financial support either for this sector or, indeed, other sectors or individual families. That has been to the huge credit of the Treasury and all those who have been part of the team that has been able to do that. The Office for Budget Responsibility forecast for economic recovery next year and the year after is a testament to that, and that should benefit this sector just as much as it does everything else.

Levelling-up Fund

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential benefits of the levelling-up fund for Wales. [913414]

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential benefits of the levelling-up fund for Wales. [913422]

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the levelling-up fund. [913426]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): The levelling-up fund is unquestionably good news for Wales. It will ensure that millions of pounds are invested in Welsh local authorities, providing much-needed local infrastructure and driving up regeneration in left-behind places.

Simon Baynes [V]: Would the Minister meet me about, and visit when possible, exciting projects in Clwyd South that fulfil the requirements of the levelling-up fund, such as Wrexham Council's bold regeneration plans and the reopening of Corwen station in Denbighshire on the Llangollen steam railway?

David T. C. Davies: I assure my hon. Friend that it is always a pleasure to meet him and hear about the enormous amount of hard work he is undertaking in his constituency. Unfortunately, I have been advised that it would not be appropriate for me to visit any specific project site, but I of course look forward to supporting him and other Members of Parliament who continue the work of using the funds being made available by the UK Government to drive forward regeneration in their constituencies.

Fay Jones [V]: I was delighted to see so much in the Budget for Brecon and Radnorshire. The levelling-up fund is extremely welcome, as is the commitment to the global centre for rail excellence in Coelbren in my constituency. However, parts of Brecon and Radnorshire are plagued by substandard broadband and mobile coverage. Could the Minister confirm that the levelling-up fund will make a genuine difference to structural problems like this that hold back rural areas such as mine?

David T. C. Davies: We expect that the levelling-up fund can be used to invest in community infrastructure right the way across the board. Of course, the UK gigabit programme will invest in broadband and the hardest-to-connect areas of the United Kingdom. I was also delighted, of course, with the news about the global centre for rail excellence—my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State pushed very hard for it—which is also going to be good news for the economy in that part of Wales.

Beth Winter [V]: Given that the Welsh Government have worked with Welsh local authorities and other stakeholders to produce a framework for regional investment, can the Minister tell the House why Ministers at England's Housing Department, with no history of delivering within Wales and no record of working with communities in Wales or understanding their priorities, are the right people to be administering this so-called levelling-up fund in Wales? Is this the result of the UK Government's fixation with undermining democratic devolution?

David T. C. Davies: That was a rather disappointing question from the hon. Lady. The Chancellor has made £800 million available for the devolved Administrations across the United Kingdom and wants the UK Government to be able to work directly with local authorities and to hear about what their priorities are. I think it is absolutely fantastic that the Chancellor, as well as being able to deliver that £800 million, has found £740 million for the Welsh Government and has continued the support for businesses and individuals in Wales affected by the covid crisis. Perhaps I can pass the hon. Lady's congratulations on to the Government for a fantastic Budget for Wales.

Green Industries

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help promote the growth of green industries in Wales. [913415]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): Earlier this month, the Chancellor committed £4.8 million to the Holyhead hydrogen hub project. Offshore wind in

Wales is going from strength to strength, with the potential for a 1.5 gigawatt project in north Wales and growing interest in floating wind off the south-west Wales coast.

Miss Dines [V]: Green issues affect the whole of this Union; does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important not only that Wales capitalises on new and innovative green industries, but that it continues to decarbonise the heavy industry it already has given that over 10 megatons of carbon emissions were generated by businesses and industries in Wales alone last year?

Simon Hart: As I mentioned in answer to an earlier question, only today there has been an announcement of a further £20 million for the South Wales industrial cluster to develop an industrial decarbonisation plan. The 10-point plan and our net zero ambitions will create 250,000 jobs across the UK, and I am absolutely determined to ensure Wales gets more than its fair share of them.

Drug Crime

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking with the Home Secretary to help reduce drug crime in Wales. [913423]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): Cutting crime is an absolute priority for the UK Government. We are working cross-Government with local partners to address the drivers behind drug-related crime, to help prevent further substance misuse and offending.

Alexander Stafford [V]: From the village of Wales in Rother Valley to the great country of Wales, drug usage, including in the form of nitrous oxide capsules, is a huge blight on our communities. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that the law is rigorously enforced, and even tightened, in regard to nitrous oxide so that everyone, particularly young people, is protected from this noxious substance?

Simon Hart: My hon. Friend points to a crucial approach, and it is worth pointing out that these awful crimes do not respect political or geographical borders; they are international problems and UK problems. Therefore, one way of approaching this is to make sure UK police forces can collaborate effectively cross-border, and that is what they are doing. My hon. Friend might have heard of Project Adder, the trial in Swansea bay, and of course will have seen some of the benefits from the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016.

UK Shared Prosperity Fund

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the First Minister of Wales on the UK shared prosperity fund. [913424]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): I have regular discussions with the First Minister of Wales and his ministerial team on a range of issues, including the UK shared prosperity fund. The Government will continue to engage with the Welsh Government as we develop the fund's investment framework, which will be published later this year.

Wayne David [V]: Will the shared prosperity fund allocate resources on the basis of need?

Simon Hart: Absolutely; that underpins the entire thrust of a number of these funds. We are attempting to prioritise areas with greatest need and where there are opportunities and challenges so that we get the money to the right places at the right time as fast as we can. One of the bits of feedback we get from local communities is that there seems to be a lot of money talked about but it never quite gets to the right place; this new initiative provides a much quicker and better way, involving local authorities, to get over that problem.

Budget 2021: Effect on Economy

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of the Budget 2021 on the Welsh economy. [913425]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): On top of the new UK-wide funds, £4.8 million has been committed to the Holyhead hydrogen hub, up to £30 million to the global centre of rail excellence, and we are accelerating funding for the growth deals in Wales.

Antony Higginbotham: In north Wales, just as in Burnley, there is a strong and proud aerospace manufacturing sector. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Chancellor's super deduction, announced at the Budget, could be transformational for that sector, allowing it to invest in equipment and machinery that will create jobs and boost productivity?

Simon Hart: My hon. Friend does not have to take it from me; he makes a very good point and I have to tell him, from the number of stakeholder engagements we have had in the Wales Office, including with that sector, that the reception for this particular recommendation has been fantastic. It is transformational. This is the first time this has ever been done—probably the biggest tax cut in history. That is the sort of thing that will regenerate jobs and livelihoods at a time when they are most needed, and I congratulate the Chancellor on his efforts.

Mr Speaker: Congratulations to the Wales Office team; we have finished the whole of Welsh questions.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

[913639] **Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con):** If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 17 March.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I am sure colleagues across the House will want to join me in wishing everyone a very happy St Patrick's day. I was delighted to visit Northern Ireland last week, where I was able to thank military and emergency response teams for their brilliant work throughout the covid-19 pandemic.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Simon Fell: A decade ago, GlaxoSmithKline announced a £350 million investment in my constituency, which would have led to 1,000 jobs. In 2017, it reneged on that, and a few weeks ago it announced that it is closing its business altogether. We have gone from the very real prospect of having 1,000 high-paying, high-skilled pharma jobs in my constituency to the risk of having none by 2025. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me and to throw the weight of the Government behind efforts to ensure that GSK does the right thing by my constituents and delivers for some very worried people?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much, and I express my deepest sympathy to all those in Ulverston affected by these job losses. I will certainly meet him. I believe that bioscience is one of the great growth areas for this country in the future, and I am determined that Barrow and Furness should take part in that boom along with everywhere else, as well as other high technologies.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I join the Prime Minister in his comments about St Patrick's day?

My thoughts, and I am sure those across the whole House, are with the family and friends of Sarah Everard, who will be suffering unspeakable grief. There are five words that will stick with us for a very long time: she was just walking home.

Sometimes, a tragedy is so shocking that it demands both justice and change. The Stephen Lawrence case showed the poison of structural and institutional racism. The James Bulger case made us question the nature of our society and the safety of our children. Now the awful events of the last week have lifted a veil on the epidemic of violence against women and girls. This must also be a watershed moment, to change how we as a society treat women and girls, and how we prevent and end sexual violence and harassment.

I believe that, if we work together, we can achieve that, and the questions I ask today are in that spirit. First, does the Prime Minister agree that this must be a turning point in how we tackle violence against women and girls?

The Prime Minister: Yes I do, and I associate myself fully with the remarks that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has made about the appalling murder of Sarah Everard. I am sure that those emotions are shared in this House and around the country.

That event has triggered a reaction that I believe is wholly justified and understandable, and of course we in government are doing everything that we can. We are investing in the Crown Prosecution Service, trying to speed up the law; we are changing the law on domestic violence, and many, many other things. But the right hon. and learned Gentleman is right, frankly, that unless and until we have a change in our culture that acknowledges and understands that women currently do not feel they are being heard, we will not fix this problem. That is what we must do. We need a cultural and social change in attitudes to redress the balance. That is what I believe all politicians must now work together to achieve.

Keir Starmer: I thank the Prime Minister for that answer. In that spirit, can I turn to the practical challenges we face if we are collectively to rise to this moment? The first challenge is that many, many women and girls feel unsafe on our streets, particularly at night. What is needed is legal protection. That is why we have called for a specific new law on street harassment and for toughening the law on stalking. Both, I think, are absolutely vital if we are going to make meaningful change in the everyday experiences of women and girls. So can the Prime Minister commit to taking both of those measures forward?

The Prime Minister: We are always happy to look at new proposals. What we are already doing is introducing tougher sanctions on stalkers. That is already being brought in and we are bringing in new measures to make the streets safer. Of course that is the right thing to do. Last night there was a Bill before the House on police, crime and sentencing, which did a lot to protect women and girls. It would have been good, in a cross-party way, to have had the support of the Opposition.

Keir Starmer: I will come to last night's Bill later, but it did say a lot more about protecting statues than it did about protecting women.

Let me, if I may, given the gravity of the situation, continue in the spirit so far. I thank the Prime Minister for his answer. The next practical challenge is that many, many women and girls who are subjected to sexual violence do not feel confident to come forward and report what has happened to them. Nine out of 10 do not do so. We have to improve the support that is provided for victims.

The Victims' Commissioner published a report last month with 32 recommendations about this. This week, Labour produced a detailed survivor support plan, and five years ago I introduced a private Member's Bill, with cross-party support, for a victims' law to give legally enforceable rights to victims. The shadow victims Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), has tabled a similar victims' Bill that is before Parliament now. It is ready to go. All it needs is the political will to act. So will the Prime Minister commit now not just to the idea of a victims' law, which I think he supports, but to a tight timetable, of ideally six months or so, to actually implement such a law?

The Prime Minister: As I say, I would be very happy to look at new proposals from all sides of the House on this issue. That is why we are conducting an end-to-end review of the law on rape and how it works, and investing in the criminal justice system to speed up cases and give women and girls the confidence they need. The point the right hon. and learned Gentleman makes about victims and their need to feel confident in coming forward is absolutely right. That is why we have put £100 million so far into services for dealing with violence against women and girls, particularly independent domestic violence advisers and independent sexual violence advisers. I do not pretend that these are the entire solution; they are part of the solution. It is also vital that we have long-term cultural, societal change to deal with this issue.

Keir Starmer: I agree with the Prime Minister on that last point. Can I gently remind him that for 10 years this Government have been promising a victims' law? I think

it has been in his party's last three manifestos. It still has not materialised. We do not need more reviews, consultations, strategies. The conversations our shadow Minister is having with Government—constructive conversations—are exactly the same conversations that I had five years ago: constructive conversations. We just need now to get on with it.

Let me press on with the practical challenges. The next challenge is this. For many, many women and girls who do come forward to report sexual violence, no criminal charges are brought. Only 1.5% of rapes reported to the police lead to a prosecution. Put the other way, 98.5% of reported rapes do not lead to a prosecution. That is a shocking statistic. I appreciate that efforts are being made to improve the situation, but can the Prime Minister tell us: what is he going to do about this not in a few years' time, not next year, but now?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is entirely right. I agree with him; one of the first things I said when I became Prime Minister was that I believed that the prosecution rates for rape were a disgrace in this country. We need to sort it out. That is why we are investing in confidence-building measures, such as ISVAs and IDVAs, and investing in the Crown Prosecution Service in trying to speed up the process of the law to give people confidence that their cases will be heard in due time. We are also doing what we can to toughen the penalties for those men—I am afraid it is overwhelmingly men—who commit these crimes. I think it would have been a good thing if, last night, the whole House could have voted for tougher sentences for those who commit sexual and violent offences and to stop people from being released early. In that collegiate spirit, I ask him to work together with us.

Keir Starmer: I was Director of Public Prosecutions for five years and spent every day prosecuting serious crime, including terrorism, sexual violence and rape, so I really do not need lectures about how to enforce the criminal law.

Walking on through the system, as many women and girls have to do, and facing up to the challenges that we need to face as a House, the next challenge is the point that the Prime Minister just referenced—the sentences for rape and sexual violence, because they need to be toughened. Let me give the House three examples. John Patrick, convicted of raping a 13-year-old girl, received a seven-year sentence. Orlando and Costanzo, who were convicted of raping a woman in a nightclub, received a seven-and-a-half-year sentence. James Reeve, convicted of raping a seven-year-old girl, received a nine-year sentence. Does the Prime Minister agree that we need urgently to look at this and to toughen sentences for rape and serious sexual violence?

The Prime Minister: Would it not be a wonderful thing if there was a Bill going through the House of Commons that did exactly that? Would it not be a wonderful thing if there were measures to defend women and girls from violent and sex criminals? Would it not be a wonderful thing if there was a Bill before the House to have tougher sentences for child murderers and tougher punishments for sex offenders? That would be a fine thing. As it happens, there is such a Bill before the House. I think it would be a great thing if the right

hon. and learned Gentleman had actually voted for it. He still has time. This Bill is still before the House. He can lift his opposition. They actually voted against it on a three-line Whip and I think that was crazy.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister mentions the Bill last night. That provided for longer maximum sentences for damaging a memorial than the sentences imposed in the three cases of rape I have referred the House to, which were all less than 10 years. I thank the Prime Minister for providing me with the best examples of why the priorities in his Bill were so wrong. Nothing in that Bill would have increased the length of sentence in any of those rape cases—nothing in that Bill.

Let me try to return to the constructive spirit, because I think that is demanded of all of us. If this House came together on the points raised today, and there has been agreement across the Dispatch Boxes, it would make a real difference to victims of crime. This week, Labour published a 10-point plan. We published a victims' law. In coming days, we are going to publish amendments in relation to the criminal justice system to make it work better. I do not expect the Prime Minister to agree with all of this and, frankly, I do not care if this becomes a Government Bill or Conservative legislation. All I care about is whether we make progress, so will the Prime Minister meet me, the shadow Home Secretary—my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds)—my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and victims' groups, who have spent many years campaigning on this, so that we can really and truly make this a turning point?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for the collegiate way in which he is addressing this and the way in which he is reaching out across the Chamber. I think that is entirely right in the circumstances, but I do think that he should not misrepresent what the Bill was trying to do. The average sentence for rape is already nine years and nine months, as he knows full well, and the maximum sentence is already life. What we are trying to do is stiffen the sentences for a variety of offences to protect women and girls and others, and that is entirely the right thing to do.

We will go on with our agenda to deliver on the people's priorities, rolling out more police—7,000 we have already—investing in ISVAs and IDVAs and doing our utmost to accelerate the grinding processes of the criminal justice system, which, as he rightly says, are such a deterrent to women coming forward to complain as they rightly should. Until we sort out that fundamental problem, and until women feel that their voices are being heard and their complaints are being addressed by society, we will not fix this problem. I warmly welcome what he suggests about wanting to fix it together, and I hope that, in that spirit, he can bring himself to vote for the tougher sentences that we have set out.

Mr Speaker: We have to be a little bit careful, because nobody would misrepresent anyone in this House.

[913640] **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for bringing the G7 leaders' summit to Cornwall this summer. This will put Cornwall front and centre on the world stage as we emerge from

the pandemic and give us a great opportunity to showcase all that Cornwall has to offer. It is a great place to visit not just for its amazing food and drink sector, but for the technologies of the future in space and in renewable energy.

I know the Prime Minister shares my ambition for the G7 to leave a lasting economic legacy for the people of Cornwall, so to that end, and in the light of the recent progress on lithium extraction, will he work with me to secure a gigafactory for Cornwall so that we can produce the batteries, leave that lasting economic legacy and provide the well-paid jobs for the future that Cornwall needs?

The Prime Minister: I think Cornwall is the Klondike of lithium, as far as I understand the matter, and I would be delighted to assist my hon. Friend in locating a gigafactory somewhere near Cornwall—I do not want to promise too much at this stage.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) [V]: May I wish everyone a happy St Patrick's day?

Across Scotland this week, a tale of two Governments with two very different sets of values has again been exposed. Yesterday, the Scottish National party Government passed landmark legislation that will put the UN convention on the rights of the child into Scots law, putting children at the vanguard of children's rights. In contrast, we have a UK Government who have to be shamed into providing free school meals, who will clap for nurses but will not give them a fair wage, and who plough billions into a nuclear arsenal that sits redundant on the Clyde. Does the Prime Minister understand that the Scottish people are best served by a Government who live up to their values—a Government who prioritise bairns not bombs?

The Prime Minister: I think what the people of Scotland need and deserve is a Government who tackle the problems of education in Scotland, a Government who address themselves to fighting crime and drug addiction in Scotland, and a Government who can wean themselves off their addiction to constitutional change and constitutional argument, because they seem, in the middle of a pandemic when the country is trying to move forward together, to be obsessed with nothing else—nothing else—but breaking up the country and a reckless referendum.

Ian Blackford: Of course, this is Prime Minister's questions, and maybe the Prime Minister might, just once, try to answer the question that is put to him. We are talking about a Tory plan to impose a 40% increase in nuclear warheads. Our children have the right to a future that no longer lives under the shadow of these weapons of mass destruction. As the Irish President said on this St Patrick's day, we need to find ways to make peace, not war. Every single one of those weapons will be based on the Clyde, so can the Prime Minister tell us exactly when the Scottish people gave him the moral or democratic authority to impose those weapons of mass destruction on our soil in Scotland?

The Prime Minister: The people of Scotland contribute enormously to the health, happiness, wellbeing and security of the entire country, not least through their contribution to our science, our defences, our international

aid and in many other ways. I am very proud that this Government are investing record sums in defence, including maintaining our nuclear defence, which is absolutely vital for our long-term security, and helping, thereby, to drive jobs not just in Scotland, but across the UK.

[913642] **Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): Back in July last year, I informed the Prime Minister of the need for a new hospital in Doncaster. Sadly, Doncaster was not mentioned among the first 40 hospitals promised in the manifesto, but the building of a further eight specialist hospitals was. Does my right hon. Friend agree that a new hospital will prove to the people of Doncaster that this Government are committed to building back better and levelling up their town?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a fantastic advocate for Doncaster, and he is right to campaign in the way he does. I wish I could give him a cut-and-dried yes or no answer today, but I can tell him that his local trust is very much in the running in the current open competition for the next eight hospitals, on top of the 40 that we are already building.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): We have seen the creation of a no-protest zone around Parliament, a 266% increase from a maximum of three months to 11 months' imprisonment for protest organisers, a direct attack on the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community, up to 10 years in prison for any offence committed by destroying or damaging a memorial, and the criminalising of people for taking part in protests where they ought to have known police conditions were in place. Does the Prime Minister agree that if the UK is to be a force for good in a world where democracy is "in retreat", as the Foreign Secretary is saying today, it needs to start at home with the protection of the long-standing, precious and fundamental right to peaceful protest, which is a cornerstone of liberal democracy?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is quite right to stick up for peaceful protest, and I understand and sympathise with that, but there are a couple of points. First, we are facing a pandemic in which, alas, we have to restrict human contact—[*Interruption.*] Although the hon. Lady shakes her head, I think the people of this country do understand that and do understand the restrictions we are now under.

I think we also have to strike a balance between the need to allow peaceful protests to go ahead, and we do on a huge scale in this country, and the need to protect free speech and vital parts of the UK economy.

[913643] **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I want to see the fundamental right to protest protected, so that events such as the powerful vigil last Saturday on Clapham Common can proceed safely, including covid safely, but I also want to see measures so that people can go about their lives, get to work and get to hospital without being hindered. Can the Prime Minister reassure me that the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which we have been discussing today and which was before the House yesterday, strikes that balance while also taking action against the perpetrators of some of the worst crimes?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend perfectly sums up the balance that we are trying to strike between allowing people, in a reasonable way, to go about their daily lives and bringing in tougher sentences for child murderers and tougher punishments for sex offenders, and stopping the continuing practice of allowing people out early. I think that is what the people of this country want to see. That is what they voted for in 2019, and I hope the Opposition can bring themselves, one day, to support it.

[913641] **Charlotte Nichols** (Warrington North) (Lab): With the Government's end-to-end rape review remaining unpublished, two years after it was promised, rape conviction rates having fallen to their lowest point on record and almost 90% of sexual harassment complaints not even reported to the police, women are increasingly being left without legal recourse against sexual violence. I have parliamentary privilege and can name the men who have hurt me, but millions of women in this country do not have that. Women are stuck between a criminal justice system in which only 1.4% of reported offences result in charges being laid and a system in which too many survivors who speak out are pursued through the civil courts by their abusers to silence them. Can the Prime Minister advise how they are meant to get justice?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that the hon. Lady is completely right, and I know that she speaks for many women up and down the country. We can do all the things we have talked about, two men arguing over the Dispatch Box. We can bring in more laws and tougher sentences, which I hope she will support. We can support independent domestic violence and sexual violence advisers. We can do all that kind of thing, but we have to address the fundamental issue of the casual everyday sexism and apathy that fail to address the concerns of women. That is the underlying issue.

[913645] **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con) [V]: Two years ago, the Bishop of Truro produced an interim report outlining the global phenomenon of the persecution of Christians. As we make progress on our manifesto commitment fully to implement the Truro review recommendations, will the Prime Minister join me in looking forward to our hosting the international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief next year, and to the UK demonstrating its global leadership in defending and promoting this universal right for all?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much for everything she is doing to campaign for freedom of religion and belief. I am very pleased that we are going to be holding an international conference on this issue. That is exactly what global Britain is all about: promoting freedom of expression, and freedom of belief and religion.

[913644] **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP) [V]: The Prime Minister refused point blank to answer the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), so I will ask him again: what gives any British Prime Minister the moral and democratic right to impose the obscenity of an even bigger arsenal of weapons of mass murder on the people of Scotland, against their express will?

The Prime Minister: I think that was a veiled attempt, again, by the SNP to ask for another referendum, which is its habitual refrain. That is all it seems able to talk about: wrangling about democracy and its desire to be separated and to break up the country. I do not think that is the right way forward. I think we need strong defences. That is what the people of this country voted for and that is what we are going to deliver.

[913648] **Steve Brine** (Winchester) (Con) [V]: From gloom to joy, with news from Winchester for the Prime Minister that the vaccination programme is going really, really well. There are now fewer than 200,000 people in the whole of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight left to do in cohorts 1 to 9, and we have the plan, plus the supply to cover them comfortably by the end of March. Will my right hon. Friend please thank the NHS and its volunteers here for this amazing effort? As he does that, will he share his view on what led to the disinformation and the apparent abandonment of scientific evidence in certain EU member states around the Oxford-AstraZeneca jab?

The Prime Minister: Of course, I thank the NHS in Hampshire, and indeed around the country, for the amazing job it is doing in rolling out the vaccination programme—it has been truly stunning. Perhaps the best thing I can say about the Oxford-AstraZeneca programme is that I have finally got news that I am going to have my own jab very shortly; I am pleased to discover that. I do not know whether the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has had his. [*Interruption.*] He has had his. It will certainly be the Oxford-AstraZeneca jab that I will be having.

[913646] **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: There have now been more than 600 cases of coronavirus infection at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency in Swansea since September, yet Ministers still refuse to meet the Public and Commercial Services Union to discuss ways in which more workers could work from home in safety before they are vaccinated. Workers have now resorted to voting for strike action, as a last resort, to protect their families and communities. I ask the Prime Minister again: will he now instruct Ministers to engage in talks with the union to help shield vulnerable workers before vaccination, or will he force a needless strike?

The Prime Minister: I think “needless” is the right word, and the hon. Gentleman should bear it in mind that any strike is likely to be bad news for motorists. We are at the stage now where we are advancing down our road map out of lockdown, and at the DVLA any staff who can work from home are doing so. Out of a workforce of 6,000, only five cases of covid have currently been found, and I understand that those individuals are all working from home. Frankly, I see no need for industrial action.

[913649] **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con) [V]: My Kensington constituents and I have been deeply troubled by what is coming out of the Grenfell inquiry with regard to the building products industry. Does my right hon. Friend agree that contractors who have behaved improperly should not be used, going forward, for

Government contracts? Will he consider imposing a tax on the building products industry, in the same way as we have done on the residential property sector, as a way of partly paying for cladding remediation?

The Prime Minister: I know how much my hon. Friend cares about this issue and how deeply her constituents have been affected by the Grenfell fire. I will study her proposal for a new tax on building materials, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will want to think about that kind of idea. We are looking at new rules to exclude contractors from Government business where gross professional negligence has been shown.

[913647] **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab) [V]: Exactly one year ago today we were told that 20,000 coronavirus deaths would be a “good outcome”. Yet our death toll is now six times higher: over 100,000 more people have lost their lives than that initial estimate. In March last year, the Prime Minister pontificated about taking it “on the chin”. Others acted decisively with lockdowns, but the Prime Minister dithered and delayed, with deadly consequences. With the worst hopefully now behind us, is it not time for the Prime Minister to hold up his hands and come clean with the British public and say, “Those deaths are on me, and for that I apologise”?

The Prime Minister: I certainly take full responsibility for everything the Government did, and of course we mourn the loss of every single coronavirus victim, and we sympathise deeply with their families and their loved ones. Am I sorry for what has happened to our country? Yes of course I am deeply, deeply sorry, and of course there will be a time for a full inquiry to enable us all to understand what we need to do better when we face these problems in the future, and that is something I think the whole House shares.

[913650] **Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con) [V]: Five years on from Storm Desmond and a year on from Storm Ciara, sadly Penrith and The Border and Cumbria remain in the frontline for severe flooding events. With climate change, these catastrophes are becoming increasingly frequent and severe, and the effects on communities are serious and long term. Can my right hon. Friend reassure my constituents that at-risk communities will be supported by Government in terms of both flood protection and longer-term support, including in the important area of help for the mental health impacts of flooding?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a really good point about the mental health impacts of flooding. Anybody who has been a victim of flooding or who visits a family that has been hit by flooding will know the immense distress that it causes. That is why the NHS will get an extra £500 million to address those issues and to give more support for the mental health needs.

[913653] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Prime Minister, in December 2019’s election campaign you visited Samantha Parker at her home in Darlington. Samantha has the rare genetic condition PKU—phenylketonuria. You vowed to do your utmost to get her access to the life-changing drug Kuvan on the NHS.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady just said “you.” We cannot use “you.” I am not responsible for this.

Liz Twist: Apologies. The Prime Minister vowed to do his utmost to get Samantha access to life-changing drug Kuvan. Last month NICE published draft guidance, which would make Kuvan available to children but not to adults like Samantha—great for children, but devastating and discriminatory for adults like Samantha. Prime Minister, speaking as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on phenylketonuria, I now ask, what action will you take to deliver on your commitment to Samantha Parker, and make Kuvan available for her and for other adults with PKU?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady very much for raising the case, which I well remember. I am glad that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has now extended the treatment’s availability to children with PKU. Clearly, we need to do more, and I am very happy to take it up.

[913651] **Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend noted that the integrated review has been widely and rightly welcomed as a bold British vision for our role in the world, but not in Scotland, of course, where the nationalist Administration think that it is more important to put indyref2 on the ballot paper at the Scottish elections? Does he realise that they are rejecting the jobs and security that the review guarantees for Scotland, because they hate the UK more than they want jobs for their own people?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his support for the integrated review. It is hard to know what motivates our friends in the Scottish national party, but I think that they are mistaken in their approach. We are better as one United Kingdom; we are stronger together as one United Kingdom; and the contribution of the people of Scotland to the defence of our United Kingdom is absolutely incredible, and has been for centuries. That is what I want to maintain—I think it is a fine thing, and they should champion it.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab) [V]: Throughout the past year, NHS staff have been working tirelessly to keep our communities healthy and safe during the pandemic. I would like to ask the Prime Minister why he has been economical with the truth, when he says that a 1% pay increase is all that the Government can afford.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just say that no hon. Member on any side would actually mislead or lie to the House? But I am sure that the Prime Minister can answer something.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. No—I am grateful for your clarification—because what we are doing is saying that we so value the incredible contribution of nurses to our country over the past year or more that we want them, exceptionally of all the public services, to be looked at for a pay increase at a time of real difficulty in the public finances, which I think people understand. That is on top of the 12.8% increase in

starting salary for nurses, plus the £5,000 bursary and the £3,000 that we have given for special help for childcare and other training needs.

If the hon. Gentleman looks at the figures, he will see that they are leading to a big increase in the number of nurses in the NHS—10,600 more this year than last year; more nurses in the NHS—and 60,000 more in training. When I talk to nurses—of course everyone wants better pay and conditions; I totally understand that—they say what they also want is an extra pair of hands next to them to give them the help and reassurance that they need. That is what we are recruiting for.

[913652] **Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Recent horrific events have brought the important debate on women's and girls' rights into the spotlight, specifically their right to be safe and feel safe as they go about their daily lives. Does my right hon. Friend agree that such issues need to be treated sensitively, and false claims made by the Labour party last night on social media about the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill are misleading and certainly not helpful?

The Prime Minister: It was certainly a mistake, and a regrettable mistake, for anybody to suggest that rape had been decriminalised in this country, because we must do everything we can to reassure victims of rape and sexual violence and get them to come forward. That is what we are doing. I also think it would be a good thing if, together, we could vote for some of the tougher sentences that we have put forward in the Bill. I liked the collegiate spirit that we had earlier on, and I hope it can be extended to voting for the tougher sentences that we have put forward.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Today the Welsh Labour Government have announced a special bonus payment for NHS and social care staff in Wales, with the Government covering the basic tax and national insurance so that most people will receive around £500. Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming that payment in recognition of the dedication and commitment of our NHS and social care staff?

The Prime Minister: I do indeed recognise the amazing dedication and commitment of NHS and social care staff who have been at the forefront of this pandemic and who have borne the brunt of it, personally in many cases. That is why I will repeat the point I made a little while ago about what we are doing to recognise the contribution of the public sector, and nurses in particular, in these very difficult times, and say how relieved and glad I am to see the number of nurses now in training. I think there has been a 34% increase in applications to be nurses this year in this country. That is great, but we are going to drive things forward. We have a target of 50,000 more nurses, as well as 20,000 more police.

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

12.40 pm

Sitting suspended.

Education Employment (Accompaniment To Hearings)

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

12.45 pm

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide that teachers and other education staff may choose to be accompanied to disciplinary or grievance hearings by a person other than a trade union representative or colleague; and for connected purposes.

For anyone in any profession, a disciplinary or grievance hearing is daunting, but for teachers these hearings can be acutely so. False allegations of misconduct are all too common within the teaching profession, but their ramifications can be uniquely damaging, often shattering careers and tarnishing respectable reputations.

As a Member of Parliament, I have spoken to many teachers who have found themselves subject to false allegations. One teacher, who must remain anonymous, was suspended from teaching for 12 months when their school, under pressure from some parents, was deemed to have inadequately followed safeguarding procedures. That teacher was not just suspended for more than 12 months, unable to teach, but dismissed from their role at the school and referred to the Teaching Regulation Agency for serious misconduct. However, with significant support—accompaniment at hearings and representation at tribunals—the teacher was found not to have committed any such misconduct and their dismissal was, thankfully, successfully challenged. Without such support, this excellent teacher may never have taught again.

I regret to say that such cases are not uncommon. For teachers, third party accompaniment at a disciplinary or grievance hearing is crucial. Third parties can help to codify situations, provide objective guidance and offer reassurance in what can often be fractious, distressing and highly charged situations. To that extent, all employees and workers should have equal employment status under the law, regardless of their trade union membership status, but as it stands, section 10 of the Employment Relations Act 1999 does not offer fair accompaniment to the 77% of workers who are not members of a trade union.

At present, section 10 dictates that workers are legally entitled to accompaniment to disciplinary or grievance hearings only by a trade union representative or colleague. That means that a trade union member can be accompanied by almost anyone, from a local union rep to a QC, as long as they are employed by a school or the trade union. But what about those teachers who are not members of a trade union either by choice or by accident? It seems unlikely that a colleague would be trained and experienced to the same extent as a union representative, but that is the only option for the 77% of workers who are not members of a trade union. Although employers can agree to alternative accompaniment, it is at their exclusive discretion, so, right out of the blocks, many workers are left to their own devices, with the chances of a positive outcome stacked against them. Put simply, they are legally disadvantaged by the constraints of the Employment Relations Act, which deprives them of a right to fair accompaniment by a reasonably qualified companion.

It does not have to be like this. Accompaniment is a positive action: it is positive for workers; positive for trade unions; and positive for employers. It is widely accepted that trained and experienced companions are beneficial to both parties at disciplinary or grievance hearings. To that extent, the Bill seeks a simple change to the law to allow accompaniment for teachers at disciplinary or grievance hearings by someone other than a work colleague or union representative. It is likely that the companion might be somebody appropriately trained and experienced and, in some cases, legally qualified. I would endorse a system of accreditation to protect the integrity of the process. What I cannot endorse is the current situation whereby teachers' statutory rights are dependent on their membership of a trade union.

This Bill is about levelling up the teaching profession. It is about strengthening the role of teachers. It is about the promotion of equal rights in the workplace, and it is about closing a gap in the law. It is a pro-worker move that costs nothing and hurts no one. It is not even a proposal without precedent. In 2008, the fifth report of the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee called on the Government to enshrine in law teachers'

“right to have legal representation or to be accompanied by a trade union representative, whichever they prefer, in all disciplinary hearings.”

Despite that, over a decade has passed, and the gap remains wide open.

This Bill is also about creating greater parity between employers and employees. As it stands, employers are free to have whoever they choose present to support, including legally qualified individuals, yet teachers' accompaniment rights are much more limited, damaging their prospects and creating an asymmetrical relationship from the outset.

Fundamentally, these proposals are about choice. No one should feel pressurised into joining a trade union for the legal protections alone, but sadly, that seems to be the case, with polls showing that teachers join trade unions largely for legal support in the face of allegations. In fact, a survey of 6,900 teachers just last year showed that one in four teachers would leave their union if they could benefit from alternative legal support in employment disputes. Take Amy Forrester, a secondary school English teacher and director of pastoral care. Amy is not a union member but told me that, even as a Labour voter, none of the unions represents her current views as a teacher. Amy subscribes to one of the alternatives, Edapt, but like me, she strongly believes that her accompaniment rights should be dictated by personal choice rather than by the status of her union membership.

I want to make one point clear: this Bill is not an attack on trade unions. It does not seek to diminish their power or influence. It does not seek to undermine the valuable work they do, the accompaniment they provide or the legal representation that they can offer. Rather, it seeks to enhance and protect workers' rights for teachers. It seeks to modernise existing legislation, and it seeks to recognise that all teachers deserve full legal protection against damaging and often false allegations.

For me, the core principle of this Bill is fairness. As a former teacher and headteacher, I want members of my former profession to feel confident in their position. I want them to feel secure, and I want them to feel

protected. Teachers have given so much throughout this pandemic. They have adapted quickly to new ways of working, and they have provided a safe haven for many children during this immensely difficult time. In proposing this Bill, I hope to make it clear that all—not some—teachers deserve robust protection in disciplinary or grievance hearings. As we know, allegations of misconduct can be more damaging for teachers than virtually any other profession, so it makes no sense that the law discriminates in this way.

It is time for change, and it is time to align the rights of those who are not trade union members with the rights of those who are. As I said earlier, this Bill costs nothing and hurts no one. It simply closes a gap in the law—a gap that for too long has prohibited fairness and choice. I hope that the Government will support this Bill, to bring an end to the inequitable and selective nature of existing legislation. I commend this measure to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Brendan Clarke-Smith, Andrew Lewer, Andrew Percy, Caroline Ansell, Damian Hinds, Jim Shannon, Jonathan Gullis, Robert Halfon, Scott Benton, Selaine Saxby, Tim Loughton and Virginia Crosbie present the Bill.

Brendan Clarke-Smith accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 276).

Opposition Day

[18TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Scotland: General Election and Constitutional Future

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

12.54 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the upcoming Scottish Parliamentary general election and Scotland's right to choose its constitutional future.

We have been waiting a while for a third party Opposition day, so I am delighted that we get to set the agenda today. The timing of this debate could not be more apposite. On 6 May, Scotland goes to the polls for a general election to the Scottish Parliament. The consequences of the outcome of that election could be profound, both for Scotland and for the rest of the United Kingdom, so it is fitting that this Parliament gets an opportunity—perhaps its last opportunity—to debate what it thinks of that before the campaign starts and before the election takes place. I hope we can have a thoughtful and considered discussion about the political principles that will infuse that campaign, and perhaps leave behind some of the more intemperate remarks that are often a hallmark of the campaign itself.

To understand what is happening currently in Scotland, we need to start with two facts. The first is that Scotland is not a region of a unitary state seeking secession from it; it is a country that has been in existence for many centuries. Indeed, it is a nation that is, by voluntary association, part of a multinational state that we call the United Kingdom. The second fact is that in determining how consent to that voluntary association should be given, the people of Scotland are ultimately sovereign in making the decision.

The claim to be sovereign has been around for at least eight centuries, but in the modern era it was codified in 1989 by the Scottish constitutional convention in a document called “A Claim of Right for Scotland”, which asserted that the people of Scotland have the right to determine the form of government best suited to their needs. For a while that claim, which underpinned the 20 years of policy and argument that were to follow, was relatively uncontroversial. In fact, even in 2014 the Scottish Conservative party issued a statement saying that although it did not think that the people of Scotland should vote for independence, it very much endorsed and agreed with their right to do so.

On 18 September 2014, the claim was put into practice and there was a living experience of that right being exercised in the referendum on whether Scotland should become an independent country. Even after the referendum, the Smith commission noted in 2016 that nothing in its report would preclude the people of Scotland voting to become an independent country in the future. As late as 2018, which seems only a blink of an eye away, we

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discussed the claim of right in this Chamber, and this Parliament and this House reaffirmed their commitment to the principle.

I remember that debate, and particularly the contribution of the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray). He felt frustrated and aggrieved; although he agreed with and supported the claim of right, he thought that my party was acting in bad faith, because the claim of right had been exercised at the referendum and we did not respect the result and the judgment of the people of Scotland in exercising their self-determination to remain in the United Kingdom. In fact, that is not true. We very much respect the decision that was taken on 18 December 2014. Indeed, had it not been for the will of the people to do otherwise, that might have been the end of the matter for a very considerable period of time. But the fact is that it was not.

A claim of right is not something that can exist on the day of the referendum and then cease to exist the day after. If it is a right, it must exist for all time. It does not have a self-destruct mechanism within it. It cannot be invalidated simply by its exercising.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Tommy Sheppard: I have an embarrassment of riches. I give way first to the hon. Member for Redcar (Jacob Young).

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is recalling all these different examples of when people have discussed the claim of right; does he remember when the leader of his party said of the 2014 referendum that it was a “once-in-a-generation” referendum?

Tommy Sheppard: All good things come to those who wait, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I will be dealing with the “once in a generation” tagline later in my speech.

On referendums and whether they should take place, the question will arise as to who should make the decision. If we believe in the will of the Scottish people to choose their own destiny, then the answer can only be that the people of Scotland should decide whether to have another referendum. I accept that there needs to be a debate about how we gauge their opinion and what democratic mechanism is used for them to express their view. Well, democratic societies will quite often do that by using the electoral process and the process of voting, and in 2016 that is exactly what happened. My party did not go into the election in 2016 saying, “There must be another referendum and, 18 months forward, we disrespect the decision that was taken.” We went to the polls saying: “It looks like things are beginning to happen in the UK that will change the whole nature of the options available to people, and there may be circumstances in which it would be legitimate and proper to go forward and reconsider the question again in a second referendum.” That was the mandate that we were given by the people of Scotland in 2016.

That was six weeks before the Brexit vote in the UK, and no one could have anticipated what would unfold in the years after the May 2016 general election in Scotland. People in England voted by a small majority to leave the

European Union and people in Scotland voted, by a much larger majority, to stay in the European Union. Overall, the vote was such that there was a narrow majority to leave, and the British Government began the tortuous process of extricating the United Kingdom from the European Union. That process was made all the more difficult and painful by the Government’s decision not to try to accommodate any of the wishes of the people on the losing side of the argument and to seek the maximum possible dissociation from the European Union. That is what happened, and we remember the agonising twists and turns in that process.

As 2018 moved into 2019 and we watched the process unfold, two things became clear. First, the opinion of the people of Scotland in the matter was to be completely disregarded. Unlike in other parts of the United Kingdom where there was an attempt to try to make the decision that was being implemented fit the aspirations of people who lived there, there was no such attempt in Scotland.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): But the fact remains that Brexit has happened, so an independent Scotland would have to apply to rejoin the EU. Leaving aside whether it would be wise for Scotland to replace union with a country that is right next door to it with one with a body that is hundreds of miles away, why does the hon. Gentleman think that Spain, with its problems of Catalonia, would ever facilitate Scotland rejoining the EU?

Tommy Sheppard: That is not the subject of today’s debate, but it only takes a cursory reading of statements from European premiers to see that their mood has completely changed and they would welcome, many of them with open arms, a self-governing Scotland into the European Union. But we are getting ahead of ourselves, because we have not yet had the ability to take that decision.

As the Brexit process unfolded, two things became clear. One was that Scotland’s views were to be completely disregarded, but even more worryingly, we saw the British Government begin to put in place mechanisms to replace the jurisdiction of the European Union that would centralise political power in this country and reduce the capacity and competence of the devolved Administrations in Holyrood and, indeed, Cardiff.

By the end of 2019 it became clear that those two things were creating a fundamentally different terrain on which the future of the United Kingdom and the future of Scotland should be judged. It was the determination of the Scottish Parliament by resolution at that time that the conditions set in the mandate of 2016 had been met and that that mandate should now be discharged. Therefore, the Scottish Parliament voted and applied to the British Government for a section 30 order to begin the process of having a further referendum. The response by the Prime Minister was fast and furious, and he dismissed it out of hand.

We were about to get into an argument about that when the world literally turned upside down and a small microbe brought humanity almost to its knees. As covid-19 raced across the globe, and as our economy and society ground to a halt, the Scottish Government—rightly, in my view—decided to shelve any preparations or plans for a further referendum until that matter was dealt with. Had the pandemic not happened, we might

well be having a very different discussion today. But we are where we are, and we are 51 days away from the Scottish general election, at which the existing mandate will expire. At that election, my party and others will be seeking a new, fresh mandate from the Scottish people to assert their right to choose whether they wish to remain in a post-Brexit Britain, or whether Scotland's fortunes are better served by having a choice and becoming a self-governing independent European country. That is what will be at stake in the 2021 election.

Unlike 2016, the mandate we seek will not be conditional, have qualifications or be reliant on things that may or may not happen. It will be unconditional and without qualification, and it will be front and centre on page 1 of our manifesto. I think it is a racing certainty—Government Members can tell me if I am wrong—that the inverse proposition will be front and centre of the Conservative manifesto as well. We can be sure of one thing, which is that there will be a full and frank debate about this question, and a vote will be taken on 6 May 2021.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): The hon. Gentleman said that page 1 will obviously refer to independence. I wonder whether page 2 will go back to what Nicola Sturgeon referred to as the focal point of her premiership: education. Perhaps we could have the OECD's review of the curriculum for excellence before the May elections, rather than after, so that the people of Scotland can see the Scottish National party's record on education since it took over in 2007.

Tommy Sheppard: I am more than happy for the record of the Scottish Government to be judged by the people on 6 May as well; independence and the referendum is not the only thing we shall be voting on. This SNP Government have been in power for 14 years, and what they do seems to go down rather well with the people of Scotland; I very much look forward to their judgment on that question on 6 May.

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): The hon. Gentleman's party is seeking a new mandate on 6 May. If it does not get the majority it is seeking, will he therefore rule out the SNP trying again to seek a divisive second referendum?

Tommy Sheppard: Everything we do is subject to the will of an endorsement by the people of Scotland; so, obviously, if they do not want to take a particular course of action that we are recommending, that will not happen. If the Conservatives win on 6 May, I accept that there will not be a referendum. I hope they will accept that if we win, there will be, and that it will be legitimate for that to happen.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: If the hon. Member does not mind, I am going to make some progress.

We need to consider what this Chamber's response would be to that likely outcome. I do not take anything for granted. The campaign has not started; not a single vote has been cast, and I do not take anyone's vote for granted. We will be arguing for this right up to 10 o'clock

on polling day. But I think people will want to know what the reaction of this Parliament here in Westminster would be if they were to take a decision saying that they wanted to have that choice again. That is why we need to be very careful about the language that is used by different opponents in this campaign. The way in which it is described will, in itself, condition how people vote on 6 May.

The only legitimate, proper and democratic response would be to say, "We disagree with the decision you've taken, but we respect your right to take it, and the British Government will therefore co-operate with the Scottish Government in trying to deliver on the wishes of the people freely and democratically expressed at the ballot box." That is the reaction that I would hope to see. There are only two other possible responses. The first would be to say, "That process of election is not a sufficient democratic event to allow the choice of the people to be gauged, and therefore we won't accept it", in which case, those making that argument have to say by which mechanism people can resolve to go forward in this matter. The second other possible response would be, "Well, it doesn't matter what the result was, because we do not respect that it is a decision for you to make." That would be rejecting the claim of right, it would be rejecting the right of people in Scotland to make a choice, and it would take us into uncharted territory, because it would move the United Kingdom from being a multinational state built on the co-operation and consent of the people who live in its component parts, to being a state based on coercion of people throughout its borders to comply with things even if they disagree with them. That would be a completely different territory.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con) *rose*—

Tommy Sheppard: I am going to make this the last intervention, because I am going to have to get on.

Paul Holmes: I am quite surprised that the hon. Gentleman has not mentioned independence polls, because he used to like to do that—especially when today's shows that 57% of people would vote against separation. Will he elaborate on what he attributes the Scottish people's change of mind to?

Tommy Sheppard: I did not mention polls because I would have thought it is too obvious, is it not? We had 22 polls in a row that showed majority support for independence, so I think—[*Interruption.*] Well, the poll that matters is the one that takes place on 6 May. I think all of us can agree on that.

In moving on, I want to deal with some of the themes that will come up in this campaign. This is where I will rejoin some of the comments and questions that were made in earlier interventions. First, let me deal with this question—this mantra—of "once in a generation". The Prime Minister has repeated it ad nauseam over the last 12 months. Sometimes, in some of the iterations in which he speaks, we would think that those words were on the ballot paper on 18 September 2014.

I accept that the phrase "once in a generation" was part of the debate, but let us at least be honest with each other about the context in which it was said. It was said, invariably, by those who were proposing a yes vote for independence as a caution to their supporters that they

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might not get another chance. It was not made as a promise or a qualification to those who opposed independence that it would go away forever.

We have dealt with who should decide whether there is another referendum, but the truth—and I fully accept it—is that, had the result on 18 September 2014 been decisive and had circumstances not changed, that might well have been the end of it, but things did change, opinion did change, and it is for the people of Scotland now to make this determination.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: I am sorry; I think I have to move on. I am not sure—[*Interruption.*] Am I okay taking some more interventions, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: It is up to you, is the short answer.

Tommy Sheppard: I am aiming for a time limit, Mr Speaker, but I give way.

Christian Matheson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he took his time deciding, but nevertheless. It is all well and good his trying to explain away this phrase “once in a generation”, but here is the point: it was not us who said it; it was not even the Tories who said it; it was the SNP who said it.

Tommy Sheppard: I hope the hon. Gentleman will do me the courtesy of listening to what I say. I made plain the context in which that was said. It was said as a warning to those who supported independence, not as a promise to those who did not. But it is a moot question, because it is not for the Prime Minister or the First Minister or me or the hon. Gentleman to decide this question; it is for the people of Scotland to make the determination whether there should be another referendum, and to do that through the democratic mechanism of electing a Parliament on a manifesto. That is the process with which we are engaged.

I have already heard the word “separatist” raised in interventions, so I also want to deal with that. Much of what we hear in the coming months will be about the long arms of the Union and how we must not turn our back. This word “separatist” is used as a dysphemism to suggest that people like me are somehow insular or self-serving, want to turn our backs on the people of England, are not interested in co-operation, and are not interested in working together across Britain. It is a lie. It is simply a lie. Nothing could be further from the truth. Getting independence for Scotland is about Scotland having the political capacity to engage with others. It will be the means not of the separation of the Scottish people, but of their involvement across this island, across this continent and across the world.

Let me turn, in my final few moments, to the substance of the amendment, because the amendment is quite interesting, is it not? I talked earlier about there appearing to be a consensus around the idea of the claim of right, so a better amendment might have been to leave the existing text, which was drafted in an attempt not to divide the House, and then insert the words “However,

we believe that now is not the time,” or whatever. It does not do that. Instead, it deletes all of it, including the assertion of the claim or right. I invite the Conservatives in this debate to make it clear whether or not they still believe that in the final resolve it should be for the people of Scotland to determine their own constitutional future. [*Interruption.*] I will not take an intervention, because other hon. Members will be speaking very shortly.

The whole premise of the amendment is to say that it is impossible to consider these matters now because of the pandemic we are all facing, because of the misery and concern that that has caused, and because it would be a distraction. Well, let us be entirely clear about this: no one—I mean no one—is suggesting that we have a referendum campaign during the pandemic. We will have to have it—[*Interruption.*] I tell you now, no one is suggesting that. We will have to have that put behind us and be moving into a recovery phase before it can happen.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I am very interested by what the hon. Gentleman says, because his leader, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), has said that an independence referendum could be held this year. The Scottish National party has put aside £600,000 of party funds to fight a referendum campaign this year. Is it wrong, or is the hon. Gentleman wrong?

Tommy Sheppard: If it is possible to have it later this year because the pandemic is over and we have moved beyond it, then I would welcome that. I do not speculate on whether it is the end of this year or the beginning of next year. The principle I am advocating is that we will not be launching or fighting a referendum campaign while the pandemic is still extant and while we have the social restrictions on people that are mandated by the public health emergency. That is a fact. I tell you this, if for no other reason than I do not want to ask people in Scotland about their future through the medium of a computer screen. I want people to be engaged in this debate as friends and as strangers in workplaces, in pubs, in parks. I want them talking about this, energised in the way that they were in 2014, and that is not possible by having some sort of mega-Zoom meeting to try to conduct this debate. So yes, we will be having a referendum campaign once we have dealt with the pandemic and are moving into the recovery phase.

Here is the final point. As we go into the recovery phase—everyone should understand this—far from the debate about a referendum or independence being a diversion from dealing with the pandemic and recovering from it, the process by which we are governed and the type of country we build and develop post covid are intimately linked. They are two sides of the same coin. If we want to see in Scotland a sustainable, green resilient economy that delivers for the communities of Scotland, then we will need the powers and capacity of independence to be able to marshal and direct the country’s capital to that end. If we want to have a better society with a system of obligation and reward that is rooted in human decency, and to see the eradication of poverty in Scotland, then the agency that comes with independence will be critical in delivering that end. If we want to see Scotland play its full role in the world and take a seat at the top table of nations where we can

argue enlightened opinions, whether on how we treat refugees in the world or how we eradicate nuclear weapons from our shores, then that will require the political capacity of independence.

Wes Streeting: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: Sorry, I am finishing.

These things are intimately linked. It is not a matter of whether we postpone a discussion on whether to have an independence referendum until we get to a recovery phase. We know the mood music from the UK Government: the Chancellor does not have a detailed plan yet, but we already know that he thinks those who should pay for covid are the public services of the United Kingdom and the people who work in them, and we are anticipating another austerity programme coming in the autumn. The people of Scotland do not have to follow that lead; they have the opportunity on 6 May to vote for the right to choose a better future, and after this long, tragic, miserable year of dealing with covid-19, I think that provides hope on the horizon that people will respond to and vote for, and this House will need to get used to the idea.

1.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (David Duguid) [V]: I beg to move amendment (b), to leave out from “House” to end and add

“believes the priority of the Scottish people is to recover from the effects of the covid-19 pandemic, and that it would be irresponsible to hold a referendum at this time.”.

I am grateful to be able to speak in this Opposition day debate. My ministerial colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), will be closing the debate for the Government and I look forward to hearing his response to the many Back-Bench contributions today. I am pleased to be able to respond to this motion, as it is important to set out why the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) and his party’s focus on divisive debates about separation is irresponsible. We are currently recovering from the worst public health crisis in a century and the deepest recession in our history, and the people of Scotland voted decisively in 2014 to remain part of the United Kingdom. That is the context of this debate.

The people of our United Kingdom want and expect us to focus on fighting covid-19. They rightly expect us to focus on protecting jobs with furlough payments, ensuring our children catch up on their missed education, and finding jobs for our young people. They expect us to focus on building back better and building back greener. The people of Scotland rightly expect their two Governments to work together to deliver these priorities. Yet in the middle of this, the Scottish National party has tabled this motion for an Opposition day debate, not to discuss what more we can do to work constructively together and drive our recovery from covid-19, but instead to promote separation and the pursuit of another divisive and damaging referendum on independence.

The motion does not focus on anything practical or suggest solutions to the real challenges facing people at the moment. It does not propose ideas for how we can work together to deliver better outcomes for all citizens and businesses across Scotland and the rest of the

United Kingdom, but we have already seen that, with the UK pulling together, we can progress quickly on the road to recovery. For example, in our vaccine programme, which is our path out of lockdown and to more normal times and lives, we have vaccines pioneered in the UK, trialled in the UK and made across the UK, including in Scotland, to protect the people of the UK and the world. In this team effort, the UK Government have bought the vaccines and are making sure every part of the UK gets its fair share, and the British armed forces are helping to establish new vaccine centres right across Scotland and to vaccinate people. As a result of our collaboration around 2 million people have already been vaccinated in Scotland.

We are collaborating on testing, too. We are providing sites across Scotland, including seven drive-through testing centres, 33 walk-in centres, over 20 mobile testing units, and the Lighthouse laboratory in Glasgow. Overall, the United Kingdom Government have provided around 60% of all tests in Scotland and, alongside that, the UK Government continue to drive forward our ambitious programme for economic growth.

The Chancellor’s Budget earlier this month demonstrated the Government’s commitment to operating on a truly UK-wide basis, from extending the furlough and self-employment schemes to the levelling-up fund, benefiting citizens and businesses right across the country. We are boosting funding for all communities and all parts of the UK, with a £200 million fund to invest in local areas ahead of launching the UK shared prosperity fund in 2022. This fund will help to level up and create opportunities across the UK in places most in need, such as former industrial areas, deprived towns, and rural and coastal communities, as well as helping people who face labour market barriers.

Our ability to do this is underpinned by the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, passed in this place at the end of last year. The Act guarantees that UK companies can trade unhindered in every part of the UK, protecting jobs and livelihoods across the country. The financial assistance power taken through the Act covers infrastructure, economic development, culture and sport, and will support educational and training activities and exchanges both within the UK and internationally. As well as allowing the UK Government to deliver the UK shared prosperity fund, the power will be used to deliver the new Turing scheme for students across the UK to study and work not just in Europe, but around the world.

There are numerous examples of where our interconnectedness, shared bonds and the value of all parts of the UK working together are clearly evident. The Union connectivity review, for example, is looking at how we better connect the different parts of the UK to boost our economy. We will be bringing at least one freeport to Scotland, and that is on top of the £1.5 billion that we are currently investing in city and region growth deals all across Scotland, in every region.

Just yesterday, the integrated review was published. This sets out the Prime Minister’s vision for the UK in 2030: a stronger, more secure, prosperous and resilient United Kingdom; a problem-solving and burden-sharing nation with a global perspective. Scottish capabilities in defence, space, cyber, maritime industries and many others contribute immensely to the security of our shared nation.

[David Duguid]

Furthermore, the Prime Minister recently set out his ambitious 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution—an innovative and ambitious programme of job creation that will support levelling up and up to 250,000 jobs. The plan will mobilise £12 billion of UK Government investment in green energy, nature and innovation technologies across the country in areas such as carbon capture, utilisation and storage, hydrogen and offshore wind. I personally expect Scotland to benefit hugely from this, becoming a global centre of excellence for energy transition.

Across the whole United Kingdom, there is far more that unites than divides us, so we should be here today using the time constructively to debate how we can best lead the recovery of our economy and our communities. We should be talking about building up, not breaking up our country. People across the United Kingdom want to see us working in partnership to tackle the pandemic and drive the recovery that we all need. That remains the top priority of the United Kingdom Government. It should be the SNP's and the Scottish Government's top priority, too.

1.26 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): A very happy St Patrick's Day to you and everyone in the House, Mr Speaker.

I am sure that you will have been as astonished as I was, Mr Speaker, to hear that the SNP was using one of its irregular Opposition day debates to talk about independence. Indeed, even the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) said that this was a very rare debate for the SNP. You could have knocked me down with a feather, Mr Speaker, and that is no mean task with my extra 10 lockdown kilos. It is not as though there is nothing else for us to debate today. You would not think that we were in the worst health and economic crisis since world war two.

Why does the SNP want to turn the Scottish election in May into a referendum on whether or not we have another referendum? Because it cannot defend its atrocious record in government for the last 14 years. SNP Members have no defence at all and nothing to offer. In 25 minutes of opening speech, there was not one positive policy about how to deal with the problems in Scotland. We have had the sheer arrogance of the SNP making assumptions about the election result without a single cross being put in a single ballot box anywhere in Scotland. However, we no longer hear the cry of "22 polls in a row in favour of separation" when it is now four in a row in favour of staying part of the United Kingdom, the one today being 57% to 43%. They are being found out.

We could have been debating all sorts of major issues today. We could have debated our democratic institutions in Scotland, whether the Scottish Government legislative settlement needs to be improved, and telling MSPs to properly hold the Scottish Government to account. The Minister made those points yesterday.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The poll today shows that only 46% of the Scottish electorate support independence. A few months ago, it was 58%, so it is down 12%. I say very gently to my brothers and sisters

around me, my Gaelic friends: the poll that really matters is the last one. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that the reason this has happened is in part the covid vaccine roll-out? To everyone, it has expressed across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland that together, we are better. Does he agree?

Ian Murray: I am sorry that I did not quite hear the hon. Gentleman—the intervention king—so I apologise, but he is right. I think the reason why the polls have moved is that the SNP has arrogantly assumed that the Scottish people want independence, so people have started to ask the big questions, to which no answers have been forthcoming. People realise, with the vaccine roll-out and the covid support, that we are much better and much stronger as a nation working with our partners and friends as part of the family of four nations of the UK.

Jacob Young: The Member from Edinburgh said that the independence referendum will be on page 1 of the SNP's manifesto and that "no independence referendum" will be on page 1 of the Conservative manifesto. What is Labour's position on a referendum and on what page will it be in its manifesto?

Ian Murray: It will not be in our manifesto because our manifesto will be a covid recovery plan for the nation.

Mr Speaker: Order. We are not here to debate what referendums might be in parties' manifestos. Otherwise, we would be here a long time, and which election would we start with?

Ian Murray: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. Just for the record, there are Members for Edinburgh East and for Edinburgh South. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East does not represent the whole city, despite the fact that the SNP thinks that it represents the whole of Scotland.

Let me go back to what we could be debating today. We could have debated the dreadful picture that everyone will have seen on social media from George Square in Glasgow last month, where 220 people were queuing up in sub-zero temperatures in the snow to get food from the soup kitchen. A photo says a thousand words, and those words were that both the UK and Scottish Governments are failing the people of Scotland who need their Governments the most. But, no, we are not debating that.

We could have debated universal credit and the £20 uplift becoming permanent, extending it to legacy benefits, removing the rape clause and helping those most in need.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Murray: I will come back to the hon. Gentleman in a second.

We could have debated the First Minister's so-called top priority: education. But the SNP cannot defend the widening educational attainment gap, thousands fewer teachers, a lower spend per pupil than in 2007, Scotland plummeting down the international rankings, or Scotland's education system being behind England for the first time ever—behind Tory England for the first time ever.

They will not even publish the OECD report into Scottish education before the election—I wonder why. We could have debated education and our children's future, but no.

We could have debated why, even before covid, the SNP Scottish Government had not met their own legal NHS waiting times targets since 2012. They have broken their own law 360,000 times in the process, but no.

How about international issues? We could have debated Myanmar and the atrocities in the coup, Yemen and the worst humanitarian disaster the world has ever seen, or Scotland's wonderful partnership with Malawi, but no.

We could have debated how Scottish businesses recover from covid and how we can support those sectors in hospitality, tourism and culture that will take longer to recover and have been hardest hit. What about the 3 million excluded from any Government support? We could have debated that, but no.

We could have debated how Scottish taxpayers are on the hook for over half a billion pounds to fund a 25-year guarantee for a failing business that owned an aluminium smelter and a hydropower plant in Scotland, but no.

We could have debated last month's Audit Scotland report, which says that billions of pounds of covid support funds are unspent by the Scottish Government and audited what they are spending them on, but no.

We could have been having a debate about COP26 and climate change, but no.

We could have celebrated the success of the vaccine roll-out—all the nations of the UK working together with our wonderful science and research and development sectors—but no.

We could have even debated how the Tories are a bigger threat to the Union than any nationalist. They got us into this mess by playing fast and loose with the UK constitution in the first place, bringing us Brexit, English votes for English laws, cronyism, wasting £37 billion on Test and Trace. We could have debated how they have nothing to offer Scotland but waving their own flag, but no.

We could even have debated how to eradicate child poverty, but no. The SNP uses its precious parliamentary time to debate another referendum—quelle surprise. Surely if SNP Members want to turn May's election into a referendum on having another referendum, they could at least put their cards on the table and be straight with the Scottish people. Even the hon. Member for Edinburgh East said on several occasions during his speech, "Let us be honest with each other," so let us make this a great opportunity for them to use their speeches to tell us what their separation proposition means. Let us be honest with each other.

On EU accession, how, when, why? How will they meet the criteria? On borders, will this be determined by the trade and co-operation agreement that has just been signed between the UK and the EU? The Health Secretary said on "Question Time" two weeks ago that it would not.

Tommy Sheppard: All these questions will be discussed and decided upon if and when we get to a referendum campaign and a referendum vote. What is at stake on 6 May is who should make the decision on whether that process happens—whether people in Scotland have a

right to even choose to make that consideration. That is a different matter. What is the hon. Gentleman's view on that?

Ian Murray: When I pose the challenge to the hon. Gentleman, "Let's be honest with each other" the answer comes back, "No". What is at stake at the elections on 6 May is how Scotland recovers from the worst health and economic crisis since the second world war. To plunge the country into another divisive independence referendum debate, while people are more worried about their lives, their livelihoods and the health of their friends and their family, is absolutely deplorable.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a characteristically excellent speech. What he says about the timing of the referendum is something that polling is clear about. While the polling has moved up and down on the subject of whether there should be independence, it is absolutely clear that even the majority of those who are in favour of independence do not think that we should have a referendum right now. What are those people supposed to do when they go to vote in May? If they vote for the Scottish National party, they will be seen as having endorsed a referendum that they themselves do not think should happen right now.

Ian Murray: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head because the priorities of the Scottish people are health, education, covid recovery, the economy, jobs and livelihoods. That is what is important to the Scottish people and poll after poll after poll shows that.

Let us be honest with each other. On the oil price, \$114 a barrel was underpinning the entire Scottish economy; it has been less than half that since the last referendum. On deficits and debt, how will they be dealt with? On pensions, SNP candidates in constituencies up and down Scotland are delivering leaflets promising pensioners that they will double the state pension. Let us be honest with each other. And how would the SNP work with the rest of the UK with regards to the EU?

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): For a start, if we are going to be honest, it is quite clear that, due to the covid restrictions, we do not have people out delivering leaflets right now. If we are talking about honesty, will the hon. Gentleman answer this question: if the voters vote for parties that have a referendum in their manifesto, should that referendum happen to reflect the will of the Scottish people? Will he give us an honest answer?

Ian Murray: I will be honest with the hon. Gentleman. The leaflet was delivered in Dumbarton and was posted on social media by the person who delivered it, so that is being honest with each other. Let me just say to him that I am very much in the same place as Sir John Curtice—we cannot extrapolate a single issue from a general election. It is disingenuous to suggest that we should turn this major election, the most important I think in Scotland's devolution history, into whether or not we should have a referendum on another referendum.

Paul Holmes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Murray: Let me make a little progress.

[Ian Murray]

Let me go to the biggest issue of all—currency. We have heard the same old arguments from the SNP time and again, so perhaps they can tell us something new. Let us be honest with each other. What on earth would the people be voting for? Let us take this issue of currency. If any SNP Members want to intervene on me and tell me what the answer is, I will give them the floor for as long as they like.

The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), the Leader of the SNP in this House, promotes sterlingisation. He says that people should not worry—we will keep using the pound until such time as six tests are met, however long that would be. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) tells us that they will only keep the pound for a few months. The SNP's deputy leader, Keith Brown, says that they will keep the pound for less than five years. Andrew Wilson, the head of the SNP's Growth Commission and a former SNP Finance Minister, says that it could be a decade before we give up the pound. Does any SNP Member want to tell us exactly how long we will keep the pound? Is it a few months? Is it five years? Is it 10 years? Is it indefinitely? Will we keep it at all? Let us just be honest with each other if the SNP wants to turn this debate into a referendum on whether or not we have a referendum.

Paul Holmes: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent case on the lack of clarity from the Scottish National party. But what he needs to be clear on to the Scottish people when he goes to the polls on 6 May is whether his party backs a referendum or not. We have been honest. SNP Members have been honest about what they want. Will he now be honest and say what his position is?

Ian Murray: The answer to the question is no.

On interest rates—[*Interruption.*] The Conservatives do this all the time. They deliberately misinterpret the Scottish Labour party's policy in order to feather their own electoral nest. That is why they are putting the Union at risk and why they are a bigger threat to the UK than any nationalist.

Let me turn to the interest rate question. For as long as we do not have our own currency, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who is in the Chamber, thinks that we will still have a monetary and interest rate policy, but his own SNP Minister for Energy, Paul Wheelhouse MSP, said that, without a central bank or lender of last resort, we would have to take whatever interest rates were set. Can any SNP Member intervene and tell us who is right—the hon. Member for Glasgow East or the Scottish Government Minister?

That leads us to exchange rates. Let us try another one. The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber said that

“when we do have our own currency it has to be pegged against the pound sterling”,

but the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) suggests that will not be the case because we would need to meet the exchange rate mechanism rules to enter the EU. Again, what is it? Is it that we would have to take our own exchange rate mechanism to qualify for the EU, or would we be

pegged to sterling? Maybe the answer is none of the above. Could it be the euro, as the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) said, or maybe Bitcoin, as the former SNP Member for East Lothian, George Kerevan, said—or, worse yet, our flexible friend? Will we all use our credit cards as if we were on holiday, as the SNP MSP Emma Harper suggested in a TV debate, when she said that we did not need a currency at all because we all used plastic anyway?

The position of SNP parliamentarians on these matters would be hilarious, were it not so serious. They want to take us out of the UK, regardless of the economic and social chaos that this would cause. This is about people's jobs, mortgages and livelihoods. It is about our communities.

If SNP Members insist on focusing on separation instead of on how we get people back to work, how we lift families and children out of poverty, how we restart and properly value our NHS and how we lead a national effort to recover from this pandemic, they should at least be straight with the Scottish people about how separation will affect their jobs, livelihoods, health, education and opportunities for the future. They refuse to put forward the details of the separation proposition either because the answers to these big questions are unpalatable to the public or because they actually do not know the answers.

Jacob Young: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Murray: I will carry on, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind, because I have taken longer than I expected to.

Let us go back to the question that was debated earlier: when would that referendum be held? The hon. Member for Edinburgh East said—let us check *Hansard*—that no one is saying it would be this year—no one except the First Minister when she set out an 11-point plan to potentially deliver even an illegal referendum this year.

Tommy Sheppard: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Murray: I will when I have finished this point.

Mike Russell, the SNP Constitutional Minister and president of the SNP, said before Christmas, and the SNP leader in this place, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, said just a few weeks ago, that the referendum could happen this year. Does anyone honestly believe, whether they are yes or no, that it would be in Scotland's interests to have a referendum on separation instead of a laser-like focus on covid recovery? But that is SNP Members' only priority. If it were not their priority, they would not put it on the ballot paper. If it were not their priority, they would not be using the valuable four days until the Scottish Parliament goes into recess for the election to bring forward another referendum Bill. The First Minister says she wants to be judged on her covid record, so which one is it? While most Scots are worried about their jobs and livelihoods, about their health and that of their family and friends, about the future for their children's education, and about how the NHS will catch up with cancer and other treatments that have been paused during covid, the SNP goes on about the constitution.

We cannot rely on the UK Government to deliver a recovery that works for everyone. We have seen that already. They just want business as usual, looking after their neighbours and friends rather than the country.

They want to defend a broken status quo, rather than trying to fix it for the future. That is why the Scottish election must be about what the new Scottish Labour leader, Anas Sarwar, is proposing: delivering a national recovery plan that at its heart is about creating jobs, catching up on education and rebuilding our NHS, so that we never again have to choose between treating a virus and treating cancer. That is what we will be putting forward: a jobs and economic recovery plan; an NHS recovery plan; an education recovery plan; a climate recovery plan; and a communities recovery plan. These are the priorities of the Scottish people, far and above all else.

David Linden: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Murray: I am happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman, as I have mentioned him during my speech.

David Linden: I sit on the Back Benches, watch the hon. Gentleman, the lonely Scottish Labour MP at Westminster, and find myself reflecting every now and again about his once great party. I was party campaigning in a Labour seat in 2001, when it took 65% of the vote. Has he ever reflected on why his party is represented as it is at Westminster, given its intransigent policy against independence and against Scotland having the right to choose?

Ian Murray: It is called having principles. The hon. Gentleman ought to try it some time. We are against independence because it would be bad for the Scottish people, and that is why SNP Members have to answer these questions. They cannot just decide that they are going to move their principles and damage the Scottish economy, Scottish society and Scottish culture on the basis of what the hon. Gentleman has just said. Anas Sarwar will get Scottish Labour back on track with his optimism and his positivity.

As we come out of this pandemic, we must focus on solutions that ensure that Scotland comes back a better, stronger and fairer nation than the one that went into lockdown last year. The SNP wants to go back to the same old divisive discussions, while Labour in Scotland is looking to the future, not separation and not defending the broken status quo. In just a few short weeks, Anas Sarwar, together with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), has shown that we can be a credible alternative. Scots do not have to choose between the divisive politics of the SNP—*[Interruption.]*—the divisive, arrogant politics of the SNP that I hear behind me and the Scottish Tories' status quo.

Not one vote has been cast yet. Now more than ever, Scotland needs its powerful Parliament to deliver a strong NHS, take action on the jobs crisis, deliver a national care service and treat poverty as the health and economic emergency that it is. Scotland needs a Government who do not just say that education is a priority but really show our children and young people that we are committed to giving them the future they deserve.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The House will be aware that a great many people wish to take part in this important debate. Members will be accustomed to a time limit of three minutes, but in this very important debate, we will begin with a time limit of four minutes.

1.45 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), who was as witty and articulate as ever, but I still have no idea where Anas Sarwar and the Scottish Labour party stand on having another independence referendum.

I was very proud to be part of the process that led to the Edinburgh agreement, which facilitated the 2014 referendum. At the time, Alex Salmond—who is now heavily criticised by some of the same people who portrayed him as father of the nation on whose word everybody in Scotland could rely—said that that was a gold standard agreement and the basis on which such a referendum could and should be held in order that it be fair, legal and decisive. And yet, from the moment that referendum was held—not in 2016, 2018 or 2019, but from 19 September 2014—the SNP has agitated for another referendum. It did not even wait for the dust to settle on the result, and it completely disrespected the outcome, having said that it would respect it.

In each of the elections we have had since 2014, the SNP has sought to downplay independence. In a television debate before the 2016 Scottish Parliament election, Nicola Sturgeon said that there was no prospect of a referendum. In the 2019 general election, my SNP opponent said, “This isn’t about independence at all. It’s nothing to do with independence. It’s about Brexit; that’s what it’s about,” yet each time, from the moment the polls close, every vote cast is portrayed as a vote for independence.

I welcome the fact that the SNP has registered with the Electoral Commission the slogans “Both votes SNP for indyref2” and “Vote SNP for indyref2”, because people will understand, I hope—and I hope it will be on page 1 of the manifesto in big writing, not hidden away on page 16 as some sub-clause, as the “changing circumstances” caveat was.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I have listened carefully, and I have heard a number of Members say this about every vote cast being a vote for independence. Would the right hon. Gentleman not accept that, in the literature produced and distributed by his party in any given election at any level of government in Scotland, “Vote Conservative to say no to indyref” is doing exactly the same thing—it is suggesting that every vote for the Conservative party is a vote against a referendum?

David Mundell: What we are suggesting as we go into this election under the leadership of my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) is that there is an alternative to this obsession with independence. It does not all have to be about independence. Despite what the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) said, Scottish Parliament time has been devoted to an independence referendum. There has been a Bill in the Parliament during the period of covid. There has not been a focus entirely on covid, because the independence issue has always been there.

We hear today that the “once in a generation” claim was only for SNP supporters, to make sure that they got down to the polling station, and it could not be relied on. We hear that Mike Russell’s pronouncements that we will have a referendum by Christmas and those of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) about having a referendum this year

[David Mundell]

cannot be relied on. Well, what cannot be relied on by the people of Scotland is that the SNP will not press ahead with a referendum regardless. We have heard that they are the people who will determine what people in Scotland think. What arrogance—it is not about elections; the SNP will decide what the people of Scotland think, and if it determines that the people of Scotland are in favour of a referendum it is willing to press ahead with one regardless. Several leading members of the SNP have said that, and I look forward to the contribution of the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), who is a proponent of this.

I agree with the hon. Member for Edinburgh South that this election is very important. It is important on 6 May that we get Scotland to focus on coming out of the pandemic with a plan for recovery—none currently exists in Scotland. There is a plan for an independence referendum, but there is no plan for recovery. The only realistic way in which people can achieve that is to use both votes on 6 May for the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party. We want to end division. No referendum—let us rebuild Scotland.

1.51 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: A happy St Patrick's Day to you too, Madam Deputy Speaker.

May I begin with this point? It is roughly the same distance from Greater Manchester to London as it is to Edinburgh or Glasgow, yet the travel time is considerably more—almost half as much again—to those great Scottish cities than it is to London. That is indicative of a problem facing the north of England and Scotland: the failure of Governments of different descriptions, but particularly the Conservative-led Government, over the past 10 years to address the needs of every part of this island of ours, its nations and regions. I empathise with the sense of resentment in Scotland about a Government who ignore the needs of many people, because that is exactly how many people in the north of England feel as well.

We have more in common than empathy. There was a time when northern MPs worked hard with Scottish Labour MPs to challenge a Conservative Government and a Labour Government to work together to bring about solutions that both Scotland and the north needed, but we do not see that now. The motive of SNP MPs is to talk up independence at the expense of major issues such as universal credit, job creation, and investment, both in industries and services and in our children's education and training.

We had those things in common, but we have more in common than that. I grew up in a city region where the influence of Scots was not romantic but real. As a young man, I was at school with people from Scottish families. During my early working life in industry, I met engineers and printers from Scotland. I met people in the teaching profession who had come down from Scotland and worked in our universities as academics. People worked together in different areas. I worked closely with many Scots in our trade union movement, and they made an important and valuable contribution. Their attitude was similar to ours, and in politics my party has always benefited, in Greater Manchester and across the north of Scotland, from many Scots who played a role.

I cannot think of a time when there was not a Scottish Member of Parliament in the region—we now have the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green). There have always been Scottish Members of Parliament, including the late Jim Dobbin, who was MP for Heywood and Middleton. That mattered, because they had similar values to us, unlike one home counties-based Conservative—I will not name them—who, many years ago, travelled up to the north and said, "I love coming to the north, Tony. It's so terribly real up there." Well, it was very real for me, because I grew up there and have lived most of my life there. The Scots understood that; they were our partners because they shared those values. That matters, because it is why, even now, 60% of Scotland's trade is with England. That matters enormously because, in the end, taking away the importance of London, the north of England and Scotland trade with each other. If we were to see Scotland in the European Union, that would devastate the trade between Scotland and the north of England; it would be crippling for both sides. That does matter because it is jobs, it is the future, and that matters.

There is an answer. It is to work together essentially for the devolved Britain that I want to see—power, yes, for the Scottish Parliament, but power too for the north of England, the north-west, the north-east, Yorkshire and Humberside. That different constitutional settlement can allow us to work together. It is the real answer to the problems of Scotland and the north-west of England.

1.55 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Debating time in the House of Commons is a precious commodity. It is an opportunity to raise important matters for our nation—important matters of international concern and, crucially, of concern to the people that we all represent. As one of the political parties in this place, the Scottish National party is in the privileged position of having debating time—time when it decides what to debate and the issues that it wants to promote. I know that my constituents in the Scottish borders will be baffled, given the huge challenges that we are facing in Scotland, that the nationalists have decided to use this debating time to promote their obsession with independence referendums.

Scots are worried about the coronavirus. We are worried about the economy. People are worried about their jobs. Families are worried about their health and the wellbeing of loved ones. And yet here we are, debating the SNP's obsession—*independence and referendums*. Scots are rightly asking why the SNP's priorities are so out of step with those of most people in Scotland.

The SNP has announced that it will hold another independence referendum as early as this year, if it wins a majority in the upcoming elections. At this uncertain time, the only priority I would suggest that we should have is working together to manage the crisis and rebuild our country. Our focus needs to be on defeating the spread of the coronavirus and on the economic recovery plan.

The SNP is trying to distract people today, I believe, with its new independence referendum road map as a shield to hide a catalogue of targets not met, priorities not delivered and promises broken. Time and again we have heard SNP politicians request that their performance be judged on education. The SNP promised to reduce class sizes for primaries 1 to 3, but for 13 years the SNP

has failed to deliver on that promise. The recent OECD report slammed the shameful attainment gap that exists between poor and wealthier children, but I am sure it comes as no surprise to Members that the SNP in Edinburgh has refused to publish the latest OECD report until after the elections in May. Under the SNP, Scotland's science and maths scores have dropped below those of England and Wales, and are at an all-time low since rankings were introduced.

The SNP shows complete contempt for the future prospects of Scotland's children. In health, too, it has failed. It has failed to deliver on its promises of tackling the chronic shortage of GPs. It has failed on the children's hospital in Edinburgh which only just opened, four years behind schedule.

David Mundell: Does my hon. Friend share my amazement that, when confronted with any of these issues—the real issues that people face in health and education—the only answer the SNP can put forward is independence, despite having had 14 years to resolve these issues?

John Lamont: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right; independence is the SNP's only answer to everything, yet it has failed to deliver for my constituents and most people in Scotland.

Similarly, the SNP has failed Scotland's economy, having presided over the lowest rate of job creation in the entirety of the UK over the past decade. The SNP has continuously failed rural Scotland too, whether it be its failure to deliver rural broadband or the lack of engagement with the Union transport connectivity review, which would have been an opportunity to improve transport links. Whether it be the A1, the A75 or extending the Borders Railway, the SNP has simply refused to engage.

And of course we have the Salmond/Sturgeon affair, which is perhaps the ultimate failure—this time with a woman at its heart. Misleading the Scottish Parliament on multiple occasions, withholding legal documents and not fully co-operating with the Scottish Parliament's inquiry, the First Minister and her deputy have shown a blatant disregard for the people of Scotland they claim to serve. The handling of this affair is symptomatic of the SNP's failure to deliver for the Scottish people across all areas of public life. With such a corrupt, sleazy and tired Government in Edinburgh, it is little surprise that the SNP has picked its obsession of separation to debate today, rather than defend its colleagues' record in Government in Holyrood.

David Linden: I guess if this was a drinking game, we would probably be having our stomachs pumped every time the hon. Gentleman mentioned the word "SNP", but I want to ask him about the fact that he reflects a lot on the SNP talking about independence, although the leaflets I have received from the Scottish Conservatives talk only about independence. He talks about party leaders. Will he be inviting the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) to come and campaign in the upcoming election?

John Lamont: The last time I checked, the SNP is your party name and it is your party ticket. If you are telling us now that you do not want to associate

with that, perhaps you should think about changing your party's name. The last time I checked it is also your party, as we heard from your party spokesman this morning—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I let the hon. Gentleman get away with it at first, but every time he says "your party", he is referring to me, and I think everybody knows that the party of the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) is not mine.

John Lamont: I am very grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. I did not want to cause you deep offence, possibly; that was clearly was not my intention.

I am very clear what my party believes in: Scotland's place is at the heart of the United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) clearly does not share my view on that, and he can put that to the electorate in May. The Scottish National party's priorities, choices and decisions reflect the reality of a party that does not care about Scotland's children, Scotland's businesses, our frontline workers and our rural communities, nor is it one that believes it can be held accountable for its actions. The SNP—the Scottish National party—is failing Scotland. The SNP is failing Scots when our focus should be on the pandemic, vaccinations and the economic recovery. Now is not the time for another divisive referendum.

2.1 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP) [V]: I am not here to debate whether we can have a referendum; that will not be decided in this place. Today, I am focused on sharing a positive vision of an independent Scotland.

The ongoing pandemic continues to present us all with completely new challenges, demanding responses that have no precedent. However, the pandemic should not be used as an excuse for the response and actions of this Government towards those seeking sanctuary here in the nations of the UK. Current UK immigration policy and the decisions made by the Government are confusing, complex and callous. That policy is heavily influenced by conditions in the south-east of England and it does not reflect the demands across other countries and regions of this Union.

Successive UK Governments have attempted to fool us all into thinking that a hostile environment for immigrants was a societal necessity. The aggressive approach to immigration and, in particular, asylum cases lacks dignity and respect, and the offer of any form of protection. The crisis caused by the pandemic only magnifies the absurdities of this inhumane approach and illustrates why, for Scotland or our Government to have any real chance to affect such matters positively, there is only one real solution available to us—an independent Scotland.

We can appreciate that there are pressures on the Government to provide accommodation for those awaiting determination of status, but that does not mean that undignified mechanisms of accommodation should be utilised. What is required is the long-term sustainable action of compassion to establish, secure and dignify dispersal options and reasonable waiting times for outcomes. In an independent Scotland, we will establish a small separate asylum agency to deal with status applications.

[Steven Bonnar]

That dedicated agency would be tailored to the needs of both our nation and applicants, and it would avoid and mitigate the barriers and complexities of the callous Home Office system. Employment and housing opportunities would be provided in different regions of Scotland to help people seeking to live in and contribute to Scotland to make an informed choice and ensure integration happened from day one of arrival. That would benefit both any host community and the individual or family.

We will build a system that reflects the outlook of our nation. Migrants have played an important part in shaping Scotland, and have enriched and enhanced our culture throughout the generations. Many modern Scots simply would not be if it were not for migration to our shores. On that note, I wish everybody a very happy St Patrick's day.

A new and independent Scotland would have an inclusive approach to citizenship and a humane approach to asylum and refuge, one that was sensitive and respectful of the needs of those with a desire to call Scotland home. An independent Scotland would work constructively with other nations, local authorities and support agencies to secure appropriate means of sustainable and integrated residence within local communities.

An independent Scotland would in no circumstance use crammed, unhygienic military barracks as accommodation for those fleeing persecution. In 2018, the Court of Appeal judge Sir Stephen Irwin said in a speech that the UK's immigration rules were "something of a disgrace". Three years on, nothing has changed. The UK should be protecting those who have arrived seeking safety from violence or persecution. That it does not is wrong, insensitive and not in our name. There is another way, and an independent Scotland will lead that way.

2.5 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con) [V]: Devolution is about giving as much power to local communities across Britain as possible. From the Northern Ireland Assembly to the Welsh Assembly and to the Mayors of London, the west midlands and Manchester, devolution works best when local communities decide on local democratic representation while comforted by the protection given by the enormous strength of the peoples of the UK acting as one. But something has gone wrong. After 14 long years of government by nationalists, focused exclusively on their narrow separatist agenda and the break-up of Britain, anything that stands in its way and anyone who stands in their way, including what is in the best interests of the people of Scotland, is crushed.

The separatists had a golden opportunity today to highlight the real issues that affect the people of Scotland and the whole UK. Today, they could have talked about the welcome strength of working together in the production and roll-out of the vaccination programme—the biggest health task this country has ever undertaken. Today, they could have talked about the strength of the Scottish people, the English people, the Welsh people and the Northern Irish people pooling their taxes to benefit us all, including those who receive the supportive furlough payments, which is possible only because of the size and strength of Britain.

Today, the separatists could have talked about the new integrated review announced by the Prime Minister only yesterday on how Scotland can best work with countries across the world in trade and commerce. Today, they could have talked about the importance of the defence sector in Scotland, which has built the UK's largest flagships, which will help to defend and protect fragile democracies around the world. But no, they did not do that. Instead, they bang the tired drum of separatism; "division", "anger", "gripe" and "divorce" are the words that best describe the nationalists.

However, I want to look at the performance of the Nats in Holyrood. They promised they would reduce class sizes in primaries 1, 2 and 3 to 18 pupils or fewer, but they have failed to deliver. Scotland's maths and science scores are at record lows, and its reading score is lower than levels seen in 2000. Overall, Scotland is performing worse than Portugal, the Czech Republic and even Slovenia. Those are not my findings; they are the findings of reputable organisations, including the PISA—programme for international student assessment—results, which show that Scottish education under a Nat Government has gone backwards.

The Nats have dismantled local frontline policing, and crime is on the rise. Police officers felt "abandoned" by the Nats at the height of the coronavirus pandemic. Those are not my words; they are the words of the Scottish Police Federation chair, Calum Steele, who said:

"There is an increasing sense among members that the Government have abandoned the police service in the midst of this crisis."

The Nats promised to expand testing capacity to 65,000 people per day, but they have only managed to test about half that number on a single occasion. Compare the record of the Nats with the UK-wide vaccination effort—the strength of the peoples of the UK is best seen in the tremendous efforts being made by our hard-working healthcare staff. They have put their shoulders to the wheel and are the ones getting us out of this awful pandemic. It is time that Nicola Sturgeon worked with the UK.

2.9 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab) [V]: I declare my interest as someone of Scottish descent—a reminder, as is the case for many families, of our shared interest in these islands over centuries.

There is, of course, a case that can be made for an independent Scotland, but I profoundly disagree with it, and in a brilliant speech my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) exposed its contradictions and lack of answers. Let us be honest: the SNP has continued to argue for a second referendum ever since it lost the first. I have listened for many years as the SNP told a story about a nation disrespected and denied its rights by this Parliament. I have always found that story rather depressing because it seems to me that it undervalues Scotland but is told to nurture the grievance that all too often appears to be at the heart of the independence cause.

I have often wondered whether a visitor from afar who knew nothing of the condition of our country might conclude that the people of Scotland were labouring under the terrible yoke of an English-dominated Parliament, but we all know that that is not the case. Indeed, I look

at the success of devolution and the extensive powers, some of them barely used, as well as additional funding, that devolution has brought to the people of Scotland—some yoke, some grievance. As a Leeds MP, I dearly wish to have some of those things for the people I represent.

I wish to see the benefits of this shared Union: the security that it gives us all, from whichever part of the United Kingdom we come, and the power of a single currency backed by the Treasury. In recent months, we have seen how, by working together through our NHS, we have been able to vaccinate people in all parts of our Union to protect them. I ask the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), why does it require separation for Scotland to engage with the rest of the United Kingdom?

This may be uncomfortable for some to hear, but I am struck by the similarities in the arguments put by those who argued for Brexit and by those who argue for Scottish independence. Both are based on the charge that one is somehow done down by the other. Both argue that sovereignty should outweigh economic self-interest. Given the problems we see on the border between the UK and the EU, how could it possibly be in the economic interest of Scotland—or, indeed, of England—to establish that same customs and single market border from the Solway firth to just north of Berwick-upon-Tweed?

Both arguments create bitter division. Opinion in Scotland is very divided on independence; be wary of the untold consequences of small margins and do not make assumptions. Opinion polls move, but there is only one true indicator of the settled will of the Scottish people, and that is the outcome of the 2014 referendum. I do not decry anyone's right to continue to argue their cause in the face of that settled will, but I do question the wisdom of doing so, especially now. Together, we face unprecedented challenges—a pandemic, an economic crisis, the threat of dangerous climate change—but I believe that we can and will best respond to them not through separation, but as one country, one Union, one United Kingdom.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I can attest to the Scottish descent of the right hon. Gentleman, as his grandmother and I went to the same school, albeit not at the same time. *[Laughter.]*

2.13 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): As we have heard from a number of speakers today, SNP politicians in this House are regular contributors in this Chamber and in our Committees, but only a couple of times a year do they get to set the title of the debate, to lead the narrative and to say where the focus should be in this Chamber. And today, yet again, they focus on independence—not on health in Scotland, not on education, not on our recovery or rebuilding after this pandemic, but on independence. In 25 minutes from the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), we did not hear anything positive about Scotland's future. We did not hear how the SNP planned to rebuild after the pandemic, or how we can get our country back up and running again after 12 months of such great sacrifices from people across the country; no, we heard about separation and independence. It is unforgivable for SNP Members to yet again prioritise their own party's priorities rather than Scotland's.

I always like to look at what individuals have said so far in the debate, so I asked my office to check what the hon. Member for Edinburgh East said about a referendum in the next year. He said:

“I do not speculate on whether it is the end of this year or the beginning of next year.”

The hon. Gentleman is saying to the people of Scotland that his view from the SNP Benches here is that we could have a referendum in December or January, but certainly within the next 12 months the SNP's plan is to take our country through that disruptive referendum process all over again. The plan is not to rebuild Scotland and to focus on the jobs that have been lost and on getting our health service back up and running again, or on protecting people and livelihoods. His focus—the SNP's focus—in the next year is more division and another referendum.

Tommy Sheppard: I feel the need to intervene, because a number of colleagues appear to be having some difficulty understanding what we mean when we say we do not want to have a referendum campaign until after the pandemic is finished. That is quite simple, is it not? The problem is that we do not know when the pandemic will end. We hope that it will end soon; and as soon as it ends, we will move on to having a referendum campaign. I hope that people can acknowledge that. I do not know exactly what the date will be, because it is contingent on what happens with covid-19. None of us knows that. But as soon as the pandemic is out of the way, then we move on. Of course, I hope the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that the whole point of independence is not to have it for its own sake, but to improve in all the areas that he is talking about.

Douglas Ross: It is incredible that the SNP position is somehow that this pandemic will be over with a flick of a switch and lives will not continue to be destroyed because of what we have been through for the past 12 months. People are still losing their lives in—*[Interruption.]* Don't do that, Mr Sheppard. That is unacceptable in a debate when we are speaking about people losing their lives and losing their jobs. You are animated in such a way that you do not care about that. Well, I care about Scotland and Scotland's recovery. The reckless approach from the SNP—to have another referendum within the next year—shows everyone in Scotland where your priorities are, and they do not lie with the people of Scotland.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East also said that “once in a generation” was a “tagline” and went on to say—I paraphrase slightly—that it was used to dupe pro-independence supporters into voting for his party. But it is written in the White Paper, the foreword of which was signed by the former leader of the SNP. Therefore, what else in the White Paper was just used to dupe people? I think pretty much everything. We have now heard from the SNP Benches that their prospectus for an independent Scotland was based on putting information in there to dupe people into voting that way.

I also want to comment on a statement made from the Labour Front Bench. I think this may be the first time that we have heard this from the official Opposition in this House and it is very welcome; Labour's shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), praised the vaccine roll-out and covid support. It is encouraging to hear the

[Douglas Ross]

Labour party finally recognising that the UK Conservative Government's vaccine programme, furlough support, self-employment income support, and support for businesses and jobs up and down Scotland has been such a roaring success north of the border and in every other part of the United Kingdom. I am extremely encouraged to hear that.

We still have to hear from the SNP's shadow Leader of the House today, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), from its temporary Chief Whip, the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson), and from other SNP Members, but we have not yet heard anything about a currency for an independent Scotland, borders in an independent Scotland or what independence would mean for our armed forces in Scotland. I again invite SNP Members to tell us the SNP's plan in an independent Scotland for our currency, for our armed forces and for our border—anything? Nothing. SNP Members wanted this debate in order to speak about independence, but when we ask them about independence, they are silent. That is not an approach to take to the people of Scotland.

We can stop the SNP. We can halt its plans for another divisive independence referendum and we can get the Scottish Parliament 100% laser focused on our recovery from this pandemic. People can do that by using both their votes for the Scottish Conservatives in May's election so that we can end the division over another referendum, focus on our recovery, and rebuild Scotland.

John Lamont: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance. After his intervention, the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) made a very unfortunate hand gesture at my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) that I believe was disrespectful both to my hon. Friend and perhaps to other people watching this debate outside of this place. I seek your guidance as to whether that type of behaviour is acceptable in this place.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I caught that something had occurred, but I could not see what the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) did with his hand. If he did make a gesture that is unbecoming of an hon. Member of this place, I am sure he will apologise.

Tommy Sheppard: I certainly had no intention to make any gesture that would cause offence. I do not know why the offence has been taken. I was trying to indicate that the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) had not given due consideration to what I had said. I am not sure exactly what gesture is meant. I was pointing at my head and saying, "Think about it." [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Let us not prolong this. I take it that the hon. Gentleman will apologise if he inadvertently caused any offence by a gesture that should not have taken place in this place. It would be helpful if he would just nod to me.

Tommy Sheppard: I do apologise if any offence was taken; it was not intended.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is sufficient. It is essential that we keep good order and good humour in these debates, where of course there is massive disagreement about policy and ideas but there is always courtesy between hon. Members. I am grateful to all hon. Gentlemen, who are now behaving honourably.

2.22 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (SNP) [V]: As others have mentioned, today is St Patrick's Day. It is also a century on from when the United Kingdom, in its first iteration as the United Kingdom and Ireland, ended when the Irish Free State was established. Now the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland stand on the brink as Scotland seeks its independence to make its way in the world and to end the dystopian fantasy of post-Brexit Britain and its pursuit of a new age of empire.

What Charles Stewart Parnell said of Ireland applies to Scotland:

"No man has a right to fix the boundary of the march of a nation; no man has a right to say to his country—thus far shalt thou go and no further."

Yet that is what Scotland is being told, despite support for independence being ever greater and despite Scotland's democratically elected representatives demanding the right to hold a referendum. Instead, we are told that it is no to indyref2, and that now and for evermore it will remain that way unless and until it is set by the British on their conditions. That is simply unacceptable. Scotland cannot be subject to a British, or even Boris, veto. It is neither his nor their right or prerogative—it is the democratic right of the Scottish people.

That is why we have to consider what options are taken. Section 30 has been rejected by the Prime Minister. A consultative referendum is to be boycotted by the Opposition parties. It is for that reason that more and more people in Scotland see the need to make the Holyrood poll a plebiscite election. It cannot be, or will not be, boycotted because of its nature. The vote on the list can be definitive for independence and parties are signing up for that. It is simply not acceptable that Northern Ireland is entitled to a referendum and the Irish Free State was established on a referendum, yet Scotland is denied another referendum despite carrying out its actions democratically and without violence.

As Brexit Britain sails off into oblivion, it is for Scotland to gain its independence. There is a better way, and the people of Scotland are beginning to recognise that the tenor and tone of the debate has changed. In 2014, and occasionally in some of the contributions here, we have heard, "Please don't go, Scotland, we love you." Equally, it is becoming clearer and clearer that it is not a desire to retain Scotland for Scotland's interests, but a desire to retain Scotland for the interests of those who are the British establishment. That was made quite clear by the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, who wrote recently of Scottish independence that:

"The rest of the world would instantly see that we were no longer a front-rank power, or even in the second row."

So the whole position put forward by the British Government is not the advancement of the interests of the Scottish people; it is the preservation of the interests of Britain as it stands and of those who are currently very wealthy, as the chumocracy looks after its friends and others.

It is for that reason that the people of Scotland recognise there is a better way, but the better way is to be an independent Scotland where you can care for your own people rather than provide for the private profits of the few. That has to be brought about and if it cannot be delivered by a referendum, we have to make the coming election the plebiscite. Independence is the right of the Scottish people; it is not subject to a veto from Britain, or from a British Prime Minister.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I now have to reduce the time limit to three minutes, as we go to Wales. I call Jonathan Edwards.

2.26 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind) [V]: Diolch, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is, of course, no surprise that a Government who are willing to undermine people's rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly by pushing through powers to restrict public protest will not authorise Scotland's right to choose its constitutional future. Despite their best efforts, the British Government have utterly failed to prevent the turbo-boosting in support for Scottish independence.

We in Wales who are looking at developments in Scotland see that the status quo is finished and we are having to think about what that means for us. I suspect many in my country share the feelings of the former First Minister, Carwyn Jones, that an England and Wales Union has little appeal. The reality is that the choice facing the people of Wales and Scotland is increasingly moving towards seizing independence or being left with neutered ceremonial buildings in Cardiff Bay and Edinburgh—devolution in name only.

As has become so painfully clear, Brexiters in this House gave little thought to the impact of leaving the European Union on the British state itself. However, one thing I have learned from my years in this place is that the British establishment never leaves a good crisis to go to waste. Realising that leaving European economic frameworks would require the creation of new structures for the British state, or the Great Britain part at least, the British Government pounced on every opportunity to place a Westminster straitjacket on Wales and Scotland, even within devolved competencies. The default position has been to centralise power in Westminster, a position regrettably accepted by the Labour party, which has always endorsed ultimate Westminster primacy, despite being the governing party in Wales.

I make that point because the Labour party's compliance has consequences: a broken funding system, an ever-increasing wealth gap and the highest rates of child poverty of any UK nation. Never have those failings been more apparent than during this crisis, where those who have the least have been affected the most. Members are used to bandying statistics around this House in a game of one-upmanship, but I ask them, if they take anything from what I say today, to reflect on the real state of affairs for communities and families in Wales and Scotland. The economic and social model of the British state is letting them down and those who fail to oppose it are complicit.

The Labour party may have accepted that position, but increasingly the people of Wales, as they have in Scotland, are refusing to do so, hence the remarkable

growth of YesCymru and the increasing support for Welsh independence. The devolution middle ground, which served the interests of all the Welsh political parties in different ways, is disappearing. The current constitutional turbulence is therefore likely to become a hurricane in the years to come. When the wind blows over, I hope to see Wales, Scotland and indeed England emerge as confident, outward-looking, collaborative and independent nations. Diolch yn fawr iawn.

2.29 pm

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak as a proud Unionist in a debate on Scottish separation. The latest poll shows that 57% of people would vote against separation from the United Kingdom—what a ringing endorsement of the SNP's record in Scotland that is! On 15 July, I spoke in another SNP debate on the issue of separation. As I said then, this is nothing more than a narrow-minded, party-focused, face-saving measure to cover its dire failures in government—and the Scottish people are fast becoming aware of that.

It is no surprise that the SNP wants to put "indyref 2" on the ballot paper, because the Scottish people know that the SNP's record on domestic issues is catastrophic. In fact, its persistent calls for separation are the only transparent thing about the party. Let us take a quick snapshot of the SNP's record in government. Aside from its misleading First Minister, the SNP has failed to pay out £200 million in business support. Before the pandemic, the SNP presided over the lowest rate of job creation in the UK. International PISA study results show that the Scottish education system has gone backwards. The SNP is refusing to publish a crucial review into its failed curriculum reforms. Most areas of Scotland have fewer police officers on the frontline since the failed merger. Violent crime in Scotland has been rising for the last five years. The SNP has missed its own legal emissions targets.

David Linden: Will the hon. Member give way?

Paul Holmes: No, I will not; I do not have much time.

The SNP said in 2014 that an independent Scotland would take 18 months to be set up. What a bizarre claim. No plan for how, and no detail on how—no chance when it comes to May. The SNP's internal squabbles and factional infighting show that it has no plan for the people of Scotland, and it will make Scotland a poorer place by its obsession with separation, providing no detail on what that means for the people it supposedly serves. The people of Scotland are waking up to the way in which they are being let down by the SNP.

Alan Brown: It is good of the hon. Member to tell us what the people of Scotland are thinking at the moment. What is important is how they vote on 6 May. Again, if the people of Scotland vote for parties that have a referendum in their manifesto, surely the claim of right should be respected and the will of the Scottish people should be respected, and there will be a referendum.

Paul Holmes: I fully respect the right of the Scottish people. I respect the right of the decision that they made in 2014, and I wish that the hon. Gentleman would show the same respect to the people he serves by accepting that decision, which he and the leader of his party—who

[Paul Holmes]

I know is in difficulty at the moment—claimed was a once-in-a-generation decision. They should abide by that and not try to mislead the Scottish people. In the next few weeks, I have every confidence that unity and progress will shine through, and many people in Scotland will vote Conservative to keep the Union together. Then, hopefully, the Scottish National party will be given the shock that it really needs.

2.33 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I look across at the SNP Benches and see Members who I consider to be friends and who I have worked well with in parliamentary cross-party groups. I am proud that the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) has described me as a grandson of Skye, in memory of my grandfather Alexander Matheson, who was born there over a century ago. Of course, I am English. I am also British, and I am a Cheshire man—a Cestrian. It is possible to identify as all three, which is why I am saddened that the narrow, divisive nationalism of the SNP has been allowed to eat away at people who, in every other sense, should know better. If nationalism is the answer, they are asking the wrong question. It is an ideology based on division, difference and setting one against the other solely on the confected grounds of limited, singular identity.

SNP Members cannot see the irony, as they sit across from the Conservatives, that they are two cheeks of the same backside. The Tories have become the party of petty little Englander nationalism. They claim to be Unionists, when in fact the current Government are the biggest threat to the Union, as we see with the predicted consequences of Brexit for Northern Ireland and the slashing of parliamentary representation in Wales. The SNP revels in this, as though working in a symbiotic relationship with the Tories, perhaps to promote its own narrow agenda and distract from its own terrible failings in government.

Gary Sambrook: The hon. Member says the Conservatives are the biggest supporters of separation. May I remind him that the Labour party lost its voters in Scotland because it did not stand up for the Union as strongly as it should have done, which opened the door to the Scottish National party?

Christian Matheson: Oh, so it is all our fault. Well, it is the Conservatives' fault what is happening in Northern Ireland and for driving the Scots away, because the truth is that the SNP is more similar to the Tories than it lets on.

Today, there are two debates led by the SNP, one on constitutional affairs—*independence*—and one on *Brexit*. In fact, they are the same debate, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, because exactly the same baseless arguments that the Tories made about *Brexit*, the SNP now makes about *Scottish independence*. The Tories showed the UK the failings of their own Government and said, "Look, everything will be fine if we are free of the EU." The SNP is also showing the failings of its own Government and the UK Government and saying, "Look, everything will be fine if we leave the UK."

In the case of *Brexit*, every prediction was that we would take a hit to our economy, but that did not matter because we would be free. In the case of *Scottish independence*, every prediction is that the Scottish economy would take a big hit, but that does not matter, according to the SNP, because it would be free. Both campaigns were and are about narrow nationalism, appealing not to sense, reason or objectivity based on facts, but to emotion stirred by distrust of others. None of the *Brexit* argument stood up; it was pure ideology. None of the Scottish nationalists' arguments stands up to scrutiny either; theirs is a pure emotional ideology. I am just waiting for them to roll out "Take back control" as their campaign slogan and the circle will be complete.

Alan Brown: I am a wee bit disappointed in the hon. Gentleman's contribution, because he knows we are better than that. We want a forward-thinking, outward-looking country that is not tied to this backward-looking global Britain. What is wrong with wanting a country where the electorate elect the parliamentarians of their choosing so that they have control?

Christian Matheson: I am quite happy for the electorate to elect a party and a Government of their choosing. That is what democracy is.

I implore the people of Scotland not to get conned again by impossible promises; not to be hoodwinked by the mirage of the oasis of *independence*; not to fall for the same tricks that persuaded people to vote for *Brexit*, because the same bogus arguments are being deployed now for *independence*, just in a different context; and not to be seduced by the power of the dark side that is *divisive nationalism*, because ordinary people in Chester have the same problems as ordinary people in Aberdeen and Inverness and Motherwell, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) said. If the UK is weaker by leaving the EU—and we are—then Scotland will be weaker by leaving the UK.

It could well be that the people of Scotland have had enough of being ruled by the Conservatives. Guess what? So have I. The answer is to get them out, not to stick our heads in the sand and wish them away through the mirage of *independence*. So I say to the people of Scotland: it may not feel at the moment like a partnership, a brotherhood and sisterhood, a commonwealth—it certainly does not from where I am standing, seeing the destruction that the Tories are wreaking—but England needs Scotland too. Scotland will be weaker out of the UK, and the UK will be weaker without Scotland.

I reckon that a chunk of the SNP's support is not necessarily for *independence*, but is an anti-Tory vote—and who can blame people for that? Now, with the outstanding Anas Sarwar leading *Scottish Labour*, I predict that much of that chunk of support will start to come back to Labour, because now, with real leadership, there will be real scrutiny in Scotland of the effects of *independence* and the failings of the SNP. The Tories cannot provide that and do not want to provide it; as I have said, they are now the party of petty English nationalism, and the truth is that they do not care if we lose Scotland. But I do care; I am proud to be British—and even more so because Scotland is such a big part of being British. We have a magnificent common shared history. Get the Tories out, ditch this impossible, divisive, corrosive obsession with nationalism, and our shared common future will be brighter.

2.37 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con) [V]: We, the United Kingdom, are the sum of all our parts, and of course Scotland is a vital part of that Union. Every British child born to this country enjoys a wealth of culture, language and ways of life, and that is brought about by our precious Union. We often hear the phrase “a family of nations”, and that is exactly what we are—a family. I do not live in Scotland, but I do not recognise it as just a country far away on a map; rather, I see it as a contributing factor to my character, my culture and my heart.

Although it is disappointing that the Scottish National party has chosen to hold this divisive debate on nationalism today, I do not want to use this as an opportunity to score political points against the SNP. Of course, it could have taken this opportunity to speak about the economic recovery after covid, or perhaps its track record on health or education, but I see this debate as a direct challenge to my identity, my beliefs and my values as a proud member of the United Kingdom. Of course, without Scottish influence on the UK, my philosophy of Conservatism would be devoid of two greats: Adam Smith and David Hume.

Looking to our position in the world now, to what global Britain looks like emerging from the covid-19 pandemic, I would like to set out the stall for why we are better as one United Kingdom—as one family. Maintaining the UK continues our climate of stability and certainty. It provides security for jobs and businesses. It provides security for who we are and our values. Under our vital Union, we have seen a Union dividend for every man, woman and child in Scotland of nearly £2,000. Public spending per person in Scotland is £1,600 higher than the UK average, and an estimated 545,000 jobs in Scotland are supported by trade with the rest of the United Kingdom. During the covid-19 pandemic, the UK Government have provided an extra £8.6 billion for the Scottish Government Budget, protecting more than 900,000 jobs.

More importantly, Scotland’s contribution to our national story is profound, and has had an impact on all of us. Scotland’s unique creative pulse brings us the romanticism of Robert Burns and the eruptive arts of the fringe festival. The food and drinks sector in Scotland is one of the most important in the UK economy, and Scotch whisky is one product that is known around the world. The Scottish mining and oil industry is at the forefront of the UK’s technological growth story, providing the UK with many high-skilled jobs. The academic arm of Scotland, which produced Smith and Hume, continues to be of tremendous benefit to the UK, and we can continue to learn from it.

It is incumbent on all Government Members to shout from the rooftops the amazing contribution that Scotland makes and how important each and every Scottish man, woman and child is to us. We cannot allow the petty politics of divisive point-scoring and nationalist politics to take away from the fact that our Union is the longest lasting marriage in history. It is a story of success, history, culture, values and beauty.

2.41 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Across the two debates and the two motions, the SNP has totally failed to engage with the issue that people across the UK and the world have lived with, grieved over and

endured over the past year. The reality facing millions of ordinary Scots is the recovery from the pandemic. As others have said, SNP Members could have used this time to discuss the issues that matter: jobs, the economy, climate change, and education. When the SNP wants to consider elections to the Scottish Parliament, as they do in the motion, it seems that the only thing in which it is interested is the constitution. Today, a Survation poll shows that independence is one of three top priorities for only 8% of Scots. The pandemic was not deemed important enough to be mentioned in the motion. I am afraid that, after 14 years in power in Scotland, the SNP is consumed by internal problems and is out of touch.

Recovery from the pandemic is important for my constituents. When I think of the small business owners in North East Fife who have contacted me over the past year—the restaurants, cafés, holiday parks, hair salons, wedding organisers and mobile caterers; when I think of the problems facing almost 4,500 constituents who have got in touch with me over the past year; when I think about constituents in higher-priority groups who have contacted me and are still waiting for their job four weeks after the First Minister said that she was “satisfied” that everyone in those groups had been offered a vaccine; when I think about people who have got in touch, concerned that covid case rates in Scotland are the highest in the UK, or who are worried that yesterday there were 17,000 covid tests in Scotland, compared with 1.5 million in England; I think what do they want, and what is their priority? What is Scotland’s priority? Is it to pursue a referendum this year, as the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs wants at a time when Scottish GDP has flatlined, after a record fall in 2020? Is it to advocate for an agenda that creates endless uncertainty for business about everything from the currency that it uses to the way in which pensions are nominated, at the very moment when many of them are on the brink?

I will be clear. Now is the time to put recovery first—that is what Scottish Liberal Democrats want. We want investment in green jobs, high-quality education, good mental health services, and measures to tackle the climate emergency. If the SNP had focused on those things during its 14 years in power, how much better life would be for people across Scotland. Over the past year, everyone in the House has dealt with many pieces of casework from constituents struggling through the pandemic and lockdown, and from people who have tragically lost loved ones. They want our focus over the next few years, as we approach the May elections, to be on how we recover. The Scottish Fiscal Commission estimates that the Scottish economy will not recover to pre-pandemic levels until the beginning of 2024—almost two years later than the UK as a whole. When does the pandemic really end? If we do not focus on recovery now, there is a risk that the 2020s will become a decade of stagnation in Scotland. After 14 years of SNP rule, we have seen so much opportunity wasted. Let us put recovery first.

2.44 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I can understand why independence calls to the souls of some in our devolved nations. The Welsh have a word for it—“hiraeth”—but our experience with Brexit has shown us just how complex things can be when separating

[Virginia Crosbie]

from a partner. The UK has far fewer co-dependencies with the EU than Scotland does with the rest of the UK, but even so, as I am sure the later debate will attest, our recent divorce has been complicated and at times painful.

With Scotland, we share a land border, a currency and a long history. Untangling that relationship is likely to be at least as fraught. Had Scotland voted for independence in 2014 and become part of the EU in its own right, the EU trade structure would have been in place for open trade with the rest of the UK, but the goalposts have changed. With the UK outside the EU, no such structure exists. An independent Scotland would need to negotiate a new trade deal with the rest of the UK, as well as with the EU and other countries globally. Yes, Scotland could apply for EU membership but there is no guarantee that it would be welcomed. Scotland's deficit is twice the EU target and, with its ageing and rural population, its public spending is already £15 billion a year higher than its tax and North sea oil revenues.

If Scotland did vote for independence, what impact would that have on Scotland's economy? First, we should consider that the majority of Scotland's trade is with the UK. About 60% of its exports go to the other nations of the UK. Only around 20% go to the EU and the remainder go to the rest of the world. Then, we should consider tourism: the Scottish Government website describes tourism as a

“cornerstone of the Scottish Economy”,

accounting for 5% of gross value added and one in every 12 Scottish jobs. Some 80% of its tourism comes from the UK and, of the other 20%, many visitors arrive in England and visit Scotland as part of a UK tour.

There would of course be significant downsides for the rest of the UK, too. The Union would lose an important element of its rich cultural heritage. The UK imports over £60 billion in goods and services into Scotland, so if we put a border between Scotland and the rest of the UK, with possible visa and customs checks, controls, duties and taxes, and maybe a different currency as well—I will leave it to the House to work out whether that would put any of us in a better place.

I can understand why independence calls to some, but it is a romantic, idealised vision of independence. It is not grounded in practicality or realism. Independence simply increases the risks and uncertainty for our devolved nations, whereas a strong United Kingdom offers certainty and security for its citizens. As part of the UK, all our nations can pool and share their resources and strengths. We are stronger and more resilient as a Union, and I believe in one Union and one United Kingdom.

2.47 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) [V]: I suspect that even the most ardent Unionist would find it hard to disagree with the basic proposition that a country in a voluntary political union should at all times have the right to choose its constitutional future. The real question is when Scotland should be able to revisit the decision made in September 2014. British politicians telling us that now is not the time tends to mean not ever, so let us analyse what “once in a generation” means in political terms.

The six and a half years that have passed since the 2014 referendum have been tumultuous. We have had three general elections, three Prime Ministers and a UK-wide referendum on EU membership, followed by a serious push for a second referendum on the same topic from people such as the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), who is now so averse to a second independence referendum. Notwithstanding those efforts, Britain has left the European Union and now we are suffering from a global pandemic. That is a lot more political change than normally happens in the span of a generation. The result of all this turmoil is that more and more people living in Scotland want to revisit the decision made in 2014.

England and Scotland chose markedly different paths on Brexit. That, and the fact that people have more confidence in the Scottish Government's handling of the pandemic than in the British Government's, are major factors in the change of heart taking place in Scotland. Perhaps the biggest problem that the UK Government and the official Opposition have in attempting to stop another independence referendum is the existence of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. That Act provides that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland may allow repeat referendums on Irish unity with only a seven-year interval in between. Even allowing for the very different context, if seven years between referendums on the question of whether to leave the United Kingdom is acceptable for Northern Ireland, why is it not acceptable for Scotland? I would like the Minister to address that directly when he sums up today.

The British Government have pressed ahead with their constitutional priorities regardless of the pandemic and its economic fallout, so why should not the Scottish Government? The need to rebuild our economy and our society in the wake of the pandemic provides an impetus to rethink our priorities. If we do not take radical steps now, there will be no change and we will go back to where we were before, which was not a sustainable place. In order to transform Scotland, we need full control over all the decisions that affect us, not just limited powers to tinker around the edges. Independence for Scotland is not an end in itself, but a means to ensuring that the vital decisions about how we run our economy and our society are taken close to home, so that we can do things differently and better.

2.50 pm

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): It always really saddens me when time in this place is used by some constantly to go back to their obsession with separation. It is not that I think that Scotland cannot go it alone: I have faith in Scotland and a lot of respect and love for Scotland. It is that I worry about the loss of Scotland's contribution to our United Kingdom. Strategically, economically and culturally, it is a huge player in the successful global powerhouse of the United Kingdom.

Culturally, people travel from across the world to visit the United Kingdom. They do not necessarily go to London to have a look round, or even to my own home city of Birmingham; they also go to Scotland to the Edinburgh festival and to experience the highlands, which I myself love to visit at least once a year. Economically, Scotland makes a huge contribution to our exports. Whisky, for example, is the single biggest food and

drink export from this country. Strategically, too, Scotland is important, especially when it comes to defence. Yesterday, the Prime Minister gave us an update on the integrated review, in which it was said that Russia was our greatest threat. When the RAF intercepted Russian bombers, it left from Scottish air bases. That is a huge contribution that Scotland makes to the defence of this country.

I will also mention family ties. Today, I am wearing the tie of the clan Farquharson. My sister's fiancé, Andrew, donated this to me so that, at some point, I could make a speech in it. I thought that today would be apt, because it is the family ties that we all share across the United Kingdom that are so very important. I hope that, as Andrew is the father of my little nephew, Freddie, the Union will carry on for many generations so that little Freddie can experience the benefits of our great Union, too.

The hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) made a very good point about devolution. Many people in Birmingham feel that Westminster is a faraway place and that it does not understand many of their problems, so that problem is not necessarily unique to Scotland.

Devolution comes with responsibility. Unfortunately, the Scottish National party constantly uses distraction as a technique to take away from its responsibility for some of the abysmal services that it runs in Scotland, including education, local government finance and transport to mention just a few. Responsibility is very important. It is tiresome that SNP Members keep coming to this place and using up valuable time to further their agenda for separation when really what they should be doing is having a debate on how Scotland is run. I very much hope that, on 6 May, people will not give them the mandate for a second referendum that they so wish for.

2.53 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: Today I am privileged to be speaking in both Opposition Day debates: on Scottish independence and on Brexit. I oppose Scotland leaving the United Kingdom for the very same reasons that I am devastated that we left the European Union. My constituents and I know the value of unity: togetherness over division, interdependence over individualism. Those in favour of Scottish independence and Brexit have come to blows in the past, but, at the same time, they put forward similar arguments. The Scottish National party insists that Westminster is the source of all Scotland's problems, as we were led to believe that Brussels was the source of ours. That cannot be believed, and that is not true.

The SNP has ruled the Scottish Parliament for 14 years. Homelessness and drug deaths have sky-rocketed and councils have been starved of funds. The past four years of division caused by constitutional chaos should not be repeated. I cannot think of anything more upsetting than going through that a second time to break up an even longer and more meaningful Union. As a United Kingdom, we have a proud and pleasing history of achieving extraordinary things. Together, we were founding members of the United Nations, and we built this international collective based on our principles of solidarity. In the 20th century, together we fought off the rise of fascism, we are leaders in the G7 and the G20, and we have been among the highest donors in foreign aid.

We are so much stronger as a United Kingdom with our collective finances, skills, social contribution and academic institutions than we would be as separate entities. We have so much more to offer our citizens and the world, but in this global world, the Scottish nationalists want to take us back 300 years to a fractured past. Surely, we should not be looking backwards; we should be looking ahead.

We should not dismiss how we have grown together through an industrial revolution, world wars, justice movements and social change. It is Thatcherism that savaged Scotland, and I am proud of Labour's history in creating Scottish devolution. Under this Labour leadership, we are determined to repair relationships and to strengthen devolved powers. As Scotland approaches its parliamentary election, the focus must not be on making it weaker by splitting our country in two. As we come together out of this pandemic, we must make Scotland stronger as a valued and significant part of the United Kingdom.

2.56 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to rise to speak in this debate. I for one do not think the SNP gets enough Opposition Day debates. I think a party of its size in this place deserves more than three in the course of one parliamentary Session. However, it is surprising, given everything that this country, Scotland, the United Kingdom and the world is facing right now, that it has chosen to use one of its three days—only three days—to debate this issue above all others, banging on about another independence referendum. It is very much like groundhog day in the House of Commons.

The SNP has chosen to debate not education, not the recovery, not economic growth, not jobs, not health, not drug deaths, not infrastructure, not broadband, not local government funding, and not the serious issues surrounding civil service impartiality and the separation of powers within the Scottish Government. No, the Scottish National party—in which I have many friends, but which I regard as a single-issue, mass membership pressure group, masquerading as a serious party of government—wants to talk about its sole obsession: ripping apart our United Kingdom.

We know why. Why would the Scottish National party not want us looking at all the issues I have listed? Because on every single one it is failing Scotland. It is failing Scotland on education, with the attainment gap wider than it was when it got into power. Kids from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to get to university in Scotland than they are in England. It is failing Scotland on jobs and the economy, with growth of only 1.8% expected in Scotland in 2022, compared with a prediction of 5% for the rest of the UK, and with jobs growth at a rate lower than that of the UK prior to the coronavirus pandemic.

The SNP is failing Scotland on health. The 12-week treatment time guarantee, which was unveiled with great fanfare by the now First Minister Nicola Sturgeon when she was Health Secretary in 2011, has never once been met. The Royal College of General Practitioners expects a shortfall of 856 doctors in Scotland by 2021. It is failing Scotland on drug deaths, with the highest drug deaths rate in Europe. That shameful statistic has occurred on the SNP's watch.

[Andrew Bowie]

The SNP is failing Scotland on infrastructure and failing Scotland on the roll-out of broadband. In 2018, Fergus Ewing, the Rural Economy Secretary in the Scottish Government, threatened to resign if he failed to deliver on its flagship R100 project, which aspired to make superfast broadband available to every single premises in Scotland by the end of 2021. The latest projections tell us that it is more likely to be 2026. Resignation incoming? I think not.

There are those in the SNP who will say—I can hear the keyboards clattering now, and I can almost hear the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) saying—that I am talking Scotland down. I am not. Let me be clear: I have simply outlined the record of a failing, arrogant, tired Government who have dragged Scotland down, down, down.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): My hon. Friend mentions talking down Scotland. Does he agree that he is one of the most vocal voices in this Parliament for the people of Scotland and their wants and needs?

Andrew Bowie: That is very kind of my hon. Friend. I couldn't possibly comment; that is for other people to judge.

The SNP has dragged Scotland down, down, down. In fact, the only things to go up in Scotland recently have been the taxes. That is the record of the Scottish National party. It is not a surprise that we are now on to the fourth poll in a row showing support for the Union increasing and support for separation going down. As the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said a few weeks ago, "Cheerio, cheerio, tick-tock."

Let us leave this divisive and disruptive debate behind us. Let us move on and tackle the issues that really matter to Scots—rebuilding, growing, creating jobs and making our schools, once again, the best in the world—comfortable in ourselves, happy as a strong, devolved nation within a great and enduring family of nations.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Gavin Newlands.

3 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) [V]: Oh, he's finished? Thanks very much, Madam Deputy Speaker.

For far too long, the Union has been a millstone around Scotland's neck—an 18th-century political construct, unfit for the 21st century. Not a single country that has gained its independence from the UK has returned cap in hand to beg for readmittance; not a single nation has become independent and regretted its choice. Scotland will be no different. The "Union dividend" has been the destruction of industry, the depopulation of our towns and cities on a scale seen nowhere else in Europe, and the tearing down of the welfare safety net. Our infrastructure was left to fester, our transport network denied investment, our key industries asset-stripped and shipped overseas.

This Government's mind-boggling and entirely counterproductive answer to their own failures is a Union connectivity review that attempts to overrule the democratically elected Government of Scotland and place power in the hands of a tiny cabal of Ministers

whose party has no mandate in Scotland. Moreover, it has zero mandate in Wales or Northern Ireland, either. It has been decades since the Conservatives had any democratic legitimacy beyond the English border.

I have campaigned for independence since I was a boy, and I was at George Square for the poll tax demonstrations, the imposition of which by the Thatcher Government on their tartan testing ground was done against the wishes of the people of Scotland and their own Ministers. With the connectivity review and other power grabs, they seem entirely unable to learn the lessons from our own history. Incidentally, the poll tax was very much a catalyst not only for the current support for independence, but for the insuppressible move towards re-establishing the Scottish Parliament. It is only since the return of that Scottish Parliament that we have seen the kind of real investment required—investment not just in bricks and mortar, but in our people too. Scotland is rolling out the biggest expansion of the welfare state for decades, because we believe in it, and we believe that with the full powers of independence we can harness our nation's wealth to improve our welfare state still further.

There is a realisation among an ever growing majority of Scots that the UK is a failing state, having to resort to waving its Trident missiles about for international relevancy, wasting billions in public money that should be used to help people, not threatening to incinerate them. Our relations with Europe, a fundamental cornerstone of our economy and society for decades, are being torched and ruined, with businesses across the country counting the cost and workers losing their livelihoods. Scotland—an outward-facing, internationalist Scotland—wants no part in it. If Scotland votes for the opportunity to choose its own future in May, only a tinpot dictator would attempt to stand in its way. I am confident that we will seize that opportunity and the potential of independence, internationalism and the transformational change our country still needs, but which is blocked by a UK in full retreat having given up on working with others.

Independence is not a panacea. We will have to work hard to repair the damage done by generations of neglect and disinterest, but we will be working well on the early days of a better nation, rather than looking at the dying embers of the UK state.

3.3 pm

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): I have some sympathy with the SNP; it must have been difficult to decide what to debate today, given some recent developments. So it is pleasing to know that they have gone with the greatest hits. I always look forward to the SNP debates because, whatever the subject, the answer is always the same—separatism. Speakers on the Conservative Benches raise education, trade, businesses, currency and the fact that a once-in-a-generation referendum on separation happened in 2014. Then the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who is an outstanding orator and politician, stands up, ignores all the points raised, flaps his arms in outrage, quotes a few opinion polls and concludes that separatism is the only answer. It is a sort of modern-day Henry VIII strategy.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you know that I am from good Scottish mining stock, and the Union is personal to me because it runs through my blood. Like millions

of others, including millions of Scots, I am looking forward to seeing my family again and to giving them a hug. However, at a time when the population wants to focus on coming together, the SNP wants to focus on tearing us apart.

The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) set out her objections and the fact that there are so many relevant things that we could be discussing today—the road map out of covid; the challenges that covid has created; the success of our world-leading Great British vaccine programme; our furlough scheme, and the fact that it has saved millions of jobs; the opportunity to create a better, greener future together—but they have all been put aside. Instead, we are discussing two issues on which we have already had referendums.

I have sat through many contributions from SNP Members in this Chamber. Unfortunately for them, they are becoming the biggest barrier to what they want to achieve. The truth is that the SNP has less faith in the great people of Scotland than I do. It is increasingly out of touch with the wishes of the Scottish people. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) just set out in an outstanding speech, the SNP is failing on so many important issues. The Scotland that I know is intelligent, tolerant and proud. It is a vital member of this Great British family, and its people want us to focus on recovering from covid and building a better future together. The politics of separatism is not the answer.

3.6 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in this important debate. It is a debate that people in England and right across the UK need to start paying greater attention to, because while I fully respect that the future of Scotland is one to be determined by the Scottish people—indeed, the Labour party's position on Scottish independence and the Union is one that is determined and led by the Scottish Labour party—the decision that is taken by the people of Scotland will have ramifications right across the rest of the Union.

The argument I want to make on the part of the Union is both pragmatic and principled. The pragmatic argument is, "Why now?" Why now, in the midst of a global pandemic of a type we have not seen during most of our lifetimes and when the challenge is not simply to roll out the vaccine but to build the recovery? Why now would we plunge not just Scotland but the entire United Kingdom into a constitutional row consuming all the focus and all the resources when the focus must be on rebuilding our country? Why now, in the midst of extracting ourselves from one sophisticated political and economic alliance, which we have already seen has caused real challenges and broken promises, would we seek to repeat the same exercise against the very future of our own country?

Then, of course, I look at the record of the Scottish Government, and it becomes perfectly clear why independence will be on page 1 of their manifesto. The alternative is that their record will be on the front cover: 182,000 children left in poverty, even in households where one person is in work; a quarter of all households in fuel poverty, and that was before the pandemic; the NHS 12-week waiting time guarantee not met since 2012 and breached 360,000 times; the four-hour waiting time target not met since 2017 until the pandemic hit;

18-week mental health waiting times; and an employment rate that is actually lower than the United Kingdom rate. That is a record that we would see in the UK Government, too.

Mr Perkins: We have heard criticism of the SNP for picking this subject for this debate, but at least this matter is the responsibility of the UK Parliament. Many of the issues that my hon. Friend is raising are the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament, and so would be sensible things for the SNP to be spending the Scottish parliamentary elections debating.

Wes Streeting: Indeed—and that brings me to education, which is my hon. Friend's passion, and mine. The number of teachers in Scotland is down by 1,700 since 2007; the promise to cap class sizes is broken; spending per pupil is down; and on the Scottish Government's central challenge—to close the attainment gap—they are failing. Indeed, the First Minister herself said:

"Let me be clear—I want to be judged on this. If you are not, as First Minister, prepared to put your neck on the line on the education of our young people then what are you prepared to. It really matters."

It is time for the First Minister to account for the record of educational failure in Scotland, because on class sizes, standards and the attainment gap, the record in Scotland is as abysmal as that of the Tories in the United Kingdom.

Christian Matheson: In outlining that dreadful record, does my hon. Friend share my concern that, with its internal divisions, the SNP has taken its eye off the ball for too long?

Wes Streeting: That brings me to the real risk of giving the SNP a majority: it is a question of not just independence but ethics and propriety at the heart of the Scottish Government. Much as I have tried to follow the Salmond/Sturgeon melodrama and the serious issues that lie at the heart of that case, it has been depressing to say the least to see factions and vested interests taking charge of ethical standards and ethics at the heart of Government. I do not care for one side of the SNP or the other—it is like watching a football match and wanting to both sides to lose—but the fact is, we have seen the SNP put its own divisions ahead of the interests of its own country. To put party before country is the central dereliction of any Government. We have seen where that got us with Brexit, and with the Brexit decision we have seen that the grass is not always greener on the other side. We have already been pulled out of the largest single market in the world and are now seeing the consequences; why on earth would Scotland leave the most successful market in the world?

In London and Edinburgh we see Governments who have been in power for far too long, with the resultant complacency, arrogance and record of failure. The choice that faces the Scottish people in May is not "Alien vs. Predator"—the Union offered by the Conservatives or the SNP's Scottish independence; there is an alternative that is led by the fantastic leader of the Scottish Labour party, Anas Sarwar, with a national recovery plan that has the potential to unite Scotland and unite our country. We need to refocus on the priorities that matter. Whether a voter has been sceptical about Labour in Scotland or about Labour across the United Kingdom, we ask them to give our leadership in London and in Edinburgh a

[*Wes Streeting*]

second look and to get behind the Labour party. Having listened to this debate, I think that at this point Labour is the only party that can keep the Union together and rebuild a stronger, fairer United Kingdom for the future.

3.12 pm

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I would say it is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Ilford North (*Wes Streeting*), but certain tweaks needed to be made to his speech for me to be able to say that.

Sitting here listening to this debate, it has struck me how depressingly similar much of what I am hearing from the SNP truly is. A referendum was held to decide an incredibly important issue that affects the future of our whole country. Prior to the poll, all sides agreed that the result would be respected and that everyone would adhere to whatever the public decided. It would be a once-in-a-generation decision. People voted and a clear winner emerged, then suddenly the sands began to shift. Some of those on the losing side of the referendum began to move the goalposts and to insert caveats and get-outs. They started to demand that the vote was rerun or the question changed slightly. They claimed that things had moved on. Allegations were made against one side or another and the whole issue rumbled on for years. Does that sound familiar to anyone?

Like Brexit, the debate around Scottish independence polarises families and communities. It turns friends against each other and divides people from their neighbours. I therefore ask the SNP very gently: is now really the time for this? Is now truly the time to sow division and uncertainty, at a moment when we have not yet even come out of the pandemic, let alone recovered from it economically? When many people have lost, are losing or are worried about losing their jobs, it does not matter whether someone lives in Aberdeen or Accrington, their priorities are the same. I encourage the SNP to focus on the day-to-day issues rather than obsessing over constitutional changes.

3.14 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP) [V]: I have to say I cannot understand why the proposition that Scotland has the right to choose its own future is so controversial for some. I accept that not everyone in Scotland, or even further afield, wishes Scotland to become a self-governing country. However, I cannot comprehend these voices who are so afraid of what the people of Scotland may decide about their own future that they believe the solution is to prevent the people of Scotland from having the opportunity to make such a choice at all. Surely anyone can see that that is not a sustainable and logical position to take. For anyone in this Chamber to tell the people of Scotland—the people of any nation—that no matter what they vote for they will not have it unless we approve, only adds to the swelling SNP ranks, as increasingly the people of Scotland take exception to being told by those for whom they did not vote that what they might vote for in future will not be permitted. It makes a nonsense of any idea of a partnership of equals.

I say in all honesty that many Unionists are nervous about this strategy of simply denying democracy for that very reason. They know it plays very badly in

Scotland. However, as many in the Chamber today will tell you off the record, they understand that, if the SNP, the party that exists to persuade Scots to choose self-government and will stand on that platform, wins the election in May and secures a majority, a mandate for an independence referendum will exist—and it will be delivered, just as it was delivered in 2014. Anyone who doubts that only has to look at the Tory election leaflets today going out across Scotland telling people that, if they want to stop an independence referendum, they should vote Tory. That is how we know that an SNP majority will absolutely deliver that mandate. It is as simple as that.

Despite the bluster, the attempt to divert the debate down blind alleys and the shrieking at squirrels, these are the undisputable facts. Today is about Scotland's constitutional choices and I have to say to those who deny that such a choice should even exist: you are sorely out of touch with the people of Scotland.

3.17 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): This debate is too often framed in terms of pounds and pence arguments—what Scotland does or does not get from its membership of the United Kingdom. Yes, that is important. We should look at the benefits. We should recognise, as any sensible person would, that almost £2,000 every year goes to every single man, woman and child in Scotland from the treasuries of Wales, Northern Ireland and England. We should recognise the incredible benefits of the Union in our response to the pandemic and the vaccine roll-out, which has been supported by England, by manufacturing in Wales and by the Novavax vaccine being manufactured in Scotland. We should recognise the strength of the United Kingdom Treasury to support businesses and families through this difficult time and, yes, we should recognise the strength of a single currency. But my personal economic experiences are much better than mere spreadsheets.

Before coming to this place, I was managing director of a business that is based in England. I did not think twice about setting up three businesses in Scotland because it is part of the Union of this country. They were profitable, they created employment and, more importantly, my business benefited from the expertise of Scots working together with us. I compare that directly with a contemporaneous decision not to invest in Ireland. Why was that? It was partly because of the different currency and partly because of the increased difference in regulations, but, if I am honest, the primary reason was it just felt harder; it felt more uncertain, with bigger risks. So I took the decision not to invest. It would be a tragedy for this country if that decision was played out because of separatists driving our country apart and leading us on different paths.

However, I recognise that identity is not measured in pounds and pence. That may sway some, but it would not sway me unless the Union was much more powerful than that, and it is so much more powerful than that. What about us; what about us as individuals and as families? Personally, I feel that the Union is who I am. I am proud to be a quarter Scots. I am proud to be a quarter Irish. I am proud to be half English and, although the maths does not add up, I am proud to be a bit Welsh as well. We are summed up by this as a nation. We are a family of nations, but we are also a nation of families.

Paul Holmes: My hon. Friend is a fantastic advocate for the Union. He says that it is not all about pounds and pence, but let us look at how much stronger we are together. The average per capita contribution to a constituency in England is £9,000. The average in Scotland is £11,000. Does that not show to the Scottish people that a United Kingdom, sharing prosperity and sharing Government income, is a good thing?

Jerome Mayhew: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It begs the question: if the separatists were successful in their game, left the United Kingdom and subsequently tried to join the European Union, what would they do with their structural deficit, which is more than twice the amount that is legally allowed for membership of the European Union?

I conclude with this thought. I am a mongrel, but I am proud of it. I am a mix of bloods and races from Scotland, Ireland, Wales and England. We are a mongrel nation and, like every mongrel, we are better and stronger for it.

3.20 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am not a mongrel. I am one of the few people speaking in the debate who do not have any Scottish blood, but I very much enjoyed the time that I spent campaigning in Scotland during the independence referendum in 2014. I went up to Scotland at a time when there were other elections in the UK because it was crucial for me to say to people that we in England desperately want Scotland to stay with the United Kingdom and be a part of our Union. While we made the argument that we thought it was in Scotland's best interests to stay a part of that Union, we also felt passionately that the UK would be much weaker without Scotland. It would be heartbreaking if Scotland were to leave, but I accept that it is a choice for the Scottish people.

What is really important is the question of when that referendum should happen. We had the debate in 2014. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said that we could have one every seven years or so, but it is clear that she wants to keep having the debate time and again in the hope that one time, on one day, they might just get over the line by 0.1%, and then there are no more referendums—then it will be over and the decision has been made.

The referendum in 2014 was pretty decisive, with 55% to 45% in favour of remaining in the Union. We should remember that more people in Scotland voted to stay in the United Kingdom than voted to stay a part of the European Union. We keep hearing from the SNP that Scotland is being dragged out of the European Union against its will, but more Scottish people voted to remain a part of the UK than voted to remain a part of the European Union. Opinion polls go up and down—we all know that in all walks of life—but one thing has been consistent: even people who want independence for Scotland do not think now is the time for it to happen. Those polls are really consistent.

Alan Brown: If the hon. Member properly analyses the polls, he will see that they show that the majority of people do want a referendum in the next few years, so that is wrong. He rightly acknowledged that it is for the

Scottish people to decide, so when does he think the Scottish people should be allowed to make that decision, as it were?

Mr Perkins: It is a matter for the UK Government. It would be one thing for the SNP to go into a general election campaign saying, "A vote for us is about independence," but it is not the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament, so it is very odd for the SNP to ask people to re-elect it on that basis.

The question I ask SNP Members is, how should someone vote this May if they want independence but think we should have a referendum in a few years' time, rather than now? Should they vote for the SNP, knowing that the SNP will claim that that is a vote in favour of a referendum? We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) about many of the failings of the SNP Administration in Edinburgh. What about someone who thinks that the SNP is doing a good job and wants to carry on electing an SNP Government to run the Scottish Parliament but does not want independence? How should they vote, given that they know that, if they vote for the SNP because they want Nicola Sturgeon to continue being First Minister, that will be taken as a vote for independence? I am not getting any interventions on this. I am asking: how should these people vote?

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): The answer in both cases is surely to vote SNP, because the decision about independence is a separate one—for a separate referendum. It is to decouple the issues. That is why we support a referendum.

Mr Perkins: I am grateful to the hon. Member for that point; it is a really important one. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) was saying earlier, "If they vote SNP, they know what they are voting for: they're voting for an independence referendum", but the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) is saying, "No, if they want an SNP Government, they should vote for us and the referendum is a question on another day." The mandate that the hon. Member for Edinburgh East was claiming at the start is not actually a legitimate one because it will actually lead to exactly what has just been said. I am grateful for that clarification.

In the event that Scotland leaves the United Kingdom, there will be a huge economic hit to Scotland. There will also be a huge hit to England. I have businesses in my constituency that have just discovered how difficult it now is to sell into the European Union as a result of Brexit. That is exactly what will happen to businesses attempting to trade either side of the Scottish border in the event that Scotland goes independent.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South listed a variety of questions about independence that we never have a debate on and that remain unanswered. I was totally against Brexit, the things that we warned about in that respect are in many ways coming true, and there is no question but that it makes Scottish independence far more economically reckless than it would have been back in 2014. The idea that we would impose that on either English or Scottish businesses is a terrible mistake.

I really look forward to the elections in May. I hope that the Scottish people will look at the Labour party anew under the leadership of Anas Sarwar, who has

[Mr Perkins]

started absolutely fantastically. I really hope that they will consider very carefully what they have just heard—that is, if they do not want an independence referendum right now, they should not vote SNP, because their vote will be taken as support for that.

3.27 pm

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): For a few days now, we have been playing a guessing game in the Parliamentary Private Secretaries' WhatsApp group about the possible subject of this debate. The running joke, of course, was that, whatever it was—fisheries, education or colonising the moon—it was actually going to be about separatism. So imagine our surprise when SNP Members just dropped the pretence and brought forward this debate. It is the sort of transparency and honesty that their colleagues in Holyrood can only dream of and then promptly forget again.

Given that I speak as a card-carrying member of the Conservative and Unionist party, it will come as no shock to Members that I am not in favour of smashing up a successful 300-year-old Union on the basis of petty spite and grievance, but it does give me the opportunity to point out that there is a special Union connection today—St Patrick's day—as St Patrick was a Welshman. That is proof that we have been doing this for quite a while now.

Like a lot of people in this Chamber, I campaigned in the 2014 referendum. I did not personally have a vote, but I felt that I should get involved because it was my country that the Scottish National party was trying to smash up. I would hope that, if one of their populist cousins such as the UK Independence party or the British National party came to power here, people would come down from north of the border to support the Unionist majority in our fight against that particular brand of divisiveness; that is what families do.

My seat of Heywood and Middleton is in the north-west of England, and in a very real sense we are the Union region. We are the only region to be represented by MPs from all four of the home nations. We border Scotland and Wales, as well as four other English regions, and they make us who we are; they enrich us. Apart from the strategic placement of the Pennines to keep the Yorkist hordes at bay, we do not want any borders with them.

The SNP does not have a mandate for another divisive referendum; it is barely getting on with the day job that it was elected to do. It is spending all its time avoiding democratic accountability as MSPs and airing its dirty laundry in public. Unless people specifically went out in 2016 in the hope that their children's hospitals would be closed and their schools would slide down the PISA rankings, it is very hard for SNP Members to justify the claim that they are delivering what people voted for. It looks increasingly like another diversion tactic to move the focus away from yet another botched policy or another sex scandal swept under the First Minister's living room carpet.

Mark Fletcher: My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. A few times, he has alluded to the fact that, irrespective of the question, when it comes to the SNP the answer is always separatism. Does he agree that the SNP increasingly resembles some sort of Nigel Farage tribute act?

Chris Clarkson: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is absolutely spot-on.

It will come as no shock to Members that I am a bit of a geek—I recently watched the BBC's 2016 Holyrood election coverage. The First Minister was asked what her priority for the next Parliament would be. Based on the past five years, we might reasonably assume that it was a second independence referendum, or perhaps shutting down free speech, which is one of the few policies that her Government have actually managed to deliver. Instead, she said it was education—a subject on which she wanted to be judged. She then managed to avoid having a debate on the subject for over two years. It could simply be that she forgot to do so, just as she forgot conversations with senior civil servants, other MSPs and, indeed, her own husband.

That forgetfulness seems to be the reason the First Minister has forgotten her “once in a generation” pledge from 2014 and her promise to respect the result. I politely suggest to our nationalist colleagues that they should focus on the day job, or they might find that the electorate have a slightly longer memory than the First Minister.

3.30 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) [V]: I have listened to the debate with wry interest, because on 30 March 1989, I was actually there; my name is on the claim of right. I think I can say that I am the only Member of the House of Commons to have that honour.

I know about the Scottish Parliament—I served in it for 12 years; I was actually a Committee Chair—and I know what was behind it. It was described by John Smith as “the settled will of the Scottish people”.

It was to have a different system, whereby democracy was brought back to Scotland and the Committees of the Scottish Parliament would challenge and hold the Government to account.

What we have today saddens me greatly. For whatever reason—perhaps because, in Scotland, the Greens are a wholly owned subsidiary of the SNP—we have an extraordinarily centralised Government, and the Committees rarely dare to raise their voices or to challenge the Government. I am sad because I think that is dangerous for democracy. I do not think it is what John Smith, Donald Dewar, David Steel, Jim Wallace and others were about at all in the constitutional convention, on which I served prior to signing the claim of right.

I must be honest that, when I hear the SNP talking about taking complete control, and when I see what it is like in Holyrood today, I shudder. We have to repair democracy in Scotland first and foremost—and, as others across the Chamber have said, what we must do now is repair the damage that has been caused in Scotland by the pandemic. People have suffered massively, and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) put that succinctly.

I will give one example. I have a constituent called Luke Graham, who lives in Wick. He knows all about mental health issues. Recently, in the *John O'Groat Journal*, he made the wise point that mental health problems had been around for a long time before the pandemic and, the way things stand, they are going to be around for a long time yet, unless the Government

step up to the table and, to use a hackneyed expression, get on with the day job. That is what Scottish people want.

I was involved in the 2014 independence referendum, and if it comes to another referendum, I shall be involved again. At the end of the day, I am a Unionist. I know that the defence of the realm depends on Scotland, because the Scots make a huge contribution. I know that questions about the currency and about how Scotland would defend itself have not been answered.

I leave the House with this final thought: yes, let the SNP talk about indyref2 to its heart's content, but I say to the SNP, from what I hear in my constituency in the highlands of Scotland, be careful what you wish for.

3.33 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) and a rare pleasure to be able to agree with our Scottish Liberal Democrat colleagues.

I could wax lyrical about my love of Scotland. New Zealand, the country of my birth, has a deep affinity with Scotland. It was forged from the blood, sweat and toil of Scottish immigrants, alongside those from other parts of the UK, such as my forebears—a wonderful melting pot of culture and values where all understood that anything could be mended simply by using a piece of No. 8 fencing wire.

Let me turn to today's debate. Too often, we talk about the benefits of the Union to Scotland, including the sharing of fiscal resources, but I would like to focus on the benefits that Scotland brings to the Union. Economically, we have a wonderful trading relationship, where approximately 60% of exports come to the rest of the UK, including whisky, with more than 10,000 jobs in Scotland in that industry. I can certainly speak for my own household in that the day we run out of a decent bottle of single malt is a grim day indeed.

Scotland is essential to UK defence and meeting our obligations to our NATO allies. UK naval shipbuilding is concentrated there. Scotland's top universities are important to the UK's wider ambition to be a global leader in science. Culturally, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Gary Sambrook), we are enriched by events such as the Edinburgh festival, which is a Scottish, UK and global event. I look forward to my visits to Scotland, where the welcome is always warm and the scenery stunning. Tourism is another fantastic asset for Scotland.

It is important to recognise that there is little that divides us in our human experience, whether people hail from Glasgow or Newcastle, or are immigrants like me—someone who is proud of the privilege of being a British citizen. It is the responsibility I now hold in this place always to be mindful of the UK-wide interest, along with the interests of my constituents in Guildford, who would be poorer for Scottish separation.

I support the amendment standing in the name of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. This last year, tackling coronavirus has impacted every corner of our precious Union. Thankfully, innovation has moved on significantly from mending things with a piece of fencing wire to the miraculous and speedy creation, approval and roll-out of lifesaving vaccines. I am delighted that all four corners of our Union have benefited and that

the UK-wide furlough scheme has sought to protect jobs and livelihoods. We have much work to do to build back better.

Chris Clarkson: Like my hon. Friend, I have a dash of Commonwealth blood in me, although in my case it is maple syrup. Does she agree that our United Kingdom has informed a great deal of the character of many other nations and that to take that away would be to break those historical links, too?

Angela Richardson: Yes, indeed. Canada has benefited greatly from Scottish immigrants, as well as immigrants from other parts of the United Kingdom. We have fought world wars: soldiers from all over the Commonwealth could trace their roots back to all parts of this United Kingdom, and they fought heroically so that we could have the freedom we benefit from today. We should always recognise both the UK's outward impact on the rest of the world and those relationships, which make us truly a global place to be. We are infinitely better placed to recover from coronavirus if we work together as four nations in our proud Union.

3.38 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Scotland is a great nation with a proud and unique history, and Scottish identity should be valued and cherished. That is why, when the Labour party last came to government, we delivered the devolution settlement and established the Scottish Parliament. But national pride, whether in Scotland or elsewhere, is deeply rooted in national prosperity and security. Economic strength is a foundation stone of national pride and the fact is that this economic strength can be achieved only if the four nations of the UK club together and pool our resources. Together, we are so much more than the sum of our component parts.

Gary Sambrook: The Labour First Minister of Scotland has said that the Union is over. Is it not the case that the hon. Member's party is too willing to jump into bed with separatists and nationalists, which undermines the very foundations of the Union?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Last time I checked, Labour did not have a First Minister in Scotland; I think he must have meant Wales. That is an easy mistake for him to make, I am sure, but I would urge him to be a little more careful next time. The Welsh Government's position is absolutely clear. We are the party of devolution. We delivered devolution. It is working for the Welsh people, just as it should be working for the Scottish people. We are utterly opposed to independence in Scotland and in Wales.

Britain is still a significant economy and a world power, despite the UK Conservative Government's botching of the EU trade deal and the weakening of the international relationships that we should be building rather than destroying. The simple truth is that our economic clout and our national security are founded on our unity as a United Kingdom. We are entering an era of great power competition, with threats increasing. The SNP, were it to secure independence, intends to ditch our nuclear defence capability, which would undermine the security of the very nation it wishes to lead. Betting the house on rejoining the EU would also be profoundly

[Stephen Kinnock]

unwise, given that 60% of Scotland's export trade is with the rest of the UK, compared with only 19% with the EU.

The reality is that the greatest source of pride and prosperity for the Scottish people will come from rebuilding the economy post coronavirus, delivering jobs, and securing an economy resilient against future shocks.

Alan Brown: On nuclear weapons, allegedly Scottish Labour's position is that it is against Trident and wants nuclear weapons removed from Scotland, so is Scottish Labour's position untenable?

Stephen Kinnock: The position of the Labour party is that our commitment to our nuclear deterrent is indivisible and not up for negotiation. What is extraordinary is the position taken by this Conservative Government's integrated review, which is to increase our nuclear capability by 40% while cutting our armed forces. That has to be the most counterproductive defence strategy that we have seen in recent times, but I digress.

The position of the Scottish National party Government is not what patriotism looks like. After the suffering of the past 12 months, compounded by a decade of Tory incompetence at UK level, now is not the time to roll the dice on a divisive referendum that would be profoundly detrimental to the interests of the people of Scotland and to the post-pandemic recovery. That is what isolationist nationalism would look like.

The Scottish Government are presiding over an education system in crisis, a health service lacking doctors and nurses, and an economy in which 230,000 Scottish children are living in poverty. The SNP's sole focus should be on improving the lives of the Scottish people. Arguments about a referendum will not get a single Scot back into work, lift a single Scottish family out of poverty or rebuild the Scottish NHS. Scotland deserves better. Scotland deserves a Labour politics whereby our national pride is founded on our shared prosperity and our common purpose. Under the leadership of the inspirational Anas Sarwar, Scottish Labour can build that Scotland of the future.

3.42 pm

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): It will come as no surprise to many in this House that I am a proud Unionist, just like the vast majority of Scottish people in their most recent independence referendum.

I support our Union because we are better together. One of the amazing things that bring us together is how our towns and cities reflect one another. In Redcar and Cleveland, we produce more than 50% of the UK's commercially viable hydrogen. We are home to the UK's first hydrogen hub, linking us firmly to Northern Ireland and Wrightbus, producing the UK's hydrogen bus fleet. Redcar and Cleveland is steel town. Although we sadly lost our blast furnace in 2015, we manufacture steel at British Steel in Lackenby, linking us firmly to the steel industry in south Wales, a lot of whose steel is still exported from Teesside. Redcar and Cleveland is home to a large petrochemical footprint—where I used to work. We transported ethylene molecules up and down the Wilton to Grangemouth ethylene pipeline, firmly linking Scotland's petrochemical and oil and gas sectors to ours.

Our Union is better together, and it is time for the SNP to own up. It does not want independence. If it did, it would not want to join the EU. It just wants to break up our United Kingdom and will stop at nothing to achieve that. The latest polls are clear that the people of Scotland are turning away from independence, yet the SNP is desperately clinging to its sinking ship. It claims to represent Scotland, yet at every opportunity it ignores the voice of its own people when it does not fit the SNP's narrative. We are now nearly seven years on from the 2014 referendum and the SNP still does not accept the result; just like the Labour on Brexit, it is constantly trying to overturn the will of the people. The SNP likes to tell us that a vote for the SNP is a vote for independence, but they know that that is not the reality. They prefer to shout as loudly as possible about independence so that they do not have to face the realities of their failures in leadership day after day.

While support for independence falls, the SNP shambles unravels. Scottish people can see for themselves the kind of Scottish Administration they have had for the past 14 years: one that is unfit to lead and unfit to listen, while they are breaking their necks in their obsession with the separation from our United Kingdom. If the SNP cared about Scotland, they would focus on improving education, not on separation. If they cared about Scotland, they would focus on cutting NHS waiting times, not on separation. If they cared about Scotland, they would focus on tackling rising crime and drug abuse, not on separation. The reality is that they do not care about Scotland—they just hate Britain. The SNP wants out of Britain and in the EU. The Liberals want to be in Britain, but in the EU. The Labour party will not tell us its view on either. Only the Conservatives are focused on a brighter future for Scotland as part of our proud United Kingdom.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The last Back-Bench contribution in this debate will be from David Linden.

3.45 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. On Monday, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster called Scottish independence a "distraction" from "our economic recovery" from covid-19, and we have heard that today. However, the motivation for his comments is the real distraction. He wants a distraction from the billions of pounds of taxpayers' money handed to Tory donors for personal protective equipment with no contract scrutiny. He wants a distraction from the billions wasted through the outsourcing of Track and Trace in England. He wants a distraction from the revelation that 39 out of 45 places to receive a share of the first £1 billion in towns funding are Tory constituencies. He wants a distraction from the cronyism scandal that surrounds the appointment of the Ofcom and BBC chairs, which would, frankly, make the Kremlin blush. He wants a distraction from the announcement that the UK is to spend billions on yet more nuclear warheads that can never be used. The Government have no money for the nurses on the frontline, who have been battling covid for the past 12 months, but plenty of money for their mates and for their cold war militarism. He wants a distraction from Westminster's failure to include about 3 million people in covid support; from inadequate sick pay; from food banks unable to

cope with demand; from the worst state pension in the developed world; from the disaster of Brexit, from the undemocratic and perpetually bloating House of Lords; from the pittance paid to disabled people on legacy benefits; and from the shocking two-child policy and rape clause.

I could go on and on, but what it really boils down to is this: if Scottish independence is a distraction from all of that, it is hardly any wonder that so many people in Scotland are having their heads turned.

3.47 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: It is a great pleasure to sum up this debate. My only regret is that I am not in the Chamber to deliver the speech personally. As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, I always enjoy my little exchanges with and interventions from my friends on the Conservative Benches. Listening to their contributions today, it is a frustration that I can only send all my love to them virtually.

Some fantastic contributions have been made by my hon. Friends today and then there were some speeches from Conservative Members. How these debates usually go is that we make the positive case about Scotland and all the opportunities that independence will present to our nation. We talk of Scottish democracy, the claim of right and the Scottish people's inalienable right to determine their own future, and then the Conservatives get to their feet to tell us why none of this is possible and why we would be better off with them and the Governments they would impose on us. Today has been a sort of variation on that theme, with so many of our Conservative friends telling us what we should be debating today, somewhat forgetting that this is our Opposition day and that, with all due respect to them, it is really a matter for us.

Independence and the constitution is the defining issue in Scottish politics and, if anything, it is not debated enough. In the latest STV poll, independence was rated as the most important issue that would influence the choice of the Scottish people—it was at 44%. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) was spot on when he said that when it comes to how we recover from covid, undoubtedly the most important issue in Scotland, we need the full powers of independence to fully secure the recovery that Scotland requires.

I always wonder what exactly the Scottish people think when they watch these debates and hear some of the curious views of Conservative Members—I am sure they find it all very amusing and bewildering. One of the reasons we bring these debates to the House is to allow the Scottish people a glimpse of the Westminster Tories' thinking on our nation. Our friends are in fact the biggest recruiting sergeants we have. I thank all of them again for all their efforts and for everything that they do for the cause of Scottish independence. Their efforts will not be forgotten and, in a few short years, the Independence Cross, first class will be awarded to everyone from the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes) to the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher). If I can, I will personally present the award.

The choice that will be offered to the people of Scotland in the next few weeks is, "Who do you want to run our beautiful country? You, the people of Scotland, who live and work here, or them, Boris Johnson's Conservatives and all their Brexit horror?" I was trying

to discern from the speeches what exactly they still have to offer Scotland. From what Conservative Members have said today, it is quite clear that their Union has run its course and that it has absolutely nothing more to offer the Scottish people. There is no positive vision for Scotland in their Union. They have nothing more to offer, nothing more to give. The key thing in all this is the future, and Scotland must secure what it votes for. Democracy must be everything to us. Scotland must have the right to choose and define its own future.

In the past few months, the Government have tried to suggest to the people of Scotland that their democracy can be ignored and rejected as they consistently assert that they will not agree to participate in another referendum. All the lofty ideals of 2014—"Lead the UK, not leave the UK", near federalism, "We love you, please stay"—have descended into this: "We will keep you as part of this Union against your will." The slogan for the next election could well be, "Scotland, we have nothing to offer you but our chains". What a pitiful condition the Union is in when it has descended into nothing other than an attempt to keep us captive.

I say to the Conservatives that there is a way to stop our referendum and that is to beat us in an election. It really is as simple as that. If the Conservatives win the next Scottish election, they will win the right to stop a referendum, but they are not considering stopping a referendum simply through democratic means. This is where it all starts to become deeply troubling. Their main means of stopping a referendum is to ignore and bypass democracy, impose their will, ignore elections and democratic outcomes, and say no to a majority. What a dreadful place to be even for this Conservative Government, with their cavalier disregard for so many democratic principles.

The Conservatives also know that the situation is unsustainable. They cannot keep a nation in a political Union in the 21st century against its will. Even they know that. When their Union becomes a prison, it has simply failed. They also know that saying no does nothing other than drive up support for independence even higher. If the SNP wins a majority in May and replicates the conditions of 2011, they know that it is game over.

While the Conservatives are saying that they rule out a referendum, they continue to prepare for one. We have seen the resources being ploughed in and the capacity that they are building. We see it in every piece of election material that is going through every door in Scotland just now, where they tell us that only by voting for the Scottish Conservatives can people stop an independence referendum. It is a curious strategy when they have supposedly ruled out that referendum.

I concede that today has been a bit more encouraging. I have looked at their amendment and listened to them very carefully. None of them has actually ruled out a referendum and our nation's right to choose, other than, curiously—from Labour—the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray). There is this weird tension that runs through everything that they are doing just now. We need only look at the demise of their Union unit to see that in all its glory. Essentially, they are conflicted as to whether to behave more consensually towards us or whether to continue to attack and undermine us. They really do not know whether to cuddle us or clobber us.

[Pete Wishart]

Their Union unit was the frontline between the cuddlers and the clobberers and it was so dysfunctional that even after its demise, I still do not know who actually won that battle. One minute it is “the full malky” Unionism, a full-frontal attack on our institutions, a constraining of our democracy and a disregard for our legislation, but they know that this aggressive “sink the heid” Unionism has been an absolute disaster for them. The Scottish people very much cherish their Parliament. They see attacks on it as attacks on themselves. And then comes the cuddling. The cuddlers now seem intent on getting us to love them by covering the country in Union Jacks as a sign of their largesse. Nothing could be more designed to irritate the Scottish people than that. When I first heard of this, I thought that it was some sort of grotesque joke, but they are actually serious about it. I do not know who advises them on all this nonsense, but all I can say to our agents and snoopers in Whitehall is that they are doing a great job. It will soon be time to come home. May will be the great independence election. I know the Conservatives have been encouraged by a couple of opinion polls showing support for the Union coming back a bit, and they have taken delight in one today that asked the Brexit question, not the independence one.

This is going to be an election about our future. I say to the Conservatives, “Let’s be constructive. Let’s work together with the principle of democracy at the heart of everything we do together. If it is clear that the Scottish people want to secure a referendum on independence, let’s respect that.” If the Conservatives win in May, they earn the right to stop a referendum. If we win, with the backing of the Scottish people, that must be respected too. Beyond democracy there is only chaos. Let us all agree to be democrats.

3.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Iain Stewart): It is a great pleasure to wind up this important debate, which has been impassioned and, on the whole, good-natured, with one or two small skirmishes.

It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). I sincerely mean that—I really enjoy his performances and admire the passion and dedication that he shows for his cause. I am afraid, however, that we have heard it all before. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) said, it is another spin of the greatest hits record. It comes as no surprise that SNP Members want to use this debate—they could have chosen any subject—to rehash their tired old arguments about why the United Kingdom should be split up, but it is a missed opportunity to debate more important issues.

I must take up the hon. Gentleman’s comment that we have not debated independence—separation—enough. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) said, SNP Members have not stopped talking about it since the day after the 2014 referendum. The idea that they have not had enough airtime is completely laughable. Let us face it: they could have chosen any subject for debate today. With elections for the Scottish Parliament less than two months away, I would have thought that they would want to use this debate to showcase their

achievements after 14 years of running the Scottish Government. However, as many Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes), have pointed out, their record on education and on public services generally has not been good. It is therefore not surprising that they do not want a light to be shone on that today. SNP Members could have used the time to focus on the covid vaccination programme and the other measures that have been put in place to see us through the pandemic.

Tommy Sheppard: I am grateful to the Minister for spending time discussing things that are not on the Order Paper. Would it be possible for him to address the Question that is on the Order Paper, and tell us whether he believes that the people of Scotland have the right to make a choice about their own constitutional future?

Iain Stewart: I am happy to tell the hon. Gentleman that I shall come on to that very subject. However, I am putting into context the question of why the SNP has chosen this debate, and why it has failed the people of Scotland by not concentrating on the many, many issues that are of primary concern to people in Scotland.

SNP Members do not want to talk about the vaccination programme and covid measures because that would show the effective partnership between the UK Government and the Scottish Government—something that undermines their perpetual grievance narrative. They could have used this debate to make their points about the security and international challenges that we all face, but that would mean conceding that together the UK is much stronger than the sum of its parts. They could have used this time to consider the economic challenges and opportunities that we all face post covid, but that would mean admitting that there is a need for all Governments in Scotland—local, Scottish and UK—to work together to face those economic challenges. That includes the work that we are doing on the city deal programme, the new trade deals that we are signing, the new export support that we are putting into Scotland, the removal of whisky tariffs that were damaging to Scottish jobs, and the connectivity review to make sure that all parts of our country are properly connected. But no, SNP Members chose to use the time to rehearse the same tired old arguments.

I am sure it will be of great comfort to people worrying about what education their child has missed during the pandemic or the security of their job that the separatists are looking for ever fresher opportunities to pit family against family and community against community in yet another divisive referendum. Glasgow will be hosting COP26 later this year, and the eyes of the world will be on us. We will be showing our global leadership on climate change. What message would it send to the world if Scotland were looking inward and debating constitutional matters that have been settled many years ago?

Alan Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Iain Stewart: No, I have already given way once, and I want to respond to some of the points that Members have made.

SNP Members have the wrong priorities, and I can only imagine that they chose this debate today to shore up their core support and distract attention away from their domestic troubles and their failures in government.

Let me turn to some of the points that Members have made in the debate. I apologise if I am unable to get through all 30-plus contributions in the next three or four minutes. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) made some very telling comments in his contribution. First, he made a vain attempt to wriggle out of being called a separatist, but that is the SNP's mission. It is to smash apart one country, our country, even though so many Members on both sides of the House today have demonstrated the importance of family, business, cultural and other societal connections. It would rip apart our country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) said, we are not just a family of nations; we are a nation of families. As my hon. Friends the Members for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie), for Meriden (Saqib Bhatti), for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson), for Guildford (Angela Richardson) and many others have said, it would be a disaster to rip apart one of the most successful partnerships the world has ever seen.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East also let the cat out of the bag when he said that the referendum might not be this year and that it might be very early next year. As my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) said, the challenges from the covid pandemic will not end with the flick of a light switch. The challenges that we will have to rebuild our economy, our society, our children's education and the mental health of the nation will run on for many years. People in Scotland want their Government to focus on that, and I think they will take very badly this obsession with having a referendum within the next 12 months.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) made the telling point that when people cast their vote, they do not cast it on just one issue. The issues that drive people's votes will be manifold. A poll out today, I believe, shows that only 8% of people regard the constitution as a driver of their vote, and I believe the hon. Gentleman referenced Professor John Curtice in making that point. It is therefore arrogant for SNP Members to assume that every vote cast for them is a vote for another divisive referendum. I do not think people want to see that take place.

The hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) mentioned the importance of connectivity across the United Kingdom, and I am delighted that we are addressing that through the Union connectivity review. The SNP refuses to take part in the review, because it dares to have the word "Union" in it. That, to me, is a mark of a very childish and single issue-focused party.

Unfortunately, time prevents me from referring to all the points I would like to refer to in this debate. I will conclude with this: Scotland voted decisively in 2014 to stay part of the UK and we are respecting that democratic decision. Now is the time to be focusing on getting livelihoods and the economy back after the covid pandemic.

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

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Serjeant at Arms, are you able to have a look in the Aye Lobby, as there does seem to be a problem? *[Interruption.]* Still, have a look, just to make sure everybody is out, please.

The House having divided: Ayes 53, Noes 362.

Division No. 240]

[4.5 pm]

AYES

| | |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| Bardell, Hannah | Hendry, Drew |
| Black, Mhairi | Hosie, rh Stewart |
| Blackford, rh Ian | Lake, Ben |
| Blackman, Kirsty | Law, Chris |
| Bonnar, Steven | Lucas, Caroline |
| Brock, Deidre | MacAskill, Kenny |
| Brown, Alan | MacNeil, Angus Brendan |
| Callaghan, Amy | Mc Nally, John |
| Cameron, Dr Lisa | McDonald, Stewart Malcolm |
| Chapman, Douglas | McDonald, Stuart C. |
| Cherry, Joanna | McLaughlin, Anne |
| Cowan, Ronnie | Monaghan, Carol |
| Crawley, Angela | Newlands, Gavin |
| Day, Martyn | Nicolson, John |
| Docherty-Hughes, Martin | O'Hara, Brendan |
| Doogan, Dave | Oswald, Kirsten |
| Dorans, Allan | Saville Roberts, rh Liz |
| Eastwood, Colum | Sheppard, Tommy |
| Edwards, Jonathan | Smith, Alyn |
| Fellows, Marion | Stephens, Chris |
| Ferrier, Margaret | Thewliss, Alison |
| Flynn, Stephen | Thompson, Owen |
| Gibson, Patricia | Whitford, Dr Philippa |
| Grady, Patrick | Williams, Hywel |
| Grant, Peter | Wishart, Pete |
| Gray, Neil | |
| Hanna, Claire | Tellers for the Ayes: |
| Hanvey, Neale | David Linden and |
| | Richard Thomson |

NOES

| | |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Adams, Nigel | Bowie, Andrew |
| Afolami, Bim | Bradley, Ben |
| Afriyie, Adam | Bradley, rh Karen |
| Ahmad Khan, Imran | Brady, Sir Graham |
| Aiken, Nickie | Braverman, rh Suella |
| Aldous, Peter | Brereton, Jack |
| Allan, Lucy | Bridgen, Andrew |
| Amess, Sir David | Brine, Steve |
| Anderson, Lee | Bristow, Paul |
| Anderson, Stuart | Britcliffe, Sara |
| Andrew, rh Stuart | Brokenshire, rh James |
| Ansell, Caroline | Browne, Anthony |
| Argar, Edward | Bruce, Fiona |
| Atherton, Sarah | Buchan, Felicity |
| Atkins, Victoria | Buckland, rh Robert |
| Bacon, Gareth | Burghart, Alex |
| Bacon, Mr Richard | Burns, rh Conor |
| Badenoch, Kemi | Butler, Rob |
| Bailey, Shaun | Cairns, rh Alun |
| Baillie, Siobhan | Carter, Andy |
| Baker, Duncan | Cartlidge, James |
| Baker, Mr Steve | Cash, Sir William |
| Baldwin, Harriett | Cates, Miriam |
| Barclay, rh Steve | Caulfield, Maria |
| Baron, Mr John | Chalk, Alex |
| Baynes, Simon | Chishti, Rehman |
| Bell, Aaron | Churchill, Jo |
| Benton, Scott | Clark, rh Greg |
| Beresford, Sir Paul | Clarke, Mr Simon |
| Berry, rh Jake | Clarke, Theo |
| Bhatti, Saqib | Clarke-Smith, Brendan |
| Blackman, Bob | Clarkson, Chris |
| Blunt, Crispin | Cleverly, rh James |
| Bone, Mr Peter | Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey |
| Bottomley, Sir Peter | Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse |

| | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Colburn, Elliot | Green, rh Damian | Longhi, Marco | Robertson, Mr Laurence |
| Collins, Damian | Griffith, Andrew | Lopez, Julia | Robinson, Mary |
| Costa, Alberto | Griffiths, Kate | Lopresti, Jack | Rosindell, Andrew |
| Courts, Robert | Grundy, James | Lord, Mr Jonathan | Ross, Douglas |
| Coutinho, Claire | Gullis, Jonathan | Loughton, Tim | Rowley, Lee |
| Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey | Halfon, rh Robert | Mackinlay, Craig | Russell, Dean |
| Crabb, rh Stephen | Hall, Luke | Mackrory, Cheryllyn | Rutley, David |
| Crosbie, Virginia | Hammond, Stephen | Maclean, Rachel | Sambrook, Gary |
| Crouch, Tracey | Hancock, rh Matt | Mak, Alan | Saxby, Selaine |
| Daly, James | Hands, rh Greg | Malthouse, Kit | Scully, Paul |
| Davies, David T. C. | Harper, rh Mr Mark | Mangnall, Anthony | Seely, Bob |
| Davies, Gareth | Harris, Rebecca | Mann, Scott | Selous, Andrew |
| Davies, Dr James | Harrison, Trudy | Marson, Julie | Shannon, Jim |
| Davies, Mims | Hart, Sally-Ann | May, rh Mrs Theresa | Shapps, rh Grant |
| Davies, Philip | Hart, rh Simon | Mayhew, Jerome | Sharma, rh Alok |
| Davis, rh Mr David | Hayes, rh Sir John | Maynard, Paul | Shelbrooke, rh Alec |
| Davison, Dehenna | Heald, rh Sir Oliver | McCartney, Jason | Simmonds, David |
| Dinenage, Caroline | Heapey, James | McCartney, Karl | Skidmore, rh Chris |
| Dines, Miss Sarah | Heaton-Harris, Chris | McPartland, Stephen | Smith, Chloe |
| Djanogly, Mr Jonathan | Henderson, Gordon | McVey, rh Esther | Smith, Greg |
| Docherty, Leo | Henry, Darren | Menzies, Mark | Smith, Henry |
| Donelan, Michelle | Higginbotham, Antony | Mercer, Johnny | Smith, rh Julian |
| Dorries, Ms Nadine | Hinds, rh Damian | Merriman, Huw | Smith, Royston |
| Double, Steve | Hoare, Simon | Metcalfe, Stephen | Solloway, Amanda |
| Dowden, rh Oliver | Holden, Mr Richard | Millar, Robin | Spencer, Dr Ben |
| Doyle-Price, Jackie | Hollinrake, Kevin | Miller, rh Mrs Maria | Spencer, rh Mark |
| Drax, Richard | Hollobone, Mr Philip | Milling, rh Amanda | Stafford, Alexander |
| Drummond, Mrs Flick | Holloway, Adam | Mills, Nigel | Stephenson, Andrew |
| Duddridge, James | Holmes, Paul | Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew | Stevenson, Jane |
| Duguid, David | Howell, John | Mohindra, Mr Gagan | Stevenson, John |
| Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain | Howell, Paul | Moore, Damien | Stewart, rh Bob |
| Dunne, rh Philip | Huddleston, Nigel | Moore, Robbie | Stewart, Iain |
| Eastwood, Mark | Hudson, Dr Neil | Mordaunt, rh Penny | Streeter, Sir Gary |
| Edwards, Ruth | Hughes, Eddie | Morris, Anne Marie | Stride, rh Mel |
| Ellis, rh Michael | Hunt, Jane | Morris, David | Stuart, Graham |
| Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias | Hunt, rh Jeremy | Morris, James | Sturdy, Julian |
| Elphicke, Mrs Natalie | Hunt, Tom | Morrissey, Joy | Sunak, rh Rishi |
| Eustice, rh George | Jack, rh Mr Alister | Morton, Wendy | Sunderland, James |
| Evans, Dr Luke | Javid, rh Sajid | Mullan, Dr Kieran | Swayne, rh Sir Desmond |
| Evennett, rh Sir David | Jayawardena, Mr Ranil | Mumby-Croft, Holly | Syms, Sir Robert |
| Everitt, Ben | Jenkin, Sir Bernard | Mundell, rh David | Thomas, Derek |
| Fabricant, Michael | Jenkinson, Mark | Murray, Mrs Sheryll | Timpson, Edward |
| Farris, Laura | Jenkyns, Andrea | Murrison, rh Dr Andrew | Tolhurst, Kelly |
| Fell, Simon | Jenrick, rh Robert | Neill, Sir Robert | Tomlinson, Justin |
| Fletcher, Katherine | Johnson, rh Boris | Nici, Lia | Tomlinson, Michael |
| Fletcher, Mark | Johnson, Dr Caroline | Nokes, rh Caroline | Tracey, Craig |
| Fletcher, Nick | Johnson, Gareth | Norman, rh Jesse | Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie |
| Ford, Vicky | Johnston, David | O'Brien, Neil | Trott, Laura |
| Foster, Kevin | Jones, Andrew | Offord, Dr Matthew | Truss, rh Elizabeth |
| Fox, rh Dr Liam | Jones, rh Mr David | Opperman, Guy | Tugendhat, Tom |
| Francois, rh Mr Mark | Jones, Fay | Parish, Neil | Vara, Mr Shailesh |
| Frazer, Lucy | Jones, Mr Marcus | Patel, rh Priti | Vickers, Martin |
| Freeman, George | Jupp, Simon | Paterson, rh Mr Owen | Vickers, Matt |
| Freer, Mike | Kawczynski, Daniel | Pawsey, Mark | Villiers, rh Theresa |
| Fuller, Richard | Kearns, Alicia | Penning, rh Sir Mike | Wakeford, Christian |
| Fysh, Mr Marcus | Keegan, Gillian | Penrose, John | Walker, Sir Charles |
| Gale, rh Sir Roger | Knight, rh Sir Greg | Percy, Andrew | Walker, Mr Robin |
| Garnier, Mark | Knight, Julian | Philp, Chris | Wallace, rh Mr Ben |
| Ghani, Ms Nusrat | Kruger, Danny | Pincher, rh Christopher | Wallis, Dr Jamie |
| Gibb, rh Nick | Kwarteng, rh Kwasi | Poulter, Dr Dan | Warburton, David |
| Gibson, Peter | Lamont, John | Pow, Rebecca | Warman, Matt |
| Gideon, Jo | Largan, Robert | Prentis, Victoria | Watling, Giles |
| Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl | Latham, Mrs Pauline | Pritchard, rh Mark | Webb, Suzanne |
| Glen, John | Leadsom, rh Andrea | Quin, Jeremy | Whately, Helen |
| Goodwill, rh Mr Robert | Leigh, rh Sir Edward | Quince, Will | Wheeler, Mrs Heather |
| Gove, rh Michael | Levy, Ian | Raab, rh Dominic | Whittaker, Craig |
| Graham, Richard | Lewer, Andrew | Randall, Tom | Whittingdale, rh Mr John |
| Grant, Mrs Helen | Lewis, rh Brandon | Redwood, rh John | Wiggin, Bill |
| Gray, James | Lewis, rh Dr Julian | Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob | Wild, James |
| Grayling, rh Chris | Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian | Richards, Nicola | Williams, Craig |
| Green, Chris | Loder, Chris | Richardson, Angela | Williamson, rh Gavin |
| | Logan, Mark | Roberts, Rob | Wood, Mike |

Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Tom Pursglove and
Maggie Throup

Question accordingly negated.

The list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy, is published at the end of today's debates.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I give the usual warning that if anybody shouts for this Division, they are expected to vote in the way that they shout.

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

The House divided: Ayes 369, Noes 55.

Division No. 241]

[4.17 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Ahmad Khan, Imran
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Kemi
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Jake
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Brokenshire, rh James
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Robert

Burghart, Alex
Burns, rh Conor
Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chishty, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Cleverly, rh James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Cooper, Daisy
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard

Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Farron, Tim
Fell, Simon
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Kate
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin

Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jardine, Christine
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenkyins, Andrea
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackrory, Cherylyn
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Mrs Maria

Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morrisey, Joy
Morton, Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Olney, Sarah
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pritchard, rh Mark
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Roberts, Rob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Rutley, David
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, rh Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Simmonds, David
Skidmore, rh Chris

Smith, Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stone, Jamie
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, rh Rishi
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, Laura
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Villiers, rh Theresa
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Wallis, Dr Jamie
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Tom Pursglove and
Maggie Throup**

NOES

Bardell, Hannah
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Bonnar, Steven

Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Callaghan, Amy
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Chapman, Douglas

Cherry, Joanna
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Day, Martyn
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Jonathan
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Flynn, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Hanna, Claire
Hanvey, Neale
Hendry, Drew
Hosie, rh Stewart
Lake, Ben
Law, Chris
Linden, David
Lucas, Caroline

MacAskill, Kenny
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Mc Nally, John
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McLaughlin, Anne
Monaghan, Carol
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O'Hara, Brendan
Oswald, Kirsten
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Sheppard, Tommy
Smith, Alyn
Stephens, Chris
Thewliss, Alison
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Richard
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Noes:

**Andrew Jones and
Gary Sambrook**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House believes the priority of the Scottish people is to recover from the effects of the covid-19 pandemic, and that it would be irresponsible to hold a referendum at this time.

The list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy, is published at the end of today's debates.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will not suspend the House for three minutes because both Dispatch Boxes were sanitised during the Division.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you can give me some assistance. You, like me, will have been grateful, I am sure, to see in the road map out of lockdown that weddings will be able to start again from 12 April when we enter step 2. However, guidance that was issued yesterday implies that bespoke dedicated wedding venues will not be able to hold weddings after 12 April and must wait until 17 May, leading to the bizarre conclusion that one might be able to marry in the frozen food aisle of a supermarket, but not in a dedicated wedding venue. I wonder, Mr Deputy Speaker, if you may be able to assist me in how I could raise that point with Ministers to get some clarity so that we can help those dedicated wedding venues and the people who want to get married in them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the right hon. Lady for notice of her point of order. The prospect of getting married in the frozen food department of Iceland, or of any supermarket, does indeed beggar belief. None the less, this is clearly an important matter, and there are several ways, as she will know, of raising the issue, including urgent questions or an Adjournment debate, but we have business questions tomorrow, which provides the opportunity to call on the Leader of the House for a debate—[*Interruption.*] However, we also have a Cabinet Minister sitting here who is eager to get to her feet.

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In the spirit of trying to be helpful, I know that my right hon. Friend raised this matter previously with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and he is talking to the covid taskforce about it. I have just spoken to my office, and we will come back to my right hon. Friend this afternoon with some clarity. I shall ensure that any further clarity that Public Health England can provide is put on the parliamentary intranet's covid hub for all Members to see.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Rarely has a point of order been more effective—

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con) rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: But now there is a challenge.

Douglas Ross: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I hope that this one is just as effective. The House has just voted on an amendment that said that we believe “the priority of the Scottish people is to recover from the effects of the covid-19 pandemic, and that it would be irresponsible to hold a referendum at this time.”

I wonder whether you can clarify something, because I thought I heard you say, when you confirmed the numbers, that more than 50 MPs voted against it and, therefore, against prioritising a recovery from covid-19 over another referendum. Can you confirm that it was the SNP MPs in this House who voted against a recovery and for another referendum, and that it is unacceptable to the people of Scotland that they are putting party priorities above the public?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That sounds to me like an extension of the last debate. I could not confirm one way or the other which individuals voted which way, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will await with eager anticipation the delivery of exactly who voted which way either through *Hansard* or other electronic means. I think it is now time to move on to the next debate.

Leaving the EU: Impact on the UK

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.27 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House considers that the immediate economic damage, recent uncertainty and the projected long-term damage to business and trade from the UK leaving the European Union has disproven the perceived benefits of leaving the European Union; notes that the Scottish economy, specifically fishing, small businesses and manufacturing, are particularly vulnerable to market disruption; further notes that the failure of the UK Government to remain in mutually beneficial education schemes such as Erasmus+ is to the detriment of education and cultural exchange for people in Scotland and the rest of the UK; shows serious concern at the loss of EU funding and its replacement with the Shared Prosperity Fund; affirms the positive role immigration plays in society; and regrets the impact leaving the EU will have on those who wish to live, study and work in the UK.

The Brexit process has lurched from bourness to shambles to chaos—a lesson in incompetence and hubris. We are assured that, after the next hurdle, things will get better and that we will start to see all the Brexit dividends that we have been promised. So, where are we now? Less than three months after the transition period ended, the UK is facing legal action and the possibility of trade sanctions. The Office for Budget Responsibility said in its response to the Budget that the Brexit trade deal will see

“a long-run loss of productivity of around 4 per cent compared with remaining in the EU.”

Businesses that have struggled through the uncertainty of snap general elections, exit day deadlines coming and going, a rushed last-minute withdrawal deal, and a year of covid-19 now face the possibility of tariffs along with the added paperwork brought by being out of the single market. That comes hot on the heels of a record-breaking drop in trade between the UK and EU in January. The Office for National Statistics said that, after the Brexit transition period ended, UK goods exports to the EU fell 40.7% in the month and imports dropped 28.8%. Those are the largest declines since records began over 20 years ago.

The hardest-hit export to the EU was food products—a growth industry in Scotland and a sector world-famous for its quality. Food and drink exports decreased by 63.6% in January this year. Seafood Scotland says that fish and shellfish exports were down 83% in January. That is devastating for the sector, which has relied on the swift movement of goods across borders. Donna Fordyce, the chief executive of Seafood Scotland, has spoken of the reputational damage this is causing, the market share being lost to countries such as Norway and the additional time and cost of processing all the bureaucracy. In evidence to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, she said that firms were having to spend around £250,000 to £500,000 extra per year on paperwork. Seafood Scotland has talked of a “one-way trade border” that

“chokes UK exporters, but ushers in EU imports with open arms.” That is the reality of the shoddy deal that the UK Government negotiated on Scotland's behalf.

[Alison Thewliss]

There was a 56.6% decline in exports in the chemical sector ahead of the UK falling out of the EU's chemicals regulations, and manufacturing output decreased by 2.3%, which the ONS directly attributed not to covid-19 but to a fall in exports caused by Brexit. Brexit has also particularly affected an export that my constituency is blessed with: an abundance of live music. Those working in creative industries are being denied the access to the EU that previous generations have enjoyed. They are being denied access to work and access to promoting Scotland and our culture abroad. We on the SNP Benches have been clear that creative professionals and those who support them must be entitled to visa-free travel.

Even for those who simply want to play music, there are barriers. My constituent Richard Traynor recently purchased a musical instrument from a German supplier with which he has dealt for many years. When it was delivered, the keyboard had warped, he suspects due to being held in sub-zero conditions at customs holding stations for a lengthy period. He had to pay customs fees to the UK Government approaching £100 for the instrument and its subsequent replacement, in addition to courier fees for a keyboard that cost £180—a real barrier to trade. Mr Traynor told me that

“the fees charged part of this has indeed been very difficult to swallow, but it does not compare to the empty hollow feeling this particular Brexit experience has left me with. I cannot believe I will no longer be able to buy from the many really nice folk I've traded with over the years from various places across Europe. I cannot imagine the damage this must be doing to small retailers such as folks who run small independent record labels or who run specialist shops...I guess this list could go on and on and on.”

There is growing evidence that companies in the EU are declining to send their goods to UK customers. The UK Government may not consider that a significant issue, but as my constituent points out, in so many ways, this chilling effect diminishes not just our trade but our way of life.

Visa-free travel is something that we have all taken for granted for some time. The loss of Erasmus+ and research funding has been a devastating blow to our universities, which already stand to lose so much from Brexit. The Scottish Government said from the outset that we wanted to remain a part of the scheme, and even Jackson Carlaw MSP, the former Conservative leader in Scotland, agreed. He said in the Scottish Parliament in May 2018 that

“it is not acceptable to me if the outcome of our exit from the European Union means that we can no longer participate in the Erasmus+ programme. It is perfectly clear that the direction that the UK Government is taking means that we will continue to participate.”—[*Scottish Parliament Official Report*, 16 May 2018; c. 61.]

Of course, we know that that did not come to pass. I do not know whether that is a reflection of the relative influence of Conservative MSPs or whether they were also being led up the garden path by their Westminster bosses.

Mon cher collègue, my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith), described the removal of the scheme as “economic vandalism” against the higher education sector. On research funding, the Wellcome Trust has said this week that the UK's ambitions to be a science superpower

“are meaningless if they're not backed up with funding.”

There were brutal cuts to international research this week, and we still have no clarity on the £1 billion hole in Horizon Europe. But the damage goes further than this.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Has the hon. Lady had sight of the London School of Economics report earlier this year which said that Scottish independence would be three times more costly than Brexit? Could she comment on that?

Alison Thewliss: Independence will give us many options. It will give us the opportunity to take our future into our own hands and not be reliant on the incompetence of those on the Government Benches.

Young people in my constituency—many from low-income families—and many new Scots are now being denied access to not just an experience but a European identity that previous generations of Scots have benefited from. More than 2,000 students from Scotland—the highest per head of population in the UK—take part in Erasmus+ each year.

My constituent and good friend Declan Blench is a translator working in European languages. He says that he and his colleagues are now cut off from not only our markets, because trade in services is so hamstrung by this deal, but the culture they have cultivated links with and come to love. Declan says that

“most of us learned our languages in adolescence to adulthood, precisely thanks to EU links, we didn't all grow up in multilingual households. I was brought up by a single mum in an English-only household in a mining town—how on earth could I ever have done what I've done, if not for Erasmus? It is not just heartbreaking but galling—sacrificing these things for the sake of unrealistic notions of imperial grandeur, the ultimate symbol of post-imperial stress disorder that Britain suffers from so acutely.”

I could not have put it better.

I know that many across the House have benefited from studying and working abroad. It is wholly unacceptable for Tory Members to pull the ladder up behind them. The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) recently admitted as much on the BBC “Debate Night” show. He said to a young person who asked a question:

“You and everybody else coming through right now will not have the benefits that I had through Erasmus, work, study abroad...But am I going to sit here and say that Brexit is perfect and your generation is going to reap the benefits? No I'm not. Because you're not frankly at the minute. And I can see that.”

A moment of honesty from the Tories, but what a statement that is—that young people are not going to benefit in the way that people on the Tory Benches did; that they will take that away from the generations yet to come.

The UK Government's replacement is a pale shadow of Erasmus+. There has been no meaningful consultation with devolved Governments on the Turing scheme, which seems to have been cobbled together at the last minute, with all the due consideration one would expect from this inept UK Tory Government. It will not pay tuition costs for students. Living costs have been cut to a fifth of what they would have previously been. It does not encompass youth work, culture, sport and vocational schemes, which are a huge part of the Erasmus+ scheme and very important to people in Scotland. We also now know that it will not cover apprentices or trainees not affiliated with further education colleges, and it will not

cover teachers, youth workers, volunteers and many more who would previously have been eligible. LEAP Sports in my constituency, which works with LGBTI people, found Erasmus+ invaluable and forged international links, which helped to build the confidence and the skills of the people they support. For example, the three-year Outsport project on preventing violence and discrimination in sport based on sexual orientation and gender identity is vital work as we seek to challenge prejudice and make sport more inclusive for everyone.

Scotland's economy has its own specific needs that are not being met by this Eton mess of a Government. We have an ageing population. Without inward migration, our population would be in decline, with more deaths than births. Scotland's Economy Secretary Fiona Hyslop announced "A Scotland for the Future" this week, which examines the significant population challenges our country faces.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The hon. Lady's title in the SNP parliamentary party is shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, so as the SNP's shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, and as she is speaking on the economy, can she tell us what currency Scotland would have if it was an independent country?

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Gentleman does not even want us to get to that point, so I am not even going to engage with his arguments. [*Interruption.*] He is not interested because he is not interested in independence. I would rather talk right now about immigration policy, and the damage that his policies are causing to people in my constituency.

We have the worst possible immigration policy. We have arbitrary targets, a hostile environment and cruelty built into every stage of the system. People who come to live and work in Scotland tend to be highly skilled and are net contributors in both productivity and Government revenue. I have seen how non-EU nationals have been treated, causing misery and hardship, unthinkable poverty and deprivation—all of that serving absolutely no economic purpose. It costs more to treat people so abysmally, and the UK Government do it anyway.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My hon. Friend is absolutely right about immigration policy. Does she agree that it is ironic that earlier the Tories were trying to complain about the projected figures and the shortage of doctors, when they are the ones who are imposing this horrific immigration policy on Scotland?

Alison Thewliss: Indeed. There are very many aspects of immigration policy that cause significant damage, including loss of skills and the general hostility, which causes people to feel that they are not welcome in their own homes. It touches me every time that someone at my surgery asks me, "Why would they do this to me? Why would they make me so unwelcome? Can I go back to my country, to the war-torn conflict that I have come from? I would feel better there than I do here, under this Government." Every time that I can, I say to somebody, "This is your home. Glasgow can be your home and you are welcome here." I do not hear that nearly enough from the Tory Benches. This Tory Government now seek to extend the hostile environment to EU nationals. They do not do so in our name—ever.

The Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population has estimated that the impact of post-Brexit immigration policy will be a 50% to 80% reduction in net EU migration to Scotland after 2020, and an overall reduction in overseas net migration of 30% to 50%. It has found that very few jobs in key sectors in Scotland will meet the arbitrary salary threshold this Government have imposed. The Home Secretary is aware of these issues and has done absolutely nothing to address them. There are currently no plans to include a route to jobs below the skills threshold, and the UK Government have rejected the possibility of any regional variation in the salary threshold. There has been no clarity on whether the Scottish shortage occupation list will continue to operate. This is a disaster for our remote communities, who depend on migration to counter depopulation. It is a disaster for businesses, who rely on that pool of talent to gain a competitive advantage in an increasingly global market. It is a disaster for our universities, who face a reduction in international staff and students and the experience and richness they bring. And it is a disaster for Scotland's cities, whose wonderful cultural offerings are ever enhanced by our migrant communities.

There are few starker examples than Brexit of how a Westminster Government are willing to sideline Scotland's interests for their own cheap political gain. A differentiated approach to migration works well in Canada and Australia, and there is no sound economic reasoning not to do it, but the UK Government would rather put Scotland's future at risk to appease the worst excesses of the Tory party.

Many people are beginning to realise that Brexit was a pig in a poke and the much-vaunted schemes that have followed it are merely a mirage. I spoke recently about the shared prosperity fund, the UK Government's replacement for EU structural funds. It is almost unbelievable that it is now five years since the Brexit vote and we are still awaiting detail on how this scheme will operate. What we are certain of, however, is that this scheme will, due to the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and the power grab, bypass Holyrood entirely. This UK Government have made sure that decisions are taken out of the hands of the people of Scotland and restored to the backrooms and corridors of Whitehall.

When we have the choice in Scotland, we invest in projects that meet the needs of our population. The Scottish Government built the stunning Queensferry crossing—toll-free and clearly adored by the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) as he delivered his keynote speech to the Tory party conference in front of it.

Douglas Ross: I was just surprised it was open.

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Gentleman says that, but actually it is a bridge designed to cope with the extremes of Scottish weather. [*Interruption.*] It is not always shut, and I want to take this head-on. The previous Forth bridge was far more subject to the weather and to diversions, and the UK Government did absolutely heehaw about it. The Scottish Government built a bridge; it is a good bridge—it is a brilliant bridge—and the hon. Gentleman loves it so much that he stands in front of it and lets the cars drive through his ears on the telly.

There is also the Kessock bridge, and the £90 million of projects in the Outer Hebrides over the past 25 years for ferry terminals, bridges and causeways, the bulk of which came from European Union funds, and which

[Alison Thewliss]

nobody on the Conservative Benches would ever have thought to fund. By contrast, the UK Government built that bridge over troubled waters, the Skye bridge, and it cost the then Scottish Executive more to buy out the private finance initiative contract than the actual cost of the bridge. And now they want to chuck money at a £20 billion bridge over the Irish sea. I have with me my second-year high school geography project, which might give the Tories an idea as to why disturbing the second world war munitions dump at Beaufort's dyke might be problematic.

The shared prosperity fund has been described as “a direct attack” on devolution by the Labour-run Welsh Government. This cannot be dismissed as grievance politics or anything remotely like it; it is a real erosion of the hard-won rights of all those in the devolved nations of the UK. Be under no illusion: it is a power grab by the Tories, who never wanted devolution in the first place. The Prime Minister has gone as far as to call it a disaster and Tony Blair's worst mistake—I am sure we can think of other mistakes, but I will leave that for the Minister.

I am much more confident now than ever before that the people of Scotland see through the lies and spin of this Tory Government. Brexit has been a wake-up call for so many, and I welcome them all to Scotland's cause. We need policies which meet Scotland's needs, not an insular little Britain driven by the whims of the Tories and their crony pals. Alasdair Gray argued that a truly independent Scotland will only ever exist when people in every home, school, croft, farm, workshop, factory, island, glen, town and city feel that they, too, are at the centre of the world. This is what we seek. An increasing number of people are seeing their role in that world, and looking forward to the day when they decide to take their future into their own hands, and to take our place in the world and Scotland's place as part of the European family of nations. I cannae wait.

4.44 pm

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “House” to end and add

“welcomes the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement, and recognises the enormous opportunities for Scotland's economy.”.

Forty-eight years ago, the UK joined the European Economic Community, a concept built by giants. Its founding vision was based on peace and economic prosperity and much good came of it—economic, social and political—but over the years it evolved into something altogether different. Those who campaigned for Brexit did not do so because they objected to the benefits of being in the EU—the free flow of goods, shared security co-operation, ease of travel or reciprocal benefits. What they objected to was the price of those things.

Some objected that the situation prevented developing deeper co-operation with other nations, or that it supported protectionism that held developing nations back, or that it facilitated misery and suffering for refugees and economics, or that it undermined NATO, or frustrated our service economy. Some resented our inability to control our own laws, our own immigration policies or further border controls. Some were concerned about

being tied to the eurozone in any way or to the European Court, others about the immense costs of membership and the lack of accountability, political and fiscal. Some wanted us to have our own fishing, agriculture and environment policy, and to realise our ambitions to promote trade for a prosperous and peaceful world.

The negotiations that preceded us leaving the EU and in the run-up to the transition period ending were complex, but our aims can be summarised in three sentences. We wanted to keep the good bits. We wanted to lose the bad bits. We wanted to maximise the possible opportunities for every part of the UK. The post-negotiation scorecard shows that we did well. Under the deal reached with the EU, people in Scotland, as well as all UK nationals, will be able to benefit from a wide range of social security rights when travelling, working and living in the EU, including access to an uprated state pension and to reciprocal healthcare arrangements.

Alan Brown: Has the right hon. Lady asked the fishermen and the seafood industry how they would mark the scorecard? Also, does she think it is acceptable that the Fisheries Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), said she did not read the details of the deal because she was involved in a nativity play at her local school? Surely as Fisheries Minister she should have known exactly what was in that deal.

Penny Mordaunt: If we are talking about scorecards, a policy of handing back coastal waters to Scottish fishermen will win every time over handing back their new quotas to the EU. I am very happy to be judged on that basis.

The trade and co-operation agreement allows the UK to take full advantage of the opportunities available to us as an independent trading nation and strike trade deals with other partners around the world. We have started to use those new-found freedoms. We now have a points-based immigration system, which is open to the whole world and the talent that is out there, and can be tailored to our needs. Following the comments from the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), I hope she will be supporting the Home Secretary's initiative to establish safe routes for refugees fleeing conflict areas, rather than them having to rely on people traffickers.

The Agriculture Act 2020, which replaces the EU's bureaucratic common agricultural policy, transforms how we support farmers. The Fisheries Act 2020 enables us to control who fishes in our waters. We have launched our new global human rights sanctions regime. There is the UK-Japan comprehensive economic partnership agreement, and we are replacing overly bureaucratic EU structural funds with the new UK shared prosperity fund.

Brexit was an event, but now there is a process. From outside the EU, we can develop, refine and build our relationship with the EU and its member states for the benefit of all our citizens. The noble Lord Frost and I, and all members of the Government, will be working day and night to address the remaining and future issues for businesses, and to listen to their needs and ambitions. We take those issues incredibly seriously. We will resolve the problems, some of which the hon. Lady touched on.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Was the Minister as amazed as I was by a complete absence from the rhetoric of the Scottish National party? It has been calling for the same special arrangements for Scotland that Northern Ireland has, but now that we have seen what the protocol actually means, no one actually wants it. May I encourage the Minister and Lord Frost to continue to push back on the protocol and repair the damage that has been done by it?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman has my assurances that we will continue discussions within the framework of the joint agreement. He knows that there is tremendous concern about and focus on those issues. But no, I was not surprised by some of the things that were missing from the Scottish National party's opening remarks. I was not surprised that there was no offer to help the efforts to resolve these issues for business. Businesses in Scotland want their representatives to do that. They do not want political grandstanding about another referendum. They want the Scottish Government to focus on improving the situation and not to be distracted by scandal.

Alison Thewliss: The right hon. Member is talking about asking the Scottish Government to help out in some way. The Scottish Government have put forward their proposals on many occasions, including "Scotland's Place in Europe" and proposals on many other aspects of Brexit, but they have been roundly ignored on every single occasion. It is for the UK Government to take on the Scottish Government's offers of help and assistance, rather than to shut the door in our face on every single occasion.

Penny Mordaunt: That is not the case. We have done a huge amount. I have been part of that engagement with Scottish Government Ministers and officials. It would be nice if Scottish National party Members would start talking up the opportunities for their businesses, goods and services, because there are many—from financial services to manufacturing to world-renowned Scottish products—that will remain protected in the EU through geographical indicators, as they were before the end of the transition period. The trade and co-operation agreement is only one of many agreements as the UK enters the global stage as a sovereign trading nation. We have already struck deals with countries including Canada, Japan and Singapore, with many more to come, and we will grow our GDP and increase our trade with the rest of the world, creating new opportunities for exporters, and delivering better choice and value for money for our consumers.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): I thank the Minister, who is my county neighbour, for giving way. While she is extolling the virtues of the deal that is being delivered by this Government, does she agree there is a seeming inconsistency from SNP Members—that is, having voted against the deal at every stage during its the passage in this place, they would have ensured a no-deal exit from the European Union, which would have made more disruption for Scottish people?

Penny Mordaunt: That goes to the heart of it. I do not think that Scottish National party Members are interested in practical benefits for the people they represent. What they are interested in is causing division and chaos.

Let me turn briefly to the fishing sector. I have already spoken about securing the uplift in quota for Scotland. We also recognise the critical role that the Scottish fleet plays. It is for that reason that we have secured £14 million in the spending review to support Scotland's domestic fishery priorities; that is in addition to the £100 million, and goes way beyond our manifesto commitment to maintain funding. This investment will modernise and rejuvenate the industry, and strengthen the long-term sustainability of the catching and processing sectors.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central also mentioned Erasmus. We changed our negotiating position at the start to incorporate the asks of the devolved Administrations regarding Erasmus, and we fought very hard to get a good deal from the EU, but that was not on offer. Instead, we have developed the Turing scheme, which will benefit more students and students from a wider variety of backgrounds than previously enjoyed the Erasmus programme.

An SNP Opposition day debate does not happen every day, so the topic chosen and the content of the speeches tell us much about the focus of a particular political party. There is a clear theme to both debates today, and, alas, it has been a predictable one: to unpick democratic votes, and to ignore and undermine referendums. Nothing about business results; everything about overturning results. I look forward to seeing whether SNP speakers this afternoon offer one practical suggestion for any of the unresolved issues affecting businesses, or offer any help to persuade the EU of initiatives that will benefit all parties. The SNP, through its fanaticism and now its emerging conduct, is losing the fragments of credibility that it once may have held. Today, we have again seen its Members' contempt for democracy.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I think the Minister is doing the SNP a disservice. Do the Government not owe it a debt of gratitude for enabling the premature election that resulted in their 80-seat majority and Brexit happening in the first place?

Penny Mordaunt: There was, I am sure, an electoral dividend, as the citizens of the United Kingdom were fed up and wanted to get Brexit done, but I wish we had not had to go through quite the gymnastics that we have over the last few years.

The SNP's relentless mission to stir up hatred, division and mistrust—

Alison Thewliss: That's outrageous!

Penny Mordaunt: I refer the hon. Lady to her opening remarks. I think the Scottish people deserve better than that. The real political heroes of the last few turbulent years, to which the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) referred, were not those who won referendums; they were those who lost referendums and adhered to the results. They were those who voted for an independent Scotland and accepted the result of that once-in-a-generation vote, and those who voted to remain in the EU but accepted the mandate to leave.

That faith in democracy, that respect for their fellow citizens, is the ultimate expression of mutuality—equality—in which we all share. It can be found in our NHS, in the

[Penny Mordaunt]

vaccine programme, in our welfare safety nets, in every charity and voluntary organisation across the land, and in every gesture of good will and kindness towards a neighbour, including neighbours across borders. These deeply felt connections, responsibilities and care we have towards each other are at the heart of the Scottish nation, and they are at the heart of every nation—the four nations—of this United Kingdom. They are what makes those nations and our country great, and the SNP's selfish, self-absorbed separatist rhetoric will never destroy that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call Ian Murray, I will just point out that we will start with Back-Bench contributions of four minutes. I have no doubt whatsoever that that will move down to three minutes later in the debate so that more Members can get in. If you are participating remotely, please keep an eye on the clock that should be on the bottom right-hand side of the device that you are using. Please do not exceed the time limit, because you will be stopped by the Chair. For those participating in the Chamber, the time limit will be shown in the usual fashion.

4.57 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): May I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who set out the severe impacts that this Brexit proposition is having on the Scottish economy? It is a shame; the title of the debate is “Leaving the EU: Impact on the UK”, but I think we will need more than one debate to go through all the impacts. She ran very quickly through a lot of the impacts that are affecting Scottish business.

May I take Members back to Christmas eve? I am sure we can all just about remember that. We were all turning our attention to our family Christmas traditions. We were putting on our Christmas jumpers, double-checking we had everything for Christmas day, cutting sellotape with our teeth, examining the TV guide to see when we could watch “It’s a Wonderful Life”, and perhaps even thinking about a small libation or two. I am sure our thoughts would have been turning to family and friends who were unable to celebrate Christmas with us due to the lockdown. Then, out of the mulled wine haze appears not Santa Claus but the Prime Minister, sitting in front of the Downing Street Christmas tree delivering an “all I want for Christmas is as an EU trade deal” address to the nation.

The Prime Minister gleefully proclaimed that the UK and the EU had come to a last-minute trade and co-operation agreement, there would be no tariffs on goods, the Northern Ireland protocol would be maintained so the Government would not break international law, and, rather surprisingly,

“there will be no non-tariff barriers”.

I hope Santa was listening very clearly, as he really should not be delivering gifts to those who do not tell the truth. Going all the way back to the day after the EU referendum, it was always going to be the case that the cold reality of Brexit would one day disinfect all those undeliverable Tory promises given to the British people at the time and since, and that is exactly what has happened.

The bare-bones Brexit deal that was so lauded by the Prime Minister falls way short of what was promised and what was needed. It is not “get Brexit done”, as the Minister said; it is “get done by Brexit”. With our country facing one of the biggest economic recessions of any developed nation and with our businesses under increasing strain from the pandemic, they have to try to navigate new trading rules with the UK’s largest trading partner that have reduced exporting output by 60%. What will happen when the EU economies start to reopen fully? That is when the deal will truly be tested. It is holding back British businesses with reams of new red tape and unnecessary bureaucracy. Businesses were promised no non-tariff barriers, but the Government’s lack of leadership and clarity and their constant dither and delay mean that businesses are facing challenges that they certainly were not prepared for.

It did not have to be this way. The Government, instead of sticking their head in the sand, could have worked with industry to get ready. They could have focused on practical action to support businesses—measures such as recruiting and training the promised 50,000-plus customs agents we knew were needed to get the checks done. They could have used the transition period for what it was designed for—transitioning to the new arrangements. Instead, they wasted that period on negotiating the deal.

The Government think that the deal they got on Christmas eve is the end of the matter, but sectors of the economy know that this is just the beginning of huge difficulties and challenges, and for some it is unfortunately the beginning of the end for their business. It is certainly the beginning of the end for many that export, none more so than the Scottish fishing industry. That the Brexit deal is neither what Scotland’s fishing sector needed nor what it was promised will not surprise anyone. The devastating delays that the sector is facing were entirely predictable. There is anger and frustration from our fishers, who have been very badly let down. Elspeth Macdonald, the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation chief executive—I am glad I was not drinking at lunch time, Mr Deputy Speaker; that was my impression of Sean Connery as well—was scathing:

“This deal falls very far short of the commitments and promises that were made to the fishing industry by those at the highest level of government.”

It is a pattern, isn’t it?

What about Scottish agriculture? There has been nothing positive for farmers in leaving the EU with this deal. They are happy that no deal was avoided, but where are the sunny uplands they were promised? They, too, see something familiar. The Prime Minister is getting a reputation not just for overpromising and underdelivering, but for overpromising and then delivering nothing.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful to Ian Murray for giving way, because I just had to check—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland for giving way. He has spoken a lot about the deal—the deal that he voted for in this House in December—but his new Scottish party leader in Holyrood voted against it. Who is right—the leader of Scottish Labour or the Labour shadow Secretary of State?

Ian Murray: That was a boring and predictable intervention. The hon. Gentleman knows that we voted for the deal to avoid the very no-deal that his Government were threatening. He also knows—he is just about to rejoin the Scottish Parliament, assuming he wins his seat, and I hope he gets the rules in train before he does so—that that is not what the debate was about in the Scottish Parliament. It was about something completely different, not whether Members there accepted or did not accept the deal. The hon. Gentleman knows that not to be the case. *[Interruption.]* Rather than chuntering, it would be much better for the hon. Gentleman to give some reassurance to the fishing industry and the Scottish farming industry. This is what they are saying to us. It is what they are putting on the record. I am not making this up. It might be a good starting point to give them some reassurance and to work together to resolve some of the problems.

The trade deal leaves a huge amount of uncertainty and falls short of what is needed and what was promised. Scottish farmers are clear that they will not stand by and see a weakening of import standards for food and allow Scottish and British produce to be undercut by others. We need concrete guarantees that food and farming standards will remain at least as high as they are now.

What about services? The financial services sector in Scotland maintains 162,000 jobs and accounts for nearly 10% of GDP. Across the UK, the financial services sector contributed £75.6 billion to the Treasury in the year before covid. There is nothing in the agreement for the 80% of our economy that supports millions of jobs and livelihoods. I hope the Minister can tell us that the EU-UK memorandum of understanding with the financial services sector that is due to be signed by the end of March will give the sector what it was promised. The Government need to secure long-term agreement with the EU on financial services equivalence and to improve access to EU markets for the wider professional services industry, so that the UK and Scotland can remain global hubs for financial services.

I have mentioned just three sectors—the hon. Member for Glasgow Central mentioned others—that have been disadvantaged by this deal, but we could have talked about so many others, including chemicals, petrochemicals and energy. The list is endless. No wonder there is frustration, as it transpires that deals could have been done that would have made things easier for people. We could have stayed in the Erasmus programme. While I welcome aspects of the new Turing scheme, the Government could have done both. That would have been a truly global Britain—stay in Erasmus+ and do the Turing scheme for non-EU countries.

We could have had a deal for our performers and production tours—it was on offer, but it was turned down. Why? Government policy seems to be to cut off our nose to spite our face. I hope that a solution can be found, or it will be more damage to another jewel in the UK's crown—our creative industries. Those issues do not need Government platitudes. We want not more promises to be broken, but action and resolution now. The Brexit reality includes everything from shellfish rotting on a motorway to stopping our musicians touring Europe. The sunny uplands that we were promised mean a 4% hit to GDP—the equivalent of £3,600 for every household in the UK, according to the House of Commons

Library. It is a shame that we do not have time to deal with the Northern Ireland protocol and the effects on the Good Friday agreement.

It is worth coming on to the SNP's approach to the EU, as the party has initiated this debate in the Chamber. We have heard time and again, in the Chamber and elsewhere, that the UK has left the EU so Scotland needs to leave the UK. The former Labour MP and Europe Minister, Douglas Alexander, said this week in an article in *The New European*:

“Independence for Scotland would represent a reckless ‘hold my beer’ response to Brexit”.

All of us who campaigned to stay in the EU and strained every sinew to ensure that the case was made are disappointed. Of course we are angry. Many are still grieving after leaving the EU, but if the response is ripping Scotland out of the UK that would add catastrophically to that position.

The UK has left its largest trading partner, the EU. Of course that is bad, and we will hear that throughout the debate. Scotland leaving its largest trading partner, the UK, would be immeasurably worse. We need a remedy for Brexit, not a hugely damaging “I told you so” moment from Scotland. I did not vote remain for my vote to be misappropriated—

Alan Brown: We hear a lot about the fact that England is our biggest trading partner—that is true—but does the hon. Gentleman accept that 62% of goods manufactured in Scotland go to the EU, so it is our biggest trader in manufactured goods?

Ian Murray: The London School of Economics report—the LSE used to be lauded by the First Minister—said that Scottish independence would be three times worse than Brexit. Everything that the hon. Member for Glasgow Central said has to be multiplied by at least three. Then we can see the impact of what would happen—*[Interruption.]* Here we go again. I am trying to shine light on the facts of what would happen. I am trying to shine light from the LSE, an organisation that used to be lauded and cited in the Chamber every single day by Scottish National party Members, and all we get is, “Are we better together?” We need answers to those questions. That is what people are crying out for—they want people to be honest and answer those questions.

I did not vote in the EU referendum for my vote to be misappropriated by the nationalists to break up the UK. It is not their vote to do that with. I wonder whether the no-deal SNP regrets spending less on the EU referendum than it did chasing a few thousand votes in its failed bid to win the Scottish parliamentary by-election for Shetland.

The most extraordinary aspect of the debate in Scotland is the SNP's promising a seamless transition back into the EU if the public vote for a separated Scotland. That is another in a long line of assertions that are not based on fact and not backed by any satisfactory answers. Indeed, we heard the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) ask the SNP's finance spokesperson what the currency would be. There was no answer. Can the House imagine the shadow Chancellor or the Chancellor standing at the Dispatch Box unable to tell the country what its currency would be? They would be laughed out of the Chamber. They would have to resign before they reached the Speaker's Chair.

[Ian Murray]

One thing is for sure: Brexit shows us that breaking up is incredibly hard to do, and I am disappointed again that the SNP has introduced a debate on the EU but not taken any time at all to set out how, why or whether it can get a hypothetically independent Scotland back into the EU. Perhaps it will answer some key questions, as its separation strategy seems to be very similar to the strategy of Nigel Farage and the Brexiteers. It wants to cherry-pick the best bits of the EU, but not take the bits that it knows the public would find unpalatable.

The SNP's proposition is that Scotland would seamlessly rejoin the EU as an independent nation, but not take the euro, or sign up to Schengen, or meet the deficit and debt requirements, or have its own currency, or meet the exchange rate mechanism rules, or re-enter the common fisheries policy. The sterlingisation plan excludes it from entering the exchange rate mechanism.

Most astonishingly, the Scottish Health Secretary said on "Question Time" last month that Scotland would not need to sign up to the very trade and co-operation agreement that we are debating today between the EU and the UK, which I and the SNP are rallying against in this debate. How is that even possible? Scotland would become an independent nation and would seamlessly go back into the European Union, and then would not even have to implement at the border at Berwick the trade and co-operation agreement that was signed between the UK and the EU? That is just implausible.

We know that the relationship between Scotland and the rest of the UK, in the hypothetical event that Scotland was ripped out of the UK, would be determined by the very trade and co-operation agreement that was signed on Christmas eve by the Prime Minister. All the problems that are being faced by Scottish industries such as fishing, manufacturing, agriculture, exports and financial services that we might hear about this evening would increase fivefold or more, as the rest of the UK is far and away the largest market for Scottish goods and services. This just does not make sense, and it is about time the SNP faced up to those key questions and was straight with the Scottish public. That is all I ask: be straight with the Scottish public and answer the questions.

Scotland has two Governments making promises to the Scottish people that they cannot deliver, and making promises to the people and businesses of Scotland that they have no intention of delivering. The problem is that the UK Government see the relationship achieved with the limited last-minute deal between the UK and the EU as the ceiling of their ambition—we heard that tonight from the Minister—but we do not. We see it as being the floor from which to build. We need to work hand in hand with industry, business, our trade unions and our European partners and friends to achieve practical solutions so that we can face the challenges thrown up by this deal with the EU and grab those future opportunities.

This deal must be built on; it must be the start, not the end. We have to live in the reality, and while we would not have taken us to this position, that is where we are. The deal has to be about a deeper, mutually beneficial relationship that means businesses can thrive. That means repairing the tattered relationship with our EU partners. It means putting aside the ideological nationalist agenda from both Governments and working in the national interest. Now more than ever, we need

what the Scottish public are crying out for, which is both Governments, Scottish and UK, working together to mitigate aspects and disadvantages of covid and Brexit, but I fear that I should not hold my breath.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): There is now a four-minute limit.

5.12 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I listened very carefully to the opening remarks of the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). What I find quite extraordinary about the SNP is its ability to hold to two completely incompatible and inconsistent policies at the same time. We recently concluded the SNP's first debate of this afternoon, in which it argued that Scotland should be separate from the rest of the United Kingdom. It has now introduced a debate to complain about the economic impact of the UK leaving the European Union. A total of 60% of Scotland's trade is with the rest of the UK, worth more than £50 billion, against £16.6 billion in exports to the EU, yet the SNP wants to rip Scotland out of that United Kingdom economic union. More than half a million Scottish jobs are linked to trade with the rest of the United Kingdom, yet the SNP continues to obsess about taking Scotland out of the United Kingdom.

It is not surprising that so many people are baffled when, on the one hand, the nationalists argue for Scotland's separation from that political and economic union, yet, on the other, they want even closer ties with another political and economic union—separation from the UK, but yet closer ties to Brussels and the EU.

I do not need to remind the House that the SNP tried to impose an economic shock on Scotland by recklessly voting for a no-deal Brexit at the end of the transition period with the EU. The EU-UK trade deal is worth £653 per person over a no-deal Brexit, according to the Scottish Government's own analysis, yet SNP MPs trooped into the Lobby to vote for a no-deal Brexit. They voted for a no-deal Brexit and all the economic challenges that that would undoubtedly have brought. They voted for a no-deal Brexit in spite of the financial hardship that would bring to families in Scotland. They also voted for a no-deal Brexit despite the Federation of Small Businesses, the Confederation of British Industry, the British Chambers of Commerce, the National Farmers Union of Scotland, the National Sheep Association and many other organisations, as well as our constituents, urging MPs in Parliament to back the UK-EU trade deal. So it is a bit rich to hear them squealing today about the impact of Brexit when they voted for a no-deal Brexit.

We should not be surprised that SNP Members voted against the UK-EU trade deal or that they supported a no-deal Brexit. In fact, they have a track record of voting against trade deals, even those from which we benefited as members of the European Union, some of which this Government have rolled over for the benefit of the UK and Scotland. SNP Members complain about our exit from the EU, yet they failed to support or abstain on countless trade deals that we have secured. They voted against trade deals with Canada, South Africa and Korea and abstained on trade deals with Japan and Singapore. I would welcome an intervention from one of the SNP Members here today to tell us which single trade deal the SNP has supported in the past 15 years.

No? Nothing. They are not favour of trade or of jobs; they are not in favour of all the families and people we represent who are dependent on trade in Scotland. They are against trade and against the jobs that are supported by trade—[*Interruption.*] I will be happy to take an intervention from the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) if he wishes to tell me which trade deal he supports. No? I didn't think so.

We are already witnessing the profound economic benefits that Scottish industry is having from our new international trading relationships, and I very much welcome that. It is clear that SNP Members are not in favour of independence; they want closer ties with Brussels. They want to take Scottish fishermen back into the hated fisheries policy and to take farmers back into the common agricultural policy. They do not want independence; they just want closer ties with Brussels.

5.16 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) [V]: Happy St Patrick's day, Mr Deputy Speaker. Latha Fhèill Pàdraig sona dhut. That completes the triple crown of senior languages of these islands here today. I believe that Welsh and Irish Gaelic have already been used. I just thought I would make that remark, given that St Patrick, celebrated and publicised by Ireland around the world, is the world's most famous Scotsman. I note that today was a day when the House of Commons celebrated independent Ireland at the same time as it decried the chance for Scotland to be independent. I have to wonder what it is about the people who go to the House of Commons and respect independent countries while talking down the countries that remain in the UK. There might be a lesson for Scotland in that.

These two debates today, on independence and Brexit, work hand in hand. They are perhaps either side of the same coin, and it is important that they should both be looked at and discussed. It is good that we have this second one on Brexit, which more of us can participate in than managed to get into the oversubscribed earlier debate, such is the keenness to talk about independence—particularly, I noted, among Tory MPs. Perhaps that is a sign of things to come. There will be a lot more talk on independence as time goes on.

I want to reflect on what is really happening with Brexit. I noted the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) condemning the idea of independence at this moment. Independence at this moment would, of course, be the escape from the Brexit that he foisted on us in the middle of a pandemic—a pandemic that he used as a pretext for not launching the lifeboat in Scotland, which is something that we need to do with great urgency. It would be far better being in the club of 28 equal nations than being talked down to at Westminster in the way we were today, but such is life. I say to the hon. Member for Moray: let the people choose, and if his party wins the election in May, we will accept that the Scottish people do not want independence, but if we win the election in May, I hope he will have the democratic grace to realise that, with an SNP victory, that is exactly what the people have in mind.

We know where we are at the moment. We have no new trade deals adding to GDP, and we have a Brexit that is going to take away 4.9% of UK GDP over the next 10 years. The trade deals that have been signed are merely roll-over trade deals. On this St Patrick's day,

it is interesting to look at where Ireland was at one time. In 1940, 90% of Irish trade went to the UK. Now, 11% of Irish trade goes to the UK. It is not that Ireland has stopped trading with the UK; it is just that it has discovered the rest of the world, through independence and through being part of the European Union. In fact, there are more jobs in the UK dependent on Ireland than ever there were when Ireland was part of the UK. That goes to show not only the benefits that independence have brought to Ireland, but those it is bringing to people in the UK who are finding that their own jobs and prosperity are dependent on a successful neighbour next door. When we make Scotland independent and as successful as Ireland, there will be even more jobs in England dependent on that success of Scotland, so it will be a win-win situation. Ireland's GDP was once 80% of the UK's, and now it is 172% of the UK's.

In my constituency, we are seeing the problems with Brexit. Salmon going to Austria is getting returned. Shellfish problems are legion, as we all know. From islands, ferries have to leave earlier and the admin costs are going up. Arts organisations such as Ceòlas in Uist, which had European structural funds, are unsure if they are going to get UK prosperity funds. The reality is that there are difficulties every step of the way.

In truth, Scotland, in the referendum of 2014, said that we will stay in the UK if it is in the EU—that was supported by 55%—but in 2016, 62% of Scotland went for the EU alone. The EU is more popular than the UK. Let us have our next say, and let Scotland decide which way it is going.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Happy St Patrick's Day to you, Angus, and I know where we would have been celebrating later on this evening, had these been normal times, but they are not.

5.20 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) [V]: I have declared my business interests in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I welcome the opportunity to debate the many opportunities that Brexit presents. It was always the case that, once we had achieved Brexit, the Government needed to use the freedoms it brings to promote the greater health and prosperity of United Kingdom citizens. We meet today with a success already as a result of these freedoms. The United Kingdom Government decided last year not to join the common vaccine procurement system of the European Union. They went their own way. They had confidence in British science and in British medicine, and they had confidence in great companies based in the United Kingdom and in our great universities.

It is tremendous news that, as a result, the United Kingdom helped pioneer one of the first successful vaccines. The United Kingdom pre-ordered a very large number of vaccines for United Kingdom people on the basis that some of these vaccines would be good and would be available for use, and that put the United Kingdom in a position to vaccinate much earlier, saving more lives than those countries can that were not in the happy position of having early supplies of vaccine. Even our regulators were quicker and more agile. Our regulators gave regulatory approval to the first vaccines some weeks before the European regulator, though the European regulator came to the same view in due course.

[John Redwood]

I think this is a model for how we can use our freedoms more widely to promote our health and better prosperity. I would draw the Government's attention to a very important policy initiative from President Biden. They may find it surprising to see me recommending something from a Democrat President, but I think his 24 February Executive order—looking at America's supply chains, and saying that America can do much better at developing its own technology, putting in its own industrial capacity and creating many better-paid jobs by having more capacity in the United States—is a model we should follow. Indeed, it is the model we have been following with the development of the vaccine, which has led to more good jobs in the United Kingdom and more United Kingdom productive capacity.

The Biden initiative starts with a very rapid—100-day—attempt to fix the need for the United States of America to have a much bigger presence in pharmaceuticals, batteries, rare earths and minerals, and semiconductors. There is then an annual programme, involving all the relevant Departments of Government, of going through the supply chains and asking what can be done to use innovation funding, Government procurement and Government regulation to encourage more onshoring and more exciting technical developments. Of course, a country needs to have strong competition law and not to abuse state aids, but many good things can be done with the massive procurement programmes of the British Government, like those of the American Government, to encourage competitive responses in the United Kingdom and to encourage that increasing capacity.

I hope the Government will do more on both the Northern Ireland border issue, where I think we need to be firm—and I support their recent action—and on the fishing industry, where I think we need more rapid progress to build up our fleet and to take back control of more of our fish. That was the promise and that is clearly the intended journey, but I wish the Government would be firmer, because I do not think that at the moment we have the right deal to promote that industry. If we wish to develop our green policies, as we do, we need to do more at home, cut the food miles, cut the fish miles and have more value added in the United Kingdom.

5.24 pm

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Happy St Patrick's Day, Mr Deputy Speaker.

My Irish surname is from ancestors who arrived from Ireland in Bellshill in Scotland before only later moving to England. That is not just a tenuous way of explaining why, as a central London MP, I am joining today's debate. I am joining it because I share a lot of the anger over Brexit. I voted with SNP Members so many times to oppose it, including against triggering article 50. I share concerns about Brexit and how we got here. My constituents, like Scotland, voted massively to remain and rejected the atrocious lies of Dominic Cummings' campaign in 2016, such as the claims that it would be "the easiest deal in human history", now so brutally exposed for exporters and importers alike, despite the Minister's claims about opportunities opening up. All those lies included the £350 million a week extra for the NHS when nurses have been slapped in the face and given a pay cut after their heroic efforts against covid.

But those who attack the dishonesty in campaigns by prominent Conservatives should also reflect on the fact that the last referendum campaign in Scotland was based on the dishonesty that staying in the EU was possible. The irony is that the SNP could have taken Scotland out of the EU before the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) and others were having wet dreams about the whole of the UK leaving. Let us not double down on that previous deceit or pretend that independence is the solution to today's problems. My constituents in Bermondsey face the same problems today as those in Bellshill. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs admits that businesses face £7.5 billion in extra costs this year because of the Government's pitiful trade deal—a deal that has already led to an export slump of £5.6 billion. I am seeing two more businesses from my constituency affected this week—Selfmade Candle and Gisela Graham Ltd, which just this year have already seen new costs of 20 grand between them as a result of this deal. What will not help them, though, is what the SNP offers, because they know that the answer to Brexit and the devastation of trade barriers with the EU is not the further devastation of Brexit and more barriers for people and businesses within the UK.

I share the SNP's concern at the petty nationalism that has taken over the Tory party, cannibalised by UKIP, and I share everyone's concern that Tories have become scared of their own members—scared to the extent that they are no longer a genuinely Unionist party, and no longer working in the UK national or security interest, as this horrendous deal has exposed. But I do not know how the SNP has reached the idea that the solution to all those problems is to be more like Dominic Cummings and more like the Tory party. The solution to division is not more division. The solution to toxic nationalism is not more toxic nationalism. The solution to economic destruction is not more damage, job losses and heartache. Our shared solution to this petty, populist, Trumpesque Tory party is not to enable it or ape it—it is to beat it, together, with our more positive vision of what the UK can be and what our shared values are. I hope we can work on that, stronger and better together, going forward in the interests of all the people across the United Kingdom to fix the damage that this Government's downgraded betrayal of a deal has done to our international standing, to our security, to our economy and to people's opportunities.

5.27 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I would like to make an offer to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), because in my intervention on her she said that I was not interested in the SNP's currency plans. Well, I am interested, and the people of Scotland are interested, so I am willing to give up all of my time for the hon. Lady, the SNP's self-declared shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, to stand up and explain to me, and explain to the people of Scotland, in simple terms, what the SNP's currency would be in an independent Scotland. I give up the remainder of my time to the hon. Lady. [Interruption.] I cannot believe that the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer for the SNP will not take an opportunity to tell this House this—to tell the people of Scotland what independence would mean for them, just in terms of their currency. That is all I am asking for, but in two debates today, with multiple opportunities, the

SNP has refused to tell us. It wants people in Scotland to vote for independence but will not tell them what that will mean. That is unacceptable.

My disappointment was only reinforced when I did as you asked me to, Mr Deputy Speaker, and looked at the voting records from the earlier Divisions that we had. It has now been confirmed by Parliament—by the Vote Office—that every single SNP MP today voted to say that they do not agree that

“the priority of the Scottish people is to recover from the effects of the covid-19 pandemic, and that it would be irresponsible to hold a referendum at this time.”

That is all that SNP MPs were asked to support, but every single one, all 47 of them, and the one independent suspended SNP Member, voted against that. I hope they go back to their constituencies in Scotland and explain to the people they are supposed to represent and to the whole of Scotland, on behalf of their party, why they do not think that our priority during this pandemic should be recovery rather than another irresponsible referendum.

Alison Thewliss *rose*—

Douglas Ross: I am not sure whether this is on the vote or on a future currency for an independent Scotland, but I will give way to the hon. Lady.

Alison Thewliss: Can the hon. Gentleman explain to me what “at this time” means? Nobody is proposing that we hold an independence referendum at half-past 5 on a Wednesday night.

Douglas Ross: The SNP has allocated £600,000 to hold a referendum and campaign for one this year. The hon. Lady’s leader in this place, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), has said that the referendum should be in 2021. In the earlier debate, the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) said it will happen in the next 12 months—whether it is in December or January of next year, it will be within a year. While we are still struggling to fight this pandemic, while we are still seeing lives lost and livelihoods on the line, the SNP priority is, as always, separation. That is their mandate and all they are interested in.

We also have had no comment from the SNP today, in a debate about Brexit and the EU, on the EU’s roll-out of the vaccination programme and how we in Scotland have benefited from decisions taken by the UK Government, led by the Prime Minister, to procure and develop vaccines right at the start of the pandemic. These vaccines are protecting people in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. How does our vaccine roll-out in this country compare with that in the rest of the EU, which the hon. Lady would like to take us straight back into?

The hon. Lady also spoke about all the great infrastructure that has been built and developed in Scotland during the SNP terms in office. I tried to intervene on that point, because I would be interested to know what she thinks of the actions of one of her party colleagues, an SNP Cabinet Minister in the Scottish Government, Fergus Ewing, writing to his own Government asking their Transport Secretary to give his constituency some good news ahead of purdah—ahead of the period in which the Scottish Government are not allowed to

make any further announcements. SNP MPs know that their 14 years are coming back to haunt them: their inability to get ferries into the water and to get hospitals open to take patients. It has been a litany of failure over the past 14 years and it has come to the extent that SNP Ministers have to ask their own Government to try to sneak out some more information because they have let down so many communities.

Penny Mordaunt: I would just like to update the House by saying that the success of the vaccine programme in Scotland has meant that a third of the eligible population have been vaccinated, whereas the figure in France is just under 8%.

Douglas Ross: The Minister outlines the figures excellently. I know that my own parents have benefited—they have been vaccinated in the Fiona Elcock centre in Elgin. People across Moray and across Scotland have benefited because of the vaccine roll-out in the UK and in Scotland. I want to reiterate that the two debates from the SNP today have been all about division and arguments about the past, with no positive vision for the future. The Scottish Conservatives are determined over the next seven weeks that we focus on Scotland’s recovery and on building back better than before this pandemic struck. We will be supporting jobs and livelihoods and communities right across Scotland. The SNP just want more division and I think that people across Scotland are beginning to realise that after 14 years of failure we can do so much better than that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I would like to try to get as many people in as possible, so after the next speaker I will take the time limit down to three minutes.

5.33 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): It is a genuine privilege to follow the contribution from the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), because I believe that in the six minutes or so he spoke for he did not once mention Brexit, nor did he once recognise the difficulties caused by Brexit. We can conclude only that the Tories do not care about the damage that Brexit has caused.

Let me start by asking: what do we know about Brexit? It was ill conceived and poorly executed, it was an act of political panic and it has turned into an act of economic self-harm. It was driven by a sense of jingoistic exceptionalism that was never going to stand any scrutiny, and all the rhetoric of bright sunlit uplands has wilted under the reality of the problems—all foreseen—that have subsequently emerged.

It was reported in February that Scotland’s salmon farmers had incurred losses of £11 million as a direct result of Brexit—unmentioned by the hon. Member for Moray. On 12 March, it was reported that fish and shellfish exports were down 83%—unremarked by the hon. Member. On the same day, the Food and Drink Federation found that food and animal exports from the UK to the EU had fallen by 63% in January, which is clearly an important matter in the hon. Member’s constituency—unremarked in a debate about Brexit, but then we should not be surprised. The UK Fashion and Textile Association said that it is

“cheaper for retailers to write off the cost of the goods than dealing with it all, either abandoning or potentially burning them.”

[Stewart Hosie]

Research from Make UK showed that 74% of the 200 major industrial firms it surveyed were facing delays with EU imports and exports, and 24 of the largest City of London firms have moved or plan to move assets worth an estimated £1.3 trillion out of the UK due to Brexit. That barely scrapes the surface of the problems.

It is not as if the Tories were not warned. Every pre-referendum economic forecast—certainly the serious ones—predicted a loss of GDP in the minus 2% to minus 7% range. The Treasury said that a free trade agreement could see a loss of GDP growth of around 6.2%, and that was not even the worst of its estimates at that time. In 2018, the cross-Whitehall analysis said that GDP could be 7.7% lower in 15 years under a smooth WTO mitigated arrangement. The one thing we can say about the deal we have with the European Union is that it certainly is not smooth—even the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has belatedly conceded that. Finally, the UK Government's November 2018 long-term economic assessment suggested a GDP fall of 4.9% on a modelled FTA, which worsened to a 6.7% fall, with net zero inflows of European economic area workers, which, of course, for many Tory Brexiteers was all this was really ever about.

The question is, how do we proceed? We should back the motion because, self-evidently, we should regret the damage Brexit has done and that Brexit ever happened at all, but we need to move forward and work out how to improve this situation. Time is too limited for me to give any prognosis in the next 12 seconds, but in short, it is time for the Government to stop the pretence that we have an “excellent deal”, fully recognise the scale of the problems, show some humility and start to fix them.

5.37 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): If the Opposition had been correct about Brexit, the sky would have fallen in by now and Dementors sporting EU flags would be swooping around our heads. If we had listened to Opposition Members of all political colours, we would currently be stuck in a perpetual cycle of referendums, while they ignore the results until they get one that suits them. I never expected the EU-UK divorce to be easy after 40 years; a long career in family law taught me that. I have a word of caution for our Scottish friends in the House: if they think this is tough, can they imagine what it will be like if they destroy a 300-year relationship? Scotland voted no, and we are better together.

We have seen how agile the UK can be outside the EU with the successful vaccine programme. While the EU politics and sows doubt about the Oxford vaccine, knowing full well that this could cause deaths, we are arranging vaccines for people in their 50s. Sadly, through family connections, I know that some people in their 70s in Europe are still waiting for their vaccination. We all benefit from the world being safe from this awful virus, so I hope the European Commission will urgently stop being daft and dangerous with people's health.

I turn back to the Opposition in front of me. I cannot stand the anti-UK rhetoric. The sky has not fallen in, and we delivered the Brexit deal as promised. There have been immediate positives in connection with the most crucial thing that we needed for this country right now: the vaccine. But there are undoubtedly problems

that need to be resolved. I have been writing to Government on behalf of my constituents and I really want to see us taking a lead on proposals to fix issues arising since the end of transition period. Lord Frost continuing to be in charge of the ongoing decisions with the EU is a good thing. It provides consistency and he knows exactly who said what and who offered what.

In my view, the “who said what” and blame game needs to stop in relation to the issues regarding musicians' and entertainers' visas. Stroud is a really creative place packed with artists of all types. I have received a number of emails about the impact and the loss of income and creative opportunities. These are incredibly talented men and women who are very much in demand for their skills. I also think about my EU-facing innovators in Stroud. They are self-sufficient self-starters, but those such as The Beeswax Wrap Co., which is based in Nailsworth, have had stunning growth and they are now facing problems with deliveries, demand and confidence that goods will arrive, and the orders are driving up.

I have confidence in this country, I have confidence that these things can be fixed, and I have confidence in Stroud. I wish that Opposition Members felt the same.

5.40 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: A very happy St Patrick's Day to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will not say it in Welsh, even though St Patrick was Welsh and was born near to me in Neath Port Talbot in Banwen.

I have a lot of sympathy for this motion, partly because it does not mention independence. It sets out the predictable disaster that Brexit has been, which has been made so much worse by an appalling Tory deal. I am acutely aware of the strange irony of having nationalists against nationalism, both in the case of the SNP, which opposed Brexit, yet wants to break up Britain—I suppose that it will be breaking up Scotland next—and that of the Tory nationalists, who wanted to break away from the EU but do not want to break away from Scotland. I am an internationalist and want to see us together as one Union and in closer alignment with the EU.

The simple fact is that the Budget confirms—as the Office for Budget Responsibility said—that the appalling Brexit that has been negotiated will cut our economy by some 4%, which equates to about 1.4 million jobs lost according to the Office for National Statistics. That will cost everybody in this country about £1,300, so it will cost a family of four about £5,000. That is not as much as would be lost by Scottish independence, as confirmed by the London School of Economics, but we are here to talk about Brexit.

The people who voted for Brexit, many of whom I represent, presented good ideas of wanting more jobs, more money and more control. That is what they were promised. There is nothing wrong with wanting those things. The problem is that they did not get them. They were promised an “oven-ready” Brexit, but the oven was turned off during lockdown and the pandemic. The Welsh and Scottish First Ministers both wrote to the Prime Minister in June and September to say, “Why do we not extend the transition period, because we will lose preparedness and negotiation time? And if we are Brexiting, let's get the best Brexit.” Stupidly, of course—the Welsh First Minister recently said he was “baffled” by this—the

Government and the Prime Minister decided that they would go ahead, and look where we have ended up. We have massive reductions in our exports. There will be impairments to our imports from April, so instead, the Prime Minister delivered a half-filled sack on Christmas eve with no services inside, despite the fact that 42% of our exports to the EU are services. We have ended up just saying, “Let’s have more deals under the comprehensive and progressive trans-Pacific partnership”, but the Japanese one is worth £1.6 billion when it would have been worth £2.6 billion through the EU.

In summary, I am a man who wants to see us as four nations, in closer alignment to the EU, and the Government not to hide the problems of Brexit through covid, and, incidentally, not to stop people marching—if they do eventually want to resume membership—through the awful Bill banning protest yesterday. Let’s stay together.

5.44 pm

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): I am genuinely sorry to make Members sit through two speeches from me today, but I must point out that this is the second Opposition day debate that has continued to highlight the strange contradictions and paradoxical policies of the Scottish National party. We have had a debate in which the SNP extolled the virtues of independence, yet in this debate it is wishing to submit to the whims and diktats of the EU. May I politely remind the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) that she and her party voted against the deal that this Government provided? Without that deal, the Scottish people would have had a no-deal exit, which would have meant even more of the disruption to UK services that she complains so much about from the SNP Front Bench.

The SNP extols the virtues of European Union ties, but the SNP and the Labour party were major proponents of the EU vaccine scheme. The Scottish National party’s Constitution Secretary—the very person responsible for devising the arrangements for Scottish separation—was promoting the EU scheme and insisted that the UK’s decision not to join the EU vaccination scheme was an “idiotic refusal”. However, thanks to our vaccine scheme, doses per 100 people are three times higher in Scotland than the European Union average—37.5 doses per 100 people, compared with 11.1 doses per 100 people in the EU. The Scottish Housing Minister called the UK Government “ideological, inept and irresponsible”. In light of these facts and the decisions that this Government took to ensure that the people of Scotland could access lifesaving vaccines, I rather think those comments would be better directed at the party of the hon. Member for Glasgow Central, whose ideological desire to break up the Union would leave Scotland in a much worse position.

I am also alarmed at the impact the SNP position would have on Scotland’s fishermen. For the first time in a generation, our fishermen will have access to our fish, and the proportion will rise from half to two thirds over time.

The economic support provided throughout this pandemic has shown that we are stronger as a Union, and it has helped Scotland enormously. Almost 1 million jobs in Scotland have been protected through the United Kingdom’s furlough scheme.

Without a hint of irony, Scottish National party Members stand up in front of us and try to claim that our departure from the EU will create unprecedented

economic damage but that our separating from the Union will suddenly deliver a major economic boom for Scotland. Who are they trying to kid? Our commitment to levelling up was demonstrated in the Budget by the relocation of 1,000 civil service jobs from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Cabinet Office to Glasgow and East Kilbride.

Let us stop misleading the Scottish people. Let us have more Conservative MSPs in Holyrood after the next election, so that we can finally have a Government in Scotland who deliver for the United Kingdom and the Scottish people as a whole.

5.47 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I am old enough to remember the days when we were told that, post-Brexit, the UK would hold all the cards and the trade deal would be the easiest in human history; that the EU needed the UK more than the UK needed the EU and there was no downside to Brexit, only a considerable upside; and that trade would boom immediately after we left.

The Office for National Statistics told us what actually happened immediately after we left. Exports to the EU were down by more than 40%, the largest monthly fall since records began. Imports were down as well, by just under 29%, mainly in transport equipment and chemicals. The transport equipment is mainly cars; the chemicals are mainly medical and pharmaceutical products, which some of us might think are pretty important. Also included, of course, are agricultural products such as fertiliser, which we might also think are important. Food imports from the EU dropped by a quarter in January, falling below £2 billion in a month for the first time since 2014.

Far worse from our point of view in Scotland are the figures for exports of food to the EU, which dropped by two thirds: fish and shellfish down by 83%, an industry wiped out; meat exports down by 59%; dairy down by half. Lord Frost, that wisest of Brexiters, suggested that the drop in exports was down to stockpiling ahead of the end of transition; I am not sure whether he has thought through the stockpiling of fresh fish—perhaps happy British fish do not rot.

Small businesses offering mail order have been hit hard. Macbeth’s Butcher in Moray and the Ethical Dairy in Castle Douglas both announced in January that they had to stop sending consignments to Northern Ireland. The Cheshire Cheese Company cannot send its products to EU customers. It, like other businesses, was advised by the UK Government to set up shop in the EU to get around the problems caused by the Government’s own failure adequately to negotiate that easiest deal in human history.

It is not just about trade barriers, either. The world’s largest daffodil grower is Varfell Farms at Longrock in Penzance, but its crop is rotting in the fields because it cannot get the workforce in from the EU. Scottish fruit and vegetable growers face the same problem. The loss of freedom of movement means the loss of seasonal workforces as well as the loss of our rights across the other 27 nations.

Brexit has been and continues to be an utter galloping disaster. Scotland is ill-served once again by this den of inadequacy, and so are Wales and great chunks of England. Northern Ireland has a category of pain all of its own.

[Deidre Brock]

In the midst of that, we have Tory Ministers who struggle to understand the EU rules that were laid out in simple language and that many, many voices warned about in advance. Scotland will see the back of this nonsense soon enough. Independence is coming for us, and we can then start to repair the harm that these witless Brexiters have thrust upon us.

5.50 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: I find myself in a curious position in this debate in that while I agree with SNP Members that the EU deal is disastrous for this country, I am dismayed by their motive. I agree with the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) about the negative impacts of Brexit: a 40% decrease in UK goods exported to the EU; the UK economy shrinking by almost 3% in a single month; and trade groups telling us about fundamental problems with new trade barriers. The Scotland Food & Drink trade association tells us that the seafood industry has suffered an 83% fall in sales to Europe—an 83% fall. The impact is clear for us all to see but, unlike the hon. Lady, I want to fix it, not to double down and make things worse.

I appeal to SNP Members to listen to their own argument and to assess the logic of the motion they have put before us today. They must acknowledge the damage, which they highlight, that is being done to our economy by leaving a strong, successful economic union. If they listen to their own argument, they will stop their incessant and baseless claims that independence is the answer to every problem from economic decline to bad weather.

If ever the people of Scotland wanted an example or blueprint of what separatism and leaving the United Kingdom might mean for their jobs, livelihoods and wellbeing, they have it. Look at the damage done to our small businesses, our exports and our fishing and farming industries and at the economic dislocation that is being brought about by Brexit. That is what this country is going through. Rather than work together to combat it and to use the benefits of being part of the world's oldest and strongest economic union, the SNP would, as I say, have us double down and make things worse—separate Scotland from its biggest market, put up a border, cut us off. Yes, I have heard the claims about an independent Scotland rejoining the EU, and it will come as no surprise to anyone in this place that I wish all the UK could at some point rejoin the EU, but the reality is that that is simply not on the table.

Countries that apply to join the EU have to meet criteria. Scotland does not meet the criteria at the moment, and it would be further from attaining that if it were not part of the United Kingdom. Please, let us address the problems we have, rather than create more. Let us make a joint effort to fix the situation that this Government have created with this disastrous Brexit deal. We must not forget that that was a kind of nationalism, too. That deal, together with the pandemic, has left us in a perilous condition. That is what worries my constituents in Edinburgh West this week. People are worried about the recovery. They want their politicians, at all levels, to focus on recovery, and that is what we should do.

5.53 pm

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): I thought the days of doom and gloom and doubt were behind us and that even the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) would have livened up a bit and become a bit more optimistic about the United Kingdom's future post Brexit, but obviously not. We were told that the UK's role in the world would diminish, but we see 2021 as a year in which the UK stands tall in the world: we are hosting the G7 in Cornwall; we have COP26 in Glasgow; a global education conference will see us trying to educate some of the poorest children in the world; and we are also going into the presidency of the UN Security Council.

More locally at home in the west midlands, there were many predictions in the years since the Brexit vote that we would see job losses and the end of production at, for example, Jaguar Land Rover. However, what have we seen over the past couple of weeks? A firm commitment by the company and investment in the west midlands—30,000 jobs and so many more thousands in the supply chain across the UK. The six new all-electric vehicles that will be built there will provide so much job security to so many people. A global green Britain—that is the impact of Brexit on my community.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) said that many Conservative Members would have benefited from the Erasmus scheme. Well, I have news for her—I do not think they did, actually. Many of those who benefited from that scheme were middle-class people; it was directed disproportionately towards middle-class children. People like me from the background that I had in a working-class community in the suburbs of Birmingham did not have those sorts of opportunities. That is why I am pleased that we have an extra £100 million going into the Turing scheme, which will help people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Time and again, we see examples—I can think of just about 25 million—of Brexit's positive impact on the United Kingdom. One of those examples is vaccines, and today we see disgraceful vaccine nationalism being deployed by the European Union. If SNP Members ever wish to play "Just a Minute" on Radio 4, they would be the worst ever contestants, because we hear hesitation, deviation and repetition from them quite frequently: hesitation, because they want to talk about anything else and far be it from them to talk about any of the issues that are currently happening in the Scottish Government; deviation, because they want to talk about any issue that they do not have responsibility for; and repetition, because time and again they reignite the old debates in this House to cause more division. I thought we had put this behind us. We will see from Brexit that all four nations of the United Kingdom are going to prosper together.

5.56 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) [V]: East Renfrewshire was one of the areas of Scotland—a proudly European nation—that voted most strongly to remain in the EU. Nearly 75% of people in my community wished to remain and yet here we are having been shunted over the Brexit cliff edge, and now my constituents are paying the price.

While tradespeople and professionals are fighting to overcome barriers to working in the EU that they were promised would not be there, Make UK has found that seven in 10 leading manufacturing companies face delays with EU imports and exports, and Scotland's creative sector, which has strong links with Europe, sees these links destroyed. The UK Government rejected special arrangements for the creative sector, and then negotiated so incompetently that they retrieved nothing from the wreckage. Whether it is artists or actors, architects or accountants, or those in the service sector, they have been badly let down.

Students in my constituency enthusiastically embraced opportunities offered to them by Erasmus, benefiting themselves and the wider community in the process. Just last year, the Prime Minister said that would continue, but instead current and future students have been failed yet again, with the UK Government chucking out Erasmus with no credible replacement in place—and, no, the Turing scheme absolutely does not do the job and will leave many of our young folk out in the cold.

Among my constituents are also many EU citizens, who play a vital part in making East Renfrewshire such a vibrant and rewarding place. They thought they were welcome, and they are—they are very welcome and our wider community feel that strongly—but they do not feel welcomed by this UK Government. Their needs come as an afterthought at best to the UK Government with their increasingly hostile environment. Is it any wonder that half a million EU-born citizens left the UK last year, undermining workforce plans in sectors as diverse as social care and advertising?

My constituents are deeply concerned about the impact of Brexit on food and consumer standards, and the actions of the UK Government give them every right to be concerned. Time after time—on trade and agriculture Bills, and the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill—Government Members voted to sign standards away and overrule the devolved settlement. The question is no longer whether this Government will sell out our standards; it is just how and when. There is no doubt whatever that the Prime Minister's so-called oven-ready deal was half-baked at best.

In October, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said,

“there are many areas in which we can co-operate more effectively to safeguard our borders outside the European Union than we ever could inside.”—[*Official Report*, 19 October 2020; Vol. 682, c. 761.]

This prompted the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) to mouth “utter rubbish”. For once, I believe she spoke for all of us. This Brexit, the deal and the consequences are all, as she said, frankly rubbish. No wonder so many proudly European residents of East Renfrewshire are looking afresh at the opportunities that an open, outward-looking, independent Scotland will bring them.

5.59 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab) [V]: This time three years ago in the Chamber I made a speech about St Patrick and Brexit, noting that wherever he was from, St Patrick was not from Ireland, but he freely wandered our shores as thousands did before him and after him. I said then that the Good Friday Belfast

agreement was not just about Northern Ireland, Ireland or a border, but the freedom of movement of people across these islands and the deep roots we have. I ended by saying that the great people of these islands expect to be able to move and trade freely, and that any dilution of that would not be acceptable to any of us. I stand by my words. I love my country. I love my heritage and the country of my birth. But things got worse, not better, after 2018 and this Tory Government, blinded by a singular narrow English nationalism, have divided us further. England is better than that. It is better than they are.

I believe that nationalism is a scourge. It supports one's own to the exclusion of others and people in Scotland rightly rejected it, but what this Prime Minister's Brexit has done is exclude others. It has created division where we thought we were moving forward, and it has given succour to nationalism, separatism and fear. But I remain an optimist, because whatever empire, monarch or constitutional settlement has been in place across these islands, we have continued to trade and migrate. We have married, enjoyed our sports, our arts and our culture. We get on with our lives too often despite, and not because of, political leadership. But we here are political leaders and it is our job to lead, and to defend and advance the interests of our constituents. It is my view that that is never done by excluding others or dividing; it is always done by understanding, including and respecting others. We have mutual interests.

Thirty years ago, politicians in Ireland and Britain did not understand or respect each other. We did not talk or meet, but far-sighted parliamentarians did lead and established forums for us to come together and start to understand each other. I am very proud to have been the British vice-chair of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly for the past few years. In those years, I have had the privilege to sit in the chairs of others in the Senedd, Holyrood, Stormont and the Dáil. I have shared committees with, debated with and had the occasional drink with parliamentarians from all jurisdictions and all parties, some of whom I profoundly disagree with but who have taught me so much about their motivations, and their fears and ambitions for themselves, their families and their constituents.

The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly offers us a way to heal and map the future as parliamentarians. I hope we can bring more informed debate, reflection and respect for difference to the next three years than the last, and I hope other parliamentarians will join us in doing that.

6.2 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) [V]: Five years ago, 70% of Dudley South voters chose to leave the EU. In 2017 and 2019, when Opposition party candidates asked them to reverse that decision, they reaffirmed their choice with large majorities.

For years, Brexit deniers said that the Prime Minister could not get a withdrawal agreement and that once we had left there was no way we would get a trade deal by the end of 2020. Like the cynics in Edgar Albert Guest's poem, they scoffed:

“Oh, you'll never do that;

At least, no one has ever done it”,

[Mike Wood]

but like that poem's protagonist, the Prime Minister "took off his coat" and went to it. I do not know if he "started to sing as he tackled the thing

That couldn't be done,"

but he did it. It was and is a good deal, which they told us "couldn't be done".

It is inevitable that there would be some extremely difficult transitional issues, as we switch from a system that we had been increasingly embroiled in for decades to a new arrangement. It is vital that Lord Frost and his team work with our European partners to get them resolved. For example, one firm contacted me to say that it sells leather goods made in Spain and Portugal. It found that the sale to Poland of one pair of shoes, worth £125, attracted £75 in customs fees. An engineering firm is charged 8% by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to reimport bearings made in Nottinghamshire from the French sole distributor—British bearings. This is not what we understood the agreement to mean. I do not think it is what the negotiating teams understood it to mean either, so we have to continue to work with our European partners to sort out implementation.

Brexit does offer big opportunities. Businesses in Dudley South trade with countries in every corner of the world, and the new trade agreements being negotiated and agreed will open up that trade further. The comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership in particular offers incredible potential to increase trade both with some of our closest trading partners and with some of the world's fastest-growing economies.

However, Brexit is not only about international affairs. It is not only about theoretical government. It is about how we can do things differently here at home. It offers us the chance to look at things such as how we can better structure taxes and have a lower rate of duty, for example, on draught beer or on-sales. That was impossible while we were in the EU, but it is now possible post Brexit. It would allow taxes to better reflect the economic and social contribution that pubs make in all our communities. Taking back control does not mean that all our problems are magically solved, but it does mean that we have the power to take responsibility for those decisions here, in the interests of those we represent.

6.5 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab) [V]: During four long years as a shadow Brexit Minister, I sat through many debates peppered with talk of global Britain, as the Government erected barriers to partnership with our most important allies and closest neighbours with complete disregard for the consequences. The Prime Minister has been at it again this week, talking about the UK's place on the global stage while trashing our reputation abroad, reneging again on international commitments to which he signed up.

It is a time for mature diplomacy—for rebuilding trust to sort out the problems with the Brexit deal as they become increasingly evident. Instead, the Prime Minister has put his former negotiator, apparently no longer trusted as National Security Adviser, back in charge. The now Lord Frost will bring to this vital role all the finesse of doing "origami...with a blowtorch", as the former Conservative party chairman, Lord Patten, said so eloquently.

The Prime Minister may think that fuelling grievances will win good headlines in the *Daily Mail*, but it will not help those facing the consequences of his ideologically driven negotiations. Far from the frictionless trade promised, businesses are threatened by extra costs and bureaucracy, and many are taking the advice of the Government's own officials in moving activities and jobs from the UK to the EU to avoid the barriers that the Government have erected, following many from the services sector, which was completely overlooked in the deal.

It is not just trade that is a problem; taking back control of our borders without the tools to use it is another feature of the deal. Our police and security services have access to less of the information they need to stop dangerous criminals and terrorists entering the country. It does not stop there: performers no longer have the ability to work freely across the continent we share, because the Government refused visa proposals offered by the EU. We have already seen the Government, no longer bound by the EU directives that we helped to write, threaten workers' rights, if put off by a big backlash.

What about the promises to protect environmental standards? Well, tell that to the bees now threatened by neonicotinoids, which were banned under our EU membership. And in an act of senseless educational vandalism, our young people can no longer participate in the Erasmus scheme. Instead, the new Turing proposals provide a clearly diminished offer, with less funding, a more complex application process, stretched universities left to persuade international counterparts to waive fees without the reciprocity of an exchange, and just four weeks to sort it out. It is perhaps no surprise that the Government have given no guarantee of funding for Turing in future years.

It did not have to be like this. It is the result of choices deliberately made by this Government.

6.8 pm

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): In a debate about Brexit, we on the Government Benches talk about the positives. Unfortunately, all we have had from not only SNP Members but others, as we have just heard from the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), is doom and gloom.

In a debate on Brexit today, the one thing that I would have expected to hear about from either the SNP or Labour is the actions of the European Union. We have heard today that the EU is now threatening to block vaccines. We have been successful in the vaccine roll-out because we were able to act independently and flexibly. I say that not to gloat, but because we need to inject into this debate some realism about the freedoms we have and the way in which we can be agile.

Typically, those on the SNP and Labour Benches will put anything positive to do with Brexit down to something else, but we can look at other things that have proven the benefit of the agility we now have. Scotland, as an integral part of the fifth largest economy in the world, is able to look out on the horizon as part of the four nations of the UK and strike new trade deals. Just next month the Prime Minister will lead a delegation to India, and I hope that Opposition Members will join us in hoping that we can find new ways to export our products and services around the world, including to the fast-growing markets in not only India but places like Brazil and South Africa.

Let me turn to a really important sector for Scotland: the Scotch whisky sector. When we were a member of the European Union, the sector was hit with a 25% tariff and sales to the US fell by 30%—that is £0.5 billion-worth of sales. It was this Government, exercising the rights that we have as an independent trading nation, who got those tariffs removed.

We have heard about the Erasmus scheme, but I am afraid it was not all that those on the Opposition Benches like to claim it was. The Turing scheme, however, will be something we can all be proud of. It does not strip opportunities but provides them. It is global in outlook and allows young people from my constituency and in Scotland—whether they are at school, college, university or another training provider—to look at the countries where they want to go and study and take up such opportunities. Really importantly, the Turing scheme has social mobility at its heart, which I would have hoped the Opposition parties would welcome.

All we have heard so far in this debate is doom and gloom, but the opportunities presented by Brexit go far and wide for every corner of our United Kingdom.

6.11 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: I am grateful to the Scottish National party for organising this debate on an issue on which we share common ground in our anger and grief. My constituency of Lewisham East represents and embraces our diverse global communities, including those from EU countries. We campaigned to remain and we voted to remain, and there is strong support for working closely and collaboratively with our EU neighbours.

Labour and the SNP share common frustrations about how the Conservatives have added insult to injury by tearing us out of the EU and then making major errors in handling the aftermath. We were promised a booming future in trade after Brexit; instead, recent data shows that Britain's exports to the EU have fallen by a staggering 39%. Our imports from the EU have fallen by 16% as we await import controls. Business leaders question their future as they see an exodus of foreign workers.

All those elements have a negative impact on our economy at a time when it is already struggling because of the pandemic. This means that there is less bread and butter on the table for many people and families up and down our country. The future is bleak: the latest figures from the Office for Budget Responsibility indicate that every UK household could lose £3,600 as a result of Brexit. I hope the Government are listening. Brexit will cause a deeper economic crisis than we have ever faced. It is time that the Government woke up and smelled the coffee. In particular, the crisis will affect low-wage earners and those on benefits. What is the Government's response?

Although some of us are keen to have a close relationship with our European neighbours, Lord Frost and the Prime Minister seem intent on provoking them. The disgraceful shambles in respect of the Northern Ireland protocol showed the Government's arrogance when it comes to respecting international law. By breaching the terms of the protocol and refusing to back down, we have provoked the EU27 to take legal action against us. I say to our EU friends listening to the debate, this Tory Government do not represent how the Labour party would behave in government.

As I said in my speech earlier today, I believe in nations collaborating to achieve greater things. That is why I oppose the break-up of the United Kingdom. The ideology of the SNP, prioritising sovereignty over unity, is a continuation of the nationalistic ideology that caused this miserable EU separation. I hope that in discussions about the break-up of Unions, hon. Members will look for common ground, rather than areas of difference.

6.14 pm

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): This is the second debate today in which the SNP has reshaped arguments that have been long settled, whether in relation to the 2014 Scottish independence referendum or the 2016 EU referendum. It just so happens that the SNP was on the wrong side of both those arguments. No wonder it wants a rehash of those referendums.

I am proud to be a Conservative Member of Parliament, standing between these Benches having delivered Brexit—something 65% of my constituents in Redcar and Cleveland voted for. We have not just delivered Brexit, because in December we delivered the EU-UK trade deal, which is a fantastic landmark trade deal that many Opposition Members—I know not many of them have turned up for the debate today—did not even vote for, including those from the SNP, which initiated this debate today. They speak of the economic consequences of the UK's departure from the EU. Let me tell the SNP: those consequences would have been far worse if they had gotten their wish and we had not passed the EU-UK trade deal. But we have not just delivered that trade deal; we have delivered many trade deals since our departure from the EU—more than 66, with many more to come, including with the US, I hope.

Brexit was about many things—taking back control of our trade, taking back control of our borders, taking back control of our laws. Aside from the steps that we have taken on trade and laws, we have introduced our points-based immigration system, finally to take back control of our border.

The EU vote was not just about leaving the EU; I have had this conversation multiple times with my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office. The EU vote was about communities like mine in Redcar and Cleveland finally getting their voice heard, whether in Brussels or in Westminster, so that they were actually speaking to those in the corridors of power. One of the best things to come out of the Chancellor's Budget statement only a few weeks ago was the fact that the Government are moving civil service jobs to Teesside, prioritising our towns and allowing people in those left-behind communities to speak to power once again. So, I reject the SNP motion, I fully back the Prime Minister's amendment, and I thank the Government for all they have done in delivering Brexit for my constituents.

6.17 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituency has higher unemployment than we would like, and for that reason we certainly welcomed European funding. It helped to support the construction of a new industrial estate in Kilmarnock, which helped create much-needed jobs. What is the replacement for European funding going to look like? Most Ministers here do not know how to pronounce Loudoun, let alone find their way to my constituency, and it is a disgrace that the

[Alan Brown]

UK's so-called shared prosperity fund is managed by the Secretary of State responsible for English local government.

I have constituents who are worried about achieving settled status before the June deadline. That is really galling when we consider that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, when he was chair of Vote Leave, was telling us that Scotland could have control over immigration. Instead, we are wedded to an insular system, and there is a pig-headedness over immigration that saw the UK rule out proposals for visa-free travel for musicians. This is directly affecting the livelihoods of my constituents Hayley Orr and Alan Scobie. Alan plays in the band Skerryvore, one of the top traditional-type bands in Scotland. Their tours to the EU are important as they promote Scotland culturally and generate visits to Scotland as a consequence, so there is a double whammy here if they cannot freely access the European tour circuit.

FMX Event Services of Fenwick provides logistical support and equipment for touring bands. It is lined up for the likes of Nick Cave for a six-month tour in the EU, but now, due to cabotage arrangements agreed with the UK Government, onward journeys within the EU are impossible, ruling out that type of work at present. A business in the constituency that exported deer antlers could not get export licences, so it has relocated to France. John Gall, who owns Brownings the Bakers, makers of the Kilmarnock pie, confirmed to me that packaging supplies, such as cardboard and polythene, are more limited in quantity at the moment and have increased in cost, as has wheat.

The supply of machinery parts for repairs and maintenance is a possible serious issue for all manufacturers. From my constituency, Worksmart Contracts carries out refurbishment and fit-out work across the UK. It has confirmed that the availability of timber is an issue, and that some prices are up 30% on last year. There is price volatility, too, in metals and fixings, which means that there are risks when it comes to pricing tenders, as a successful contract award down the line might mean a company taking a hit if prices continue to rise after it has compiled the tender.

McLaren's Nurseries in my constituency is the first in Scotland to have a plant passport, but it feels that it is acting as a guinea pig and has found that a costly and exhausting exercise. It is losing out just now on what it can import, and it also faces cost increases. It is looking at having to unpack 10% of its exports—up to 20,000 plants—to be checked by inspectors, which is a massive risk with regard to damage and delay to what are perishable goods. All this goes way beyond teething problems and it is a direct consequence of leaving the EU. It might not be headline news, but this is the real impact on people in my constituency.

6.20 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con) [V]: I cannot say I am surprised that our colleagues on the SNP Benches have decided to devote their time to discussing Brexit today. I missed out on contributing to the previous debate on independence by just one speaker. I would have said, as others did so effectively, that the SNP is a party singularly devoted to doing one thing,

which is focusing its time, energy and effort on doing anything other than tackling the day-to-day challenges facing the people of Scotland. If an issue is not related to independence, the SNP is not really interested. If it does show interest in another issue, that is only if that issue can be related back to independence, which is why we are here now, discussing Brexit.

Furthering the division over Brexit serves the SNP's singular obsession with independence, so today, instead of talking about improving standards in Scottish schools or bringing down waiting times and raising standards in Scotland's NHS, it wants to talk about Brexit. Of all the SNP positions, I find the ongoing ideological crusade against Brexit the most bizarre. As other Members have asked, how can SNP Members argue, in the same breath, for more devolved decision-making and for giving up decision making to the EU? How can they complain about the rights and wrongs of our fishing deal if they want the EU to decide on their fishing? How can they complain about the decisions on farm funding if they want the EU to decide their farm funding? How can they complain about our foreign policy and aid spending when they want to rejoin an EU determined to have a bigger and bigger role in both areas?

I am not here to say that there are no challenges facing us as we navigate our new future outside the EU. Change is always challenging. The SNP is not really interested in helping to overcome those challenges. The only solutions and challenges it is interested in are ones that rely on independence. The Government are spending £23 million to support seafood exporters, standing behind businesses across the UK impacted by export delays at the border. Recognising the unique circumstances of the fishing sector, that fund will support businesses that can evidence a loss in exporting fish and shellfish to the EU. The Prime Minister has committed £100 million to help to modernise fishing fleets, on top of the £32 million that will replace EU funding this year.

While protecting trade with the EU is apparently the SNP's paramount concern, such concern evaporates when it comes to protecting trade with the rest of the UK. Estimates are that more than half a million jobs in Scotland are supported by trade with the rest of the UK. That is over three and a half times more than the 144,000 Scottish jobs that are linked to trade with the EU.

The SNP professes its diehard opposition to Brexit, but that is the latest example of the SNP viewing everything through the prism of independence. Despite the fact that its two positions are entirely contrasting, it feels that that opposition amplifies division and suits its independence obsession, so it will keep waging its ideological crusade long after the Scottish people want it to move on.

6.23 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con) [V]: Despite being born in this country, I found myself living the first two decades of my life in Italy. When I returned to this country in my late teens, I questioned where I belonged, where I identified myself with. The fact that the UK was a Union of four nations that embraced all its identities, ideals and values, which were diverse even within each nation, gave me a sense of belonging among our differences. I love Scotland. The Scottish people are some of the friendliest, most unassuming and loyal people I have

ever met, and the theatre too often played out in this Chamber is not representative of people from Dudley or Dunblane.

Brexit means that all four of our nations, when united, will benefit from our renewed position in the world, leading the way in science, innovation, renewable technologies, defence and cyber. Record investment in all those areas and the ingenuity of our scientists, proven by the development of the Oxford vaccine, coupled with the freedoms unleashed by Brexit, mean that a bright, exciting future lies ahead for us all. The SNP has frequently claimed that the case for Scotland's separation from the rest of the UK is made stronger by Brexit, but if the SNP really wanted a truly independent Scotland, why did it campaign to remain in the EU? The truth, as every SNP Member knows, is that with each passing day the case for separation is made not stronger by Brexit, but weaker.

I am sorry to say that the SNP approach is also somewhat arrogant. It is wrong for the SNP to assume that the EU would agree to Scotland's membership. Why would the EU rush into accepting the membership of a country that spends much more than it earns, while also setting a precedent for other separatist movements? I do not think Spain would be that quick to agree Scotland's membership. If the EU did agree, the terms would be extremely punitive financially, as any Greek would attest.

Wherever they live within this United Kingdom, all that any of our constituents want is leadership, stability, humility and fairness. For SNP MPs to interpret selective narrow facts to support a dangerous separatist agenda, rather than supporting what is right for Scotland, the Scottish people and our democracy, shows failure on each of those tests. People in Yorkshire, Cornwall and the Black Country, and across Scotland, have their own unique identities, but we know that together we are stronger and more prosperous.

6.26 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Government have described the current Brexit chaos as “teething troubles”, but for British businesses exporting to the EU it has been more like root canal surgery without anaesthetic. The Prime Minister could have opted for close alignment with the single market, which was promised by the leave campaign in 2016, but instead he opted for a hard Brexit that is wreaking havoc on our economy. In the Scottish food and drink sector, EU-bound exports for January 2021 were down 63% on the previous year, while those in Scotland's largest food export category, fish and shellfish, were down a crippling 83%, and meat and dairy exports fell by half. Meanwhile, new border controls and red tape mean that the fish is rotten by the time it reaches the EU. That is not a pretty sight, and it is probably not a pretty smell either. As they say in Norway, “There is nothing that is in as much of a hurry as a fish on a lorry.”

However, none of that justifies the nonsensical arguments made by the SNP that somehow the best bet for Scotland is to walk away from its biggest market, the UK. The nationalists rightly point to the costs of walking away from the EU, but in the next breath they claim that walking away from the UK is the right thing to do. Two wrongs do not make a right. Let us not forget that the rest of the UK is Scotland's biggest export market,

with 60% of Scotland's trade going to UK markets and just 19% going to the EU. The economic hit should Brexit and Scottish separation be combined could equate to an income loss of between £2,000 and £2,800 per person every year in Scotland.

The answer to Conservative failures cannot be to put up more trade barriers between Scotland and the rest of the UK. The separatists are making the same mistake that the Prime Minister made: they think separatism delivers sovereignty, but sovereignty in the deeply interconnected world of the 21st century is not a binary choice—just ask the Prime Minister. Despite the claim to have “got Brexit done”, negotiations are still continuing. The UK is involved in myriad working groups and committees—more than 20 different ones—and desperately trying to resolve conflicts, and that is before we even get to the problems of the Northern Ireland protocol, under which the steel industry, for instance, is set to be hit by 25% tariffs once the quotas run out.

The Prime Minister has weakened our negotiating hand. Sovereignty has been diminished, not strengthened. We are not in the room on decisions affecting the huge 500 million-person market on our doorstep. Our country faces one of the biggest economic recessions in the west, with our businesses under increasing strain not just from the pandemic, but from new trading rules with the EU. The last thing any UK nation needs right now is more division. Only seven years ago, the Scottish people voted to remain in the United Kingdom in higher numbers than the number of Scots who voted to remain in the EU. Credit to them—they know that devolution, not separatism, is the way forward. They know that we are stronger together.

6.29 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): I rise to speak with mixed emotions. I am delighted to speak about the benefits of the Union, but it is depressing to be here yet again speaking about the divisions that Brexit has caused in the past few years—even more so, given that the debate has been brought to the Chamber by the Scottish National party.

What we have seen throughout the debate is hypocrisy. There is hypocrisy from the Scottish National party, which wants to hear about the benefits of democracy for independence, but does not want to accept the democracy that it is not in favour of. I am thinking of the Brexit referendum and the two general elections since then. There is the hypocrisy of Labour Members, who almost want to pretend that the past few years have not happened. They are still talking as if Brexit should not have happened and we should still be a member of the single market and the customs union. They lost the argument then and they have lost it ever since.

We have got Brexit done, and we have fulfilled a manifesto commitment. We will make a success of it, but to do so we need to come together. It is time to put the divisions of the past few years behind us and make the best of the situation. We have a levelling-up, one-nation Government who are committed to making sure not only that all regions but that all nations in the Union benefit.

Delivering Brexit has been a monumental occasion, and it means that we have been able to put the stranglehold of Parliament behind us. We can talk about the priorities of the British people, whether that is crime, as we have

[*Christian Wakeford*]

seen in the past couple of days, education, health, defence, or supporting businesses and creating jobs. The Scottish National party should take note and send those messages to Holyrood. It should begin to focus on those priorities and look at constitutional arguments that, quite frankly, are already in the past.

On the back of Brexit, we have been able to focus on the UK's internal market. We have been able to focus on a vaccine programme that is pretty much world leading, certainly within Europe. Again, we hear time after time from Opposition Members that we should have joined the EU vaccine programme. Where would that have got us? We would be nowhere near where we are now. We have vaccinated roughly 40% of the population, because we were not part of the programme to which those Members were intrinsically linked.

We have signed up to many trade deals, for example, the continuity trade deals and the trade deal with Japan, and there are trade deals we are working on. We are truly a global Britain, and we are the better for it because of the Union, not in spite of it. Again, we have heard arguments about how Scotland will be stronger away from the Union, without any thought about what it will do about defence or currency, or having any real policies. The SNP's one policy is separation, and that is not for the Union and it is not for global Britain.

6.32 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab) [V]: The news that EU exports are down by a catastrophic 41% since the introduction of the wafer-thin trade deal does not bode well. From the shores of Scotland to the chemical industry in my constituency, the promised land of sovereignty—of taking control with bonfires of EU red tape—is now experiencing what happens when reality bites. It seems that British-inspired red tape has grown in abundance as the result of a shabby deal and the fact that Ministers did not read the detail. The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) admitted that she did not bother to read the deal. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs agreed to decimate our shellfish industry, accepting the consequences of the deal in a letter to the EU that he signed, then protesting about them, seemingly forgetting about the letter.

These actions have consequences, with exports from Scottish fisheries to the EU now down by a massive 83%—jobs and livelihoods being dealt a crushing blow—while Ministers proclaim that at least unwanted fish are now British and others bizarrely suggest recipes for the types of fish that the British consumer does not usually consume. We are governed by a Dad's Army without the humour.

We have a Prime Minister who has stated that there will be no border across the Irish sea—of course, we now have a border across the Irish sea—and that if any paperwork comes as a result of this deal, it will be ripped up. HMRC has confirmed that British businesses will now spend £7.5 billion a year on handling 215 million more customs declaration forms. Chemical exporters, some of which are based in my constituency, are now paying an additional £1 billion for the pleasure. The only things that have been ripped up are the business plans

and the profit margins of British businesses. Many SMEs simply do not have the resources to cope with the level of bureaucracy.

What legal measures are the Government putting in place to mitigate these permanent boulders in the road? At what stage will the Government do an impact assessment—a courtesy accorded to Albania but not Britain, and certainly not Scotland? As for the SNP, they cannot have it two ways. They claim to want to return to a union with the EU while breaking up the Union with their closest neighbour in the rest of the UK.

6.36 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, although it seems that speaker after speaker, no matter which side of the House they sit on, has chosen to use a substantial portion of their time to castigate the Scottish National party for its choice of debate topic. In truth, I do not think it really mattered which topic we chose. We could have made one debate about sunshine, lollipops and rainbows, and the Conservatives would still have been determined to take up time giving an airing to their only discernible policy of being against a second independence referendum in Scotland, without which they would have nothing at all to put on their election leaflets in Scotland.

Members on both sides of the House throughout the afternoon have displayed a near-demented determination to paint a picture of a dystopian Scotland that anyone actually living in Scotland would seriously struggle to recognise, even in caricature. It rather begs the question why, if the Scottish Government are doing such a bad job, Labour and the Conservatives are currently tussling over which of them will end up in third place in May's Holyrood elections.

The reason that reliable polls on voting intentions show such strong support for Scottish independence recently is, in large part, due to a significant body of voters in Scotland: those who voted no in 2014, who voted remain in 2016 and who, in the light of all they have experienced and their unhappiness with the way that the Brexit project has unravelled under the Conservative Government, have chosen to embrace independence as the best future for our country. It is somewhat ironic to find ourselves being lectured in this debate about the problems being caused by the creation of borders, when that is exactly what the UK Government have just delivered straight down the Irish sea, under the terms of the deal agreed.

The Minister, amid some quite poorly chosen remarks, asked for one positive suggestion in this debate from the SNP. Let me suggest one that would help to remove a large part of the friction over the border currently between Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland: aligning food and agricultural standards with the EU once again, which would remove the need for the phytosanitary checks that are threatening to leave shelves empty.

Brexit may not have been the circumstances in which we would have chosen to embark on a second independence referendum, but once the pandemic is over, they are certainly the circumstances that make it necessary to pursue that goal, to secure our recovery, to secure our prosperity and to secure the integrity of Scotland's hard-won democratic institutions. We have always been a European nation. I look forward to us being so once again.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): As number 39 has withdrawn, the final speaker before the winding-up speeches will be James Daly.

6.39 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con) [V]: As a Member representing an English constituency, I welcome the opportunity to say how much the Union of our countries within the United Kingdom means not only to me but to all my constituents in Bury North. Scotland is a brilliant, beautiful country, and I feel honoured to be a citizen of the United Kingdom.

Every Conservative Member is united behind our Government's mission to level up, bringing prosperity, jobs, increased life chances, massive increases in public infrastructure spending and investment in frontline services to all parts of the United Kingdom. That is our priority, not talking endlessly about Brexit. The SNP could have tabled a motion to address any of those issues, or many more that impact the everyday life and future of everyone in Scotland, and how we in the United Kingdom Parliament could work together with the Scottish Government to secure better outcomes for every resident in Scotland.

Instead, SNP Members chose yet again to prioritise their political need, no matter what the opportunity, subject or context, to bring every debate back to an independence referendum or their overwhelming desire to rejoin the European Union, rather than concentrating on jobs, skills, investment and many other important subjects that are crucial to Scotland's future.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) and many other SNP Members, this is not a debate about the impact of the UK's exit from the European Union; it is a debate about the desire of the Scottish National party to rejoin at all costs. Myriad statistics show the negative impact on the Scottish economy of independence, and I do not believe we should overlook such things, but at heart this debate is about heart. It is about Members speaking up to say, "I believe in the United Kingdom. I believe in its financial construct, its social construct and its partnership. We must and should work together to achieve the best possible outcomes for all our citizens."

Even though I am the Member for Bury North, I want to work constantly and tirelessly to ensure that my Government's desire to level up and to make sure that everyone in each nation of the United Kingdom feels the benefit of the spending that is being put into the economy over the coming years is felt in Scotland.

I will not talk about the past; I want to talk about the future. As an MP, I want to work with the SNP and with all hon. Members to improve people's lives, and not to engage in the same debate over and over again.

6.42 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: Some MPs on the Government Benches seemed to think they were speaking in the first debate. While they still cling to the idea of a post-Brexit fairy tale, other MPs from right across the UK have highlighted the chaos caused by Brexit and the lack of preparation for the end of the transition period.

It is not just that Scotland rejected Brexit, but that the UK Government made such a complete bourach of implementing it. In the run-up to the 2019 election, the

Prime Minister repeatedly boasted that he had an oven-ready deal. Despite this clearly not being the case, he refused to extend the transition period, even in the middle of a pandemic.

Although the Government spent millions on adverts telling everyone to "Get ready for Brexit", there was precious little information on exactly what to get ready for. The necessary IT systems were only launched in December, and the Government have now had to delay the start of their own customs and border checks on imports. Although this gives an additional grace period for importers, it puts UK exporters at a huge disadvantage in relation to their European competitors.

It is clear the Government are hoping to blame the impact of Brexit on covid, but recent ONS data shows a much greater fall in post-transition exports to the EU than during the first covid lockdown last spring. January saw a 50% drop in the export of dairy products, a 59% drop in the export of meat and a staggering 83% fall in seafood exports to Europe.

Seafood is the biggest UK food export, and it is dominated by the Scottish fishing industry. I had actually taken the trouble to read the fisheries section of the trade deal at Christmas, and it was clear to me that there was little movement of quota from EU to UK fishermen for most species, and with no ability to swap quota with their EU counterparts, Scottish fishermen would actually be able to attach less of the popular species such as cod and haddock.

The Prime Minister claims that his deal is tariff-free and also avoids all non-tariff barriers, but I think most exporters, including skippers and fish processors in my constituency, would beg to differ. Our local catch is dominated by lobster and langoustine, 85% of which goes to EU customers. In January, the chaos made it almost impossible to export fresh or live seafood to Europe, and most local skippers had to just stop fishing, as they were already paying to freeze fish that they could not get to market.

Despite boats being tied up for weeks in the harbour, the UK Government have made eligibility for their compensation scheme so narrow that most will not qualify for any financial support. Even now, exports are taking three days instead of one, and many exporters are getting less than half their normal prices. Some on the east coast have resorted to landing their catch directly into Denmark to cut out export delays. Unfortunately, this also cuts out the onshore fishing sector, such as fish markets, processors and exporters. The Paymaster General says that she is looking for solutions to Brexit problems. May I gently suggest that the UK Government reconsider their decision to turn down a veterinary agreement with the EU, thereby reducing the sanitary and phytosanitary checks that are causing border delays? The Prime Minister's understanding may not be too clear, but this is exactly what is meant by non-tariff barriers.

Food and drink are not the only products to be affected. Leaving the European Aviation Safety Agency has already had an impact on pilots and is now increasing costs for aerospace companies. It is not just European customers who do not yet accept the UK Civil Aviation Authority's certificates; global customers do not recognise them either, and they expect European Union Aviation Safety Agency—EASA—certification. Inter-Tec, an aerospace company in my constituency, has had to establish an office in Ireland to maintain its

[Dr Philippa Whitford]

EASA design organisation approval. As well as paying for EASA registration, costing £3,800 per year, it has now had to pay over £11,000 to register with the Civil Aviation Authority, and it faces paying another £11,000 every year in exorbitant annual fees that are three times those of EASA.

With the aerospace industry suffering from the impact of the pandemic, it is hard to understand how the Government think these businesses can survive, let alone thrive in the UK. Such manufacturers are also exposed to the Prime Minister's other great fallacy: that there are no tariffs in the UK-EU trade deal. Even a cursory perusal of the section on rules of origin shows that manufacturers such as aerospace or electronics, which use a high proportion of non-UK components, will face tariffs when they export their finished goods into the EU.

In addition to the direct harm of Brexit, it is being used as an excuse to undermine devolution. The United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 can now be used to force lower food safety and environmental standards on Scottish consumers, while a return to direct rule on infrastructure spending means that UK Ministers, rather than the Scottish Government, will get to decide about Scotland's priorities. This could result in Scotland's infrastructure budget being squandered on a white elephant of a tunnel to Northern Ireland, despite the lack of political support for it in either country or any evidence of economic benefit. For Northern Ireland, the problem is not with the ferries but with the Brexit bureaucracy inherent in the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement.

Brexit is a litany of broken promises, with claims that there would be little impact on trade and no change for EU citizens. Even last January, the Prime Minister promised young people that the UK would stay in the Erasmus scheme. The loss of freedom of movement undermines Scotland's attempt to deal with the demographic challenge of an ageing population and creates workforce issues in public services right across the UK. There has already been a 90% drop in the number of EU nurses coming to the UK, while the Home Office's health and care visa does not even cover all care workers.

The Government's hard Brexit bears little resemblance to the sunny uplands eulogised in 2016, and makes a mockery of the promise made during the Scottish independence campaign, "Vote no to stay in the EU". The other broken promise was that "Scotland is an equal partner in a family of nations". Well, that has not held up very well, as we saw the 2016 compromise proposal from the Scottish Government dismissed within weeks. The Prime Minister has treated Scotland's wishes and interests with contempt, and he is already boasting that he plans to ignore the democratic will of the Scottish people.

MPs from other parties have criticised SNP support for the EU, but that just suggests they have not looked at the difference between the two Unions. The outcome of the vote that happened earlier this afternoon and that which will happen at the end of this debate serve to illustrate how even a clear majority of Scottish MPs are simply overruled in this place. This contrasts with the EU, in which countries work as partners and are involved in making decisions. I believe it is only as sovereign nations in their own right that the countries of the UK could avoid having decisions such as Brexit forced on

them against their will and could instead choose to work together on common goals. It is only with independence that Scotland and the other UK nations will ever be equal partners on these islands.

6.51 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez): I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have taken part in this afternoon's debate. The contributions from most have been passionate, insightful and optimistic about our nation's new path outside the European Union, while recognising that our ambitious and wide-reaching trade and co-operation agreement with the EU will take time to embed itself. Most also set out a belief in the UK.

The British people's choice to leave the European Union has often been mis-characterised as a nostalgic, inward-looking reflex, and today we have heard from the SNP that it is "post-imperial stress" syndrome. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) derided the UK as "insular little Britain", while Labour MPs suggested it is toxic nationalism and a disaster. The future is bleak, said the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby). Sometimes it feels as though we are still in the last Parliament. If only they did talk of sunshine, lollipops and rainbows.

Instead, I believe the vote to leave was a recognition, first, that the world of tomorrow demands agility, speed and nimbleness in resolving the challenges we shall face, with greater democratic accountability, not federalism, in decision making. The vaccine roll-out is a case in point. International co-operation and partnership will always be vital for the UK, but that need not be channelled via a costly bureaucracy.

Secondly, the vote was as much about ourselves and how we govern ourselves as it was about the EU, and my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) had that spot-on. It was a request by the British people for us to be more accountable—not to seek scapegoats, but to deliver to communities solutions that fit them. Those in the SNP, in their relentless, sneering negativity, have made it quite clear that they see themselves as unwilling passengers on that journey, but we recognise that Scotland is not the SNP and that the Scottish people are integral to our collective success as active and much-valued builders of the UK's future.

This is why we are not just focused on the opportunities for Scotland that stem from our leaving the EU, but intent on making the levelling-up agenda mean something for each of the four nations in the UK. Ironically, given their appetite for such polls, SNP Members like to frame the choice of voters at referendums as mistakes, and today is no different as they seek to tell the British people once again why they were wrong to leave the EU.

SNP Members talk about the Erasmus scheme without highlighting the tremendous new opportunities for Scottish students from the Turing scheme, which will open up study placements across the world, not just the EU, from September, with grants provided and tuition fees waived. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Gary Sambrook) highlighted the opportunities open to working-class constituents in his city.

SNP Members talk about the challenges to the fishing industry without setting out the investment that we are making to grow the Scottish fishing fleet, the collaboration with industry and European partners to tackle border

frictions head-on, or the fact that under the agreement we have reached, Scottish fishermen will benefit from being outside the strictures of the common fisheries policy. They talk about the loss of EU regional funding without explaining that we will be at least matching it.

Alan Brown: Will the Minister address the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) about the fact that Scottish fishermen cannot swap quotas, and therefore cannot actually access more of the cod and haddock that they rely on as their key income?

Julia Lopez: The Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), is running the Scottish fisheries taskforce, which is going through some of the issues that the hon. Gentleman highlighted.

SNP Members talk about the loss of EU regional funding, as I mentioned, without explaining that, through the new UK shared prosperity fund, we will at least be matching the funds that have already been distributed to the benefit of communities across our four nations. They talk about the positive role of immigration to the UK without understanding that the desire for greater control of our borders does not undermine the warmth of our welcome to talented, hard-working people from around the world, as our new points-based system attests. They talk of their concern for small business without explaining how our moving away from the EU's complex procurement regime, rather than clinging closely to it, as they so desire, could open up many more opportunities for SMEs to bid for Government contracts. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) rightly challenged us to be even more ambitious in this area.

I have heard concerns today about Scottish exports without recognition that geographical indications for valued Scottish products remain in the trade and co-operation agreement, and that those products can now also find new markets as we secure ambitious new trade deals with nations such as America and Australia, and we can benefit from those already agreed with Singapore, Japan and Canada. SNP Members portray the UK as a spent force without celebrating the fact that Glasgow will be hosting the COP26 conference, showing global leadership on the issue of climate change, as well as British ingenuity in green tech.

We do not define the relationships between our nations by our 40-odd years of membership of the EU. No—we are bound by the cultural, familial and economic ties of centuries, which SNP Members want to dismantle as they seek so desperately to bind Scotland back into EU bureaucracy. We also have the humility to recognise that our Whitehall-centric model of Government can be improved. It does not do a good enough job of utilising the talents and hearing the voices of everyone in the UK. That is why, this week, the Cabinet Office announced our second headquarters in Glasgow, where at least 500 civil servants will be based as we relocate at least 1,000 roles to Scotland, including from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Brexit was not just about the EU; it is a creative catalyst for us to govern better, which is not a challenge that the SNP seems up for—not when shortcomings can be obscured by finger-pointing. This move brings key decision makers

closer to the communities they serve so that we understand the perspective of people in East Kilbride as much as south-west London.

The integrated review published this week on national security, defence and foreign policy sets out the Prime Minister's vision for the UK in 2030: a stronger, more secure, prosperous and resilient Union that will draw on tremendous Scottish capabilities in space, cyber and maritime industries.

I am grateful for the valuable points that have been raised by right hon. and hon. Members throughout this debate, and I regret that time does not allow me to cover all of them. I have great affection for the Chair of the International Trade Committee, the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), from our time together on that body. He will know that the demand for Scottish goods comes from nations beyond the EU and that with tariff-free trade secured in the TCA, we now have scope quickly to dismantle tariffs to new markets. Scotland already exports £7,600 worth of goods to the US every minute, but a new FTA could unlock even more opportunity with the US.

Right hon. and hon. Members highlighted genuine constituency concerns this afternoon that I do not seek to brush over. We recognise that there has been friction for seafood exporters and we have set up the seafood distribution support scheme and the Scottish seafood exports taskforce to work through these issues constructively. I received an email just yesterday from a French counterpart in the Hauts-de-France region who is actively engaged with the taskforce and wished to offer assurances that our continental friends are every bit as eager as we are to deal with issues of paperwork, given the exceptional quality of Scottish seafood and its importance to their regional market, which contains Europe's largest processing seafood processing centre.

On the issue of touring musicians, we are alive to the concerns that have been raised. We have sought a more ambitious deal with the EU. Unfortunately, that request was rebuffed and we are now actively working with the industry to see how the Government can facilitate their ambitions.

The Government remain committed to ensuring that every success is made of our status as an independent, outward-looking nation. We believe that this is an exciting new chapter in our national story, to which the contributions of the Scottish people will be fundamental. Indeed, we have ambitious plans for every part of the UK. Unfortunately, today the SNP has rather limply and sourly exposed that it would rather keep up its habit of blaming others than lay out its own ideas for improving the lives of Scottish people.

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

The House divided: Ayes 65, Noes 361.

Division No. 242]

[6.59 pm

AYES

| | |
|-------------------|----------------------------|
| Bardell, Hannah | Callaghan, Amy |
| Black, Mhairi | Cameron, Dr Lisa |
| Blackford, rh Ian | Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair |
| Blackman, Kirsty | Chamberlain, Wendy |
| Bonnar, Steven | Chapman, Douglas |
| Brock, Deidre | Cherry, Joanna |
| Brown, Alan | Cooper, Daisy |

Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela
 Davey, rh Ed
 Day, Martyn
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Flynn, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Hanna, Claire
 Hanvey, Neale
 Hendry, Drew
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Jardine, Christine
 Lake, Ben
 Law, Chris
 Lucas, Caroline

MacAskill, Kenny
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Mc Nally, John
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McLaughlin, Anne
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Smith, Alyn
 Stephens, Chris
 Stone, Jamie
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thompson, Owen
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Ayes:

**David Linden and
 Richard Thomson**

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Ahmad Khan, Imran
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Amess, Sir David
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew

Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishty, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims

Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Kate
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon

Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome

Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew

Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:

Maggie Throup and
 Tom Pursglove

Question accordingly negated.

The list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy, is published at the end of today's debates.

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

Question agreed to.

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

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement, and recognises the enormous opportunities for Scotland's economy.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 3 and 4 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

POLICE

That the draft Representation of the People (Proxy Vote Applications) (Coronavirus) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 22 February, be approved.

ECCLESIASTICAL LAW

That the draft Grants to the Churches Conservation Trust Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 19 January, be approved.—(*Leo Docherty.*)

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS COMMITTEE (TEMPORARY STANDING ORDER)

Ordered,

That the European Statutory Instruments Committee Order of 3 February 2020 be amended as follows:

(1) After paragraph (1)(a) insert:

“(aa) any of the following documents laid before the House of Commons in accordance with paragraph 8(3)(b) of Schedule 5 to the European Union (Future Relationship) Act 2020—

(i) a draft of an instrument; and

(ii) a memorandum setting out both a statement made by a Minister of the Crown to the effect that in the Minister's opinion the instrument should be subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament (the negative procedure) and the reasons for that opinion, and”;

(2) in paragraph (2), delete “paragraph (1)(a)” and insert “paragraph (1)”;

(3) After paragraph (2)(a) insert:

“(aa) contains any provisions of the type specified in paragraph 6(2) of Schedule 5 to the European Union (Future Relationship) Act 2020 in relation to which the Act requires that a draft of the instrument must be laid before, and approved by a resolution of, each House of Parliament (the affirmative procedure);” and

(4) Leave out paragraph (16) and insert:

“(16) This Standing Order shall lapse—

(a) in so far as it relates to documents laid in accordance with paragraph 3(3)(b) of Schedule 7 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 (and matters arising from the consideration of such documents), at the end of the period after which no more regulations may be made under section 8(1) of that Act;

- (b) in so far as it relates to documents laid in accordance with paragraph 17(3)(b) of Schedule 7 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 (and matters arising from the consideration of such documents), at the end of the period after which no more regulations may be made under section 23(1) of that Act; and
- (c) in so far as it relates to documents laid in accordance with paragraph 8(3)(b) of Schedule 5 to the European Union (Future Relationship) Act 2020 (and matters arising from the consideration of such documents), at the end of the period specified in paragraph 8(1) of that Schedule.”—(*Leo Docherty*.)

Transport for the North: Funding

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Leo Docherty*.)

7.10 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I thank Mr Speaker for granting this debate this evening. I sought it after the Prime Minister’s response to me in the House at Prime Minister’s Question Time on 24 February, when I asked him:

“Is the 40% cut to Transport for the North’s budget part of the Prime Minister’s plans for levelling up the north?”

He responded:

“There has been no such cut, and we intend to invest massively in Northern Powerhouse Rail, and in railways in the north and across the entire country.”—[*Official Report*, 24 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 911.]

That statement was simply incorrect, and I therefore welcome the opportunity this evening to set out the facts.

As background, in April 2018, Transport for the North became England’s first statutory sub-national transport body. Its role was to provide strategic advice on road and rail investment, helping to shape projects, although decisions are still made ultimately in London; to co-manage the north’s rail franchises through the Rail North partnership; to co-client large-scale projects, such as Northern Powerhouse Rail, and to develop and implement an integrated and smart travel ticketing project across the north.

On 4 January this year, Transport for the North received a funding letter from the Department for Transport. This letter was not good news. First, it stated that Transport for the North’s core funding allocation for 2021-22 would be £6 million, a £4 million reduction on the current allocation of £10 million. That was the basis of my question to the Prime Minister. Secondly, in that letter, £33 million of funding for integrated and smart travel, a London-style Oyster card for the north, was also cut by the Government, delaying the roll-out of contactless technology in the north.

Why do these cuts to core funding matter? Throughout the early discussions about what Transport for the North was supposed to do, the point was made repeatedly that it would be a strategic body, responsible for setting priorities for the region. That is precisely what the core funding is meant to support. For an organisation at this stage of its life even to keep the same level of funding would be seen as a cut, but with a 40% cut to its core funding, the Government are undermining the original aspirations for TfN. At the most recent Transport questions, the Minister—I am glad that he has joined us on the Treasury Bench—keenly pointed out that Transport for the North had been set up under a Conservative Government. Why are the Government now clipping its wings just as it is getting ready to fly?

Aside from the cut to TfN’s core funding and the smart ticketing project, the lack of any Government commitment to work with the organisation on the development of its northern transport charter, which will determine the organisation’s future role, including its own allocated pot of funding, is worrying. Together with the cuts to funding, it raises serious doubt about this Government’s commitment to the north, to devolving real power and to genuinely levelling up. My clear question to the Minister tonight is, has Transport for the North’s core funding been cut—yes or no?

Since my exchange with the Prime Minister on 24 February, I have written to him twice, on 25 February and 11 March, to request that he corrects his statement. He has yet to do so, and I have received no substantive reply to my letters. I have also tabled written parliamentary questions asking when he will reply to my letters and have been told that it will be “in due course”. I tabled other written parliamentary questions just today, asking again when I will get the courtesy of a response. I also raised a point of order on 25 February; following the courtesies of the House, I informed the Prime Minister that I was doing so. With the matter still unresolved, I was advised to apply for this Adjournment debate, which was kindly granted by Mr Speaker. This is the very first time in 16 years as a Member of Parliament—having been in the House with five different Prime Ministers—that I have needed to take such a prolonged course of action to try to correct the record.

It now appears that the Prime Minister has on two other occasions in recent weeks made statements in the House that are inadvertently misleading and then failed, or refused, to correct the record. On 22 February, it was over personal protective equipment contracts being on the record. On 10 March, it was the incorrect claim that Labour had voted against a nurses’ pay rise.

Mr Speaker made a clear statement to the House on 11 March. He said:

“All Members should correct the record if they make an inaccurate statement to the House. They can do so by raising a point of order or in debate, or, in the case of Ministers, they can make a statement or issue a written ministerial statement. The Government’s own ministerial code could not be clearer about what is expected of Ministers. It says:

‘It is of paramount importance that Ministers give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity’.

The Speaker cannot be dragged into arguments about whether a statement is inaccurate or not. This is a matter of political debate. All Members of this House are honourable. They must take responsibility for correcting the record if a mistake has been made. It is not dishonourable to make a mistake, but to seek to avoid admitting one is a different matter.”—[*Official Report*, 11 March 2021; Vol. 690, c. 1001.]

Further to the passage quoted by Mr Speaker, paragraph 1.3c of the ministerial code goes on to say:

“Ministers who knowingly mislead Parliament will be expected to offer their resignation to the Prime Minister.”

The fact that the Prime Minister is responsible for enforcement of the ministerial code raises the question of what happens when the Prime Minister may be in breach of the ministerial code and the issue of the accountability of that Prime Minister. We all know the culture of institutions that investigate themselves and usually conclude, “There’s nothing to see here”; it is one that we have seen many times in recent decades. We saw it over Hillsborough, with what the Right Rev. James Jones called the

“patronising disposition of unaccountable power”,

and I have encountered the same problem in campaigning for an independent public inquiry into the NHS infected blood scandal.

The Prime Minister’s cavalier attitude in inadvertently misleading the House and then not correcting the record reflects his strained relationship with his wide-ranging brief as Prime Minister and his attitude to accountability. This does not just disrespect Members of this House;

I think it shows contempt for constituents, who send us here. It is a worrying shift to the “alternative facts” culture that we saw in the Trump White House, and is unhealthy for a modern democracy. In the case of Transport for the North, it is the road, bus and rail users in northern England to whom promises have been made who are most disadvantaged if and when there is no accountability for broken promises, moved goalposts or factual inaccuracies.

Let me turn to why what the Prime Minister says about transport investment in the north matters so much to me as a Hull MP. My constituents in Hull North face the daily reality of poor transport links and infrastructure in the north, especially east of Leeds, and the long-standing disparity during the years of the northern powerhouse, as yet unaddressed, between levels of public and private investment in the south-east and the rest of the country. On transport especially, Hull people get a poor deal as fare payers and as taxpayers.

By the time the northern powerhouse was launched in 2014, there appeared to be a growing acceptance of the need to rebalance the economy in several ways, including investment in transport and other creaking infrastructure across northern England. “Rebalancing the economy” has now become “levelling up the north” in the everyday terminology used, but it means the same, and this broad political consensus is that levelling up the north is not just vital for the north, but would also be a win-win for the wider UK economy. It would boost the north’s productivity, general economic activity and the north’s contribution to GDP growth. It would also take pressure off the congested, overheated infrastructure of the south-east, with the economic inefficiency and constrained productivity and growth that that spawns.

We know that in the digital age, not so much economic activity needs to cluster in the south-east, a point proven again during the covid crisis. More employees can work from home than before, and not so many homes and workplaces need to be in or around the M25. However, levelling up is only meaningful when we start to see action on the ground—physical evidence that transport schemes are under way in this decade, far beyond just the moving of transport civil servants to Leeds, as announced in recent days.

So what has been happening in Hull in terms of transport investment? The first significant development after the launch of the northern powerhouse was, sadly, Tory Ministers in November 2016 blocking Hull’s privately financed scheme to electrify the rail lines into Hull. In recent years, Hull has seen a downgrading of our rail services, even in relation to towns like Scarborough, which, unlike Hull, now enjoys a direct rail link to Manchester airport. The city of Hull currently faces a further downgrading of cross-Pennine rail services and even slower services. Certainly, it has been my suspicion that we will see commercial space travel before we get the high-speed electrified rail line between Hull and Liverpool that the Hull and Humber chamber of commerce and many others have long pressed for. Delivering on the previous promises of a high-speed northern rail powerhouse, Crossrail for the north or HS3—it has been called all those things in recent years—is a minimum requirement if Ministers are serious about levelling up: a fully electrified rail line between Hull and Liverpool.

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

East-west connectivity across the north is as important as the north-south link to London. Just a few spur links to HS2, especially the cut-down version that would be more distant from the Humber sub-region, do not amount to levelling up the north. Transport for the North research shows that Northern Powerhouse Rail, once delivered, would contribute £14.4 billion in annual gross value added to the UK economy and create up to 74,000 new jobs in the north by 2060. With the challenges of Brexit and “building back better” after covid, this economic boost is now perhaps even more important for the whole country, not just the north, than was the case a few years ago. As just one example, the boost it could give to the steel industry alone is vital for places like Scunthorpe. The importance of boosting capacity for passengers and freight across the north is only underlined by the new freeport status of both the Humber and Liverpool.

A few years ago, it was estimated that the north needed £100 billion-worth of investment to catch up with London and the south-east. Before the 2019 general election, that scale of investment was promised by the Prime Minister within a five-year Parliament. So far, that level of transport investment remains a promise. Funding for the Northern Powerhouse Rail project appears to remain at the level provided for 2020-21, but the fact that Transport for the North was told by Whitehall to delay submission of its business plan until after the Government’s integrated rail plan, itself delayed yet again, shows again that Transport for the North does not have the devolved powers and clout that, for example, Transport for London enjoys. The Department for Transport still controls funding for Northern Powerhouse Rail. Although a statutory body, Transport for the North is only an advisory body—Whitehall still decides. This is why we want straight talking from the Prime Minister, which we are famed for in Yorkshire.

In Hull, we have worked hard through the austerity decade to make our own luck, with Siemens and the energy estuary, a growing tech sector, city of culture status and exciting projects like the Hull lagoon and Maritime Hull. However, when it comes to transport investment, we are tired of being promised jam tomorrow, but having jams today. We have had advances such as cutting the Humber bridge tolls and the Mary Murdoch connection across the A63, and we are finally seeing Pacer trains gone, although we still have the polluting diesel rolling stock. But every step forward has been hard won, usually delayed for years and tiny in scale compared with the investment we see elsewhere in the country, especially in Greater London. Meanwhile, Hull Trains, the open access rail operator that has provided Hull’s main direct rail link to London—a service built up successfully over the past 20 years to meet demand, amid all the franchise and infrastructure problems on the east coast main line—has not received any of the Government support that others in the rail industry have had during the covid crisis.

Other levelling-up funding streams, from the new towns fund to the levelling-up fund and the community renewal fund, do not point to a scale of investment that will be transformational even for the most favoured areas, and certainly not on the scale that London docklands has enjoyed since the 1980s or that London and the south-east have seen—including, among many examples,

the £19 billion spent on Crossrail over the last 12 years of construction. If levelling up is to mean anything, it must be a whole-north approach, and the funding, the city deals and the devolution must be instruments for economic regeneration in the national interest, not for political gerrymandering.

In conclusion, I hope that I have shown why statements made by the Prime Minister about transport in the north matter to people who live in Hull and should matter to people across the whole United Kingdom. We need improvements to start happening visibly in the 2020s, rather than just hearing more about the Prime Minister’s latest fantasy project, such as a bridge or tunnel to Northern Ireland.

When I am in London, I frequently pass the £500 million shiny new Crossrail station at Canary Wharf, built with private investment and complete with its own lush roof garden. The site is surrounded by all the other fruits of 40 years of ongoing London docklands regeneration work from both public and private investment. There cannot be a greater contrast with my own battle over the past three years to get the botched, on-the-cheap waiting room and toilet improvements at Hull’s Paragon station, managed by TransPennine, which unfortunately seems not to even be able to sort that out. If we really are to be one nation, levelled up and facing the future, those two symbolic locations must stop being such a tale of two cities. That is why Transport for the North needs to be properly funded.

7.27 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): Let me start by saying that delivering high-quality, world-class transport infrastructure in northern England and following through on our commitments to level up remain a top priority for the Government. Transport for the North shares that ambition, and I am surprised and disappointed that its latest funding settlement has provoked such a great deal of consternation. Let me assure Members across the House that Transport for the North’s funding settlement is appropriate and fair and enables it to continue to carry out its statutory functions, which is what it was established to do. Given the level of scrutiny that its funding settlement has received, I think it would be helpful if I laid out all the facts here today, so that we can finally move on and focus on what is really important to people in the north: delivering for the north.

Dame Diana Johnson: I am surprised that the Minister did not pay the usual courtesies at the beginning of his speech, but I will leave that to one side. I want to ask again the question that I posed in my speech: can the Minister confirm whether the budget for Transport for the North, which was £10 million, has now been reduced to £6 million—yes or no?

Andrew Stephenson: No. I will now continue, and as the right hon. Lady did not observe the usual courtesy of only taking 15 minutes, I will not take any further interventions.

Dame Diana Johnson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am rather annoyed by that comment, as I was in the Chamber waiting to be called to speak, and the Minister did not even have the courtesy to be on the Front Bench when the debate started.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

That is not really a point of order, but it is up to the Member who has the Adjournment debate to take a reasonable amount of time, and I have to say that I have seen Adjournment debates in which the Member in charge has taken considerably longer than the right hon. Lady. I think the Minister does have adequate time to reply.

Andrew Stephenson: I will always defer to your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker. For the record, I was waiting behind the Speaker's Chair for at least five minutes, but there was a Minister at the Dispatch Box and, due to social distancing, it would have been inappropriate for me to come into the Chamber and on to the Front Bench while the previous Minister was here.

At Prime Minister's questions on 24 February, the right hon. Lady said:

"Is the 40% cut to Transport for the North's budget part of the Prime Minister's plans for levelling up the north?"

In response, the Prime Minister said:

"There has been no such cut, and we intend to invest massively in Northern Powerhouse Rail, and in railways in the north and across the entire country."—[*Official Report*, 24 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 911.]

Transport for the North became a statutory body in April 2018. I was proud to serve as a Government Whip on the statutory instrument Committee that oversaw the process at the time.

Let us first look at the budget that has been available to Transport for the North since it was established. Transport for the North has had a core funding grant of £10 million per year since it was established as a statutory body. That settlement has been used to support core operations, as well as to underpin Transport for the North's medium-term financial strategy through the maintenance of reserves. The Department and Transport for the North have agreed a minimum reserve of £2 million.

However, this financial year, partly as a consequence of the coronavirus pandemic, Transport for the North underspent its core grant and built up significant reserves. According to its own forecast, its reserves would have grown to an excessive £9.5 million if its funding had remained unchanged this year. Ministers therefore took the decision to adjust Transport for the North's core settlement this year, allocating £7 million for the current financial year and £6 million for the next. That is a prudent and sensible use of taxpayers' money that ensures that Transport for the North still has enough to continue to deliver on its statutory functions while making sure that it does not continue to build up unnecessarily large reserves.

To come to the crux of the argument, it is important to note that the core funding grant is just one of several funding streams that make up Transport for the North's budget. During 2018-19—its first financial year as a statutory body—some £388,000 was available for the Rail North partnership grant. That has risen year on year, with £680,000 available this financial year and a further rise to more than £750,000 anticipated for the next.

Likewise, when Transport for the North was established as a statutory body, £15 million was made available for Northern Powerhouse Rail in 2018-19. Again, that amount has risen year on year, with £59 million available this year,

rising to £67 million in the next financial year, subject to the usual agreement of programme activity with the Department, as co-client.

In the 2015 spending review, Transport for the North was allocated up to £150 million to support its integrated and smart travel programme. It has utilised only £24 million in the past five years to enable the roll-out of smart ticketing throughout the north. Additionally, it incurred development, business-case and other project costs of around £10 million, but was unable to produce a business case for its ambitious multi-modal projects that was acceptable to all transport operators in the north.

The multi-year funding for Transport for the North's integrated and smart travel programme was always due to expire at the end of this financial year. We are considering how best to deliver more effectively the roll-out of smart ticketing to improve passenger services throughout the region.

What all that amounts to is that the Prime Minister was right in his assertion that there has been "no such cut". Taking into account all the funding streams available to Transport for the North, its budget has not been reduced by 40%. To that end, impartial website Fullfact published a piece on 3 March, in reference to the 40% reduction quoted by the right hon. Lady. It stated:

"This much is being removed from Transport for the North's core funding, though not from its total funding. It will be able to access some extra funding from other programmes to supplement its core funding."

I am happy to provide even more clarity on those figures. First, the 40% reduction in Transport for the North's core funding will not take place until the next financial year. Secondly, looking at its core funding for 2021-22, the Department has agreed that Transport for the North can charge £2.5 million of the costs that previously came from its core budget to the Northern Powerhouse Rail programme, significantly reducing the impact of the reduction in its core expenditure.

The right hon Lady again asked the Prime Minister, in a written question on 1 March, about Transport for the North's funding settlement, and the Prime Minister responded promptly on 4 March that Transport for the North's overall funding means that it will have access to over £70 million this coming financial year alone.

For the avoidance of doubt, let me quote what the Prime Minister said in response to the right hon. Lady:

"A reply will be sent in due course. Transport for the North's overall funding means they will have access to over £70 million this coming financial year alone. We are building on the £29 billion we have invested in transport in the north since 2010 with: the Integrated Rail Plan bringing together HS2, Northern Powerhouse Rail, and our multi-billion-pound rail investment programme; our £5 billion investment into local bus and cycle links, including in the North; our £4.8 billion Levelling Up Fund which will benefit communities across the region; and our £4.2 billion intra-city transport fund, benefitting bus, train, and tram services across our 8 largest city regions. And at Budget, we reaffirmed our commitment to northern infrastructure, with: the launch of the UK Infrastructure Bank, headquartered in Leeds; a new government economic campus in Darlington; investment in offshore wind port infrastructure in Teesside and Humberside; and over £450 million in Towns Fund Deals for towns across the north—investing in infrastructure and culture from Middlesbrough to Bolton, to Rochdale and Scunthorpe."

I think that more than clarifies and settles the matter of the adjustments to Transport for the North's funding. The settlement is fair, reasonable and appropriate, and

[Andrew Stephenson]

indeed Transport for the North will continue to receive more funding than any other sub-national transport body.

Lately, the subject of Transport for the North's funding has too often been conflated with investment in northern transport and the Government's commitment to levelling up more generally, and again I would like to set the record straight. To be clear, Transport for the North is not, and has never been, a delivery body. It is a strategic body, there to provide advice to the Government—something that it is perfectly able to do within its current funding settlement. Therefore, a reduction in Transport for the North's core funding will not impact on the delivery of the vital infrastructure projects that the north needs. The Government are wholly committed to levelling up all parts of the country, including the north. Therefore, £29 billion has been invested across the north since 2010. There is still a long way to go, but we are on the right track.

I do not have time tonight to list the many schemes and investments that we are progressing across the north, but I will mention a few. The dualling of the A66 has seen its construction time scale halved by the Government's Project Speed. The planned reopening of the Northumberland line to passenger services will better connect our communities in the north-east. We are embracing our ambition of a zero-carbon future with a planned hydrogen transport hub in the Tees Valley.

Last July, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced an initial £589 million, with more to follow, for the trans-Pennine route upgrade, delivering much-needed rail capacity and reliability between Leeds and Manchester. I am pleased that the right hon. Lady shares my joy at the new freeport being established on the Humber, alongside two other sites in the north, at Liverpool and Teesside. However, I am surprised she did not mention that the work on the improvement scheme for the A63 Castle Street in Hull is under way. She mentioned the incredibly beautiful bridge, to which many of her colleagues have paid tribute—the Murdoch's Connection bridge—that is providing safe and convenient crossings for pedestrians and cyclists. The very fact that we are getting on with these schemes underlines our commitment to levelling up.

I could go on, but the point is that changing Transport for the North's core funding settlement does not alter the Government's commitment to the north or to levelling up. Our ambition is to deliver world-class infrastructure in the region and unlock the potential of the northern powerhouse. Opposition Members will continue, I am sure, to play games and try to score points, but this Government will not be distracted from building back better and delivering record investment to the region.

Question put and agreed to.

7.39 pm

House adjourned.

Members Eligible for a Proxy Vote

The following is the list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy:

| Member eligible for proxy vote | Nominated proxy |
|---|-------------------|
| Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy |
| Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con) | Robbie Moore |
| Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy |
| Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab) | Mark Tami |

| Member eligible for proxy vote | Nominated proxy |
|--|-------------------|
| Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op) | Mark Tami |
| Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudon) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy |
| Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy |
| Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab) | Mark Tami |

| Member eligible for proxy vote | Nominated proxy |
|--|-------------------|
| Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Sir Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP) | Ian Paisley |
| Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) | Wendy Chamberlain |
| Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD) | Wendy Chamberlain |
| Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy |
| Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Robert Courts (Witney) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Sir Geoffrey Cox (Torrington and West Devon) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |

| Member eligible for proxy vote | Nominated proxy |
|--|-------------------|
| Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| James Daly (Bury North) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD) | Wendy Chamberlain |
| Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) | Mark Tami |
| Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mims Davies (Mid Sussex) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con) | Ben Everitt |
| Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy |
| Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op) | Mark Tami |
| Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP) | Ian Paisley |
| Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab) | Mark Tami |

| Member eligible for proxy vote | Nominated proxy |
|--|-------------------|
| Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP) | Ben Lake |
| Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind) | Stuart Andrew |
| Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op) | Mark Tami |
| Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op) | Mark Tami |
| Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) | Wendy Chamberlain |
| Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance) | Wendy Chamberlain |
| Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind) | Stuart Andrew |
| Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab) | Mark Tami |

| Member eligible for proxy vote | Nominated proxy |
|---|-------------------|
| Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy |
| Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op) | Mark Tami |
| Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP) | Ian Paisley |
| John Glen (Salisbury) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Damian Green (Ashford) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| James Grundy (Leigh) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |

| Member eligible for proxy vote | Nominated proxy | Member eligible for proxy vote | Nominated proxy |
|---|-------------------|--|-------------------|
| Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con) | Anthony Mangnall |
| Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy |
| Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP) | Ben Lake | Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) | Wendy Chamberlain |
| Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP) | Owen Thompson | Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab) | Mark Tami | David Johnston (Wantage) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| James Heapey (Wells) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op) | Mark Tami | Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) | Owen Thompson | Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) | Wendy Chamberlain | Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP) | Owen Thompson | Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| John Howell (Henley) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | | |

| Member eligible for proxy vote | Nominated proxy | Member eligible for proxy vote | Nominated proxy |
|--|-------------------|---|-------------------|
| John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con) | Mr William Wragg | Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy | Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP) | Owen Thompson | Jim McMahan (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Alan Mak (Havant) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con) | Robbie Moore | Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) | Ian Paisley | Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy | Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy |
| Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy | Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (SNP) | Owen Thompson | Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP) | Owen Thompson | Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP) | Owen Thompson | Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy | Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) | Owen Thompson |
| Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Damien Moore (Southport) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) | Wendy Chamberlain |
| Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Penny Mordaunt (Portsmouth North) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |

| Member eligible for proxy vote | Nominated proxy |
|---|-------------------|
| Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con) | Robbie Moore |
| Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) | Mark Tami |
| Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op) | Mark Tami |
| Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD) | Wendy Chamberlain |
| Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Abena Opong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy |
| Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy |
| Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Priti Patel (Witham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |

| Member eligible for proxy vote | Nominated proxy |
|---|---------------------|
| Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con) | Antony Higginbotham |
| Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op) | Mark Tami |
| Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op) | Mark Tami |
| Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Will Quince (Colchester) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op) | Mark Tami |
| Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP) | Ian Paisley |
| Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Dean Russell (Watford) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op) | Mark Tami |

| Member eligible for proxy vote | Nominated proxy | Member eligible for proxy vote | Nominated proxy |
|--|-------------------|---|-------------------|
| David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC) | Ben Lake | Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy |
| Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab) | Mark Tami | James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Grant Shapps (Welwyn Hatfield) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con) | Mr William Wragg |
| Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) | Mark Tami | Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP) | Owen Thompson | Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op) | Mark Tami |
| Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) | Owen Thompson | Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy |
| Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Elizabeth Truss (South West Norfolk) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con) | Robbie Moore |
| Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) | Owen Thompson | Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Mr Ben Wallace (Wyre and Preston North) | Stuart Andrew |
| Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | David Warburton (Somerset and Frome) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) | Wendy Chamberlain | Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy |
| Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con) | Stuart Andrew | Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab) | Mark Tami | Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab) | Mark Tami |

| Member eligible for proxy vote | Nominated proxy |
|---|-----------------|
| Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| John Whittingdale (Malden) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC) | Ben Lake |
| Gavin Williamson (Montgomeryshire) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |

| Member eligible for proxy vote | Nominated proxy |
|---|-------------------|
| Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD) | Wendy Chamberlain |
| Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP) | Ian Paisley |
| Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab) | Bell Ribeiro-Addy |
| Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP) | Owen Thompson |
| Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab) | Mark Tami |
| Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con) | Stuart Andrew |
| Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab) | Mark Tami |

Division 240, Wednesday 17 March

To the Noes, add

Hunt, Tom

Division 241, Wednesday 17 March

To the Ayes, add

Hunt, Tom

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 17 March 2021

[DAME ANGELA EAGLE *in the Chair*]

Passenger Boats and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 25 February).

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

9.25 am

Dame Angela Eagle (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the new hybrid arrangements. Timings of debates have been amended to allow technical arrangements to be made for the next debate. There will be suspensions between debates. I remind Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive at the start of the debate in Westminster Hall, and Members are expected to remain for the entire debate. I remind Members participating virtually that they are visible at all times, both to one another and to us in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks' email address. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and before they leave the room. I call Andrew Rosindell to move the motion—and happy birthday.

9.26 am

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of passenger boats and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency.

Thank you very much, Dame Angela, and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship on this St Patrick's day. What a great day to have this debate. It is also Montserrat day. Mr Speaker is flying the flag of Montserrat from New Palace Yard, which is the first time ever that the flag of an overseas territory has been flown from the Palace of Westminster. Happy Montserrat day and happy St Patrick's day to one and all.

I have served in the House now for 20 years. Also, I have served as the MP for my home constituency of Romford, which is and always has been a proud part of the county of Essex, while of course bordering on and with very close links to the capital city of London. As an MP within the authority area of the London Borough of Havering, located on the Thames estuary, I am all too conscious of the role that our great River Thames has played in our nation's history, and the role that it will undoubtedly play in our future. To the east of London, the River Thames has once again become crucial for our trade, and in central and west London it continues to play a hugely important role for tourism and the London leisure economy.

I enthusiastically welcome the new Thames freeport, where thousands of new jobs will be created close to my Romford constituency, serving Romford, Havering, east

London and the whole of the south-west Essex area. That is a piece of great news that we can celebrate today.

The River Thames is our river. It belongs to us in this region of the United Kingdom, whether we are from London, Essex, Kent, Surrey, Middlesex, Berkshire or beyond, and it must always be a river that the people of this region of our country are able to use for business, travel and pleasure. [*Interruption.*] Yes, I should perhaps have mentioned Oxfordshire as well, although today's debate is more about the use of the River Thames in the more central part of London. But I assure the Minister that I had not forgotten Oxfordshire.

Many of my constituents rely on the Thames for their livelihoods and careers. They are highly skilled, and keen that a fair, competitive and safe working environment is maintained on the river, both for them and for future generations. As we go further upriver into central London and beyond Westminster, there is—as Members will know, because in normal times we see it alongside Parliament every day—a vibrant river-based tourism industry, whereby visitors to London and tourists can enjoy a unique boat trip along the Thames.

That is one of the issues I want to address today. I will explain why proposals from the Government's Maritime and Coastguard Agency for London's older passenger boats threaten to put this all at risk. As they stand, the plans are, I believe, disproportionate, inflexible and unfair. They risk forcing up to 25 popular and safe older passenger boats off the River Thames. I am grateful for the Minister's letter on Monday that set out a determination to proceed with the plans, but I will now set out my very real concerns, which are shared by many Members on both sides of the House.

The MCA first proposed changes to the rules that govern passenger boats operating in category C tidal waters, such as the tidal Thames, three years ago. They are known as grandfather rights. The Thames, uniquely, is home to a large variety of safe, older passenger boats that operate in different parts of the river, based on their target tourist market and suitability. Each year, in normal times, they safely carry hundreds of thousands of passengers both on scheduled services such as the hugely popular and historic Westminster to Kew Gardens and Hampton Court summer service, or on private charter work such as evening parties and functions. As well as the many direct skilled jobs that those services retain, they also indirectly support the Thames boatyards and key tourist attractions, such as Kew Gardens, Hampton Court and London's night-time economy, all of which have suffered terribly because of a year of lockdowns. They are essential in helping to deliver recovery.

In recent years, because of the growth of the fast and large Uber Thames Clipper fleet of boats, many of the older passenger boats on the Thames have chosen to operate in the less congested upriver areas of the tidal Thames, in the area west of Westminster pier. That will become more attractive as the large, river-reliant infrastructure projects, such as the Northern line extension at Battersea and the Tideway tunnel, are finished and the large tug and barge flows connected with those projects come to an end.

In the Minister's letter to me on Monday, he said that the determination to proceed with plans was based on "evidence of ship numbers, movements and incidents upriver of Westminster, particularly in Lambeth Reach."

[*Andrew Rosindell*]

May I ask the Minister to please write to me and detail each incident that the Department has considered and the criteria against which it has judged it appropriate to take those plans forward? That surely is crucial information to judge whether it has been the right decision.

The MCA plans contain some proposals that can be met and delivered by operators, despite their having no work since the pandemic struck last March, but the specific proposal for vessels on the tidal Thames to have to subdivide their hulls, fit new bulkheads and effectively totally rebuild their boats at the waterline is both economic suicide and effectively vessel ending. Known as the damage stability rule, it would slash the passenger-carrying capacity on vessels that were built on the Thames to operate on the Thames and would cost hundreds of thousands of pounds per boat.

Consequently, owners will not be borrowing money to make their boats unfit for purpose—of course not. These boats are owned and operated by family businesses whose ancestors have worked on the river for centuries. They are long-standing stakeholders in the river, and the MCA proposals will put them out of business and their boats and jobs will be lost—the last thing we want at this stage. We should be revitalising the industry, not crushing it. I therefore sincerely hope that the Minister will see the need for at least some flexibility, pragmatism and risk-led common sense, both to improve river safety and to keep the sector afloat.

I want to place on the record the significant cross-party opposition to the MCA's subdivision plans for older Thames passenger boats. Excellent work has also been done on the matter by Lord West of Spithead, in the other place, as the Minister will know. There have been letters to Secretaries of State for Transport from more than 60 Members of Parliament—cross-party—including the hon. Members for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), who used to lead the Conservative group on the Greater London Authority, my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), the leader of the Liberal Democrats. The Minister will also know that many members of the London Assembly support the opposition to the proposals, and have raised objections and written to the Transport Secretary and his predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling). I understand that the Prime Minister has been made aware of the issue by his concerned west London constituents.

Importantly, the organiser of the 2012 Thames diamond jubilee pageant, Lord Salisbury, has also written in protest. One of the boats under threat from the MCA is the Connaught, which led the pageant and carried the Queen's heralds, alongside Her Majesty's own vessel. It was a special day for the River Thames, the Queen, the royal family and the whole country. Yet that boat is under threat from the proposal. Surely that cannot be right and there must be a reconsideration of the whole proposal. I hope that the Minister is starting to understand my horror at the implications. I ask him please to intervene and urgently review the Government's position.

There is a key word that the MCA continues to use in promoting, and seeking to justify, its proposals. It says that the boats must be subdivided in the hull to make them safer. Safety is of course critical and must be proportionate across all modes of transport, particularly heritage transport. The Marchioness incident of 1989, which I am sure we all remember with great sadness, is sometimes cited by the MCA and the Minister in justifying the bans. However, that is not fair or valid. The Marchioness was the victim of a total and unforgivable lapse in navigational rules and standards, which caused it to strike and be sunk by a much larger vessel.

Importantly, in a letter on the subdivision issue to a Thames boatyard owner in September 2019, the chief executive officer of the Port of London Authority wrote: "I fully accept that such a change would in all probability have had minimal impact on the tragic outcome of the Marchioness collision." That point is an important contribution. River skills, route knowledge, quieter and lower-risk waters, and the best possible training are key for the future of the Thames, alongside a viable and credible compromise that I want to set out for the benefit of the Minister and his Department.

I note that the MCA has told the Thames boat operators that it wants to update them on its plans on 14 April. I hope that the debate can help us to make some progress on that. The Minister is aware of the careful thought and consideration that have gone into the compromise proposal for the older Thames passenger boats, which is that they should be restricted to the Thames west of Westminster pier, with the use of the pier itself, without the need for the subdivision. In our virtual call with the Minister on 2 November, Lord West explained how operators were prepared to limit their operations from this point, and concentrate their navigation in the less congested areas of lower operational risk along the river. Indeed, many of the boats were built to operate in the upper tidal reaches of the Thames, with their shallow draft and low deck profiles.

This solution would achieve four important goals. First, river authorities would know where older passenger boats were operating at any one time, given their new zonal restrictions alongside already being on the automatic identification system. Secondly, no older passenger boat would be forced off the Thames. They would instead be able to play their part in bringing tourists and visitors back to the river after the covid restrictions, and help meet the Transport for London, Port of London Authority and Greater London Authority ambitions to significantly grow river passengers over the next 15 years, particularly upriver. Thirdly, the boats would continue to support the important Thames boatyards and skills supply chain, which means jobs would not be lost and yards closed. Fourthly, we would avoid the MCA's earlier plans to issue exemptions only if individual boats can successfully clear their future risk assessment test, the criteria for which have never been published or released.

I foresee a real risk of bureaucratic and legal quagmire here. As the Minister knows, the upper tidal Thames has full and fast Royal National Lifeboat Institution cover as well. There are many issues that I do not believe have been fully addressed in the current proposals. That is why the Minister simply has to take this seriously and change the current projection and policy. It is crucial that we strike a pragmatic and proportionate balance for operators and safety. This lower operational

risk solution will deliver this, without forcing anyone out of business or losing any of these key and safe assets from the river.

If the Minister will not change direction, will he discuss with the operators what compensation they will be offered for the forced loss of their income and their businesses, as well as the considerable devaluation of their assets? He needs to address this directly. If he pushes ahead, he has to consider what he is doing to the livelihoods and the businesses that will be affected. The Government will have to pay huge sums of money to compensate for the damage this policy will do. That could all be avoided if he reviews this policy today.

The Thames has changed considerably in the last 20 years, and it is great to see so many people using it for leisure and commuter travel. As it has grown in importance and popularity, the need for services to be carefully regulated and monitored is all too clear, as is the importance of preventing any anti-competitive practices or unfair situations, which I fear have been allowed to develop. That is a further angle to this.

As the Minister knows, I am increasingly concerned by reports from my constituents that the company tasked with delivering the river's commuter boats, Uber Thames Clippers, has been abusing its dominant market position and enjoying unfair advantages, which in turn unfairly undermines other operators on the river. I wrote to him about this last year and he replied, asking to be kept informed.

Since 1999, Transport for London has made provision for a dedicated scheduled river boat commuter service, now called Uber Thames Clippers, which is regulated by TfL, under the responsibility of the Mayor of London. Clippers run services between Putney and east London in normal times, in the morning and evening commuter peaks and throughout the day. Consequently, in normal times they carry hundreds of thousands of tourists and visitors. It seeks to attract them with prominent marketing. Uber Thames Clippers is therefore not only a commuter service; it is also a tourist service.

For this daytime tourist offering, Uber Thames Clippers enjoys many commercial advantages as a result of arrangements with TfL that are not enjoyed by competing scheduled Thames tourist boat operators. That simply is not fair. It is this point that I wish to explain. I have written to the Deputy Mayor for Transport in London twice, and my colleague in the Greater London Assembly, the Assembly Member for my own borough of Havering, Keith Prince, is also taking these matters up in the GLA and asking probing questions of the Mayor of London, but no answers have been given; this matter is unresolved. A future investigation by the Competition and Markets Authority may now be necessary, and I ask the Minister to address this point.

The key issue is that Uber Thames Clippers does not have to pay landing fees at busy central TfL-owned piers such as Westminster, Tower of London, Greenwich and Bankside, when its boats disembark and pick up tourist passengers during the day, but its scheduled competitors do. These costs run into hundreds of thousands of pounds every year, which Uber Thames Clippers avoids but its rivals—the traditional operators—still have to pay. That cannot be fair, it cannot be right and it is uncompetitive, and the Minister must intervene to end this unfairness.

TfL has explained how and why it justifies and maintains having one rule for one tourist operator and one for another. I have constituents who work on the Thames and have to endure the unfair competition and unacceptable distortion. I want to know how it is justified by the Mayor and what Transport Ministers might be minded to do, in line with the Competition Act 1998, given the unfair practices being maintained by a body, in TfL, that has received billions of pounds in public support.

All the operators ask for is a level playing field, so that when they compete with Uber Thames Clippers for tourist passengers outside of commuter times, they all pay the same pier fees. At the moment, Uber Thames Clippers enjoys an unfair market advantage, which is being maintained and defended by the Mayor and TfL. Will the Minister tell the House what the Government can now do to bring more scrutiny and attention to this disturbing issue, especially when the Mayor and TfL have been given billions in taxpayer support over the last year alone? Does he think a CMA inquiry might be an option for consideration?

The future of London is intrinsically tied up with the future of the River Thames. It is the liquid highway, and it has again become key to how we enjoy this great city and to creating jobs, growing the city and showcasing it to the world as part of our new global Britain. Everything must be done to prevent and remove any bad policy, plan or failing situation that threatens to disproportionately undermine those who rely on it for their business or the public's ability to enjoy it, especially as we come out of the pandemic and look again to the river for some peace, fulfilment and enjoyment. I therefore hope that the Minister will answer my points and provide real assurances to those who want to help ensure that our wonderful River Thames recovers after this bleak period in our history and resumes its historic role of helping Londoners to work, with key services provided on the river in a fair, pragmatic and safe environment.

I conclude on this St Patrick's day by paying tribute to the vital part that our Irish friends have played in the history of the River Thames over many centuries. I draw the House's attention to the important contribution of Irish workers, particularly the vital part they played in building the Thames tunnel between 1825 and 1843, which has a special place in British history as the first tunnel built under a navigable river anywhere in the world. The workers spent long shifts digging the 700-foot tunnel in treacherous conditions that would lead to the death of six during the course of its construction. These workers were predominantly Irish migrants who moved to London in the 19th century to find work, and who created a significant piece of London's history. It is important that their work and achievement should be remembered, and I can think of no better day on which to do that than this St Patrick's day.

Dame Angela, Minister, colleagues, let us celebrate the central part our River Thames has played in the lives of our people, our capital and our nation, and seek to ensure that it may go on doing so for many centuries to come.

9.50 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Angela. I congratulate the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) on

[*Jim Shannon*]

his presentation and on doing it so well. I wish all hon. Members here in this Westminster Hall sitting and elsewhere a very happy St Patrick's day. It is a pleasure to come and speak today.

It is good to remind ourselves, as the hon. Gentleman did, that those who built the Thames tunnel were Irish migrants. We should thank them—many from Northern Ireland, and many from the Republic of Ireland—for their contribution to this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

As you probably know, Dame Angela, and as others will know as well, they say that if St Patrick turns the stone the right way up on St Patrick's day—in other words, if it is dry and sunny, as it is outside—that probably means that we will have good weather between now and the summertime. I hope that is the case.

I wish the hon. Member for Romford many happy returns. He is an Aries, I think—

Andrew Rosindell: Pisces.

Jim Shannon: Sorry. I am an Aries—I am not that far away. Again, I wish the hon. Gentleman many happy returns.

The title of this debate is very clear and specific, and I will come to it specifically, but I would like to make some general comments to start with, and I would also like to talk about river ferries at the end. I have to take this opportunity to discuss a massive issue for my constituency. Some of the context in my constituency will tie in with some of the things the hon. Gentleman has referred to.

As we are all aware, Northern Ireland is a landlocked nation in the UK, and, as the Northern Ireland protocol has shown very clearly, landlocking brings its own problems. I am not going to talk about the Northern Ireland protocol—that is not appropriate, Dame Angela, and I know you would bring me into line and correct me if I did—but I just wanted to make that point and then say how it features within this debate.

The onus on hauliers and shipping is massive, and any issue or problem with this route affects the supply of basic goods to Northern Ireland. The passenger ferries from Larne to Cairnryan, where some of the problems we have seen have occurred, or the other ferry services, do not simply ensure free movement of people—they carry our necessities. The issue for ferries, for water travel, is so specific, and it ties in well with this debate about the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and the future of passenger boats.

Coronavirus has seen a massive impact on our connectivity, and understandably so. However, what must be understood is that this has wider connotations for GB-NI trade, which must be protected at all costs. The waterways are not simply a way for tourists to travel, although having travelled on the Thames on a few occasions with my wife, with other family members and individually, I can understand its attraction and that of maritime boats—it is similar in my constituency, which many people visit to experience the landscape and the warmest welcome—but the waterways are also a way of feeding people.

Over the last four Sunday evenings, Strangford has featured in “Bloodlands”—a drama programme that has given James Nesbitt fairly great prominence. When my wife and I were watching it on television, we were not as intrigued by the drama and the story as we were by trying to work out which part of Strangford lough it was set in and whose farm we were seeing. I can identify with that.

Let me turn to the main thrust of the debate, which is the replacement of boats that are older and that may need attention. The hon. Member for Romford referred to how important that is, and I want to give another example from my constituency. Old is not always not good, and it is important we recognise that. The hon. Gentleman referred to providing grants and help for small boats. We have done that in Northern Ireland; it was in a different sector, but the same principle applies, and that is what I want to refer to.

The fishing fleet in Portavogie is between 45 and 48 years old. It was decided that massive rebuilds had to take place to bring it up to safety standards. Any seaman or fishing person in Portavogie would say that they would take their sturdy, old, seaworthy boat over the new and improved one any day, any time. The Government and, most of all, the Northern Irish Assembly, through the fisheries Department, have made sure that grant in aid is available for that. I know that we are in a difficult time with covid, and that resources are minute, so that is not always a possibility, but the Minister might want to look at the issue.

While it is undoubted that any passenger ferry must be to a high standard and safe, that is not to say that we must discard the older boats. As one who is feeling this more and more, let me say that sometimes the old things can be the best things, and it is important to put that on record as well.

I share the concerns of many about the impact on services, should the requirements be implemented to the full. I will certainly be asking the Minister to listen carefully to those whose livelihoods and trade depends on these boats—the hon. Member for Romford has referred to them, and I am here to support him in his request to the Minister and in what he wants to bring about.

Safety can go hand in hand with this lively and wonderful internationally recognised service. Without a doubt, when people come to London for a few days, as I do every week, or for a break, one of the things they have to do is travel on a boat—one of those leisure cruises—and enjoy the scenery and the water.

In my constituency, there are thriving private fishing and leisure boat business. We have excellent fishing in Strangford lough and the Irish sea. Those businesses thrive because the opportunity to catch fish is there, but also because there is something really exciting about doing that. I am not sure whether we have the same ability to do that in the Thames, or whether there is a thriving fishing sector—or angling sector, I should say—but, if there is, it would certainly be another thing to look at.

Again, while safety is paramount—it has to be, and it must be upheld—we also have to look at how we can improve some of the older boats. I have spoken to people regarding this debate and comments by the hon. Gentleman about the Thames and the area. I find myself agreeing with a number of MPs, and especially

the hon. Member for Romford, who introduced the debate, as well as with others who are looking at this debate from afar—I have spoken to some of them as well, and although they are not here today, they have a similar opinion to the hon. Gentleman.

I will just quote from the *Evening Standard*:

“The operators are SMEs and family-run businesses which have worked on the river for generations. The double whammy of covid and these unnecessary MCA proposals will do potentially terminal damage to London’s maritime heritage, river jobs and tourism. They should be changed so that no boats are forced off the river and the sector can recover.”

I know that the Conservative party—and, in fairness, the Labour party as well—is committed to ensuring that small and medium-sized enterprises can be protected, and that the self-employed have opportunities. If ever there was a time to do that, it is now. Perhaps in his response the Minister can give us some assurance that SMEs will be protected in legislation. I know that the Minister and the Government have done that and continue to do that, but we need that assurance today.

I support the *Evening Standard* in its call. I truly believe that we can see these boats being safely used and upgraded in a methodical and financial manner that does not close businesses down, but that, as with the changes to fishing vessels in my constituency, where this happened, subsidises them with grants, guides them and enhances them. This is not the time to be putting unbearable financial pressure on any aspect of tourism. In my constituency, tourism is vital—it is the key theme of Ards and North Down Borough Council and Strangford as well. I ask the Minister to review the mechanism and timing of these proposals.

In conclusion, these boats are a wonderfully visual aspect of tourism and must be safe and protected. We can do these things differently, and the hon. Member for Romford referred to that. I ask the Minister to review this issue once more, with a post-covid view and perhaps with a slightly different perspective.

10 am

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP) [V]: It is pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dame Angela, for today’s debate on the future of passenger boats and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. I wish the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) a happy birthday, and I thank him and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for their contributions. I wish all hon. Members a happy St Patrick’s day.

Although small in number, the contributions to the debate have been wide-ranging, covering many aspects of marine passenger travel, from the future of travel and the use of the Thames, to the Larne and Cairnryan sea link, to which farm is owned by whom on the banks of Strangford lough.

As the Member of Parliament for Argyll and Bute, which boasts 26 islands and probably has more passenger ferries than any other UK constituency, I could not not speak in this debate. The passenger ferries, whether they are operated by CalMac, Argyll and Bute Council or Western Ferries, are a critical lifeline to our rural communities. I want to highlight some of the enormous contribution made by all of those who work on the boats every day of the year, providing an essential, sometimes lifeline, service to thousands of people and

hundreds of small communities on dozens of remote islands. I would like to put on record my sincere thanks to every single one of them.

By far the biggest ferry operator in the west of Scotland is CalMac, the legendary Caledonian MacBrayne, which sails to more than 30 destinations across the west of Scotland. For more than a century, the distinctive black and white boats, topped by a fiery red funnel, have connected Scotland’s islands to the mainland, ensuring that, despite the worst weather that could be thrown at them, the remote communities are served and regularly supplied, and that islanders are able to come and go freely.

In my constituency, CalMac operates 18 different routes, connecting the islands of Mull, Iona, Islay, Bute, Tiree, Coll, Colonsay, Lismore, Gair and Kerrera to the Scottish mainland. It is not just island communities that are served in that way. CalMac plays a hugely important role in linking remote mainland towns and villages to the centre of Scotland, including Dunoon, Creagan, Campbeltown and Tarbert.

For so many of my constituents, ferries are not just something they take to go on holiday; they are the lifeline that brings food, drink, parcels, the post, the daily newspapers, building materials and vital medical supplies. Although CalMac is undoubtedly the largest ferry company, I also recognise and pay tribute to the year-round contribution made by those working on Argyll and Bute Council-operated ferries between Port Appin and Lismore, Cuan and Luig, Ellenabeich and Easdale, and Port Askaig and the Isle of Jura.

A huge and important contribution is also made by Western Ferries, which operates the car ferry that ploughs the Firth of Clyde between Hunters Quay and Gourock. If I look out of my window right now I can see Western Ferries boats crossing the Firth of Clyde on one of their multiple daily journeys.

Not only do these operators serve local communities; they are also part of the communities they serve. They do so much good to improve the area and the general wellbeing of so many communities. I would like to make special mention of four CalMac employees in Oban who last month raised thousands of pounds to support one their colleagues, Megan, who had experienced a particularly difficult time in her life. Nicky MacKechnie, Alan MacInnes, Ian Rodgers and Keith MacMillan launched a charity exercise regime called Megan’s Miles. It had an initial target of raising £500 for the Scottish Association for Mental Health, but by last night they and their colleagues at the CalMac terminal at Oban had raised more than £8,000. I am sure colleagues from across the House will want to congratulate them on that magnificent effort in support of one of their colleagues; it is a very worthwhile cause. Although Nicky, Alan, Ian and Keith may not be unique, they serve as a good example of the people who keep these essential services running. Those services belong to, and are an integral part of, the communities they serve.

There is no doubt in my mind that without CalMac and the other services, those communities would struggle to survive. Despite the challenging circumstances in which we find ourselves, the Scottish Government are, and have been, absolutely committed to supporting and improving the ferry network by implementing a long-term, positive, sustainable series of policies to connect our rural communities to the mainland, thereby boosting local economies and creating employment opportunities.

[Brendan O'Hara]

The SNP Scottish Government recognise the essential role that passenger ferries play in supporting our island communities. That is why, since coming to power in 2007, they have invested £2.2 billion in the Clyde and Hebrides ferry service, the Northern Isles ferry services and general infrastructure, as part of our commitment to promoting Scotland's islands and remote communities. The Scottish Government recognise the important role played by CalMac and others in connecting those communities to the centre, and they have put in place measures to make it easier and cheaper for islanders to travel to the mainland and for visitors to go to the islands.

In 2008, the Scottish Government introduced a pilot scheme called the road equivalent tariff. The principle of RET was essentially that ferry fares should be set on the basis of travelling the equivalent distance by road, and that island communities should face no financial disadvantage. At the same time, it promoted Scotland's beautiful Western Isles as a great place to live, work, stay, raise a family, invest, conduct business and, of course, visit and spend a fortnight's holiday.

It is absolutely right that any scheme that is funded, as RET is, to the tune of £25 million a year be rigorously and robustly scrutinised, so I was pleased that, earlier this week, with almost precision timing for today's debate, Transport Scotland delivered its official evaluation of RET on the Clyde and Hebrides network. It is a large and interesting read—it runs to more than 80 pages. It examines in detail the roll-out and impact of RET on local communities, island infrastructure, the local economy, the environment and the all-important tourism sector.

The report took as its measure the original objectives that the Scottish Government set out to achieve when RET was introduced. They are increased demand, increased tourism and enhancing local economies. The Transport Scotland report shows that the demand for ferries has increased. Almost all routes have shown an increase, with a significantly higher number of residents and visitors using the Clyde and Hebrides service than before RET was introduced. Across the network as a whole, it is estimated that the average fare paid by passengers and car users has dropped by between 34% and 40%. That, in return, has made an overall positive contribution to local economies.

Of course, the report makes it clear that the scheme is not perfect. Nothing ever could be when dealing with a large transport network that connects hundreds of communities in the often windswept north Atlantic. There are problems—some predictable, others not—that have arisen since the introduction of the scheme. Among them, the popularity of RET has put added pressure on the already fragile road infrastructure in many of the islands. A lack of public toilets, camping facilities and chemical waste disposal has been highlighted, and increased visitor traffic has made travel for islanders wishing to leave far more challenging, as spaces on the car deck are booked up well in advance of sailing.

The long-term signs are that the upward trend in people visiting the islands will continue, and that will require significant new investment in boats, services and port infrastructure. That said, there is a broad consensus that the introduction and roll-out of the road equivalent tariff has been a very good thing for the islands, and I commend the Scottish Government for it.

Looking to the future, there can be no doubt that improved physical connectivity, coupled to advancements in digital connectivity, has a vital role in reversing the depopulation trend that we are unfortunately seeing across our island communities. Allowing people to live safely and securely in remote island communities must form a major part of any Government's strategic thinking, and of course, better, more reliable, environmentally friendly ferries have a role to play. However, in and of themselves, they are not the answer.

I urge the Scottish Government and others to consider the bold, innovative approach taken by our neighbours in the Faroes, whose Government have combined a ferry network with a system of subsea tunnels. I was fortunate to visit the Faroes in 2019, to visit the Ministry that oversees these large infrastructure projects, and to stand on the Eysturoy tunnel during its construction—11 km long, connecting three islands by means of the world's first subsea roundabout. It is a remarkable feeling to stand 5 km offshore, 190 metres below the Atlantic, watching them cutting and blasting their way through the basalt rock. Of course, I understand that the Faroes are much smaller than Scotland, but the scale of their ambition to connect people to the centre and reverse what people believed was an irreversible population decline is something to behold, and something we should all learn from.

Finally, I pay tribute again to the hon. Member for Romford for having secured this debate, and for the passionate and forensic way in which he laid out his case; I am sure the Minister will look forward to answering that. I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford for his, as always, telling and informative contribution, and I thank you, Dame Angela, for allowing me to put on record my appreciation for those who work so hard in Argyll and Bute and, indeed, across Scotland to provide that vital service that keeps our remote, rural and island communities connected to the Scottish mainland.

10.11 am

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Dame Angela. I congratulate the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) and wish him a happy birthday on this St Patrick's day, which he was very eloquent about. For those who cannot see the hon. Members for Romford and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), they have beautiful green ties on today, but the hon. Member for Romford has excelled by having matching coloured socks as well. I think the British public need to know that. I also thank him for his chairmanship of the Chagos islands (British Indian Ocean Territory) all-party parliamentary group, as I do on a regular basis, and the work he has put in over the years for that community. The small community that I represent in Wythenshawe and Sale East are very grateful for the work of that group.

Like Henry V before Harfleur, I was not angry before I came to this meeting, but when I heard about the Connaught, I became quite agitated. My parents emigrated from the great province of Connacht, from Leitrim and Roscommon, in the mid-1950s. They did not know each other in 1955; they met at a dance in Manchester, and married and moved out to the green pastures of Wythenshawe, where I came along a few years later. On this St Patrick's day, I pay a particular tribute to my

parents and my father, who was an Irish navvy and built the roads and the sewers of the north-west of England in his working life. As you well know, Dame Angela, I also play in the Fianna Phadraig pipe band—the warriors of Patrick—which celebrates its 73rd year this year in Wythenshawe, and I play in another musical ensemble called Lorica. A lorica is a poem that was used by warriors in the time of St Patrick—a poem on their breastplate to go into battle—and one of the lines in the lorica on St Patrick’s breastplate is

“God’s strength to pilot me”.

Listening to the hon. Member for Romford’s speech today, I thought that was an apt part that we should think about; a pearl of St Patrick’s wisdom that he gave us.

Today’s debate has focused on the Maritime and Coastguard Agency’s proposed changes to grandfather rights for all passenger boats. It has particularly highlighted the thriving and—at least pre-covid—successful passenger boat businesses on the Thames. The Tony Robinson TV series “The Thames” was particularly excellent at showing what a vital artery the Thames is for our whole nation—and in Oxfordshire, as well, for the record; I say that for the Minister. Members will have admired boat trips along this section. Just before lockdown, I had the pleasure of going to Kew Gardens on one of those boats. These historic boats, including 19th-century ships and even some veterans of the Dunkirk evacuation, continue to provide safe and enjoyable experiences for tourists, all year round, year after year. I pay tribute to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency for the work it does and the exemplary safety standards on our rivers and coastal waters. It is of great importance to maintain that record, so I welcome the principle of upgrading the standards of vessels operating on rivers such as the Thames.

I join the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) in paying tribute to all ferry workers who have worked so hard during the pandemic. I am sure that view is shared by all Members. They have kept our vital supply lines open, externally to the United Kingdom, and internally. Life is tough at sea and on our waterways and they have done exemplary work. However, I think the sleep is beginning to fall from some voters’ eyes in Scotland; things are not quite as rosy with CalMac as the hon. Gentleman makes out. I am a huge user of CalMac ferries in my biannual holidays to either the Orkney Islands or the Western Isles. I see what is going on in Papa Westray and Westray, and on the ferries to Barra and other places. We know that there are huge problems with Scottish Ministers curtailing ferries to the Western Isles. There are huge rows about that. We know the CalMac fleet is ageing, because the Scottish Government have not invested in it over the last few years. There have been some terrible procurement problems with the SNP Government sourcing new ferries out of Port Glasgow. In particular, there are the contracts that doubled in value for two ferries; then they had to nationalise the shipbuilding yard. Governance of CalMac by the Scottish Government could be better and I hope we see that going forward.

I lend my support to the DFT’s review of Lord West of Spithead’s recommendations for the River Thames west of Westminster. I understand the Minister is currently exploring the review with officials. By allowing those businesses operating boats to continue to work upriver of Westminster pier, where traffic is much lower, Lord

West’s plans may mitigate the risks, allowing these businesses and boats to continue working. While I am no expert on boat safety, I would like to note that the Port of London Authority support that plan as being within an acceptable level of risk. The proposed revisions to safety standards, especially affecting boat businesses on the Thames, have been a long time coming. The Minister will be aware that before our time covering this portfolio, there was considerable opposition to the implementation of these new regulations. The Mayor of London, MPs, Lords, GLA Members and businesses have also raised concerns about them. If enforced in their current form, they could wipe out an important part of London’s heritage.

Covid-19, having ravaged much of our economy and taken so much of our bandwidth, has not spared this sector. I ask the Minister to take away the feedback from today’s debate and show some urgency in concluding his deliberations. I hope that the Department and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency can find a proportionate response that allows these historic boats and vibrant businesses to continue to sail safely.

The hon. Member for Romford finished with a tribute, echoed by the hon. Member for Strangford, to Irish navvies, who built the Thames tunnel. On this St Patrick’s day, I think it apt that I finish with a lorica:

“Navigator, Navigator, rise up and be strong,
The morning is here and there’s work to be done,
With your pickaxe and your shovel and your old dynamite,
To shift a few tons of this earth by tonight.”

10.19 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Angela. I very much enjoyed the speech made by the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane). I am not entirely sure I can follow it; it was a very good speech that I listened to intently. I thank all hon. Members who have spoken today. I wish everyone a happy St Patrick’s day and Montserrat day, and wish my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) a happy birthday. We have paid tribute to everyone in those diverse communities across the UK today, from Romford to Strangford, and it is an honour to be a part of that celebration.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate about passenger ship operations, particularly on the tidal River Thames. He is quite right to refer to it as a “liquid highway” connecting the country together. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East for having rightly pointed out to the House that it connects Oxfordshire. In fact, it forms the southern border of my constituency and is an artery through the entirety of southern England.

I join my hon. Friend the Member for Romford in supporting the announcement of the Thames freeport. Given its location, it has the potential to become a national hub for international trade and commerce, and to attract business and jobs to the region. It reconnects us with our vibrant maritime history and reinforces our position as an outward looking trading nation.

My hon. Friend mentioned the competitiveness points that fall within the responsibility of the Mayor of London. Those matters are for the Mayor and Transport for London to address. I know he will continue to

[*Robert Courts*]

engage with the Mayor and he may question his management of London's transport system, which has left a lot to be desired. My hon. Friend asked about scrutiny; he is doing a good job in providing that scrutiny himself, but I am happy to join him and write to the Mayor to raise those concerns as well.

I turn to the subject of passenger boats. I associate myself with the comments made by all hon. Members, particularly the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), who paid tribute to maritime workers across our wonderful United Kingdom and everything they have been doing to connect communities, particularly in the difficult circumstances of the pandemic.

I am sure the House will agree that safety must be a top priority for the Government when it comes to ship operations. Operators must ensure that ships are not only built but maintained and operated to maintain the safety of their passengers, their crews and other ships. There is a balance to be struck between safety and the right to trade and remain operationally viable. Ultimately, this is a matter of judgment of risk, and it comes down to having proportionate and appropriate safety measures. I suspect that my hon. Friend the Member for Romford and I would entirely agree on that statement of principle. It is just a matter of where the balance falls.

It may be appropriate to spend a moment looking at the origins of the legislation that is proposed, which, as my hon. Friend points out, was the Marchioness incident. I hope the House will pardon me if I reflect on the tragic events of 20 August 1989, as the background may be helpful. Hon. Members will remember the deeply harrowing scenes of the Marchioness party boat after its collision with the Bowbelle dredger on the Thames around Southwark bridge. Tragically, 51 young people lost their lives that night. That tragic event prompted 30 years of debate about the general safety of passenger ships on our inland waterways, particularly those on the tidal River Thames. The proposals that we are considering spring from that tragic incident, rather than seeking to address an incident that had already taken place. That is an important distinction to make.

There were a number of drivers of change. There was a Marine Accident Investigation Branch recommendation. After Lord Justice Clarke's Thames safety inquiry in 2000, he conducted an exercise and enhanced security arrangements were proposed. A number of improvements have taken place since 1989 to the emergency response and the operation of small passenger ships. For example, Her Majesty's Coastguard now has a presence on the river, with the Port of London Authority, at the Thames barrier, the RNLI now has a presence on the river, and additional rescue equipment and safety aids are placed along the banks of the Thames to support people who may find themselves in the water.

Ship movements are closely monitored by the Port of London Authority, which is responsible for safe navigation using modern tracking systems. Ships have adopted better look-out arrangements to reduce the risk of collision and training is better, as is the certification of crews. Additionally, ships built after 1992 must meet modern ship damage survivability standards. That is to keep them afloat in the event of an accident, either to get them back to shore under their own steam or to give time for passengers and crew to be rescued.

However, those modern standards have not thus far been applied to the older ships, which retain what are called grandfather rights, and that of course is the subject of today's debate. But as waterways have become busier, so the concern about the safety of these ships has also grown. Some of the ships are very old and are heritage boats. My hon. Friend the Member for Romford is right to say that they should be treasured. The hon. Member for Strangford has paid tribute to them as well. I think his phrase was that the old can sometimes be the best. I think we would all agree with that sentiment. I totally understand the special place that these ships have in the hearts of many Members of this House and of the other place. I feel a lot of that sentiment myself.

Significantly, I also appreciate the concerns and representations from operators, who are concerned about being unable to continue in business if they are compelled to modify their ships to bring them into line with modern safety standards, particularly the damage stability requirements, which I will come to in a little more detail in a moment. Of course, that is all amplified by the pandemic. Therefore, we come to looking at the point of balance, which is perhaps the real issue in the debate today. There is an argument for saying that the safety record of the old passenger ships on the River Thames is good and therefore there is no need to introduce the new requirements. It is true that we have not seen an incident with loss of life similar to the Marchioness tragedy since that dreadful night in August 1989, but the difficult question is whether that is by design or whether it is simply a matter of good fortune, and it is that difficult question that we must ask ourselves when we are considering this matter.

Safety experts at the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and the Port of London Authority are of the clear view that there has been too much reliance on continuing good fortune, and I would like to spend a moment or two explaining why that is. It is of note as background that, as I understand it, to this day the sister ship of the Marchioness continues to operate on the tidal River Thames. Evidence is inconclusive as to whether the measures proposed in the legislation would prevent an identical incident. My hon. Friend the Member for Romford may well be right; I think he made the point that perhaps they would not prevent an identical incident. But what I ask the House to consider is that that is not the right question, the question that we should be asking, because the relevant comparator is how quickly a vessel would sink were something—not necessarily that type of accident—to happen to it.

The Port of London Authority says that between 2010 and 2018 there were 1,192 accidents or incidents of varying severity along the Thames. I would like to give one example of what may have been just such a near miss. It is very appropriate: in 2008, the Millennium City hit Westminster bridge, literally outside this window here. It was pushed, as I understand it, by the tide and sustained an 8-foot gash to its side, below the waterline. We can never know what would have happened if a different vessel had been involved in that incident, but the expert opinion of the MCA is that, had it been one of the older passenger ships that did not meet the modern standards, it might well have sunk rapidly, with a considerable risk to life. Similarly, with regard to the Millennium Time collision in 2014 with the tug Redoubt, there would have been significant risk of an older vessel, covered by the grandfather rights, foundering.

The tidal Thames, the stretch of the river from Teddington Lock to the east, is complex in nature. It has varying depths and varying width. Other issues are its density, the make-up of the traffic on it, navigational hazards and environmental conditions. It is a tricky bit of river. The significant amount of large commercial traffic that operates on the Thames makes the risk of a collision unacceptably high, particularly in terms of a catastrophic collision between vastly different size ships, where the impact of the larger one overwhelms the smaller one. That mixture of heavy and light vessels also leads to congestion around bridges on the Thames. There is a mixture of tugs and barges with passenger ships and smaller craft. There is competition for berths at piers. That combination of risk factors necessitates the highest safety standards in ship construction, because if one of those older, unmodified ships were involved in an accident, it is likely that it would sink and lives would be lost.

It is against that background that the MCA legislation has been developed over several years. It has been the subject of a number of consultations and intense scrutiny, and there have also been a number of industry workshops. I accept that there is controversy surrounding it, and I totally accept that there is cross-party objection to it. That is why I met my hon. Friend the Member for Romford, as he kindly said, and others, so I have a first-hand understanding of it. The intention behind the legislation is to update the standards so that they are closer to those expected of modern ships. Passengers have a right to expect safety standards that appertain to the 21st century. That is probably what they expect, without a second thought, when they step on to a ship. My hon. Friend has asked for flexibility. I will come to that in a moment, but it is right to note that even under these revised proposals, older ships will have flexibility in how they comply.

It is important to note that, in addition to survivability in the event of damage, the proposals also cover safety improvements to life-saving equipment, firefighting and detection, bilge pumps and associated alarms. The most challenging part is the damage stability requirement and flexibility—better referred to as “damage survivability”, because that is what it really means—and even there we have introduced a facility for an exemption. Owners will need to demonstrate, through a risk assessment, that their ships are operating in an area that presents a lower risk profile. That risk assessment will need to be agreed by the MCA and must not be opposed by the relevant navigation authority. My hon. Friend quite rightly mentioned the details. Some consultation has already taken place, but there will be time, between the laying of the legislation and its coming into force, to make clear the steps that those operators that wish to apply for an exemption will have to take.

I totally recognise that it may not be possible to modify some of the older ships to comply with modern stability standards. As I have said, we will undertake a risk-balancing exercise, whereby risk to life will be assessed alongside the safety standards—it is all a balance of risk, as hon. Members well understand. It seems to me that that is in the right place. Operators can either comply with the standards by modifying their ships, or apply for the exemption. I would suggest that that represents the flexibility referred to by my hon. Members, and it is a compromise of sorts.

There has, of course, been a request for further compromise. I am hugely grateful to all hon. Members and Members of the other place for their constructive and expert engagement. I recognise the strength of feeling and thank them for that engagement. It is precisely because of that engagement that the MCA and the Department have considered in great detail whether there is a case for further compromise.

The MCA has carefully evaluated the option of not applying the damage stability requirements to ships that keep their operations to the west of Westminster bridge, which it judges as being not acceptable from a safety perspective. That decision is based on ship numbers, movements and incidents upriver of Westminster, particularly in Lambeth Reach. My hon. Friend asked me to write to him with details, and I will of course enter into correspondence with him on the basis for that decision.

Although the level of maritime traffic may be less, the balance of risk means that it remains unacceptable to rely on a blanket exemption for small passenger ships. And it is, of course, the blanket exemption that my hon. Friend is asking for today. It is important to stress that that does not mean that exemptions are not possible, because operators can apply for an exemption, using the risk assessment process to demonstrate that the arrangements for individual ships are safe and will protect the ship, its passengers and crew in the event of an accident. Proposals will allow operators an exemption from the new damage stability requirements if they demonstrate that they operate in an area of category C waters, which pose a lower operational risk. That risk assessment must be agreed by the MCA and not opposed by the relevant harbour authority.

I would not want to prejudge any risk assessment outcomes, but it may be that operators will struggle to show evidence that there is a lower operational risk in the vicinity of Westminster, for the reason I have outlined. There may be more scope to demonstrate a lower risk upriver of Chelsea, although of course everything will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

To sum up, the level of maritime traffic may be less in this part of the river, but the balance of risk means that it remains unacceptable to have a blanket exemption for small passenger ships. However, I believe that the flexibility and proportionality that my hon. Friend asks for is there, because it does not mean that no exemptions are possible; they just have to be approached in the right way in order to protect safety in the way that I have outlined.

I thank all hon. Members who have made representations about the safety of older passenger ships. My hon. Friend made a powerful speech. He spoke hugely compellingly on behalf of his constituents, those who use the river, and all the people who have raised the issue with him. They could ask for no better advocate. He has made powerful points, and I have great sympathy for many of them. However, as I have said, the question ultimately comes down to a matter of judgment on the basis of risk.

The Government's position is that, when we look at the risk-assessed exemption present in the proposed legislation, we believe that it is no longer sufficient to rely on good fortune when dealing with the safety of life on the river. The MCA has made efforts to take account of as many as possible of the matters raised in the

[*Robert Courts*]

consultation and elsewhere. As I say, there are routes to exemption from those damage stability requirements, subject to developing that risk assessment.

The MCA will consider all cases on their own merits, and will be as pragmatic and flexible as possible, provided of course that safety is not compromised. Although I have sympathy for many of the points that my hon. Friend makes, I feel it is right that we continue with the legislation simply because of the risk to life, which is, as I say, unacceptably high without the new legislation. I thank all hon. Members for their support for, and interest in, today's critical debate. I am very grateful to everyone for their time.

10.37 am

Andrew Rosindell: I thank the Minister for his response, and the hon. Members for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) and for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), and of course my good friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for their contributions. I thank the Minister for his responses to many of the points that I made, but I fear that it will be met with disappointment. I am sure that he instinctively understands my points and why I am making them in this way. I hope that he will not simply follow what he is being told, but that he will be genuinely convinced that this is not a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

I hope that the Minister will go back to his Ministry, talk to the MCA, fight for my constituents and the boat operators that have served London for so long and so well, and not be part of a decision that will wreck people's jobs and wreck an industry that has done so much for London and played such a central part on our wonderful River Thames. I ask him to please think

about those points: please go back to the Ministry, speak to the people who work in the industry, and look for flexibility and compromise. Do not take what we are told—look at the real situation.

Finally, I was a little concerned by the phrase “design or good fortune”. My goodness—imagine if we applied that principle to everything we do in Government and everything we do in our lives: “It is only by good fortune that bad things have not happened.” We might as well have a permanent lockdown and have everyone stay indoors and never do anything in their lives, just in case we do not have good fortune. We cannot live like that. We have to allow flexibility. We are a Conservative Government and this is in unconservative way of approaching the problem. Yes, we need safety and a sensible way of dealing with such things, and we need people to upgrade their standards where possible, but for goodness' sake, let us have a light-touch Government, not interfering with everything and taking measures to an extreme whereby people lose their jobs and livelihoods.

I know that the Minister must, deep down in his heart, agree with much of what I am saying. I know, given the Minister that he is—strong and determined—that he will not go back to the Ministry and allow civil servants and others to dictate, but that he will make the decision himself. He will, of course, be responsible for those decisions, so I know that, in the end, he will make the right decisions for the River Thames and for all those people who work in this cherished industry in our capital.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of passenger boats and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency.

10.40 am

Sitting suspended.

Marine Protected Areas

11 am

Dame Angela Eagle (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to facilitate the new hybrid arrangements. I call Tony Lloyd to move the motion.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the extension of marine protected areas.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Angela. Marine protected areas are of enormous importance not only to our country and our coastal seas, but to the whole world. Our oceans are massively complicated systems and not properly understood, but we know how important they are to human life. For example, some 25% of the carbon gases produced by human activity are absorbed by the ocean. Some of that is good and some of it leads to the acidification of our seas, which is less good. We know, and the United Kingdom Government and the United Nations are in agreement, that our oceans are now at a critical point. Some 1% have protection but scientists think that a minimum of 30% require protection, to allow our oceans to restore and recover.

Sadly, overfishing and industrial fishing are still with us, putting whole species of fish at risk. The yellowfin tuna, for example, is now endangered and could cease to exist within a relatively small number of years. The massively destructive use of bottom trawlers—those that scour our oceans, ripping up the seabed and the basis for the biodiversity that allows the fish to spawn and flourish—is doing enormous damage across the world and in the seas off these islands of ours.

We also know that the use of the oceans as a dustbin for human activity cannot go on. Plastic pollution is across our oceans. Even in the deepest recesses of the oceans, many miles down, we now find plastic waste from human activity. Using our oceans as a dump for our sewage is simply no longer acceptable. I can remember a time when the sewage boat from Manchester went out into the Mersey bay and dumped sewage—admittedly treated sewage, but nevertheless sewage—into the Irish sea. Such practices have stopped in the UK, but they must also be stopped worldwide.

Of course, there are questions about antibiotics in our seas and the short and long-term impact that will have. There are even questions about the destruction of the efficiency of antibiotics for human use. We need international action, and it is clear that we need United Nations treaties to govern the use of the sea as a resource. There is a call by scientists, for example, for a moratorium on the fishing of mesopelagic fish that lie at a depth of between 200 metres and 1,000 metres. It is up to our Government to operate internationally and to call for action at a global level.

Whether the UK has less influence today post Brexit is a moot point that we can debate on another occasion. It is a real issue, although I welcome yesterday's announcement of the new fisheries agreement between Norway, the European Union and the UK. That is an important step forward in rebuilding the trust that has been lost recently. In fairness, the UK Government have entered an era where there are some very good examples

of our international obligations in care for the sea. The protection zone, for example, around St Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha is important. I think that Tristan da Cunha is the largest protected area of ocean on the planet. It was a welcome step by our country and Government.

I want to concentrate the bulk of my remarks on UK inshore and offshore seas. The cycle of carbon capture, and the maintenance of productive fishing as a resource for human consumption, depend on the biodiversity in particular of our inshore and offshore seas. Those things are most likely to have an impact closest to our coast. The sea is massively important as a source of carbon capture, and we can increase or decrease that. On an international level, in practice, before I talk about our own coast, maintaining the mangrove swamps and seagrasses—and more locally our salt marshes—is of huge importance for carbon capture; but biodiversity of the oceans is of fundamental importance.

There are good examples. The Lyme bay experiment has yielded positive results and shown what can be done, with less fishing but more fish being caught. It is a measure of how far the productivity of the oceans has declined that we can now demonstrate that we can increase the productivity of fishing with less intensive methods. When we fish less intensively there is an increase in the number of coastal fish such as pollock, cod and wrasse, which used to abound around our coast but have now become much scarcer. However, they increase once again if we take care to manage the resources around our coast.

Our coasts are not yet in the state that we would want: 25% of the UK's seas and 40% of our inshore seas are in some form of marine protected area, but we face problems. The Government's marine strategy report revealed that only four of the 11 indicators of good environmental status are met across our local seas. There are problems to do with nomadic fishing practices: the practices of those who come into an area without having been there before, fish and overfish, and disappear, perhaps for some years, to come back when it suits them but does not suit the biodiversity we are trying to encourage. In 2019 supertrawlers with bottom dredges engaged in 3,000 hours of fishing in our offshore marine protected areas. It is estimated that in the first half of 2020, that level of overfishing had already doubled. We have huge problems and have to take action, or the destruction of our seas will continue.

I am bound to welcome—and I do welcome—the steps that have been taken already, with the creation of the many marine protection areas around our coast. There are hundreds of them. However, we have a patchwork with different rules and regimes operating in different areas. We need to look forward to something to give greater consistency around the coastline. There are differences, it is sad to recall, between the English, Welsh and Scottish coasts. Of course Ireland is a different regime, but Northern Ireland, again, has different practices. We need consistency. I welcome the fact that the Government are looking at Dogger Bank and south Dorset for the banning of bottom trawling—that is so important because of the impact of bottom trawlers—but of course, that means that of the 76 offshore marine protection areas, only two will potentially have that kind of protection. We need a more joined-up strategy.

[Tony Lloyd]

There has been progress, as I have said. Lyme bay is a tremendously powerful example of what happens when we take a whole-site approach and say, “We are looking at the protection not just of individual species, but of the total biodiversity of an area.” That is important. The ban on electric pulse fishing has been another major step forward. I am a reluctant Brexiteer even to this day, but that ban has demonstrated that, where we now have the power to use UK law, we can take positive steps and move things forward. The Prime Minister spoke recently about the need to ban the vessels that “hoover up” our oceans, and he was right to call for that, but we need action to ensure that a ban comes into operation.

We need the UK Government to move forward on a total strategy for our shores and oceans. We have some of the best marine scientists in the world, and we have the capacity, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, to be a leader in the demand for international change, but we need a total UK marine strategy that looks after our own shores—both inshore and offshore—and gives leadership on and commitment to ensuring that we cherish oceans around the world as something for the future, not simply as dumps for the past or as a resource to exploit and destroy.

A total international strategy would begin the move towards protecting the 30% of our oceans that we have to protect. The UK Government are committed to that, but not yet. My first call is for the UK to operate internationally to look for the kinds of global treaties that will make a material difference, give protection to our oceans, and bring sustainability for the future. My second call is for a whole-site approach to our inshore and offshore seas to join up the work that has been done across the marine protection areas off our coasts. It is tremendously important that we move in that direction.

Perhaps the most important call at the moment is for some consistency in challenging the practice of bottom trawling by super trawlers, which destroys the ocean bed. As our Prime Minister has already said in recent months, we have to stop those who would Hoover up not only the fish, but the seabed, which will take many years to recreate. If we bring an end to bottom trawling in our offshore seas, we will have taken a huge step forward.

I appreciate that this is something that we have to take with care. I know that there is suspicion in the European Union that the Dogger Bank ban is being done for nationalistic fishing reasons, but we have to demonstrate clearly that it is actually being done for scientific marine protection reasons. If we can get those arguments across, we can begin to make a material difference to the biodiversity across our seas.

I say to the Minister that although the Government have done some seriously good things, which I genuinely applaud, I look forward to a joined-up marine strategy that says that we will take the lead internationally to protect our oceans, that we will take a whole-site approach to our marine protection areas, and that we will guarantee that the unacceptable practice of bottom trawling by super trawlers is brought to an end.

11.14 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I feel as though this is a very personal debate, with just Dame Angela, me and the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), whom I thank for securing the debate. From what he said, we have a great deal in common and share a great deal of interest in this area. I am not going to say it is all perfect, but I will say that I genuinely think we are driving in the direction that he is very keen for us to go.

The hon. Member recalled the dumping of raw sewage in the Mersey. I had the perhaps ignominious role of going out on the last ever shipment of raw sewage to be dumped in the River Severn when I was a new reporter, and jolly smelly it was. However, that has all stopped, which is a great move. We do not want to see that again.

As I said, the hon. Member and I share a great deal of interest in the wonderfully rich UK marine life and in our marine protected areas, where we have protected the most precious habitats and species. We have three types of protections that come within what we generally call MPAs: marine conservation zones, special protection areas, and special areas of conservation. They all contribute towards our having an ecologically coherent network of MPAs. I hope I can demonstrate that we have a clear strategy for our marine space, but that is not to say there is not work to do. Having left the EU, we now have a great many more opportunities to do a lot of what we really want to do in the marine space.

It is worth looking back at how far we have come in recent years in order to build up the network. Just 10 years ago, there were only a small number of MPAs scattered throughout our waters. Since then, huge amounts of work have been undertaken by the Government, agencies and stakeholders through surveying and other means. The hon. Member mentioned that we have a fantastic groundswell of scientists in this country—experts and specialists in the marine space. They have all been feeding into this endeavour, which has allowed us to identify and designate the network of MPAs in order to protect the very special habitats and species found around our waters.

We now have 371 MPAs—I think the hon. Member will agree that that is quite some achievement—which cover 38% of the area. In England, there are 178 MPAs, covering 40% of English waters. That really is a very big achievement in what is quite a short space of time. However, it is not just about slapping on a designation; it is about making sure we manage those protected areas properly. As he will know, our marine space faces enormous pressures. It has struck me, particularly since I have been the environment Minister, that everyone wants to get their hands on the marine space. There are a lot of challenges, but that is why it is important that we have our network of MPAs and a strong marine planning and licensing regime to prevent harmful activities. However, MPAs also need protection from other forms of activity that fall outside those regimes, such as certain types of fishing that might be harmful to them.

I want to touch on our inshore waters, which are up to six nautical miles from the coast. That is where we have full control of our MPAs. Over 90 of those are now protected from damaging fishing activities, thanks to the hard work of the Inshore Fisheries and Conservation

Authorities and the Marine Management Organisation, and to the use of byelaws that we have been able to put into operation in the inshore areas. The hon. Member touched on bottom towed fishing. In many of those areas, we have been able to permanently stop bottom towed fishing taking place. That is happening right now in Poole harbour, The Needles, Bembridge on the Isle of Wight, Lyme bay—he rightly referred to the model project that has been put into operation there—and Torbay.

Through working very closely with the fishing industry and other stakeholders, it has been possible to develop individual, tailor-made schemes for certain areas. There are others around the coast that protect such things as reef features by having measures that relate to mobile fishing gear, and restricting dredging in some areas and the hand-harvesting of certain shellfish—for example, in seagrass beds. Lots of measures are being put in place so that we have more sustainable habitats and sustainable fishing at the same time.

The hon. Gentleman rightly says that there are opportunities in many of these areas, particularly in the carbon storage space—for example, carbon storage in kelp beds and in our mud. There are lots of opportunities and good reasons why we should put in place some of these measures.

In our offshore waters, which the hon. Gentleman touched on, the picture is very different. Introducing management measures for our offshore MPAs has been really hard to achieve because we had to get the agreement of all the EU member states. As you will probably realise, Dame Angela, that is pretty tricky. Now that we have left the common fisheries policy and introduced the Fisheries Act 2020, at long last we have the opportunity to bring in our own byelaws so that we can start to protect these areas properly. A great deal of work has been done really fast to try to use some of the new powers. As was mentioned, we have proposals for four of our most sensitive offshore sites—the Canyons, Dogger Bank, Inner Dowsing, Race Bank and North Ridge, and south Dorset. We set about consultations literally within days of getting the new powers, and the consultation runs until 28 March.

We are not going to stop there. We are also developing a whole programme to bring in required management for the remainder of the offshore areas in English waters, and we want to do that as fast as possible.

Although we have a proud record of MPAs, the Government are mindful that we could go further in the marine space, which is why we called for a review into the idea of highly protected marine areas. The subsequent Benyon review, which I am sure the hon. Member remembers, looked at whether we could create highly protected marine areas. The Government welcomed the report and are looking at the recommendations. Such areas would allow biodiversity to recover across a whole site. It is very much what the hon. Member touched on—a much wider, more holistic approach. A lot of work is going on with stakeholders to talk about those recommendations. The Secretary of State has announced that we intend to pilot some highly protected marine areas. It is very exciting, and we will hear more about it as time goes on.

I want to touch on large fishing vessels, which are often referred to as super trawlers. Lots of organisations are raising that issue, and I have had a lot of letters

about them and their impact on MPAs. The Government are looking closely at what our policy for such vessels should be, but as ever it needs to be evidence-based. Everything has to be based on science. Those vessels are usually what we call pelagic trawlers, which means that they fish in the water column. As such, they are not likely to come into contact with seabed habitats and species, which most of the MPAs were designated to protect, but we know that, for those highly mobile fish species, area-based protections such as MPAs might not be sufficient, and they are best protected by measures that apply across the full range. Certainly, looking at those vessels is on the radar.

I just wanted to say yet again that having left the common fisheries policy, and now that the transition period has ended, we have the opportunity to look at these large vessels coming into our waters offshore. I want to highlight, though, that we have already acted to ban pulse fishing in our waters, which the hon. Member referred to, and I am pleased that he welcomed that.

Our domestic MPA network has meant that the UK is in a strong position to be a global leader in protecting our seas. The hon. Member questioned what our role would be, and whether we would step up to the plate—whether we could, now that we have left the EU—but I definitely believe that we can play a much greater role on the international stage.

We are a very ambitious participant in what we are calling a marine super year—2021 is the marine super year—and we are continuing to push for strong multilateral action on ocean protection. As part of this, the UK is advocating the protection of at least 30% of the global ocean within marine protected areas by 2030, which aligns with global protection of at least 30% of land by the same year. We are championing the 30 by 30 target through our leadership of the Global Ocean Alliance, and as ocean co-chair of the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People. I am delighted to announce that Bangladesh has recently joined the Global Ocean Alliance, which brings us to 41 countries and counting. Between the two alliances, 70 countries now support the 30 by 30 target, which I think the hon. Member will welcome, because he touched on some of these much wider issues.

The hon. Member also touched on this whole space of a more holistic, joined-up approach to everything that goes on in our seas, particularly fishing. It is our ambition to have world-class fisheries management that will achieve sustainable fisheries, safeguarding stocks, which is obviously crucial for the fishermen themselves, but also safeguarding the environment in the long term. The Government remain fully committed to sustainable fishing, and to the principle of maximum sustainable yields as set out in the 25-year environment plan and our fisheries White Paper. The objectives of the Fisheries Act 2020, the joint fisheries statement and the fisheries management plans collectively reaffirm our commitment to achieving sustainable fishing and protecting the environment, while tailoring our approach to our unique seas and the needs of our fishing industry. I want to give reassurance that I am working very closely with the Fisheries Minister on this, because while she is responsible for fishing and our fishermen, I am responsible for the environment, and we need to work together so that we have a sustainable future for everyone.

I have been very pleased to have the chance to talk about some of these issues, and I thank the hon. Member for Rochdale for, in his very measured and fair way,

[Rebecca Pow]

raising the points that he made. I think he will agree that we are thinking along the same lines, which is always good, even when speaking to the Opposition. I know this is something that he strongly believes in, and I hope I have demonstrated that we are doing a great deal for marine protection. Our marine does faces a lot of challenges, but we now have the structure in place and we are working very hard to make all these things line up so that we have a sustainable future around these coasts, and are also using our influence internationally for all concerned: wildlife, nature, and those earning their living from the sea.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Research and Development Funding

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice, in order to support the new hybrid arrangements. Timings of debates have been amended to allow technical arrangements to be made for the next debate. There will also be a suspension between each debate. I remind Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive for the start of the debate and they are expected to remain for the entire debate. I must also remind Members participating virtually that they are visible at all times, both to each other and to us in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks' email address. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and before they leave the room. There are no Members in the Public Gallery.

2.31 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of research and development funding.

It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Mr Dowd, and to have the opportunity to discuss this vital question, which is extremely timely. Has there ever been a time when the public were so interested and indebted to the work of our researchers? Quite simply life-saving and life-changing, with huge social and economic consequences, the vaccine development is not the subject for today. The research and development, the research institutions and universities that support them are a cause for global celebration and thanks.

That opening sentence makes it clear that this a huge and complicated area. I suspect that in 90 minutes we will not be able to do full justice to it, not least the complicated and important relationship between public and private funding, which I suspect others will touch on. I will concentrate on some of the key, immediate questions facing particularly public funding and its future. The debate is also timely for different and, frankly, much more political reasons.

I will concentrate on public funding issues relating to Horizon, the impact of official development assistance cuts, and the curious case of the new kid on the block, the Advanced Research and Invention Agency, which I know was discussed earlier today at the Select Committee on Science and Technology, chaired by the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark). I am sure he will have more to say about that later.

Although for obvious reasons the debate is about money, money is only part of the challenge. The vital resource is people. Throughout the difficult debates of the past few years, I have spoken to many people in the research and development and science sectors, and that is a point they come back to every time: it is about people, relationships between people and scientific collaborations. Science is global and research is global. Those relationships matter.

I am delighted to see my neighbour, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne), who shares some of Cambridge with me. My constituency is in an area that is about research and development to its core. It boasts countless institutions working on a dazzling range of areas. To cover it geographically, from north to south and east to west, we see a huge array of start-ups at the innovation centre to the north, very close to the science park, which hosts UK success stories such as Owlstone, now the Bradfield Centre.

Nearby Darktrace, the world-class laboratory of molecular biology, whose iconic building is a gateway to the south of the city, has been conducting research for decades to understand biology at a molecular level, and whose work has produced no fewer than 12 Nobel prizes. That is now located, by no accident, very close to the new AstraZeneca building, to allow collaboration to thrive, as it does right across that area of the biomedical campus.

Green aerospace design work will be found at the Whipple to the east, a project that is well known to the Minister and is very topical. That is not far from the British Antarctic Survey, while the huge international success story that is Arm is to the west. Marshall Aerospace is also in the private sector, providing world-leading aerospace development as well as materials development.

Go further to see the Cleantech works being done at Allia, and go past the railway station to see the Sainsbury Laboratory of plant science. Step forward to find Anglia Ruskin University, with its hugely important research into climate and environmental change. We then find our famous colleges, which host such relevant thinkers as Professor Dasgupta, whose recent review of economics and nature must be transformative. There is huge expertise among our social scientists, helping our understanding of our past as well as our future, our legal frameworks and our relationships with other countries.

I could speak for 90 minutes just listing all the amazing things going on in and around Cambridge. I will not do that, but I can hardly fail to mention the National Institute of Agricultural Botany and the surrounding science parks, Babraham and the amazing DNA sequencing at the Wellcome Sanger Institute. I will have missed others and I apologise to them. In all of them, people are the key. The money counts too.

For a considerable time, the importance of research and development work and the funding for it has been recognised on a cross-party basis. There is widespread agreement that UK spending on R&D has historically been too low. Although R&D investment in the UK has risen over the past 30 years, the amount we actually spend on it as a proportion of GDP has been flatlining, hovering at between 1.5% and 1.7% of GDP over the past two decades. It is behind the European average of 2% and the OECD average of 2.4%.

Our key neighbours and allies have been successful in investing far more. We often claim that we punch above our weight and get more for our money, but how much better we could be if we were matching that. The Government acknowledge this and have pledged to catch us up with the rest of the developed world, with a target of raising investment to 2.4% by 2027 and to increase public investment in R&D to £22 billion a year by 2024-25. This is welcome, although we know it will be a challenge.

This week we have seen studies showing that such targets are often set but have historically been difficult to reach, despite good intentions. It is important that we have this as an ambition and set a clear pathway. There are growing concerns in the R&D sector about how that figure is to be achieved and whether, beyond the rhetoric, the Government really still have that commitment to meet that ambition.

I will turn to the immediate problems, the first of which is Horizon. For many of us, there was little to welcome in what I would call the slapdash, desperate, last-minute trade and co-operation agreement that the Prime Minister salvaged with the European Union, but one glimmer in it was the framework for the UK's continued association with the EU's newest and biggest research funding programme, Horizon Europe. With a budget of €100 billion, it is the world's largest and most competitive research funding programme.

We know that membership of the EU's 2014-2020 Horizon research programme has been extremely beneficial to UK research. The UK has been one of the largest beneficiaries of the nearly €60 billion of funding that has been allocated over the past six years, receiving more than €7 billion. The vast majority of that has gone to our excellent UK universities, with academic research in the social sciences, arts and humanities particularly dependent on this stream of income from the EU.

The harsh reality of leaving the EU means that we are undoubtedly in a worse position this time around. While the rules for our participation have yet to be completely settled, it is clear that we will now be participating as an associated country, meaning that although we can lead and participate in collaborative research projects, we will have no formal decision-making power over the programmes and we will not be involved in discussions about which areas should receive priority for funding.

Taking back control turns out to mean not being in the room when decisions are being taken and, incredibly, having to beg others to make the case on our behalf. It does not matter how it is dressed up, our influence is reduced. In another blow this week, we have learned that we could also be excluded from major quantum and space research projects.

Whatever one thinks about all that, one of the biggest question marks is about how the Government will be funding the UK's association with Horizon Europe, which is expected to cost about £2 billion a year, and who in Whitehall will be managing this. Post Brexit, we know the Horizon Europe bill will be paid in isolation rather than as part of overall EU membership, and that there is no existing budget provision for it. It was notable, despite many calls from the sector, that plans for where the funding would be sourced were conspicuously absent from the Budget earlier this month. There are significant and growing concerns among scientists and research funders that it could now be taken from the UK's existing science budget. That would pit different elements of UK R&D against each other and would see a collective diminishing of the overall pot. It could set us back in our progress towards 2.4%.

Universities UK has warned—I am sure that the Minister will be aware of its letter to the Prime Minister this week—that if the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is required to fund the costs of participation out of the existing budget, it will amount to an effective cut of something in excess of £1 billion,

[Daniel Zeichner]

roughly equivalent to the cost of funding the entire Medical Research Council and the Science and Technology Facilities Council combined. Reduced domestic funding would also damage our ability to compete for Horizon Europe funding, risking a double loss. Universities UK estimates that a £1 billion reduction in funding would be equivalent to cutting more than 18,000 full-time academic research posts, distributed across all parts and all four nations of the UK, and could potentially lead to a further reduction of up to £1.6 billion in private R&D investment that would have been stimulated by public investment.

The Campaign for Science and Engineering—I am, as ever, indebted to Professor Sarah Main for her advice—warns that sourcing the Horizon bill from the current science budget in the way I referred to would effectively negate two years of Government increases in UK R&D funding, so it is a serious issue. I am sure that the Minister is well aware of it, and I hope that she will be able to confirm that the Government are on the case. Ideally she would confirm that the cost of association to Horizon Europe will not be taken out of the existing UK Research and Innovation budget.

I am afraid that what I have been describing is only one of the pressing problems. The Government's recent decision to cut £4 billion from the aid budget prompted fury in Cambridge, where we take those things very seriously, not least because it broke a manifesto promise by the governing party to maintain spending of 0.7% of gross national income on aid. However, it is becoming increasingly clear this week that as a consequence the plug will now have to be pulled on hundreds of international collaborative research projects funded with UK aid. In passing, I want to pay tribute to Chris Parr and his colleagues at *Research Professional News*, who uncovered much of the detail. UKRI, left with a £120 million shortfall, has had to announce this week, with just four months' notice, that most of its aid-funded research projects are now unlikely to be funded beyond 31 July, regardless of the stage that the research is at.

Those projects are aimed at tackling some of the world's major problems, such as climate change, antimicrobial resistance and poor health and nutrition across the world. Projects that were previously funded through the global challenges research fund and the Newton fund, which usually receive official development assistance, have seen UK universities take centre stage in efforts to address plastic waste management, develop renewable energy and clean water technology, improve worldwide labour laws and roll out 5G networks in lower and middle-income countries. In the past year alone, lessons learned from ODA-funded projects have enabled UK universities to support the national effort against covid-19 through enhanced virus detection technology and online rehab services to help those suffering the long-term effects of the disease. I am grateful to Universities UK for its advice. As I said, the Minister will have seen its letter this week, which I thought was an unusually strong warning and intervention.

In Cambridge I am already hearing that there could be an impact on internationally important scientific programmes, such as those run from the UN Environment Programme world conservation monitoring centre, which is based in the city, as well as on many university

projects that are currently focused on international development. Once again, I could read a long list of projects. I will not, but I will say that a consistent message is coming from all those people about the soft power delivered for us by those projects, which are of course good in their own right, but are also how we still have influence in the world. Those people all tell me that that is based on trust, and that if we break that trust it is hard to get it back again. There is much more than a financial cost.

That response is not only coming from Cambridge. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) just missed the deadline for speaking today, but he asked me to mention that the all-party parliamentary group on global tuberculosis recently conducted an inquiry into the UK's investment in global health research. It found that the sustainability of the UK's funding across the full product development pipeline is essential to getting life-saving new tools from UK labs to patients around the world. Cutting that funding will have enormous implications for the lives of the most vulnerable, collective global health security, the UK's research infrastructure and our standing on the international stage. He urges the Government to think again.

It is shocking that the Government are punching a hole in such important research, particularly in a year when we are recovering from a global pandemic and, of course, hosting the G7 leaders summit and the crucial COP26 climate summit. Frankly, in terms of diplomacy, how inept does it get?

Universities have rightly warned that the cuts will harm our international standing, curtail successful programmes that have been a key vehicle for UK science diplomacy for many years, and lose international science and research partnerships that have taken a long time to establish. Stopping funding mid-cycle frankly shows blatant disregard and disrespect for our international partners. It is hardly surprising that six academics from a key research council advisory group for international research resigned this week in protest. The publication *Research Professional News* put it well yesterday when it noted:

“Anyone who has held a grant from the Global Challenges Research Fund will know that the UK goes out of its way to carry out rigorous due diligence on international organisations to ensure that they are reliable partners. It turns out that Her Majesty's government was the party that everyone should have been keeping an eye on.”

All this is taking us in a worrying direction, when looking at that 2.4%. It seems to be flying in the face of the Chancellor's stated aim of making the UK a scientific superpower, which was reiterated only yesterday by the Prime Minister. Universities UK has estimated that on top of the cost of Horizon association, the cut to ODA research funding could lead to a £1 billion reduction of the overall R&D budget. I suspect that, in the end, these are Treasury decisions. The Minister may well agree with the rising number of voices speaking out against many of the cuts. I urge her to do all she can to ensure that they are reversed and the vital projects that the funding supports are maintained.

Given all those pressures, it is perhaps surprising that the Government are considering diverting funding into a new, untested idea—the Advanced Research and Invention Agency. I will try not to duplicate this morning's discussion. I will also try not to let my view of its leading proponent

prejudice my thoughts, but I cannot help reflecting on the delicious irony of the name transition. DARPA—the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency—sounded like a rather crude 1960s American missile system. ARIA is much more, dare I say it, European. Names aside, it raises a whole series of questions about how it fits into a delicately balanced landscape.

The Haldane principle, dual funding, mechanisms to safeguard blue-sky research—people have been wrestling with these issues for years. The *raison d'être* of the Cambridge college system is to preserve space for imaginative and creative thinking. I do not say that there is no scope for change or improvement, but please identify the real problem. As David Sainsbury has so sensibly warned in the past, we should not just try to import something from another culture or another system; it is much better to nurture and encourage what we are good at. We should maybe look at the real problem: the much-talked-of valley of death—getting our great innovations developed. If we want to borrow from America, we should perhaps look more closely at the Small Business Research Initiative and the role of public procurement.

Where is the overall plan? I have to say that there was not much that the Opposition welcomed from the previous Conservative Government, but an industrial strategy—now apparently sadly discarded—was a step forward. A huge amount of work was done across many sectors, although I fear there is only limited public awareness of it. The Opposition would certainly have preferred the mission-oriented approach championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), but at least we had a structure.

Let me conclude on two further issues. These sources of public funding are vitally important for R&D, but given that public funding made up only 26% of total R&D funding in 2018 and the majority of funding currently comes from the private sector, we know that much more needs to be done to encourage private sector investment. According to Government estimates from 2019, we will need an additional £12 billion per year of private investment to meet the 2.4% target. That is significant.

Currently, British businesses invest less in R&D than those of similar nations. Investment is concentrated in major players in just a few sectors, with the life sciences sector consistently the largest R&D investor in the UK, but my understanding is that this, too, has been flatlining in recent years. There are concerns over the long-term certainty of key schemes which have been supporting early-stage innovation in the UK life sciences sector. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for life sciences, and colleagues tell me that despite being recognised by the Government as a highly effective scheme for driving business investment in R&D, the biomedical catalyst scheme still has no confirmed budget for the 2021 competition. I could say more, but time presses.

I will touch briefly on workforce issues. Back in 2019, the previous Science Minister, the right hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), highlighted that, as well as private investment, one of the key challenges we may face in meeting a 2.4% target will be the workforce, with an estimated 260,000 additional researchers working in R&D across universities, business and industry likely

to be required. He was right. We should be concerned, because there are a number of known workforce issues facing those in R&D.

As the Royal Society has helpfully set out, the UK immigration system is still one of the most expensive in the world, which is a particular deterrent to international researchers and entrepreneurs considering making the UK their research home. Careers in R&D are not as attractive as they should be, with relatively low salaries, short-term funding, unclear career development and difficulties facing researchers and technicians looking to shift between academia and industry at various times during their careers.

Diversity is also an issue, with only about 7% of managers, directors and senior officials in academic and non-academic higher education positions being black, Asian and minority ethnic. Despite many excellent initiatives, such as Athena Swan, still too often there are too few women.

All of this must be challenged in order to create a welcoming working culture in R&D. I recognise the good work that the Minister has done, and is doing, to tackle this. I am glad that the Government have made at least some moves in the Budget to undo the damage inflicted by their predecessors, by looking again at visa restrictions, with a view to attracting global talent, and that they have recognised the need to tackle these wider issues in their recent research and development road map. I look forward to seeing the detail of the people and culture strategy that has been promised.

Unfortunately, as the trade union Prospect notes, public sector research establishments have found themselves constrained by public sector pay freezes by successive Conservative Governments, and unable to match the competitiveness of pay offered by universities and elsewhere in the private sector. Another former Science Minister, David Willetts, admitted in 2020 that it was only when George Osborne visited Cambridge's Medical Research Council laboratory of molecular biology and saw the impediments to performance caused by public sector rules that the then Chancellor was convinced to grant it and similar bodies greater freedoms. I am told by Prospect that those freedoms have once again been removed. If that is the case, they should be restored.

In conclusion, we all recognise the importance of this sector to the future of the UK. I suspect that the Minister is fighting her corner, and all power to her. If she needs an aria, she should look no further than Puccini, "I will win—vincerò!" "Nessun Dorma" did once capture the public mood, and we need to show that our victory against the virus, if it is secured, will have come on the back of UK researchers and our great universities. We should celebrate them, but that means securing the funding. Minister, please sort out how Horizon is to be funded, restore the ODA cuts, and start to undo the damage that I fear has already been done to our international reputation.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I ask Members to speak for no more than five minutes.

2.53 pm

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on

[Greg Clark]

securing this debate. I am a little disappointed that he did not burst into song at the finale of his speech, but I recognise the important points made.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that this is a time in which the profile of, and gratitude for, UK and international science has never been higher across the country and the world. The excellence of British science has been particularly prominent, whether in the city that he and my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) represent, or in other great cities and towns across the country that host some of the best scientists in the world, working in collaboration with others across the world. It is no coincidence that the first pillar of our global strategy—in the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy published yesterday—is science and technology, specifically to grow the UK’s science and technology power in pursuit of strategic advantage. That is right and it represents an exciting prospect in the light of what we have discovered about the possibility of science moving quicker than we ever thought possible to save lives across the world. We are also seeing, in other aspects of the response to the pandemic, a real acceleration in the deployment of technologies, even if they are far removed from medical sciences.

The new Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy confirmed this morning that it remains the Government’s intention and commitment to invest 2.4% of GDP in science by 2027, and to achieve a public R&D budget of £22 billion of investment in science, so this should be a boom time for science and research. With the confidence of the public and the unprecedented commitment that the Government have made to doubling the science budget, we should be able to do more things to change more lives. Just at this moment, however, for some of the reasons mentioned by the hon. Member for Cambridge, science faces the prospect of having to retreat.

First, two weeks before the beginning of the next financial year, our principal science research body, UKRI, does not yet know what its budget will be for the year ahead. As we know, especially for science projects, long-term funding is crucial to contracts and investigations that take many years and months.

Secondly, there is uncertainty, as the hon. Gentleman said, about whether the UK’s contribution to Horizon Europe will be deducted from the science budget. In the past, what we got out of Horizon 2020, as it was known, was separate from the science budget. It has been suggested that our contribution to that project will be £2 billion a year, which would amount to as much as a quarter of the UKRI budget, meaning that at a time of intended advance, programmes such as the Faraday Institution’s research into batteries might have to be cut. In evidence to my Committee this morning, Dominic Cummings made it clear that the Prime Minister’s intention in the Brexit negotiations was always that that subscription should not be settled by cutting the science budget.

Thirdly, the temporary reduction in ODA spending that the hon. Gentleman mentioned is already causing UKRI to have to terminate some existing grants and leaving it unable to initiate any new awards. Sir Jeremy Farrar of the Wellcome Trust has said that the National Institute for Health Research could see a cut in global health

funding of 28% just at the time when covid has established the importance of that international work. There is also the importance of restoring the fundraising proceeds that charities have lost.

We know that the Minister and the Secretary of State are committed to getting the budget we need. Now is the time to fight for that. The Minister enjoys the support of my Committee and, I am sure, of the whole House, in fighting those battles to give clarity to UK science.

2.58 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for his interesting and comprehensive speech, and for arranging a debate on this important issue.

Research and development underpins our economic resilience, our global competitiveness and our progress towards a sustainable and climate-friendly future. The UK has always been a centre for research excellence, and Wales has played a foundational role in driving innovation across the UK. Wales is home to eight universities, including Bangor University in my own constituency of Arfon, and—as you would expect me to say, Mr Dowd—Bangor is a leading centre of excellence across the disciplines, in fields as diverse as social science, forestry and psychology. Wales has long driven innovation, from producing the historic first hydrogen fuel cell in 1842, to innovations reflected in the work of leading Welsh companies such as Riversimple. I hope that the Minister can confirm today the protection of funding for Bangor University’s research into agricultural microplastics and the consequences for food security and sustainable development in developing countries.

Welsh research has global implications, with Welsh-based researchers active in many countries, not least in the developing world. Perhaps the only really welcome aspect of yesterday’s grandiose integrated review was the commitment to return spending on overseas development to 0.7% of the UK’s national income. That, of course, was qualified, but I assure the House that I will do what I can to encourage the Government to return to their commitment, as set out in law by a previous Conservative Government. I hope you will allow me to say, Mr Dowd, that I was dismayed by that particular cut in the midst of a global pandemic. It is a cut in aid to those in conflict zones such as Yemen, where British-made weapons and systems are causing and compounding untold suffering. More positively, overseas development assistance also supports research by universities across the UK to advance our global progress towards achieving the UN’s sustainable development goals. As I said, I hope that the Government can confirm that funding for Bangor is protected.

From supporting sustainable development to ensuring our global competitiveness, research and development funding is pivotal to sustainability and productivity in our economy. That is why Plaid Cymru welcomed the UK Government’s commitment to raise R&D spending to 2.4% of GDP by 2024, yet the same regional inequalities that split our economy, favouring London and the south-east, are reflected in how the UK Government support research and development. In 2018, while R&D spending was £587 per head in England, it plummeted to just £250 in Wales—in other words, the level of

research on R&D in Wales was just 42% of that in England. I have no doubt that this is linked, to a degree, to the low level of investment and ambition by the Labour Welsh Government, but it also reflects the huge concentration of public spending in the golden triangle of London, Oxford, and—with due respect to the local Member—Cambridge. For instance, in 2018 London and the south-east received 49% of total R&D spending from the UK Government and UK Research and Innovation.

Such inequalities have also extended to the UK Government's fiscal interventions, which of course have profound implications for research. Between 2015 and 2018, only 210 businesses in Wales benefited from the enterprise investment scheme. That is why I urge the UK Government to acknowledge that, if the rhetoric of levelling up is to have any substance, they should immediately commit to equitable funding, not least in research and development, for otherwise marginalised economies such as we have in Wales. Anything else would prove that, in yet another respect, the UK just does not work for Wales.

3.4 pm

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con) [V]: I begin by putting on record my thanks to the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for having secured today's important debate. I am also delighted that it comes a day after the Prime Minister announced in the integrated review the Government's renewed commitment to spend 2.4% of GDP on R&D by 2027. It is a familiar figure, which I know the R&D policy community has spent a long time debating.

I was a Science Minister for two years and set out my own road map to 2.4%. I made a series of four speeches that looked at the importance of investing in people, in international partnerships, in private R&D investment and in emerging technologies in order to meet the target. The broad theme of those speeches—the hon. Gentleman rightly referred to this—was the importance of doubling not only public but private investment and seeking an entire change in the culture of how we do R&D in this country in order to hit 2.4%, given that other countries are now racing ahead of us. Germany is near 3%, South Korea is at 4.5% and Israel is at 4.9%. We will fall behind in the global race unless we raise our ambitions higher still.

I stand by the words of those speeches that I made in 2019, but what has changed since then is time: we have too few years to achieve 2.4%. As the hon. Gentleman stated, we are standing still at 1.8% of GDP being spent on R&D. There are just 2,115 days until 2027. We have only 302 weeks—or just a little over 50,000 hours—to go, if we are to reach that target.

Reaching the target is not just about investment, important though that is—I will talk about that in a moment. It is also about providing certainty for the future; and with certainty comes the need for advance planning in order to allow for the lead-in times, which are lengthy for R&D investment. That is why, when we were preparing to leave the European Union, the Government announced the underwrite in August 2016 and then the underwrite extension—the guarantee—so that in-flight applications to Horizon 2020 and projects already taking place in Horizon 2020, would still receive

money for the duration of the projects. Communication is absolutely vital when it comes to demonstrating long-term certainty for the R&D community.

On certainty and commitment, there were big-ticket items that I needed to fight for as the Science Minister. One of those was association into Horizon Europe in order to ensure that British science stayed on the road. That was why I also worked hard to commit to an increase in the UK contribution to the European Space Agency, increasing the subscription to a record level in 2019, and also to secure the first real-terms increase in QR—quality-related research funding—for more than a decade. Those were essential big-ticket items that we needed in order to enhance stability for the sector.

When it came to Horizon, many people told me that that simply would not be possible to do. I think that sometimes the R&D policy community can see things in a bit of a glass-half-empty way, mourning for yesteryear, when what we really need is to work together towards a positive vision for the future.

The manifesto commitment made by the Government saw R&D investment publicly increase from £9 billion to £19 billion. That was a huge amount—one of the most significant increases in a generation. Since then, the Chancellor's Budget last year increased the investment to £22 billion, so my assumption was that the Horizon subscription would come from that increase of £3 billion—the difference in what was being spent as a result of the Budget.

I recognise that we have difficulties over the current ODA R&D money that needs to be secured. Although we need certainty, it is right that we now look afresh at new structures and new funds in order to ensure that we can enhance our international research capabilities. I think that sometimes the global challenges research fund and the Newton fund were a square peg to fit a round hole when it came to justifying ODA spend—not necessarily when it came to actually fighting for what is right when it comes to R&D spend. I would look at the agility fund and the discovery fund set out in the Smith and Reid review for answers here.

On funding in general, however, we need to move away from the diverse plethora of pots—there are too many people competing for too small budgets—and replace them with the UK equivalent of Horizon Europe. A multi-annual framework for the R&D budget would help us to reach 2.4% by 2027.

3.9 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab) [V]: Let me begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing the debate and by welcoming the proposals for ARIA, which I believe is about to begin its legislative journey. It is good to hear that ARIA will have a guaranteed life of at least 10 years and that the chair will be responsible for its mission. It would also be good to hear that industry will be represented on the board. There is widespread recognition that innovation funding is just too short term in this country. The Catapult programme, for example, which has been a significant success, is funded in five-year blocks. The Select Committee on Science and Technology recently called for long-term funding for Catapult.

[*Steve McCabe*]

We need that long-term funding and support for research that might fail. Otherwise, we will be in the game of trying to spot and back winners. That is not the way to lead research in this country. We have a 10-point plan for the green industrial revolution. We have set out the grand challenges in the industrial strategy. Surely we now have to develop an R&D strategy that supports those measures and is aimed at finding jobs for the future.

Let me pick two areas. We have committed to phasing out petrol and diesel cars by 2030. When we take into account the rules of origin requirements guaranteeing free entry to the single market, that probably means 2027. Batteries account for 60% of the value of an electric car. The UK Battery Industrialisation Centre is helping with the developments, but in Europe, CATL, Samsung, LG Chem and SK Innovation are already building gigafactories close to European car manufacturing centres. Unless there is more support and subsidy, as is happening on a massive scale across Europe, we will be the losers.

With all due respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge, we need a strategy to support those areas with high industrial R&D investment but poor access to public money. The alternative is simply to reinforce the golden triangle, which already benefits from the lion's share of UKRI and the industrial strategy challenge fund. In south Birmingham, we are building the health innovation campus, dedicated to translational health and life sciences research. The first phase of the partnership, involving the University of Birmingham and the University Hospitals Birmingham Women's and Children's NHS Trust, will include space for small and medium-sized enterprises and scale-ups, working in med-tech, precision medicine, diagnostics and digital healthcare, the very areas we need to develop.

The campus was approved as a life sciences opportunity zone last February, the first outside the south-east. Now the Government need to demonstrate what benefits attach to being an opportunity zone. As Professor Richard Jones points out in his paper, "The Missing £4 Billion", the east midlands, west midlands and north-east benefit from business-led investment at or above the UK average, but suffer from low levels of public investment.

There is a concentration of UK R&D activity in the three areas of London, the south-east and the east of England. Over the past 10 years, 72% of R&D jobs in the 10 most R&D-intensive industries were in the sub-regions covering London, Oxford and Cambridge. If the Government's proposed uplift in R&D investment were targeted on projects outside the golden triangle, it could mean a further £9 billion for regions where there is real industrial potential.

Now is surely the time to maximise the benefits of combining public funds and business investment, to take risks on research, to ensure that resources are distributed fairly in a way that supports new jobs and new industries.

3.14 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing this essential and timely debate. He rightly referred to the renewed awareness of how critical properly funded research and development is, and how it saves lives.

There is a need to provide adequate public research funding for brain tumours. We have developed the covid vaccine through proper funding and a reduction in logistics and bulky infrastructure. Brain tumours predate covid and their lethal threat will remain when the vaccine has reduced covid mortality rates.

I am grateful for the opportunity to explain why research and development of brain tumour treatment and diagnosis is so critical. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on brain tumours and we mark the month of March each year by raising awareness and finance for brain tumours and their treatment. In fact, more than 100,000 people have signed a brain tumour research petition calling on the Government to level up research and development funding for brain tumours to similar levels as that for other devastating cancers.

Public funding for research is critical if we are to offer hope to brain tumour sufferers. Brain tumour research supports discovery science and early-stage translational research. The major output from discovery science—also known as basic research—is new knowledge. Few organisations are willing to take on such early-stage, high-risk research. Therefore charities such as Brain Tumour Research play a critical role at the early discovery stage. As well as the governmental support offered by the NIHR, the UK Government can also support discovery science through UK Research and Innovation and the Medical Research Council.

However, only 14% of UK spend on brain tumour research is from the Government. The remaining 86% is from the charity sector. Without new discovery science, the outlook for patients with brain tumours is very bleak. While it is high risk, when discovery science is successful it can lead to significant progress, new ways of thinking and new treatment strategies. It is this investment in discovery science that can, in time, deliver huge improvements in patient survival.

The 2016 House of Commons Petitions Committee report "Funding for research into brain tumours" declared that successive Governments have failed brain tumour patients and their families for decades. Somewhere between the NIHR, UKRI and the MRC lies a funding solution for brain tumour research, but responsibility must not be shuffled and passed on between those departments. If it is, we will continue to fail those diagnosed with this devastating condition.

It is worth pointing out that if early-stage research is not funded, there will be nothing coming out at the other end of the pipeline, and currently we are not allocating available money effectively. Just 25% of the NIHR £40 million, which was announced following the sad passing of Dame Tessa Jowell, has so far been committed to brain tumour research. Brain tumour sufferers just do not have the luxury of time. Even after significant attention has been given to the brain tumour and brain cancer space, it is still the case that brain tumours kill more children and people under 40 than any other cancers.

The potential for significant improvement to survival rates is very real. New methods of treating brain tumours are being developed, but it is a very difficult and tricky pathway. Proper Government focus and targeted funding into brain tumour research will accelerate the discovery of effective treatment. Not only would that give thousands of families real hope and reduce mortality rates, but it

will also support UK plc as a world leader in this, as will the other areas of research and development raised during the debate.

It is critical in this month of March and as we go forward to make sure that adequate funding is going into research so that we can find the correct way to treat and cure those who have a brain tumour diagnosis.

3.19 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on setting the scene so very well, and other hon. Members on their contributions. I very much look forward to the Minister's response. It is a pleasure to speak for the first time in a Westminster Hall debate that she will respond to.

One of the many lessons that can be learned from coronavirus is that for the brightest scientific minds in the world—I say this unashamedly, because we all believe it and the evidential base for it is very clear—the special ingredient is governmental support. That has made it happen. The Government deserve credit for the way the coronavirus vaccine has been found, and for the initiative, power and strength that they put in to make sure that happened. The roll-out of the vaccine is proof of the brilliance and expertise of our scientists. We should put that on the record and thank them. I am not a scientist—I never could be, as I would not have the brains for it—but many are. Thank the Lord that we have them and that they have been able to find the antidote for covid.

We need the right people with the right training and the right equipment to make the groundbreaking discoveries that we are capable of and to achieve what we need with Government backing. This debate is about ensuring we have that. That is what we are trying to achieve. We all know that we are in difficult financial times, and my party and I have backed the Government's Budget and plans. However, there are a few issues. We need to invest in healthcare and in research and development. Those are the two issues that I want to speak about very quickly.

The UK Government have committed to investing £22 billion in UK R&D by 2024-25 as part of the target of 2.4% of GDP by 2027 and 3% in the long term. The Government have always been committed to R&D, but I want to pose a few questions. I do it gently and constructively, by the way. I always try to do that. That is the way I try to work with my contributions.

I read the briefing by the Royal Society, which outlined what it felt must be committed to enable our research and development to continue to provide the breakthroughs that coronavirus has shown we are capable of achieving. There are many reports of mutant strains, and we need to ensure that we have the people in place to respond to whatever the future may bring, in the way that we have in the past. I personally believe that we will have to live with covid-19. I think it will be like getting our flu injections, which I do every year. I have had my vaccine, and one hon. Gentleman said that his is coming. It is good to have that in place.

The Royal Society has said that further raids on the UK research and development budget will create a funding gap that undermines the Government's commitment to increasing UK investment in R&D to 2.4% of GDP by 2027. We realise the potential of that to improve lives. It is good to have the research, but it is also good for

jobs, the economy and the wages that go with it. Since then, the Government have confirmed the UK's association with Horizon Europe—a valuable commitment to international scientific collaboration—but they have not given an assurance that the money to pay for it will be additional to the funds already committed to the research and development budget, so we seek a response to that. The Government previously recognised that and committed to addressing the funding gap that would open up if the UK did not associate with Horizon Europe. The payment for association is now taken from the existing research and development budget, so the Government are creating a new funding gap.

I want to speak about health, but I just want to give a quick plug to the battery initiatives. In my constituency—back home in Strangford—we are going to have a couple of those coming through, and I believe there is the potential for us to drive that. I want to take the opportunity to get clarity—we are not robbing Peter to pay Paul here, I presume. It is not enough to say that we are sewing it in, but the money for this year is for little more than a membership pack.

Will the Minister also confirm that there will be collaboration between universities and companies? Queen's University in Belfast has been one of the great exponents of how businesses and universities can work in partnership to improve health. We have cancer care in Queen's University. We had the Prime Minister in Northern Ireland just last week, and he was saying that very thing. The Prime Minister recognises that, and we as a Parliament should recognise it and try to push on it. I want to ensure that Queen's University has the continued funding to continue to deliver its research on cancer and many other issues.

I look to the Minister to clarify and underline what the precise delivery of the Government commitment looks like for the future of R&D. We need that, and the Minister and the Government need to deliver it.

3.24 pm

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner)—a fellow Cambridge city MP. I have the south of the city. It is fantastic to have this debate on this issue, which is really important for all the reasons he highlighted. It is enormously important for the country but also for my constituency.

Research and development is clearly absolutely vital for economic growth. We are a largely knowledge-based economy. It is a growing sector globally. It is growing far faster than general economic growth. It is absolutely right that we position ourselves as a science superpower. I fully welcome the Government's target of R&D being 2.4% of GDP by 2027.

One thing that the pandemic has shown, and that we have always known in South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge, is that we are already a life sciences superpower. We do more testing per capita than any G20 country. The AstraZeneca vaccine, which the hon. Gentleman talked about, has been rolled out not just in the UK, but around the world, despite some wobbles in Europe at the moment, which I am sure they will get over. In my constituency, the Wellcome Sanger Institute does more genome sequencing of the covid virus than the rest of the world put together—that is a huge achievement.

[Anthony Browne]

The life sciences are the largest R&D sector in the whole economy. In 2019, it brought in £2.8 billion of investment, up tenfold since 2012. Although there are great amounts of private investment there, there is a huge role for Government support. The reason for that is that in the life sciences, there are often very long lead times. After the research and development stage, many years can pass before getting any revenues. There is also a lot of fundamental blue-skies research that is not necessarily directly related to commercial opportunity.

I want to mention bit.bio, a start-up company in my constituency that I happened to meet virtually yesterday. It has the technology to use the DNA from a human hair to create every type of cell in the human body in a functioning way. It has created functioning human muscles from a human hair cell in a laboratory, not for Frankenstein reasons, but because those human cells can be used to treat a lot of diseases. The company is at least two years away from any commercial application, however.

Jim Shannon: Could they use my hair?

Anthony Browne: They might be able to use the hon. Gentleman's hair—he has some left and they could use the DNA.

The Government support the life sciences industry, through the biomedical catalyst, with £30 million a year—that is a very welcome and successful scheme. An Ipsos MORI report last year showed that for every £1 of Government money put in, it leveraged £5 of private sector investment. The 150 companies that won grants from the scheme have raised £710 million. That is a 5:1 ratio compared with a 2:1 ratio across Government funding for R&D in general, so it is a far better sector in which to leverage private sector investment. Six firms in my constituency have won grants from the biomedical catalyst in recent years, and I thank the Government for that.

One sign of success is that the quality of applicants has increased dramatically. Five years ago, one third of projects of sufficiently good quality got funding, but now only one in 25 does, because there are so many high-quality applicants. That means that there is a lot more opportunity to fund, and if the Government wanted to maximise the leverage of private sector investment across R&D in all sectors, they should increase the budget of the biomedical catalyst from £30 million to, say, £100 million. There are definitely enough projects there.

I have some good news and some bad news about what is happening at the moment—the Minister and I have exchanged letters on this. The biomedical catalyst has had a competition this year, and has decided the winners, three of which are in my constituency. They are poised to make the announcement about their great funding so that they can go out to investors and get more private sector investment in, showing what a triumph both the Government programme and their technology are. The bad news is that the winners cannot be announced because the biomedical catalyst has no budget as we speak. The money is there in BEIS overall, but there are departmental negotiations going on. In the industry as a whole, that has led to a fear that no news is bad news, and that the rug is going to be pulled from under the whole scheme. The industry is finding the silence rather ominous.

My plea to the Minister is to prove the worriers wrong. Will she announce the budget commitment to the biomedical catalyst, unlock the investment in the companies in my constituency and across the UK, and help Britain and South Cambridgeshire retain their position as life sciences superpowers of the world?

3.29 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: I thank everybody who has contributed to this really interesting debate. The public have never been more aware of the global importance of science, nor have they ever been more supportive of spending in that area. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing the debate. He rightly highlighted the superb work taking place in his constituency.

I will not attempt to detail all the groups working across Glasgow, specialising in areas as diverse as quantum optics and space, and doing all sorts of incredible work striving towards eliminating global poverty. This diversity is important, and as we see cuts in ODA, we have to ask what exactly the purpose of research funding is. As the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) said, today in the Science and Technology Committee we discussed both ARIA and UKRI funding, and if we throw in the impact of Brexit and the role of Horizon Europe, we have a lively mix of factors contributing to funding in the UK.

The ambition to increase research funding to 2.4% of GDP is widely welcomed, but there needs to be clarity on what this means. The UK's status as a science superpower is underpinned by international research collaboration, and we need to make sure that that is protected. It is concerning that UKRI has announced a shortfall of £120 million between its ODA allocation, which has been reduced to £125 million, and its commitment to grant holders. That will affect projects funded both through the global challenges research fund and the Newton fund. A UKRI spokesperson has said that it is too early to detail the final impact on grants funded by ODA funds but that

“we expect to be making some very difficult decisions—including issuing grant termination notices”.

I have been contacted by my constituent Professor Alison Phipps, who is the UNESCO chair at the University of Glasgow. She says:

“This is profoundly concerning and will set back our ground-breaking work on racial justice at the University of Glasgow...Far more important is the welfare and safeguarding of the communities we work with in the world's poorest countries, and where the staff we have just employed across 24 ODA countries will be destitute if we terminate their contracts upon termination of grants”.

Universities Scotland has said:

“The decision will have a whole-systems impact on our connections and collaborations internationally. Our research and innovation communities have worked intensively to establish high quality global partnerships targeted around the UN Sustainable Development Goals.”

It says that the impact will be permanent reputational damage to both Scottish and UK researchers and that it will impact a whole pile of poverty-associated challenges, including the impact of climate change and the response to the covid-19 pandemic. Investing only in domestic scientific research will not solve the problems we face as a planet. In the year when Glasgow will host COP26, and the UK is meant to be showing global climate leadership, this cut is just unacceptable.

Many Members this afternoon have asked about Horizon Europe contributions. Will this be new money, or will UKRI see its budget squeezed? We need answers to that. It is of further concern that, in the latest draft of the Horizon Europe work programme, text has appeared that would exclude participation in all quantum and space programmes by organisations in associated countries. I urge the Minister to look at that, and if groups do indeed find themselves locked out of funding as a result, I urge the Government to ensure that that funding is replaced. On ARIA, of course, any additional funding or spending is welcome, but there has to be clarity over whether this is new money or simply reprofiling.

This morning, Dominic Cummings talked about the bureaucracy of current funding as one of the reasons for the new body, but if bureaucracy is causing problems, we would surely be better off tackling that than creating a new body. He also talked about extreme freedom for researchers, so could the Minister detail how we enable extreme freedom while retaining oversight of public spending?

The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) raised the issue of national inequality of research spending, and the National Audit Office report into the industrial strategy challenge fund noted:

“The Fund is unevenly spread across the UK with the majority being provided to the West Midlands, South East and London”.

I would therefore like to hear something about how the Government will ensure that ARIA is fully representative of the devolved nations.

I have found myself in the strange situation in the last few days of agreeing with Tories when they have commented about balancing the books on the backs of the world's poor. A global Britain—or a Britain that purports to be global—that continues to do that is not one that any of us should be proud of.

3.35 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]: It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship for the first time, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who called today's important debate. He is a passionate champion of science and his constituency's science strengths. In his excellent opening remarks, he set out today's R&D landscape, and where the Government must do better. Indeed, there has been cross-party agreement in the debate about the importance of research funding. It is unfortunate that the Government do not build on that consensus.

From the gravitational constant to the structure of DNA, and from jet engines to the worldwide web, the UK has a proud tradition of science, innovation, research and development that is renowned across the world. Our university research base contributes £95 billion to the economy, supporting nearly 1 million jobs in science institutes, charities and businesses of all sizes across the country. Twenty per cent. of the UK workforce is employed in a science or research role, and those are good, high-wage, high-skilled jobs that are helping to solve key challenges facing our country and planet—climate change, disease and productivity—and helping to ensure that the UK stays globally competitive.

As the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) emphasised, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of the UK's science research

base and shown the world what we can do, particularly through vaccine research and development. However, our world-leading science sector does not have the world-leading Government that it deserves. As we have heard, the Government's warm words on science have not been backed by action. Industrial strategy seems to have been archived, with decisions on science made piecemeal rather than strategically.

The Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), mentioned the importance of science to yesterday's integrated review, but the Wellcome Trust has commented:

“There's a growing gulf between rhetoric and reality in the government support for science. The Integrated Review is full of fantastic and achievable ambitions, but the words are meaningless if they're not backed up with funding.”

Funding our R&D sector makes economic sense. The Campaign for Science and Engineering found that, for every £1 of public investment in R&D, between 20p and 30p was returned every year. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) emphasised, R&D is a key driver in building the economy of tomorrow, creating new jobs as others are overtaken by automation, and positioning the UK as a leader on the world stage.

I am sure the Minister will agree when I speak about the importance of R&D, but let us look at the Government's actions. Reports in the *Financial Times* today indicate that the Government are likely to miss their 2.4% of GDP R&D spending target following the cuts to overseas development. Labour has called for a 3% target. To fail on 2.4% would be truly shocking and, as has been said, it would be on the backs of the poorest countries in the world. Imperial College London, where I studied electrical engineering decades ago, is one of the many bodies that have written to me emphasising the need for international collaboration to be a priority. Yet, as the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) highlighted, the Government are cutting overseas development research. Why?

The Government promised to double R&D spending to £22 billion by 2024—a move supported by key stakeholders. However, as with many a prime ministerial promise, we do not have the detail. I have tabled many written questions on that, but the Minister has successively hidden behind the spending review, the Budget and, now, departmental budget reviews. As the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee mentioned, just this morning the Business Secretary admitted that UKRI's 2021-22 budget had not yet been agreed. When Labour calls for a long-term funding plan for science, our ambition is orders of magnitude greater than three weeks.

During the Brexit negotiations, the Government sowed uncertainty and anxiety among researchers as they refused to commit to Horizon alignment. I am pleased that the eventual deal did make that commitment, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge pointed out, the Government continue to be evasive over the funding details. The Wellcome Trust says:

“Researchers in the UK welcomed the decision to continue the UK's”

Horizon commitments, but

“they will be immensely frustrated, and with good reason, if it's going to be paid for by cuts to other research. We urgently need reassurance on this.”

[*Chi Onwurah*]

Can the Minister tell me whether the UK's estimated £2 billion of Horizon contributions will be taken from the promised £22 billion science spend, as the right hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) implied? Will funding received back from the Horizon programmes be counted as part of that £22 billion, and which departmental budgets will pay the Horizon contributions? Science spend increases are a positive break from the decade of austerity inflicted on our economy, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge explained, we need direction, not a destination-less road map, in the absence of a clear strategy.

The Government have failed to protect our research sector from the impact of the pandemic. The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) highlighted the importance of charity medical research, which invests £1 billion into university research and development but has been consistently ignored when it comes to pandemic support. Modelling by the Institute for Public Policy Research predicts that lost charity income could mean that medical research charities invest £4 billion less in health R&D between now and 2027, with a knock-on effect on private investment of up to £1 billion. The British Heart Foundation and Cancer Research UK have announced thousands of lost research jobs and cut hundreds of millions from R&D budgets as the Government have turned a blind eye. Why have the Government been prepared to risk those jobs and that investment?

The failure of the Government to respond to the pandemic is costing jobs and risks creating a lost generation of researchers. There are 17,000 early-career researchers whose long-term future in research is in jeopardy. In January, researchers from the Northern Ireland and north-east doctoral training partnership, representing universities across the UK, wrote to the Government calling for them to provide security for PhD students. The Government have merely shifted the cliff edge six months back, and only for some. Will the Minister tell us what the Government are doing to support early-career researchers and the next generation of science researchers?

My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge and others have highlighted concerns about the new high-risk, high-reward research body ARIA. Although we welcome it in principle, today's Select Committee hearing reflected our concerns that, without a clear mission beyond the ideological eyesight of Dominic Cummings, ARIA could become a vanity project vulnerable to cronyism.

If R&D is to drive our recovery and provide high-skill, high-paying jobs, it must do so for all regions. In 2018, 72% of R&D expenditure was in the south-east and south-west, with the north-east receiving the lowest per-head funding in England—just a quarter of that of the east of England. Recent decisions may make things worse. Chris Day, the vice-chancellor of Newcastle University, has written to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to say:

“The decision to reduce the budget for international development projects is deeply concerning. If funds are cut such that the Hubs contracts are terminated this will lead to immediate redundancies in North East England.”

What is the Minister doing to ensure that R&D investment is shared fairly across the regions of the UK? The Labour party would champion R&D as an engine of regional progress, strengthening regional economies by rebalancing R&D investment.

Finally, we will never unlock the full potential of our research sector if we do not use the talents of everyone. There are real issues with diversity in the UK's science and research sectors. Diversity is an economic imperative, especially as we face a shortfall of science, technology, engineering and maths workers, so what is the Minister doing to increase diversity, and how is that reflected in the Government's funding model? Labour would build on the UK's science successes and ensure that we continue to be an innovation nation that draws on the talents of all.

The Royal Society said that the Government's actions are undermining their ambition for the UK to be a science superpower. Government indecision and inaction have made the impact of the pandemic worse for our critical research sector. They must now provide the long-term funding needed for the recovery.

3.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Amanda Solloway): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing the debate and raising important issues for the future of research development funding. I thank all hon. Members for the quality of their contributions. There have been many enthusiastic observations, indicating the passion felt by many Members. I fully echo that sentiment, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to reiterate that R&D is absolutely central to the Government's ambitions of unleashing innovation and continuing to cement the UK as a science superpower.

The hon. Member for Cambridge spoke of the importance of research and development, highlighting the benefit that it brings, as well as the issue of Horizon Europe. I am delighted that the United Kingdom has an agreement to take part in the Horizon Europe programme. He also rightly pointed out that R&D is about relationships as well as investments, which is why the association to Horizon has been welcomed by businesses and the research community and will bring huge benefits to the United Kingdom. The decision to associate to Horizon Europe came after the spending review, so we continue to work through where its costs will fall. We will set out our plans for R&D spend in 2021-22, including funding for Horizon Europe, in due course. I reiterate the comments made by the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy earlier today that we continue to robustly defend the research budget. We are working hard to confirm R&D budgets as soon as possible.

A number of hon. Members, including the hon. Members for Cambridge, for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) and for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), raised official development assistance. I recognise the depth of feeling across the research sector regarding ongoing funding for international development research. The impact of the pandemic on the UK economy forced the Government take some difficult decisions, including temporarily reducing the overall amount spent on aid. This has inevitably meant

less funding for BEIS R&D development programmes, as it has for all areas of ODA spending. My officials are working with our delivery partners to best manage the impact of those reductions and to protect the strongest research programmes. I should add that both the Chancellor and the Foreign Secretary have reiterated the Government's commitment to international development and our intention to return to the 0.7% GNI target when the fiscal situation allows.

The hon. Member for Cambridge mentioned our commitment to the R&D road map and to developing an R&D people and culture strategy that will set out the direction and actions that Government, funders, employers and individuals can take to ensure that the R&D sector has the people it needs, working in a culture that gets the best out of everyone. I am committed to ensuring that the UK attracts, develops and retains talented individuals and strong teams to support our science superpower ambitions.

The hon. Members for Arfon (Hywel Williams) and for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) raised the important question of levelling up. The Government are due to publish the UK R&D places strategy in the summer. We will ensure that R&D and innovation benefits the economy and society in nations, regions and local areas across the United Kingdom, contributing to the Government's wider levelling-up ambitions. This is about not only how much money we spend in each place, but outcomes, so our focus must be on the impact that our R&D system can have in different places across the country.

R&D is incredibly important in so many ways. It advances the boundaries of human knowledge and discovery and is a key driver of economic growth and productivity. It also enables society to solve the challenges of the future in areas of fundamental importance, such as health and climate change. As several hon. Members have noted, the UK gets significant value from its investment in R&D. Each £1 of public investment in R&D ultimately leverages around £2 of additional private sector investment and creates, on average, around £7 of net present social value.

Hon. Members will know that we published our R&D road map last July. It sets out our vision and ambition to ensure that the UK is the very best place in the world for scientists, researchers, innovators and entrepreneurs to live and work. Although we recognise the challenging economic and fiscal climate, the Government committed through the spending review in November to invest £14.6 billion in R&D in 2021-22, with BEIS, as the custodian of the R&D system, being allocated £11 billion for R&D in 2021-22. That commitment re-emphasises the importance of science, research and innovation towards our future prosperity, as well as our ambition to move towards the UK investing 2.4% of GDP in research and development by 2027.

The UK has a world-leading research base and global expertise across a wide range of disciplines. With less than 1% of the world's population, the UK accounts for 14% of the world's most highly cited academic publications. Our strong core research system is integral to that success, as recognised by the Chancellor in the spending review. He confirmed an ambitious multi-year settlement for UK Research and Innovation and the national academies core research budget. By 2023-24, the

Government will be investing £1.4 billion more per annum in core funding for our world-leading research base compared with 2020-21.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) spoke about funding for life sciences, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his passionate and constructive contribution. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) also spoke passionately about the importance of funding for devastating conditions such as brain tumours and cancers, and I recognise the importance of such research. That is why we are committed to supporting the health and life sciences sector, where we are fortunate to boast a vibrant ecosystem that brings together researchers in some of the world's top universities to work collaboratively with their counterparts in leading pharmaceutical companies, clinical researchers in the NHS and others. This has never been more important than in the response to covid-19, and we recognise that years of blue-sky research, enabled by the strength of the UK's core research system, was vital to our success in developing effective vaccines so quickly. The Government continue to support that response, with commitments including £128 million to support vaccine research and manufacturing.

The rapid response to covid-19 has also led to a cultural shift around funding and decision making, with a desire to move towards a leaner and more agile system. The new Advanced Research and Invention Agency will be an independent research body that funds high-risk, high-reward scientific research, and it will complement the work of UK Research and Innovation and other research funders. ARIA will be led by a prominent world-leading scientist, who will be given the freedom to identify and fund transformational science and technology at speed. It is based on successful models that are built on giving researchers significant autonomy and freedom from bureaucracy.

Looking forward, we want to go further and build on our truly excellent UK R&D achievements, which is why we are committed to increasing UK investment in R&D to 2.4% of GDP by 2027. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) spoke about this, and about the importance of public and private investment in reaching that target. Public investment in R&D is increasing, but we must also leverage further private sector investment. UK businesses provided almost £26 billion of R&D in 2019—an increase of 3.3% compared with 2018—as part of a long-term trend of positive annual growth.

Earlier this month we published “Building Back Better: our plan for growth”, in which we announced plans to publish a new innovation strategy in the summer to inspire, facilitate and unleash innovation, supporting and harnessing the tremendous capability of UK innovators to boost future prosperity, both locally and nationwide. The Budget also announced £375 million to introduce Future Fund: Breakthrough, a new and direct co-investment product to support the scaling up of R&D-intensive businesses, and Her Majesty's Treasury has announced that it will review R&D tax relief to ensure it remains up to date, competitive and well targeted.

In conclusion, research and development are integral to our objective of unleashing innovation. R&D will help us drive the Government's long-term plan to build

[*Amanda Solloway*]

on the UK's world-class credentials in research and development, and deliver economic growth and societal benefits across the UK for decades to come.

3.54 pm

Daniel Zeichner: I thank all hon. Members for the high quality of their contributions, as one would expect given that we had former Science Ministers and former Secretaries of State involved. It was an excellent discussion. I am particularly grateful to the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) for mentioning the medical research charities; others picked that up, including the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas). I probably should have alluded to them in my introduction. They have been very hard hit and they do vital work.

I note, as I had expected, that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) and others suggested that the golden triangle is in a privileged position. We are and we do get the lion's share of research, but I gently suggest that when talking about levelling up we should always be aware that there is a danger of dragging down. We are world leaders, but that does not happen by accident. I have always said that future success cannot be taken for granted, and we have to make sure that we continue to support what we do very well in this country. Some of that is in the golden triangle, and we should not be ashamed to say that.

In conclusion, I say to the Minister that I am a little disappointed. I had hoped to hear a little more than that the budget would be resolved in due course and the cuts would be managed to minimise the impact. I hope that she will be fighting our corner, because this is so important, and not just for the future of this sector or for particular parts of the country. This is what we do so well. If there is a future for Britain in the world, this is it, but it cannot be done by making short-term cuts because the budget cannot be sorted out for a few months for bureaucratic reasons. I hope that the message will go back to Government loud and clear that we are looking for better.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of research and development funding.

3.57 pm

Sitting suspended.

UN Human Rights Council: UK Voting Record on Israel

4.5 pm

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the UK voting record at the UN Human Rights Council on Israel.

[*Interruption.*]

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. There is a Division in the House, but we do not have to suspend the sitting unless Members wish to do so.

Scott Benton: Personally, I can continue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Mr Dowd, I would like to suspend the sitting and take part in the Division.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is not on the list to speak, so it is in the grace of the Minister and the Member in charge. I am happy to suspend the Sitting if other Members wish to do so, but I cannot suspend it only for the hon. Gentleman.

Jim Shannon: If the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) and the Minister want to go ahead, I am happy with that, but I have a small intervention that I would like to make. Do we have eight minutes for the Division?

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Can we move on? I call the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton).

Scott Benton: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd, for the first Westminster Hall debate that I have had the privilege to lead. I refer Members to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests for a fact-finding visit I undertook to Israel and the Palestinian Authority in 2019.

The landmark peace agreements signed between Israel and her Arab neighbours in recent months are an extremely welcome development after years of stagnation, but it is an unavoidable reality that the unrelenting attacks on Israel at the United Nations make regional peace harder to achieve.

It is no secret that the UN and its associated bodies have a long history of singling out Israel far more than any other nation in the world. Past UN Secretaries-General have publicly raised concerns about the UN's fixation with Israel, with Ban Ki-moon stating in 2016 that

"decades of political manoeuvring have created a disproportionate number of resolutions, reports and committees against Israel."

He rightly said that this bias does not help the Palestinian issue but instead foils

"the ability of the UN to fulfil its role effectively".

His predecessor, Kofi Annan, said that while Israel faces "intense scrutiny",

"other situations fail to elicit the world's outrage and condemnations."

The current UN Secretary-General has said that Israel "needs to be treated as any other state".

Jim Shannon: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing the debate to Westminster Hall. I fully support what he is saying. Does he agree that the targeted, sustained and passionate bias against Israel displayed at the UN is a stain on every bit of good that the UN seeks

to do? Our Government and our Minister need to take firmer steps to highlight that the Israel-Palestine issue will never be resolved by continuing to peddle the false narrative perpetuated by the UN, by painting an awful picture of the victimisation of innocent Palestinians at the hands of so-called evil Israel. Will he join me in saying that this is simply false and needs to end now, if there is to be a lasting peace in the middle east that we can all subscribe to?

Scott Benton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is a proud supporter of Israel, as are all his colleagues in the Democratic Unionist party. I have a great deal of sympathy with his remarks.

I believe that the UK has a historic responsibility to help resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to stand up for our friend, Israel, when it is singled out for such unfair criticism in international forums. The Foreign Secretary recently said that we have

“stood up for Israel when it has faced bias, and frankly, politicised attacks in the UN and other forums.”—[*Official Report*, 2 March 2021; Vol. 690, c. 111.]

Our voting pattern at the UN now needs to match these warm words.

The subject of today’s debate is the UN Human Rights Council, which is currently meeting for its 46th session. The Council was established in 2006 to promote and protect human rights around the world, a laudable and just cause, which I am sure all of us would completely endorse. It is deeply regrettable that the Council has failed so comprehensively in its noble mission, while gaining a reputation as yet another politically exploited UN body. Consider that in the 15 years since its inception, the Council has passed 171 condemnations, of which more than half have targeted Israel. It is simply unjustifiable that 90 condemnations have been passed against Israel, while a mere 10 have been adopted on the world’s worst human rights abuser, Iran.

Astonishingly, no condemnations have been adopted on China, Russia, Pakistan, Venezuela or other serial human rights abusers. Instead, many of those serial violators are Council members, which of course makes a mockery of the UN’s highest human rights body. As China crushes democracy in Hong Kong, and as Venezuela stands accused of crimes against humanity, both remain members of the Council. For proof of the Council’s inbuilt conscious bias, one need look no further than the existence of the permanent country-specific stand-alone agenda item at every session. I am sure it will come as no surprise which country is targeted.

Permanent agenda item 7 is reserved for criticism of Israel, showing how deeply embedded this anti-Israel obsession has become. Motions adopted under item 7 have accused Israel of serious breaches of international law, while ignoring Palestinian rejectionism and terrorism. It is of course legitimate to highlight the plight of the Palestinian people, just as the national claims of other groups should also be given due attention. But when the blame is solely placed on Israel for the plight of the Palestinian people, with not even a superficial recognition of the numerous security challenges Israel faces, the failure of Palestinian leadership to prepare its people for a future peace agreement, and the countless peace deals rejected by the Palestinian leadership, it is clear that something has gone seriously wrong.

There is no mention of Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which terrorise Israeli civilians with rocket fire. Those terror groups use Palestinian civilians as human shields, investing in weaponry rather than welfare. Just last month a Hamas-run court ruled that women required the explicit permission of a male guardian to travel. Where was the international condemnation?

The violations of Palestinian rights in Lebanon are also conveniently forgotten by the Human Rights Council and other UN bodies, despite hundreds of thousands of Palestinians being denied the most basic freedoms, including the right to work. At each and every session of the Council, the likes of the Palestinian Authority, Syria and North Korea accuse Israel of human rights abuses, while escaping scrutiny of their own violations. Frankly, it is a student politics-style stunt that is entirely unbecoming of a supposedly distinguished international forum.

It is worth reflecting that such disproportionate singling out of Israel is one of the clearest examples of contemporary antisemitism, according to the world-leading definition. Such blatant bias will not change unless it is tackled head-on and rooted out. The UK’s decision in 2017 to put the Council on notice, stating that

“If things do not change, in future we will adopt a policy of voting against all resolutions concerning Israel’s conduct” was a hugely welcome first step.

Our Prime Minister was right, during his time as Foreign Secretary several years ago, to describe the Council’s “disproportionate” focus on Israel as “damaging to the cause of peace”.

In 2019, the UK said that item 7 amounted to “systemic institutional bias” and voted against all item 7 resolutions. That was another welcome step, but when an anti-Israel resolution previously adopted under item 7 was proposed under item 2 in the same session, the UK abstained rather than voting against it.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an important and timely contribution. He is rightly highlighting the systematic bias that brings the United Nations into disrepute and does nothing to aid the cause of peace and security in the middle east. Does he agree that the key issue right now—he alluded to it a few moments ago—is that the kind of biased text that has traditionally appeared under item 7, and which we as a Government have rightly committed to voting against every time, is now quietly making its way into another agenda item, sometimes with cosmetic changes, and when it appears there, we do not appear to be showing exactly the same level of commitment to voting against it? That is the issue we need to lean into this afternoon, and hopefully hear some positive remarks about from the Minister later on.

Scott Benton: I welcome that intervention from my right hon. Friend, and of course he is entirely right. If items that are moved under item 7 are then moved to item 2, but the text is substantially the same, the UK should of course oppose those, just as we would have opposed them under item 7.

The resolution in question referred to the findings of the international commission of inquiry on the 2018 Gaza border protests, which the UK refused to support as it failed to examine Hamas’s role in the violence. Despite stating that Hamas bore responsibility for the violence and recognising Israel’s right to self-defence, the UK did not oppose this one-sided resolution.

[*Scott Benton*]

As a direct result of growing international opposition to item 7, proponents of these one-sided motions have been working to move them into other agenda items, as my right hon. Friend has just stated. In 2018, instead of challenging this procedural sleight of hand, we undermined our principled stance by abstaining. Surely, if the UK deems resolutions within item 7 to be biased, it is ultimately irrelevant where they end up on the agenda. Biased one-sided motions are biased one-sided motions, irrespective of the agenda item number attached to them. Can the Minister explain this step backwards from the previously stated pledge to vote against all anti-Israel resolutions? Will he confirm that at the current session of the Human Rights Council, with votes expected next week, the UK will call for a vote on item 7? He will know that if no country calls for a vote, the resolution passes uncontested by consensus. Given our principled and outspoken criticism of item 7, we cannot afford to rely on others.

Reports of some of the language that has been considered for inclusion in an item 2 resolution next week are deeply worrying, including language that we would have voted against had it appeared in item 7 resolutions previously. The Government have said that they will support scrutiny of Israel outside of item 7, so long as it is justified and proportionate. Does the Minister believe that a resolution that condemns violence, including acts of terror, provocation, incitement and destruction, but does not even mention Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad, is justified and proportionate? Does he agree that there should never be any implied equivalence between Israel's defensive actions and indiscriminate attacks by terrorist groups?

The text also reportedly seeks to restrict arms sales to Israel, despite article 51 of the UN charter stating that countries have a right to defend themselves. I hope the Minister can reassure me that the UK will indeed vote against this harmful motion. The Foreign Secretary's calls earlier this month for the abolition of item 7 should mean not only the end of a permanent agenda item singling out Israel for criticism; it should mean that all one-sided motions are also withdrawn, not simply moved elsewhere. Until then, we must honour our pledge to vote against all anti-Israel resolutions wherever they appear, just as we would have voted against those motions if they targeted our other allies.

Another UN body known for its bias against Israel is the UN General Assembly. While the likes of Iran, North Korea and Syria have only been condemned a handful of times, 112 resolutions condemning Israel have been adopted there since 2005. China has not been condemned once.

It is deeply worrying and regrettable that the UK voted for 12 out of 17 resolutions singling out Israel in December 2020, abstained on four and voted against only one. One of the resolutions we supported only used the term Haram al-Sharif to describe Jerusalem's Temple Mount—Judaism's holiest site—ignoring the Jewish connection to the site altogether.

The Abraham Accords present a momentous opportunity to reinvigorate the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians in order to achieve the two-state solution that we all hope to see. We simply must not allow this process to be derailed by allowing attacks on Israel at the UN to go completely unchallenged. At the

Human Rights Council next week, we should vote with our feet and send a clear message that Israel must be treated fairly. I look forward to the Minister's response, and I hope that he can confirm that the UK will be calling for a vote on item 7, and voting against all anti-Israel resolutions, including any proposed outside the scope of item 7. It is time that our words were matched with actions.

4.21 pm

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) for securing this debate and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend not just for the words that he has spoken in this debate, but for the hard work that I know he does outside this Chamber to fight against antisemitism. I have listened to, and am grateful for, the contributions and interventions made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), and I will try to cover as many points as possible.

First, let me state on the record that the UK is a proud friend of Israel. I think it is fair also to say on the record that prior to my ministerial appointment I was a member of Conservative Friends of Israel. My personal feelings aside, the UK Government's position is that we are both happy and proud to stand up when we feel that Israel faces bias and unreasonable criticism from international institutions, or indeed from anywhere else. We agree with my hon. Friend that item 7 is an example of that bias. As he said, item 7 is unique; it is the only item on the council's agenda that singles out an individual country for scrutiny. For many of the reasons that he mentions, we feel that this is wrong; furthermore, we believe it hinders the work of the human rights agenda that the UN seeks to pursue and actually disincentivises full co-operation in pursuit of that agenda. Rather than encouraging Israel to engage with the mechanisms and expertise that the Human Rights Council has to offer, we believe that item 7 alienates Israel.

This is an issue that has been brought up with me directly, and it is clearly one on which a number of Members of the House of Commons agree. We want Israel to engage fully with the human rights machinery. We feel that item 7 dissuades it from doing so. Item 7 damages the efforts to advance dialogue, increase stability, and build mutual trust and understanding between the Israeli and Palestinian people, and therefore damages the prospect of a sustainable, meaningful and peaceful two-state solution. That is why, at the 40th session of the Human Rights Council in March 2019, the UK adopted a principled approach in which we voted against all resolutions tabled under item 7.

Our vote sent a clear signal that the UK stands against the implicit supposition that Israel's conduct deserves a unique focus and greater scrutiny than that of any other country in the world. The UK will continue to push for the abolition of agenda item 7. Let me make it clear that we will continue to support the scrutiny of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories in the Human Rights Council, as long as that scrutiny is justified, fair and proportionate and is not proposed under agenda item 7, which is why, by definition, agenda item 7 should be abolished.

My hon. Friend spoke about issues moved from agenda item 7 to other agenda items. I touch on that because it is an important distinction. It goes to the point that the UK is happy to support the scrutiny of countries, including Israel, if it is done fairly and proportionately. That is why, when the Palestinian Authority made the decision in 2019 to move resolution items from item 7 to item 2—bearing in mind that item 2 looks at a range of actions of a range of states—the UK engaged with that resolution in good faith and closely with our international partners. We ultimately chose to abstain, in keeping with the position we took in 2018 when we abstained on a resolution to create a commission of inquiry into Gaza protests. In that instance, we could not and did not support an investigation into violence that refused to call explicitly for an investigation into the action of non-state actors such as Hamas—a point that my hon. Friend made. Our expectation is that accountability must be pursued impartially, fairly and in an even-handed manner.

This Government have also chosen not to support resolutions at the Human Rights Council that include provisions that go beyond our broad policies. In 2016 and 2017, alongside other European states, we abstained on a Human Rights Council resolution that called for the creation of databases of companies involved in settlement activities in the Palestinian territories. As we said in our explanation of votes at the time, we did not believe that establishing such a database was a helpful measure or consider it appropriate for the UN Human Rights Council to take on this role. The UK has not co-operated with the process of compiling this database, nor have we encouraged UK companies to do so.

As my hon. Friend says, the 46th session of the Human Rights Council is ongoing. The Government will continue to vote against all resolutions under item 7. The Palestinian delegation has listened to our concerns and has moved some resolutions from item 7 to item 2, meaning there will now be two Palestinian-tabled resolutions under item 7, rather than the four that were under item 7 back in 2018. The Palestinians have also merged or consolidated the two items, reducing the overall number of resolutions focused on the Israeli-Palestinian situation.

Negotiations on the resolutions are ongoing. As I said, we have committed to enter in good faith into negotiations on the text of such resolutions. Our blanket opposition is to resolutions under item 7, rather than more broadly to resolutions on Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. We will therefore decide how we vote based purely on the merits of the resolution and on the final text that is put before the council.

Stephen Crabb: I am sorry to cut in just as the Minister is making a very important point, but I want to get some clarity. I understand the argument that he is

making about engaging with the text that has moved from a permanent item 7 agenda into item 2, but if we voted against text that singles out Israel for criticism without mentioning Hamas or Islamic Jihad when it appears in item 7, surely it is morally right and logically consistent to vote against it when it appears under item 2 or anywhere else. Will he commit to vote against text exactly like that when it appears under item 2?

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I remind the Minister that we have about three minutes left.

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point, which it is worth exploring. The UK Government have a principled opposition to agenda item 7 and have therefore voted against it because of its nature. We recognise that moving away from agenda item 7 is a positive step, so our commitment is to engage with the specific text. It may well be the case that the UK Government find the final text unacceptable, but the decision will be based on the specific text rather than our principled opposition to item 7 as a tool of specific and unfair criticism of Israel. Those negotiations are ongoing, so I am not in a position to provide my right hon. Friend with the reassurances he seeks.

It should be recognised that the close and strong bilateral relationship between the UK Government and Israel gives us the opportunity to speak out when we feel that Israel's actions warrant it, as we have done on our concerns about annexation and the demolition of settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. However, it is also the Government's position that we will continue to support and advocate balanced resolutions in UN bodies. We are committed to making progress toward a two-state solution.

Resolutions that politicise UN bodies or that risk hardening the position of either side do little to advance peace or mutual understanding. We believe that negotiations will succeed only when they are conducted between Israelis and Palestinians and supported by the international community, and we will continue to work with international bodies, regional bodies, European partners and the United States, and of course with Israel and the Palestinian leadership, to advance dialogue, to encourage joint working and to find a permanent peaceful solution to this conflict, which has gone on for too long.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Thank you for your forbearance during the Division Bells.

Question put and agreed to.

4.34 pm

Sitting suspended.

Offshore Wind Farms: Unexploded Ordnance

4.49 pm

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the new hybrid arrangements. Timings of debates have been amended to allow technical arrangements to be made for the next debate. There will also be suspensions between each debate. I remind Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive for the start of the debate in Westminster Hall, and Members are expected to remain for the entire debate. I must also remind Members participating virtually that they are visible at all times, both to one another and to us in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks' email address. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and before they leave the room.

4.50 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the disposal of unexploded ordnance for offshore windfarm construction.

I express my appreciation to the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) and the hon. Members for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) and for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) for supporting my application for the debate. All of us welcome the extraordinary potential of our wind and wave power. As we seek to meet our climate obligations, we have a God-given asset off our shores. I think it was the Prime Minister who called Scotland the Saudi Arabia of renewables.

To the casual observer, the bonanza ahead may seem low-cost and environmentally unimpeachable. If only that were so. Alas, the 20th century's brutal European conflicts littered our once pristine seabed with a legacy: 100,000 unexploded 20th-century bombs—a monstrous monument to brutality,

“for there is no folly of the beast of the earth which is not infinitely outdone by the madness of men”,
as Herman Melville tells us in “Moby-Dick”.

The great offshore wind turbines are anchored to the seabed, and the bombs—an estimated 100,000 of them—pose a mortal danger. What should we do with them? How do we make safe these aquatic minefields? Hitherto, we have got rid of these munitions in the crudest way possible, by blowing them up, using high-order disposal, as it is called, with a counter-explosive detonating the munition so that it can be safely moved—safe for humans, perhaps, but devastating for marine life. Due to the greater penetration of sound underwater, the explosion aftershock can travel up to 25 km. To give an idea of scale, that is roughly half the distance of the channel tunnel. Imagine the noise.

These explosions will kill any sea life nearby. If they do not die instantly, the pressure wave causes traumatic harm, such as lesions, haemorrhages and decompression sickness. Marine biologists tell us that, even if they survive the initial blasts, these can deafen aquatic mammals such as whales, porpoises and dolphins. Without hearing, they cannot communicate or navigate, leading to mass stranding. One recent example of mass stranding occurred when 39 long-finned pilot whales were stuck in the

Kyle of Durness. A UK Government Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs report concluded that the only external event with the potential to cause such a mass stranding was a munitions disposal operation. Nineteen of the stranded whales died. Last year, autopsies showed that scores of porpoises were deafened as a result of explosions used to clear second world war German mines in the Baltic sea. All died subsequently.

Do we have to choose between green power and mammal safety? Fortunately not. A new method of munitions disposals is available. I have seen it work. It is known as low-order deflagration, and it is a breakthrough. The technique was invented in the early 2000s and is used by the US military and 15 other countries' navies worldwide, including our own Royal Navy, which has used it since 2005. The National Physical Laboratory has said that the new method

“shows considerable promise for noise abatement”
in bomb disposal.

In layman's terms, this alternative system makes the bombs safe without blowing them up. It allows a small charge to penetrate the bomb casing without detonating it. That causes the explosives to burn out, and the device becomes safe. This system significantly lowers emissions and noise, thus reducing dramatically the danger to wildlife and the local environment. Scientists calculate that for some of the larger munitions, low-order deflagration could be several hundred times quieter.

Therefore, we understand the problem, and luckily the solution is straightforward. In answer to a written question from my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), the Government assured her that were Ministers to become aware of evidence concerning harm caused to marine life by the disposal of munitions, they would act, and Ministers have now included a request for developers voluntarily to use deflagration

“as an initial method of mitigation”.

Saying please is nice. However, as we well know, it does not always work. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Marine Management Organisation must update their current licensing regime to ensure that deflagration is the only option for munition disposal. After all, if the Royal Navy uses this method, why should not businesses do so as well? The Secretary of State must set out a realistic timeline for this requirement, so that businesses are able to adjust. No one wants to see renewable energy construction delayed any longer than is absolutely necessary, but none of us wants to see a bloodbath on our ocean floors.

This is one of those times when party politics can be set aside and evidence-based policy can be enacted with all-party agreement. The Minister's team asked me yesterday to outline my arguments for today, to help them to prepare a response. I was happy to do so; I doubt that there will be much disagreement between us. But I will ask something in return. I ask the Minister to take ownership of these issues and regulate as soon as possible. Perhaps we could work together and invite Labour colleagues, too.

In closing, let me thank Joanna Lumley, who brought this issue to my attention. I was delighted to accept her invitation to become involved—indeed, who could resist?

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I intend to give Back-Bench Members an indicative time—four minutes, please.

4.57 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Mr Dowd; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) on securing the debate. He has highlighted a very important concern.

I am a supporter of offshore wind. It is bringing significant benefits to my constituency, and there is the potential for it to do even more over the next 30 years. In the southern North sea, there will be an enormous expansion of wind farms, which will create jobs and play a key role in the transition to net zero, but this exponential growth brings challenges with it. Our marine environment is an extremely sensitive and precious resource, and we have a duty to manage UK waters in a responsible and sustainable way, passing them on in a better condition than they were in when we inherited them.

That is not an easy task, as our seas are becoming incredibly busy. Off the East Anglian coast, there are, as well as wind farms, rich fishing grounds, gas fields in which we can store carbon, interconnectors, cables, busy shipping lanes and areas where dredging takes place. I believe that the time is right to review the regulatory framework and to pursue an ecosystem approach that takes full account of the many different marine resources.

With regard to the specific subject of this debate, it is important to point out that developers are bringing forward innovative techniques that significantly decrease the impact of detonating UXOs. ScottishPower Renewables has trailed deflagration and the use of bubble curtains on the East Anglia ONE wind farm, and has given an undertaking to continue with that on the forthcoming East Anglia Hub. The Government must work with and encourage industry to come forward with new and innovative techniques that minimise disturbance to the marine environment. The UK has a good track record of doing that, and it can bring economic benefits as we promote those new technologies globally.

We must also put in place policies that reduce the risk of conflict between the many marine activities. The report by REAF—Renaissance of East Anglian Fisheries—highlighted the significant increase in wind farms along the East Anglian coast and the fact that the displacement of fishing is not being properly taken into account in the marine planning and consenting system. We recommended that more use be made of existing data, so as to manage potential conflicts between fishing and offshore wind. I urge the Government to adopt that recommendation, and I am happy to provide the Minister with further details.

The rapid growth of offshore wind is a great British success story, but as the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire has highlighted, it can bring unintended and serious consequences. By working collaboratively within a planning and regulatory framework that is fit for purpose—it does need updating—we can meet those challenges and properly and fully build back better.

5.1 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab) [V]: A number of constituents contacted me about this issue last year, so I am pleased that the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) managed to secure the debate.

Offshore wind is absolutely essential to our efforts to decarbonise the UK grid and combat the climate emergency. Although I welcome the Government's commitment to quadruple offshore wind capacity by 2030, and the funding package announced last October, we need much more sustained financial support and real leadership from the Government if we are to maximise the true potential of wind power as a clean energy source and promote green jobs and enterprise for the UK supply chain. We still need to see much more from the Government on a green recovery package to take us along that path.

As we have heard, the unexploded ordnance in British waters—the figure I have is 500,000 or so items—remains a considerable threat. That terrible legacy of two world wars is not just an obstacle to the construction of offshore wind farms, but a danger to marine life, so it is vital that we safely clear those mines. We cannot let their detonation come at the expense of biodiversity and marine life; we need to identify environmentally sensitive ways to clear them.

The traditional method of detonating the explosives can prove extremely damaging, as we have heard. The images on the Stop Sea Blasts website, which I congratulate on its campaign, are shocking, as are the reports about the mass stranding of pilot whales, the death of porpoises, and how detonation deafens many marine mammals, confusing their navigation systems and causing long-term harm. The blasts also spread toxic chemicals into our oceans, further damaging marine life.

It does not have to be that way, however: there are deflagration methods that burn out the explosive content of mines and cause considerably less damage to surrounding marine life. The Government have stated on the record that they are investigating deflagration as an alternative to detonation. The first phase of the ongoing study by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has shown positive results, so I hope that we see a shift to that method as soon as possible, and I would welcome an update on that from the Minister.

Despite their boasts, the Government's record to date on marine conservation in UK waters is pretty woeful. They have really dragged their feet on creating the ecologically coherent network of marine protected areas that we need, which was first set in motion during the last days of the last Labour Government. The MPAs that have been created are essentially paper parks and offer no significant protection to marine life. The Government recently stripped out of the Fisheries Bill amendments promoting conservation and marine stewardship. With those past failures in mind, we need a firm commitment from the Minister that the Government will act now to protect our marine life.

5.5 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) on securing this important debate. Quite a lot of constituents have written to me about it. Initially, I was not aware of how extensive this issue is, but through correspondence with my constituents and the lobby group on sea blasts, I have learned a great deal more, and the hon. Gentleman very ably laid out the case.

There needs to be a clear strategy to tackle the issue of unexploded ordnances in the waters surrounding the UK. The number I have differs from that given by the

[Sarah Olney]

hon. Gentleman, so I will allow the record to stand with what he said. As he pointed out, these are leftover unexploded ordnances from past conflicts that are still lying on our seabed. We are still having to deal today with a century of conflict. It is a historical issue that has come back to us in the present day. It is pressing, because of our urgent need to invest in more offshore wind. Given that unexploded ordnance disposal is a key step in the provision of our future energy needs, the Government must explore ways of delivering it safely and with minimum impact on the environment. It is not good enough to allow our marine life to be adversely affected by such a critical step.

Exploding unexploded ordnances can have a significant noise impact, which is likely to disrupt the hearing ability of significant numbers of marine wildlife. Their hearing is essential for their navigation, communication and feeding habits. That kind of damage can have a huge impact on whole populations of marine wildlife. Exploding unexploded ordnances can also lead to toxic and chemical waste in the water, which has an obvious negative impact on biodiversity.

There are better ways of clearing ordnances, and they urgently need to be explored. In particular, low-order deflagration has been found to be effective. A recent joint study by the National Physical Laboratory—I should declare that I am proud to be a former employee of NPL in Teddington—and Loughborough University found that deflagration as a way of clearing ordnances could significantly lower noise emissions. That is something that must urgently be taken forward.

It is urgent and vital that the Government explore alternatives to explosion so that our marine life can be protected at the same time as we enable our renewable energy programme to expand as necessary to meet the Government's plans for net zero. The failure to take action points to a larger Government failure to set out clear plans for achieving net zero. So far, we have had a set of aspirations set out in the 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution, but it is backed up by very little strategy or investment. If there had been a greater focus on the practicalities of how net zero was going to be delivered, consideration would already have been given to this matter.

DEFRA must urgently update its guidance to the Marine Management Organisation and other organisations that are required to remove unexploded ordnances. The need to tackle climate change is urgent, and the path to net zero must lie through our expansion of offshore wind. We cannot allow that expansion to negatively impact on our marine life. The solution to that conflict is straightforward, and I urge DEFRA to adopt it without delay.

5.8 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab) [V]: It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) on securing this very important debate. I was the Minister for the marine environment for four years under the previous Labour Government, and I took through the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, which at the time was groundbreaking. I add

my voice to those of colleagues of all parties in this debate who have said that that legislation and the regulatory framework governing these practices needs updating.

I might try Members' patience slightly because I come at this from a different angle. Deflagration can have huge benefits both in the marine and land-based environment, as we have experienced recently in Exeter. Colleagues might have seen the news coverage of the recent controlled explosion of the Exeter bomb, but they might not be aware that that "controlled" explosion—I use that word advisedly—caused considerable damage to surrounding properties. People can get an idea from the video footage of how much damage would be done in a marine environment by such a powerful explosion in terms of both noise and physical damage in the immediate environment.

I want to use a few seconds of this debate to request that the Minister—I cannot see her very clearly because the picture is so small, but I think she is the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), a fellow south-west MP—does what she can to try to persuade the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence to answer the questions that my constituents have put to them, because they are still in a state of great uncertainty following that controlled explosion. I have been contacted by several retired bomb disposal experts who believe that the alternative, much less damaging process could have been followed in this case. Numerous properties were damaged, and some are still not inhabitable. Residents had to be moved out for several days, and residents of a care home are still not back. They are being told by their insurance companies that the companies are not liable and that liability rests with the Government—either the MOD or the Home Office. Will the Minister or her officials listening to this debate please try to get me answers from the Defence Secretary and Home Secretary? I have asked them, but I am still waiting.

On the marine side, I completely agree that we can learn from what has been common practice in land-based bomb disposal for a very long time. There are alternatives to simply blowing up this stuff and causing the sort of havoc that we see in the marine environment and that we saw in Exeter recently, with very serious structural damage done to numerous local properties that might have been avoided if we had used less explosive and less damaging alternatives.

5.12 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) for calling this important debate on a matter of grave concern to some of my own constituents and, as we have already heard, to those across the United Kingdom.

I have received letters in support of Joanna Lumley's Stop Sea Blasts campaign, which is supported by Marine Connection, Whale and Dolphin Conservation, World Cetacean Alliance, and Advocating Wild. I thank everyone who is doing that fantastic work right across the UK. I have written to the Government on constituents' behalf and I have tabled written questions, as has already been highlighted. I have also submitted an early-day motion on this matter, so I urge other hon. Members to look at it and consider signing it.

In summing up for the Scottish National party, I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their excellent contributions today. It has been a thorough debate highlighting to the Minister many of the main issues of concern, and has included contributions from the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), and the hon. Members for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and for Waveney (Peter Aldous).

Stop Sea Blasts is concerned with the future of marine mammals that rely on their auditory systems for navigation and communication. Those systems are rendered ineffective by the detonation of unexploded ordnance. Efforts to drive a green and sustainable future by the expansion of offshore wind farms should not come at the expense of harming marine mammals such as whales, dolphins and porpoises. Explosions can have deadly consequences for marine mammals. We would do well not to forget the mass stranding of 39 pilot whales at Kyle of Durness on the north highland coast following munition clearances in 2011. The future of many marine mammals is already, as we know, precarious. Many are vulnerable or at risk of extinction as a result of human activity already, so we must do everything we can to secure their survival for future generations to marvel at in wonder. That is all the more important, I believe, in the light of the upcoming G7 at Carbis Bay and the United Nations COP26 later this year in Glasgow, where discussions will focus on how to implement a greener future for all.

The wind power potential of Scotland both onshore and offshore must play a crucial part in the drive towards net zero and beyond. We can use the opportunity to lead, by setting ambitious targets for the protection of the environment, and, in doing so, to address the sustainable development goals. Stopping sea blasts and using deflagration will protect marine mammals from harm, but there is another benefit. Protecting life below water relates to sustainable development goal 14, and as we develop offshore wind farms to reach sustainable goal 7 on affordable and clean energy, we can implement sustainable development goal 13 on climate action—everything works in harmony.

The Government must set ambitious targets for the protection of the environment, and for our future. I have no doubt that wind power will be a topic of much discussion through COP26, just as it should be. The drive towards a sustainable future should not jeopardise the future survival of marine wildlife, which is already vulnerable to eco-stress. Deflagration should be used, as we have already heard, instead of sea blasts. COP26 in Scotland and the G7 represent perfect opportunities for the Government to set out their commitment to act on the issue. I urge the Minister to prioritise the matter in conversations with ministerial colleagues in the lead up to that crucial conference.

We need updated guidance to be published, and evidence gaps to be identified, as well as funding for research on the impacts. However, guidance and evidence offer little protection without political will and commitment, so they must not be mistaken for anything more than a first step. I urge the Government to prioritise those programmes and publish their findings without delay, and to act to enforce their findings wherever and whenever possible, to make sure that we have a sustainable, climate-friendly future for all.

5.17 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) on securing the debate. I am pleased to respond on behalf of the Opposition.

As we have heard from many Members today, the issue of unexploded ordnance in our seas is a far-reaching one. There are no official estimates of how many unexploded devices sit on our seabed, but as we increase our use of renewable energy—and we welcome increasing construction of wind farms in our seas, which the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) highlighted—the issue of munitions must be addressed and dealt with. The creation of an offshore wind farm should not come at the cost of irreparable damage to the seabed and vulnerable marine species. It is clearly preferable for wind farms to be constructed offshore. The risk and disruption at sea are clearly less. In my constituency just last week a blade flew off a wind turbine. Luckily no one was hurt, but there is clearly a risk to human life. Where we can extend offshore wind at sea that is preferable, but clearly that comes at a risk to the seabed and to marine life.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), using high-order detonation methods to remove munitions from the seabed is causing undue harm. Many species of marine life rely on their hearing to navigate around our waters, establish feeding patterns, and communicate with other mammals. High-order detonation has been found to cause irreversible noise trauma to thousands of sea mammals, as discussed by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). A 2015 study found that 88 explosions in one year would be likely to cause about 1,200, and possibly more than 5,000, permanent hearing loss events. In the five years since that study, we have seen an increase of 13 new wind farms in British waters, which contain a combined total of 853 individual wooden turbines. Does the Minister agree that a more up-to-date assessment of the harm caused to our vulnerable marine life is well overdue? We need to establish the damage caused by more recent detonations, so that we can understand the scale of the problem today.

Low-order deflagration is said to cause far less damage to our marine life and seabeds than high-order detonation, yet detonation remains the most common method of clearing unexploded ordnance in preparation for the construction of offshore wind farms. My right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) spoke with great experience and knowledge of that alternative, and of its benefits. Surely protecting our marine life and seas should be a major factor in the decision about whether to move to the use of low-order deflagration methods in place of detonation. We should not have to tolerate any more man-made tragedies, such as what happened at Kyle of Durness in 2011, when 39 long-finned pilot whales became stranded in the bay area after being displaced from their habitat following a high-order blast. Nineteen sadly died, and the subsequent DEFRA report concluded that a high-order blast

“was the only external event with the potential to cause the Mass Stranding Event.”

In June 2020, the National Physical Laboratory published a report funded by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The report appears to favour

[Stephanie Peacock]

low-order deflagration over high-order detonation, but there has been no move from the Government to implement any changes following the report's publication. Instead, we are told that there will now be a third, and potentially a fourth, stage of the report in order to "further improve the information base".

Will the Minister give an indication of when the findings of the third phase will be published, and whether there is a commitment to move straight into the fourth stage? When that is completed, do we expect to see a change in legislation to preserve vulnerable marine life and our seabeds? Given that the reports have been commissioned by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and that this is obviously an issue that has far-reaching consequences for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, can the Minister tell us what ongoing discussions DEFRA has had with BEIS on this issue?

As everyone in the debate is aware, we are in the midst of a climate crisis, which is something that the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) spoke about at some length. An increase in renewable energy sources needs to be made available, and more offshore wind farms is one of the best ways to achieve that. Indeed, at the end of 2020, there were a further nine offshore wind farms under construction. When finished, they will have a combined total of an extra 619 turbines. On the one hand, that is a positive move in the fight against the climate crisis, but it should not come at the cost of threatening our marine life. The Government have previously said that they

"recognise the potential for significant impact of underwater noise from unexploded ordnance (UXO) clearance on vulnerable marine species",

and that they are

"taking active steps to manage and reduce the risk."

In conclusion, can the Minister outline the steps being taken and give a commitment that further action will be taken to ensure the waters around the UK, and the species that live there, are protected?

5.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) for securing this debate on the very important issue of detonating unexploded ordnance in the wake of the growing offshore wind industry. He is not alone in his interest in this area; we had a great many eloquent speakers, all of whom I thank for their interest. We share a great interest. I am particularly interested in this issue, and I am very pleased to have the chance to talk about it today.

I want to thank all the Members who have spoken, including my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), the hon. Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), and the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw). The debate has really brought the issue into sharp focus. We have also had it raised recently by the Stop Sea Blasts campaign, which has contacted me about it.

I want to set the record straight by saying that protecting the whole marine environment—both habitats and species—is a key commitment of the Government. DEFRA's 25-year environment plan sets out ambitions and targets to improve our marine environment and protect it for future generations. Of course, that plan will be the first environmental improvement plan for the Environment Bill, which is making its way through Parliament. I refer all those who have spoken today to the Westminster Hall debate I responded to this morning about the marine landscape. That was all about marine protections, and it touched on many of the things that hon. Friends and hon. Members have asked about today. The hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) secured that debate, and in it I highlighted that we have made a great deal of progress in just the past 10 years on marine protection in the UK: we now have 371 designated marine protection areas, protecting 38% of UK waters and spanning 340,000 sq km. Internationally, the UK is advocating for the protection of at least 30% of the global ocean within marine protected areas by 2030.

I also highlight that leaving the common fisheries policy has given us extra ability to put protections in place and create management arrangements in our MPAs that previously would have been very difficult, particularly in our offshores. We have used our bylaws on the inshore area; now we can use them on the offshore area to do much more specific, sustainable management, which touches on what my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney was pointing out when he was calling for a much more joined-up, holistic, sustainable approach to a marine strategy. We have our marine strategy, and it is very much moving in that direction. I also add, because it is relevant to this conversation, that cetaceans—whales, porpoises and dolphins—are legally protected species in UK waters.

Let us just touch on the expansion of offshore wind. Alongside all of our environmental ambitions, we have further targets to help tackle the climate crisis and secure a green recovery from covid-19, and we have set targets for reaching net zero by 2050, one of the most ambitious targets in the world. Right at the heart of the Prime Minister's 10-point plan for a green recovery—which I think was touched on by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock)—is this commitment to quadruple offshore wind energy to produce 40 GW by 2030, which is a huge commitment and has massive support. I think every hon. Friend and hon. Member who has spoken today has supported that ambition, which is central to achieving net zero and reducing carbon emissions.

However, and really importantly, the Government are also committed to leaving the environment in a better state than we found it, so we are very clear that the offshore wind must not come at the expense of the marine environment. As has been highlighted, there are now multiple calls on the marine space in many areas: everybody wants to get their hands in the water, so to speak, whether for carbon storage, fishing, oil and gas, or all of these different challenges. I wanted to make very clear that DEFRA is working closely with BEIS to come up with the right balance and approach for delivering sustainable offshore wind and a sustainable, well-managed and well-protected marine space.

Turning to the noise issue—the underwater noise impacts—we recognise that underwater noise can cause significant damage and disturbance to marine life. That is why the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is working so closely with Departments, statutory nature conservation bodies, and marine industries to reduce the impacts on sensitive species such as marine mammals. However, as has been highlighted quite clearly by all speakers, unexploded ordnance continues to be a dreadful legacy, particularly of the second world war, and removing these items from the seabed is absolutely vital for the safe construction of offshore wind and other marine industries. There is some dispute about how many of these bombs there actually are; my figures were between 300,000 and 500,000. I think the 100,000 figure referred to by the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire is the tonnage of the unexploded bombs, but however many it is, it is a great many, and it is a really significant issue.

I want to give reassurance that at the moment, the highest levels of protection possible are put into place for our marine mammals and our environment while these removals take place. Any removal of unexploded ordnance must be individually assessed in accordance with our habitats regulations. A marine species licence is also required if the activity is likely to negatively affect a protected species, which includes all dolphins, whales and porpoises. Marine mammal specialists are deployed to ensure that no marine animals are in the vicinity. I said, “Well, how are you going to do that?” Acoustic devices can be put into the water to try to keep them away from the area where the bomb is going to be exploded. Bubble curtains can also be put around the area. They create bubbles that take away a lot of the sound created by the explosion. There are, therefore, already things in place.

I take note of the comments made by the right hon. Member for Exeter. I saw what he spoke of on my local news, coming as I do from Taunton. I urge colleagues in the Ministry of Defence to take note of the impacts that he highlighted very clearly.

Everybody who has spoken is right—there is more to be done in this space. We also recognise that, given the huge expansion of offshore wind, there will be increases in the levels of underwater noise. That is why DEFRA has recently secured a £4.3 million fund from the Treasury for a cross-Government programme to facilitate the sustainable delivery of offshore wind in the marine environment. That includes a dedicated focus team for reducing the impacts of underwater noise. They are working on this, to get better evidence, data and solutions.

Deflagration, which many colleagues have raised today, is a potentially quieter and less destructive alternative to detonating unexploded ordnance. As mentioned, this issue was raised by the Stop Sea Blasts campaign. Indeed, Joanna Lumley wrote to the Prime Minister just last week and her letter was shared with me. Like Joanna, I am keen that we take care of our vulnerable marine species and that we do the very best we can. The Government are testing and investigating the feasibility of deflagration. In recent weeks and months, we have been in discussions with providers of this technology, the Royal Navy and scientists who are exploring its success, the noise mitigations, the level of risk and its safety.

The Marine Management Organisation fully considers potential mitigation to effectively manage underwater noise before issuing a licence for unexploded ordnance clearance. It already requests that developers investigate and use this deflagration method where feasible, as referenced by the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire.

We welcome the testing funded by BEIS and the industrial strategy last year. The testing has been carried out inland, in a quarry. It is producing strong evidence that the technique results in significant and positive noise reduction, but we need to be sure of its safety and effectiveness out in the much wider marine space, because users of the marine environment have raised quite a lot of concerns about its reliability, effectiveness and safety. We would not want some of the explosive to be left there—we have to be super sure that it does the whole job. It is hard to get all the evidence, but that is what we need. We need to know, however it has been dealt with, that it is safe for other operators, vessels, mariners and developers working in the marine space, but we do not yet have evidence of its safety and effectiveness. We need to be sure of that.

The wider marine space complicates the issue because of the challenges caused by water movements, greater depths, poor visibility and partially buried, partly degrading explosives. That makes real-life ordnance removal in the marine environment more challenging than it is in the controlled quarry site, but that is why we are working closely with scientist to gather the evidence and assess the risks with all speed, and that will continue.

To respond to the shadow Minister’s point, following the completion of the third phase of the analysis work, we will, potentially, go into the fourth phase, involving offshore fieldwork to explore these issues with all speed. We will report back once we have the details and are content with what we feel safe with.

I want to touch on the wider issue of noise. It is not just the noise from exploding ordnance that our fellow creatures face in the sea. There are many other forms of noise. A great deal of work is being done to consider how underwater noise can be monitored and managed more strategically—my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney touched on this—to reduce harm and to enable the sustainable and responsible growth of the offshore wind sector, which is so important to all of us. It is a growing and important area on the shores of England and Scotland.

There is no doubt that underwater noise is increasing and there are concerns. That is why I welcome—the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow mentioned this—the guidance on underwater noise for statutory nature conservation bodies, which was published last June. This important guidance includes information on noise thresholds that should not be exceeded in special areas of conservation for harbour porpoise. That should help to avoid significant disturbance of vulnerable marine species.

Through DEFRA’s offshore wind enabling actions programme, we have set up a strategic advice group, comprising policy makers, regulators, industry representatives, statutory nature conservation bodies, the Crown Estate, which is really important in this area, environmental organisations and a range of scientific experts, to see what else we can do in this space, including looking at new techniques. A number of today’s contributors

[Rebecca Pow]

have urged us to look at all techniques and to apply new technology. I hope I am making it clear that I think this is a really important area to get right.

The Government's commitment to using offshore wind and our drive to achieve net zero are to be applauded, as is our commitment to protecting our marine environment. Getting the balance right is key, and part and parcel of that, of course, is reducing the impact of underwater noise, finding strategic solutions and protecting our vulnerable species, in particular in relation to the concern about unexploded ordnance.

I again thank the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire for securing the debate. It has been a good debate and it has shown that we are all in the same waters, so to speak, and that we all want to drive forward to get this right.

5.38 pm

John Nicolson [V]: I thank all the people and constituents who asked for this debate, and the hon. Members who have spoken. I felt the Minister's pain as she tried to cope with saying "East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow" a couple of times.

I was interested to hear the Minister say that whales, dolphins and porpoises are legally protected. They are not being protected if they are being blown up, which is what is happening at the moment. The Minister asked a number of times whether deflagration works, what the evidence is, and whether it is safe. Those are all excellent questions, but we already know the answers because the method has been tried around the world. We do not have to do our own independent research when research is available from other countries.

There is only one question that Members across the room want an answer to, and it is this: will the Minister ban the bomb—yes or no? Sadly, the answer appears to be maybe. I hope there is speedy progress.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the disposal of unexploded ordnance for offshore windfarm construction.

5.40 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Wednesday 17 March 2021

HOME DEPARTMENT

Government Response to the Fire Safety Consultation

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse):

My noble Friend the Minister of State, Home Office and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Lord Greenhalgh) has today made the following written ministerial statement:

Today, the Government publishes their response to the Fire Safety Consultation held from 20 July-12 October 2020.

This public consultation was a vital step in a process to ensure that the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (the ‘Fire Safety Order’) continues to be fit for purpose as part of the Government’s consideration of the reform of the wider building safety landscape. The consultation sought views on a number of proposals to:

Strengthen the FSO and improve compliance in all regulated premises (section 1).

Implement the Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 1 report recommendations that require a change in the law (section 2).

Improve the effectiveness of consultation between building control bodies and fire and rescue authorities on planning for building work and the arrangements for the handover of fire safety information (section 3).

We received feedback from over 250 stakeholders with an interest in building and fire safety, including residents, responsible persons and enforcing authorities, which we have used to inform our response. The Government have listened, and now we are taking action.

We will be bringing forward a number of changes to the Fire Safety Order, legislating where necessary primarily via the Building Safety Bill, as well as through building regulations fire safety guidance, to strengthen fire safety in all regulated buildings. We will:

Improve the quality of fire risk assessments by requiring that a Responsible Person (RP) must not appoint a person to assist them with undertaking a fire risk assessment unless they are competent and a requirement on all RPs to record their completed fire risk assessments and prescribed information. The name and or organisation of any person engaged by the RP to undertake all or part of the fire risk assessment will also need to be recorded to assist enforcing authorities undertaking enforcement action to establish compliance.

Improve the identification of RPs by requiring them to record—and update as necessary—who they are, and the extent of their responsibility under the Fire Safety Order, and to include a UK based address. This will sit alongside a further proposal to require all RPs to take reasonable steps to identify themselves to each other where they share or have duties in respect of the same premises. A new requirement will also be introduced to ensure that information is transferred effectively between outgoing RPs and their replacements.

Amend existing provision relating to statutory guidance for RPs to include provision that failure to follow such guidance may be considered in court proceedings for breaches of the Order as evidence of such a breach, and conversely proof of following guidance may be considered as evidence of compliance.

Increase the level of fines from Level 3 (£1,000) to Level 5 (unlimited) for offences in relation to the impersonation of an inspector, failure to comply with specific requirements imposed by an inspector, and failure to comply with requirements relating to the installation of luminous tube signs.

Amend the guidance in approved document B of the building regulations to require all new buildings above 11 metres to provide a readily locatable, accessible and secure premises information box, to tie in with the height threshold for new buildings to require sprinklers and signage.

The Fire Safety Consultation consulted on a range of areas to strengthen fire safety. Where further work is required to develop policy, we will continue to consider the findings of the consultation and engage with the sector and stakeholders to inform ongoing policy development in these areas.

The Fire Safety Consultation also included proposals to implement recommendations from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 1 report requiring changes to the law. We will consider these proposals further in light of the consultation responses and—subject to the Fire Safety Bill gaining Royal Assent—intend to lay regulations before the second anniversary of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 1 report which will deliver on the Inquiry’s recommendations. These will include measures around checking fire doors and lifts.

Three of these proposals related to Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPs). The Government’s commitment to implementing the Inquiry’s recommendations remains undimmed, as does our commitment to ensure those most affected by the tragic events at Grenfell Tower—the bereaved and survivors—continue to have a voice in their implementation. It is important that we get this right and ensure the voice of residents and those likely to be affected by the proposals are heard. That is why we have decided to undertake a further consultation this spring to seek additional views on the complex issue of personal emergency evacuation plans in relation to the proposals to implement the relevant Grenfell recommendations. Further details about this will be available soon on the Government’s website.

Finally, proposals to improve the engagement between Building Control Bodies and Fire Authorities in reviewing plans for building work and for the handover of fire safety information to the RP on completion will be implemented through changes to legislation and guidance.

We are determined to ensure that the public feel safe and are safe from fire in all regulated premises regardless of where they live, stay or work. These changes, alongside the Fire Safety Bill, Building Safety Bill and planned overhaul of the statutory guidance provided under the Fire Safety Order are important steps needed to strengthen the whole regulatory system for building and fire safety. Taken together they will help to ensure there is greater accountability and responsibility for fire and structural safety issues throughout the lifecycle of all buildings regulated by the Fire Safety Order.

Further detail of the changes we are making can be found in the consultation response. The consultation response will be available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/fire-safety>.

A copy will also be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS851]

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