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12 May 2021**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 12 May 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.]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Today we are marking the 80th anniversary of the destruction of the House of Commons Chamber by the Luftwaffe during what was the biggest air raid on London of the second world war. This morning the Lord Speaker and I laid wreaths at the memorial in Westminster Hall in memory of the three members of staff who lost their lives that night. On the way into the Chamber today, my procession paused at the entrance arch to commemorate the raid. Colleagues will know that Winston Churchill ordered that the arch be retained in its bomb-damaged state as an enduring reminder of the ordeal Westminster suffered during the war. We remember those who gave their lives to defend this place and all it represents, and thank friends and allies from across the Commonwealth who helped rebuild what was lost. This renewed Chamber will always remain a symbol of the resilience of democracy in the face of adversity.

As colleagues will know, the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee is elected each Session. Nominations are open now and will close at 5 pm on Tuesday 18 May. Nomination forms are available from the Vote Office, on the intranet, or by emailing the Public Bill Office at pbohoc@parliament.uk. Candidates need the support of no fewer than 10 Members from a party represented in government and no fewer than 10 Members from a party not represented in government or from no party. Only Members from a party not represented in government may be candidates. If a ballot is necessary I will announce the arrangements in due course.

NEW WRIT

Ordered,

That the Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the County constituency of Chesham and Amersham in the room of Dame Cheryl Elise Kendall Gillan, deceased.—(*Mark Spencer.*)

Violence in Israel and Palestine

11.36 am

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) (*Urgent question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the violence in Israel and Palestine.

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): The recent escalation in violence in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories is deeply concerning. It is the worst violence seen there for several years. As the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have made clear, this cycle of violence must stop and every effort must be made to avoid the loss of life, especially that of children. The UK offers our deepest condolences to the families of those civilians killed. Civilian deaths, both in Israel and Gaza, are a tragedy.

We urge all sides to refrain from any kind of provocation so that calm is restored as quickly as possible. As we enter the final days of the holy month of Ramadan, restoration of peace and security is in everyone's interest. The UK will continue to support that goal. The UK unequivocally condemns the firing of rockets at Jerusalem and other locations in Israel. We strongly condemn these acts of terrorism from Hamas and other terrorist groups, who must permanently end their incitement and rocket fire against Israel. There is no justification for any targeting of civilians. Israel has a legitimate right to self-defence and to defend its citizens from attack. In doing so, it is vital that all actions are proportionate, are in line with international humanitarian law, and make every effort to avoid civilian casualties. Violence against peaceful worshippers of any faith is unacceptable. The UK has been clear that the attacks on worshippers must stop. The status quo in Jerusalem is important at all times, but especially so during religious festivals such as Ramadan. Our priority now must be an immediate de-escalation on all sides and an end to civilian deaths.

As I made clear over the weekend, we are concerned about tensions in Jerusalem linked to threatened evictions of Palestinian families from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah. That threat is allayed for now, but we urge Israel to cease such actions, which in most cases are contrary to international humanitarian law. The UK continues to support international efforts to reduce the tension. The Foreign Secretary delivered a message of de-escalation in a call to the Israeli Foreign Minister yesterday and will speak to the Palestinian Prime Minister shortly. I have spoken to the Israeli ambassador and the Palestinian head of mission in the UK to urge them to de-escalate and to restore calm. The UK has also engaged at the UN Security Council, calling for all sides to take measures to reduce further violence and making clear our deep concern at the violence at the holy sites in Jerusalem. I am sure that the Security Council will continue to monitor the situation closely, and it is due to reconvene. UK embassies throughout the middle east are engaging with regional partners, and we remain in close contact with the US Administration and our European allies.

The situation on the ground over the last few days demonstrates the urgent need to make progress towards peace. The UK remains committed to a two-state solution

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as the best way to bring peace and stability to the region. I repeat: we urge all sides to show maximum restraint and refrain from taking actions that endanger civilians and make a sustainable peace more difficult.

Layla Moran: Ibrahim al-Masri, 11; Marwan al-Masri, six; Rahaf al-Masri, 10; and Yazan al-Masri, aged just two—those are some of the names of the children killed this week, and last night an Israeli child was added to their numbers. My heart breaks for them, and my heart bleeds for Palestine, for Jerusalem, the city of my family, for the worshippers attacked by extremists at the al-Aqsa mosque on the holiest night of Ramadan and for all innocent civilians, Israeli and Palestinian.

We cannot allow this to escalate any further. The Israeli Government pursuing evictions in Sheikh Jarrah that would be illegal under international humanitarian law, including the fourth Geneva convention, and the subsequent overly aggressive reaction of the Israeli authorities, which injured hundreds, has ignited a tinderbox. Hamas then retaliated, and those strikes must be condemned too, because violence only begets more violence. The UN special envoy last night warned that the situation is

“escalating towards a full-scale war.”

The Minister will know that he does not say such words lightly, and he refers to not just Israel-Palestine but the entire region.

My questions to the Minister are these. Will the UK back Security Council resolutions condemning these attacks, regardless of what the US does? Should that fail, will the Minister work with international partners such as the European Union to issue a statement on de-escalation in the strongest possible terms today? What steps is the UK taking to stop the attempted illegal evictions in Sheikh Jarrah? Will the Government commit to supporting a new round of peace negotiations and, indeed, new elections in Palestine?

Finally, if this is not the time to recognise the state of Palestine, then when is? The United Kingdom has a historic responsibility to the people of Palestine and a fundamental obligation to uphold international law. The two-state solution promised to the likes of my family is as elusive as ever. It is time for the Government to not just say but do.

James Cleverly: I recognise the passion with which the hon. Lady speaks and her personal connection to both Jerusalem and the region. I can assure her that the United Kingdom will work with international partners, both bilaterally and through multilateral institutions, to encourage an end to the violence and conflict, which does nobody any good.

We all mourn; we all feel the deepest sympathy and condolences for those who have lost children and loved ones, whether they be in Gaza or in Israel. It is in everybody's interests to de-escalate, and we will work with our regional partners, as well as the leadership of the Palestinian Authority and Israel, towards de-escalation. The rocket attacks coming from Gaza cannot be justified, and we call for them to cease immediately as part of that de-escalation.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Over the past week, Hamas is alleged to have fired over 1,000 rockets at indiscriminate targets inside Israel. By the same token, Israeli aggression has also escalated. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must press in this place for both sides to return to direct peace talks and that the targeting of civilians, against international law, is abhorrent?

James Cleverly: We have spoken with both Israel and the Palestinian Authority to work with them to de-escalate and bring about peace. My hon. Friend mentions the avoidance of civilian casualties, and we press for that as a priority in all instances. We will continue to work with parties both in the region and in multilateral forums—with the United States and the European Union perhaps most closely—to push for peace so that we do not have to hear of any more fatalities in either Gaza or Israel.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab) [V]: Like everyone else in this House, I have been appalled by what we have seen in Jerusalem, Gaza and Israel. The loss of life has been terrible, and my heart goes out to the families who have lost loved ones. The Labour party strongly condemns the indiscriminate firing of over 1,000 rockets by Hamas, and I also strongly condemn the Israeli actions that have killed Palestinian civilians. Israel and the Palestinians generally must do everything possible to de-escalate the situation, and I would urge the Government to do all they can to prevent further conflict. The violence must stop now. Once this terrible violence has ended, we must ensure that the root causes of the violence are recognised and addressed. The eviction of Palestinians from their homes in East Jerusalem must end. International law must be upheld, and all religious sites must be respected. At the same time, Britain and the international community must recognise the commitment to a two-state solution. Will the Government commit to doing this?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman highlights a number of areas where the UK's policy is long-standing, particularly with regard to settlements and evictions, and I have discussed those issues a number of times from this Dispatch Box. The UK Government will continue to work towards peace—in the immediate instance to bring about the end to this particular violence, but in the longer term to secure meaningful, peaceful and prosperous two states. That remains the UK's policy, and we will continue to work to bring that about.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Minister will know how deeply shocked many of my constituents in Gloucester and across the land are by the extraordinary images this week, during Ramadan, of the Israeli defence force effectively attacking the al-Aqsa mosque, the centre of Islamic worship in Jerusalem for hundreds of years. Although the rocket attacks by Hamas from Gaza are completely indefensible, it is clear that a major cause of the increased discontent is the number of illegal evictions from Sheikh Jarrah. Will my right hon. Friend confirm today that the Government will ask Israel to cease immediately any further illegal evictions from East Jerusalem and to respect the sanctity of mosques, for without both of these steps surely an already fragile situation can only deteriorate further?

James Cleverly: On the holy sites in Jerusalem, which is the home of some of the holiest sites for all three Abrahamic religions, our position is that the status quo

must be maintained and those religious sites must be respected. Obviously, many people have been very distressed by the images we have seen from the region. We will continue to speak directly with our contacts in the Israeli Government about evictions and settlements. As I say, our position on that has been long-standing, and I have spoken about that issue from the Dispatch Box. We call upon Hamas to immediately cease its indiscriminate rocket attacks into Israel, and we call upon all actors in this to bring about peace so that we do not see any more fatalities and casualties.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on bringing this very urgent issue to the House. The SNP condemns all violence whoever perpetrates it and whoever it is perpetrated against. We send our deepest condolences to the innocents who have been caught up in this dreadful conflict. We are a friend of Palestine, we are a friend of Israel also, but above all else we stand four-square behind international law, and it is through that prism that we need to look at this latest flashover of a long-simmering injustice.

I have two points for the Minister. I agree with much of the tone and sentiment of his statement—it is worth stressing the House's unity in this—but surely now is the time to recognise Palestine. That would give an impetus to the two-state solution. Secondly, settler goods by their very definition are illegal. The UK should not be trading in them, and if we will not ban them from our presence, can we not at least label them as such so that consumers can make a choice?

We do have influence within the state of Israel, which is a deeply complex place. The Israeli Government are not entirely in charge of events, and we do have influence. Warm words, however sincere, will not cut it. Now is the time for action.

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments about the tone of this debate and I agree with him on that. I understand his point on the timing of recognition and the long-standing conversations about goods coming from Israel. While those issues are well worthy of debate, our priority at the moment is to bring about peace. We are focused relentlessly on that. That will be the UK Government's priority, working with international partners to bring about a resolution to the current conflict. I am sure we will have the opportunity to debate wider issues in this place and others in future.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Many in Dudley South are shocked at the scenes from the al-Aqsa mosque and a police response that does not appear to be proportionate. Does my right hon. Friend agree that a lasting two-state solution requires both sides to feel secure, and that means a stop to the stream of rocket attacks from Hamas, restraint from Israeli forces and the wider population, and a reconsideration of the evictions and settlements policy by the Israeli Government and courts?

James Cleverly: The policing of Jerusalem and the holy sites within Jerusalem is always a sensitive issue, particularly during religious festivals such as Ramadan, and we have called and will continue to call for restraint in the policing of those areas. As I have said, our

position on settlements and evictions is of long standing, but ultimately I agree with my hon. Friend that a two-state solution offers the best chance for sustainable peace in the region, and we will continue to work towards that.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab) [V]: My constituents have watched with growing anxiety, anger and, frankly, horror the spiralling events in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The threat of forcible evictions and demolitions, restrictions on Palestinians entering the city of Jerusalem, and violence against worshippers at the al-Aqsa mosque have all inflamed tensions, and we now see a terrifying escalation, with Hamas rocket attacks and Israeli airstrikes killing and injuring innocent Israeli and Palestinian civilians. Both are unacceptable and both must end, but does the Minister agree that, if proper accountability and the rule of law had been followed in the past, we might not be where we are today, and what steps will he take now to ensure that the Israeli Government adhere to international law, end the evictions, end the discriminatory planning laws and end the construction of illegal settlements?

James Cleverly: As I have said, the UK's position on settlements and evictions is of long standing. We have communicated that both from the Dispatch Box and directly with our interlocutors in the Israeli Government, but ultimately our priority at the moment is to do everything we can, both bilaterally and through multilateral institutions, to bring about an end to this conflict so that the terrible and distressing images that the hon. Member and others in this Chamber have spoken about come to an end, and then we can work on a long-term, sustainable, peaceful solution for the region.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con) [V]: If my right hon. Friend examines his statements today and compares them with those made by the Foreign Office 25 years ago in respect of illegal settlements at Har Homa, he will find a remarkable similarity. What has changed is the end of any hope for the Oslo peace process, built out of existence by illegal settlements, and the dominance of factions in both communities of those least committed to justice, security and reconciliation between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples. When will the United Kingdom work to achieve real accountability for those breaching international and humanitarian law, including those indiscriminately mortaring the innocent, the disproportionate response by the occupiers to violence by the occupied, and decades of the violation of the fourth Geneva convention that has made a practical mockery of the British policy commitment to a two-state solution?

James Cleverly: As I have said, the UK's position on settlements is of long standing, it is clear and has been communicated here and elsewhere. There is no justification for the violence that we are seeing coming out of Gaza and the targeting of civilians. As I have said, Israel absolutely has the right to defend itself. We call on it to act with caution and care in discharging that defence, but ultimately, we are seeking to bring about a speedy conclusion to the current violence that we are seeing, and then we will continue to work—I appreciate that my hon. Friend said that this has been a long-standing

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aim, and it has been a long-standing aim of this and other Governments—to bring about a peaceful two-state solution so that we have a sustainable, peaceful resolution in this region.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): On behalf of the many constituents of Newport East who have been in touch with me over the last couple of days expressing their horror at events and calling for an end to the violence, may I join others here in asking the Minister to use the considerable diplomacy of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to try to bring an end to this humanitarian crisis? The murder and maiming of children and civilians cannot be the solution to the ongoing tragedy of this conflict.

James Cleverly: I can assure the hon. Lady that we will use our considerable diplomatic might to work both with the Government in Israel and in the Occupied Palestinian Territories through the Palestinian Authority, and with regional partners and through multilateral forums, to bring about a speedy resolution to this terrible conflict, which does no good for anyone.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said:

“Our commitment to Israeli security is unwavering”.—[*Official Report*, 16 March 2021; Vol. 691, c. 172.]

Of the thousand rockets that have been fired towards Israel, many have fallen short and caused damage and death in Gaza. Will the Minister confirm that we are doing everything possible to support our close ally against what amount to nothing more than terrorist groups out to seek Israel's destruction?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes a good point; the rocket attacks by Hamas from Gaza do harm, not only indirectly but directly, to the Palestinian people. We call on them to cease immediately. As I have said, Israel does have the right to defend itself. We urge it, in doing so, to act with caution and to do everything in its power to minimise civilian casualties.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP) [V]: The covid-19 pandemic has hit Palestinian communities disproportionately hard, but despite Israel's having the world's highest covid-19 vaccination rate, it remains the case that fewer than 150,000 Palestinians have been vaccinated in the occupied west bank and Gaza. What are FCDO Ministers and their representatives there doing to rectify that injustice?

James Cleverly: As I have said, our main priority at the moment is the cessation of the violence that we have all seen. The hon. Lady will know that the UK has been one of the most generous donors to the COVAX vaccination programme, which has helped communities across the globe have a route out of this pandemic through the vaccination process. We are incredibly proud of the £548 million that we have contributed to that as well as our technical expertise, and that will be to the benefit of the Palestinian people and others around the world.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con) [V]: Like all Members of Parliament, I condemn all acts of violence and the loss of innocent lives. The focus of my question is freedom of religion or belief for all. Does the Minister agree that the force used against the worshippers at the al-Aqsa mosque on the 27th of Ramadan, the night of Laylat al-Qadr, one of the most important nights in the Islamic calendar, was completely and utterly unacceptable? In the light of the United Kingdom's commitment to human rights and freedom of religion or belief for all, I know that the Minister has raised these matters with the Israeli authorities, but can he assure the House that he will continue to do so, to ensure that all individuals can practise their faith freely and openly in the holy city of Jerusalem? With that, will he ensure that freedom of religion or belief and human rights are put on the G7 presidency agenda later this year?

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend and I pay tribute to the work he has done on freedom of religion or belief. He is right that violence against worshippers of whatever faith is unacceptable. As I have said, it is important that policing is particularly sensitive around religious holy sites in Jerusalem, and particularly so during religious festivals like the holy month of Ramadan. We have made that position clear with the Israeli authorities, and we will continue to make that argument in our bilateral conversations with them.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): After years of persecution and oppression, indiscriminate attacks, a brutal siege of Gaza, the expansion of illegal settlements and the demolition of Palestinian homes, unfair trials, arbitrary detention and restrictions on the freedom of movement, and now the attack on worshippers at the al-Aqsa mosque, tensions in the region are the highest they have ever been. I join others in condemning the escalation of violence and the loss of life, yet the silence of the international community is deafening, even as the Palestinians scream out for help. I have to ask the Minister: how many times will we come back to this House to debate the persecution of the Palestinians, and when will the international community finally wake up?

James Cleverly: I do not recognise at all the scenario the hon. Gentleman paints. This is an issue that I have spoken about from the Dispatch Box. The Prime Minister has made a statement on this issue. The Foreign Secretary has made a statement on this issue. We are speaking with the United Nations Security Council. The United Nations regularly makes statements on this issue. This is a terrible situation, no doubt. We are working to bring it to a conclusion and we will continue to work to bring about a peaceful two-state solution, so the Israelis and the Palestinians can live and work side by side in peace. That should be, I am sure, the goal of everyone in this House and in the wider international community.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): It is clear from voices across the House and internationally that everyone is incredibly disappointed to see that violence has broken out in the region once again after the Palestinian Authority recently resumed co-operation with Israel. Does my right hon. Friend agree that continuing down the path of normalisation, rather than that of

violence and escalation as we have seen recently, is the only way to secure long-term peace for the region? Will the UK Government continue to support that end?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The UK Government, at both ministerial and official level, encourage greater co-operation between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Government. I spoke to representatives of both yesterday. I am sure I will have further such conversations in the future. We will always support closer working between the Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel as part of their route towards a sustainable two-state solution.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab) [V]: If the Foreign Secretary will take action on ethnic cleansing in Xinjiang, why not in Sheikh Jarrah? If the UK Government will impose sanctions for the occupation of Crimea, why do they allow trade with illegal settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories? The Minister rightly condemns the killing of children in Gaza and Israel. Does he recognise that these war crimes spring from an unlawful occupation, and will he now give his full support to the investigation of the International Criminal Court?

James Cleverly: I do not think it is at all helpful to try to imply there is a commonality between the examples he gave and the situation we see in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The hon. Gentleman will know that where we have criticism of the Israeli Government, we have a strong enough relationship that we are able to air those criticisms, whether from the Dispatch Box here or in our bilateral conversations. We will continue to work towards a sustainable, peaceful two-state solution. That remains the UK Government's goal and that will be our focus once we have helped to bring this current conflict to a conclusion.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): In the last few days, I have been contacted by hundreds of constituents who are concerned by the proposed evictions in Sheikh Jarrah, the activities outside the al-Aqsa mosque and the events that we have seen in the last 36 hours. Will the Minister reassure them, me and the whole House that the Government will use the full power of their diplomatic network to de-escalate the immediate issue and then bring both sides back to peace talks, because that is the only way that we can prevent events like this happening again?

James Cleverly: The al-Aqsa mosque is one of the most holy sites in Islam, and Jerusalem has the privilege of being the home of a number of the holiest sites in the Abrahamic religions. Therefore, the policing of Jerusalem needs at all times to be sensitive, as I say, particularly during the holy month of Ramadan. I assure my hon. Friend and others that the UK Government will work tirelessly to bring about a conclusion to this, so that we no longer have to see the distressing images that we have seen in Jerusalem and other parts of Israel, and that we no longer have to hear about fatalities.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): Like other, I condemn the violence, wherever it comes from, and feel very strongly that those responsible for that violence should be held to account. The Minister spoke about

bringing an end to hostilities. There have been four wars in Gaza since 2000 and no one has been held to account from any side, so bringing an end to the current hostilities is not enough. The underlying problem of nobody being held to account, the demolition orders in Sheikh Jarrah—these are only the tip of the iceberg. The status quo is not really the status quo. According to the UN, a third of Palestinian homes are probably under threat of demolition orders in the Jerusalem area. These issues need addressing before we can move to a two-state solution. Does the Minister agree that those engaged in violence from any side should know that there will be a day of reckoning and consequences for their actions? What will the British Government do, in line with the international community, to ensure that this happens?

James Cleverly: The hon. Lady is right that we should focus on bringing about a speedy resolution to the conflict. As I said, the rocket attacks from Gaza are unacceptable, unjustified and completely illegitimate. Israel does have a right to defend itself and we have made it clear that, in doing so, it must abide by international humanitarian law and make every effort to minimise civilian casualties. Ultimately, the two-state solution is, in our assessment, the best way of bringing about lasting peace for the people of the region, and that will continue to be a priority area for UK foreign policy in the region.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): It is deeply upsetting that we are again witnessing such violence and division, especially when the Abraham accords signed between Israel and gulf partners last year showed that peace is achievable. What discussions have my right hon. Friend and the Foreign Secretary had with Israeli and Gulf counterparts on how the current tensions can be de-escalated?

James Cleverly: As I say, the Foreign Secretary has spoken with his Israeli counterpart and will shortly be speaking with the Palestinian Prime Minister, among other calls that Ministers and senior officials have been making and will continue to make. We will use our significant diplomatic strength to be a passionate and powerful voice for de-escalation and peace, and I am sure that many others in the international community will join us in doing so.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab) [V]: The human misery on display in East Jerusalem, Gaza and Israeli cities is on show for the entire international community to bear witness to as the violence escalates. I join hon. Members on both sides of the House in condemning the violence on both sides. Sometimes the most difficult conversations are required with our allies, so what is the British Government's position on forced evictions and displacement of Palestinian families in East Jerusalem, and has the position been relayed to the Israeli Government? Does the Minister believe that Mr Netanyahu's Government are sincerely committed to a viable, two-state solution, given the plan previously cooked up with President Biden's predecessor?

James Cleverly: The UK Government's position on settlements and evictions is long-standing and has been communicated a number of times at the Dispatch Box, both today and on previous occasions. We do, of course,

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outline directly to the Israeli Government our position on such matters, and also do so from the Dispatch Box. We will work with the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and their regional friends and neighbours, to work towards a sustainable two-state solution, which remains a priority UK foreign policy.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con) [V]: Many of my constituents have contacted me about the recent reports from Jerusalem, and I share their concerns about the ongoing violence and unrest. I therefore welcome the Government's strong call for calm and de-escalation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this violence is completely unacceptable and that all sides must now come together to de-escalate tensions and achieve a peaceful resolution?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Ultimately, peace has to be something that is delivered by both sides, and we call upon everybody to step back from the situation and not allow it to escalate further, and indeed to de-escalate so that we can see an end to this conflict. We will work tirelessly to achieve that, both bilaterally and through multilateral forums.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Government's response to this and every other episode in Palestine is completely inadequate. The Palestinians have lived under brutal oppression and apartheid from Israel with the tacit consent of the west for too long, and we have heard the "plague on both your houses" song too many times. Of course we must condemn all violence on both sides, so in that spirit can the Minister tell me whether he thinks it appropriate that the UK grants arms licences that see UK weapons being used in these indiscriminate Israeli attacks on civilians, including children?

James Cleverly: The Government take their arms export responsibilities very seriously, and we aim to operate one of the most robust arms export licences in the world. We consider all our export applications against a strict risk assessment framework and keep all licences under careful and continual review as standard.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: While there is never any excuse for firing rockets on civilians, would not the Israelis sleep more soundly at night if access to all the holy sites was maintained as agreed in 1967, if free Palestinian elections were allowed in East Jerusalem, and if Palestinians were not being evicted from their homes in Jerusalem?

James Cleverly: As I have said, the UK's position on evictions is well known. It is incredibly important that worshippers have access to those very holy sites in Jerusalem. We have been supportive of Palestinian Authority elections and we pushed for them to go ahead, including in East Jerusalem.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: What we are seeing in the news is absolutely horrific. Many constituents have contacted me in the last few days about the violence against worshippers during Ramadan, as well as about the evictions in Sheikh Jarrah. Airstrikes on both sides

must absolutely end, and I condemn this violence. As the occupying power, the Israeli Government have legal obligations that they are not meeting. What are the UK Government doing to ensure that Israel adheres to international law?

James Cleverly: The hon. Lady is right to say that violence against peaceful worshippers of any faith is unacceptable, and as I have said, we condemn the rocket attacks from Gaza. We will continue to be a voice for calm and peace in the region and to work with international partners. At times, that includes having difficult conversations with some of our friends in the region, but we are unafraid of doing so when necessary.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The violence and the loss of life is tragic, and it needs to stop, but is it not the case that, right under the noses of the international community, Hamas has been allowed to build a terrorist city state in Gaza? It has diverted humanitarian resources into stockpiling missiles behind civilian buildings. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is wrong to draw some kind of phoney equivalence between the actions and the aggression of terrorists and the sovereign right of a legitimate democratic Government to defend their citizens? I would not expect the Minister at the Dispatch Box, or anybody else in our Government, to do anything other than what the Israeli Government are doing to defend their citizens.

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. The military wing of Hamas is a proscribed terrorist organisation, and we have a policy of no contact with Hamas in its entirety. We completely condemn the rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel, and they are the actions of a terrorist organisation. As I said, Israel has the right to defend itself, but we have said—I have said this at the Dispatch Box and directly to representatives of the Israeli Government—that, in doing so, it must abide by international humanitarian law and must do everything it can to minimise civilian casualties.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) [V]: The extent of the expansion of illegal settlements in East Jerusalem, the forced eviction of Palestinian families from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah, the brutality against worshippers at the third most holy site in Islam and during Ramadan—this is not a clash between two equal sides. Until we discuss the root issue, we will miss the entire context and fail to recognise that one side is an occupier and the other side is occupied.

Will the Minister demand that the Israelis end all the discriminatory and illegal practices that have actually provoked these current tensions? What specifically will he do to ensure accountability for violations of international law, which have been going on for the past 50 years?

James Cleverly: As I say, the UK's position on the settlements and evictions is clear. I have spoken about it from this Dispatch Box today and in the past, and we have also had that conversation directly with the Israeli Government. However, there is no legitimacy and no justification for indiscriminate rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Members of the Muslim community in Aylesbury are extremely distressed by recent events in East Jerusalem, describing this as a moment of deep anguish and sorrow. They want an immediate end to the eviction of Palestinians from their homes, as well as immediate and concrete progress towards a two-state solution. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is, in fact, the only way to deliver Palestinian self-determination, to permanently end the Arab-Israeli conflict and to preserve Israel's Jewish and democratic identity and, therefore, that his Department remains committed to achieving a solution based on 1967 borders, with agreed land swaps?

James Cleverly: I think that Members in every part of this House, and our constituents, will have been deeply distressed by the images we have seen from some of the most holy sites not only in Islam but in Christianity and Judaism. It is in everybody's interest to de-escalate, to bring this current period of violence to a conclusion and, as my hon. Friend says, to work towards the long-standing UK Government position of a peaceful, two-state solution based on the lines, with agreed land swaps, through a political process.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con) [V]: Given how hard and fast this conflict has escalated, and as we approach Eid, what will the Government do specifically to encourage Israel to guarantee freedom of worship for Muslims at the al-Aqsa mosque?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point about the importance, during this holy month of Ramadan, of worshippers having access to one of the most holy sites in Islam, which is something we have communicated to the Israeli Government. We will continue to work towards de-escalation, particularly at this most sensitive and religious time, and it is a conversation we have had recently, and we will continue to have, both at ministerial level and at senior official level.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): In 2018, I stood in Mefalsim, in the Southern District of Israel, just on the edge of the Gaza strip, and held in my hands the remains of a Hamas-engineered rocket that had been fired into a playground of schoolchildren with one intention only: to murder mothers and children who were doing what we have the freedom in this nation to do, which is raise our kids in peace.

No right-thinking person could not be heartbroken by the horror in the holy land they see on our television screens. However, is it not the case that Hamas will not negotiate with Israel because it wants to murder Israelis and to obliterate the state of Israel off the map of the world? That is Hamas's stated objective and position. The Palestinian people need to free themselves from being used as human shields by a terrorist and political organisation that wishes to continue to launch rocket attacks into Israel. I urge the Minister to do everything in his power to persuade the Palestinian people to free themselves from the grip of Hamas.

James Cleverly: The rocket attacks by Hamas, whose military wing has, as I say, been proscribed as a terrorist organisation by the UK Government, are completely

counterproductive to the effort for peace and do harm to the Palestinian people. On behalf of moves towards peace, we urge Hamas to cease these actions, because they are completely counterproductive to peace and completely against the interests of the Palestinian people, in Gaza and elsewhere.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): I am deeply concerned by the escalating tension between Israel and Palestine, and we all here condemn the violence against civilians, on both sides, be that the murderous missile attacks or the misguided attempted eviction of Palestinian residents in Sheikh Jarrah.

Given that the missile technology employed in attacking Israeli heartlands could have come only from Iran, does my right hon. Friend agree that now is not the time to do a deal with Iran that rewards it for instigating further instability in the region, as well as violating the JCPOA—joint comprehensive plan of action—nuclear commitments and its obligations under the non-proliferation treaty? Is this not another reminder, were one needed, that we must not appease this dangerous regime?

James Cleverly: I am not able to speak on the point my hon. Friend has made about the potential relationship between Iran and Hamas at this point. As I have said, we are working to de-escalate the situation and bring about peace. More broadly, we are seeking to bring greater stability to the region and to dissuade Iran from its destabilising actions within the region. That will continue to be a priority piece of work for Her Majesty's Government.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): The events in Jerusalem have triggered emotive responses here in the UK, and we need only look at the protests last night to see that. My constituents and others have seen in the past that, when conflict erupts in the middle east, the UK Jewish community is targeted by those wishing to import this complex situation on to our streets and university campuses, and online. What does my right hon. Friend say to those who seek divisions between communities here in the UK? Will he join me in thanking the Community Security Trust for all the work it is doing to keep the Jewish community safe?

James Cleverly: Antisemitic acts and violence against the Jewish community, wherever they may be, are unacceptable. I pay tribute to the CST and others who seek to keep communities safe. In the UK we enjoy, for the most part, very good community relations. We should be proud of that and seek to reinforce it. It is important for us to demonstrate that we are good friends with Israel and with the Palestinian people, and that we are seeking a peaceful two-state solution that can see people of all faiths enjoying the peace and security they deserve.

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

12.24 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Update

12.27 pm

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on our response to covid.

The patience and hard work of the British people have combined with the success of the vaccination programme to reduce deaths and hospitalisations to their lowest levels since last July and, from Monday, England will ease lockdown restrictions in line with step 3 of our road map. This will amount to the single biggest step of our journey back towards normality. But after everything we have endured, we must be vigilant, because the threat of this virus remains real and new variants—including the one first identified in India, which is of increasing concern here in the UK—pose a potentially lethal danger. Caution has to be our watchword.

Our country, like every country, has found itself in the teeth of the gravest pandemic for a century, which has imposed heartbreaking sorrow on families around the world, with more than 127,000 lives lost in the United Kingdom alone. Our grief would have been still greater without the daily heroism of the men and women of our national health service, the protection of our vaccines—already in the arms of more than two thirds of adults across the UK—and the dedication of everyone who has followed the rules and sacrificed so much that we cherish.

Amid such tragedy, the state has an obligation to examine its actions as rigorously and as candidly as possible and to learn every lesson for the future, which is why I have always said that, when the time is right, there should be a full and independent inquiry. I can confirm today that the Government will establish an independent public inquiry on a statutory basis, with full powers under the Inquiries Act 2005, including the ability to compel the production of all relevant materials and take oral evidence in public under oath.

In establishing the inquiry, we will work closely with the devolved Administrations, as we have done throughout our pandemic response. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has this morning spoken to the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales, and the First and Deputy First Ministers of Northern Ireland, to begin those conversations.

Every part of our United Kingdom has suffered the ravages of this virus, and every part of the state has pulled together to do battle against it. If we are to recover as one Team UK, as we must, then we should also learn lessons together in the same spirit. We will consult the devolved Administrations before finalising the scope and detailed arrangements, so that this inquiry can consider all key aspects of the UK response.

This process will place the state's actions under the microscope, and we should be mindful of the scale of that undertaking and the resources required to do it properly. The exercise of identifying and disclosing all relevant information, the months of preparation and retrospective analysis, and the time that people will have to spend testifying in public—in some cases for days—will place a significant burden on our NHS, on the whole of Government, on our scientific advisers, and on many others. We must not inadvertently divert or distract the

very people on whom we all depend in the heat of our struggle against this disease. The end of the lockdown is not the end of the pandemic. The World Health Organisation has said that the pandemic has now reached its global peak and will last throughout this year. Our own scientific advisers judge that, although more positive data is coming in and the outlook is improving, there could still be another resurgence in hospitalisations and deaths.

We also face the persistent threat of new variants, and should those prove highly transmissible and elude the protection of our vaccines they would have the potential to cause even greater suffering than we endured in January. In any case, there is a high likelihood of a surge this winter when the weather assists the transmission of all respiratory diseases and the pressure on our NHS is most acute.

I expect that the right moment for the inquiry to begin is at the end of this period, in spring 2022. I know that some in this Chamber and many bereaved families will be anxious for this inquiry to begin sooner, so let me reassure the House that we are fully committed to learning lessons at every stage of this crisis. We have already subjected our response to independent scrutiny, including 17 reports by the independent National Audit Office and 50 parliamentary inquiries, and we will continue to do so—we will continue to learn lessons, as we have done throughout the pandemic. None the less, no public inquiry could take place fast enough to assist in the very difficult judgments that will remain necessary throughout the rest of this year and the remainder of the pandemic. We must not weigh down the efforts of those engaged in protecting us every day and thereby risk endangering further lives.

Instead this inquiry must be able to look at the events of the past year in the cold light of day and identify the key issues that will make a difference for the future. It will be free to scrutinise every document, to hear from all the key players, and to analyse and learn from the breadth of our response. That is the right way, I think, to get the answers that the people of this country deserve, and to ensure that our United Kingdom is better prepared for any future pandemic.

Entirely separately from the inquiry, there is a solemn duty on our whole United Kingdom to come together and cherish the memories of those who have been lost. Like many across the Chamber, I was deeply moved when I visited the covid memorial wall opposite Parliament, and I wholeheartedly support the plan for a memorial in St Paul's cathedral, which will provide a fitting place of reflection in the heart of our capital.

I also know that communities across the whole country will want to find ways of commemorating what we have all been through, so the Government will support their efforts by establishing a UK commission on covid commemoration. This national endeavour, above party politics, will remember the loved ones we have lost, honour the heroism of those who have saved lives and the courage of frontline workers who have kept our country going, celebrate the genius of those who created the vaccines, and commemorate the small acts of kindness and the daily sacrifice of millions who stayed at home, buying time for our scientists to come to our rescue. We will set out the commission membership and terms of reference in due course.

In telling the whole story of this era in our history, we will work, again, across our United Kingdom, together with the devolved Administrations, to preserve the spirit that has sustained us in the gravest crisis since the second world war, resolving to go forwards together and to build back better. I commend this statement to the House.

12.36 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement? I clearly welcome the independent inquiry into the pandemic and the establishing of a UK commission on covid commemoration. Both are necessary; both will play an important part in learning the lessons and commemorating those we have lost.

Let me speak first for the families grieving the loss of a loved one. I, too, attended the covid memorial wall that the Prime Minister spoke of, opposite Parliament. It is moving. Everybody who has been there knows it is moving—thousands of hearts on the wall, stretching from one bridge to the next, and rightly facing this place. But I have also taken time to meet the grieving and bereaved families on a number of occasions, and to talk to them and with them about their experience. Those meetings have been among the most difficult I have ever had in my life, and the same goes for the staff who came with me and the other members of my team who were in those meetings, because what those families described was not just the loved one they have lost—the dad, the mum, the sister, the brother—and something about those individuals, nor was it just the fact that they had passed away. The hardest bit was the details. They told me about not being able to say goodbye in the way they wanted, whether that was in a hospital or elsewhere, and not being able to have a funeral in the way they wanted.

It was very hard to hear some of those stories, and lots of those families have searing questions about what happened—the decisions; what went wrong; why what happened happened to their families. So it is good that the Government are consulting the devolved authorities, of course it is, but the Government must also consult the families, because this inquiry will only work if it has the support and confidence of the families. I urge the Prime Minister and the Government to consult the families at the earliest possible moment.

The Government should also consult those on the frontline, who have done so much, whether in the NHS or social care or on other frontlines that we have seen, because they, too, deserve answers to the very many questions that they have, and they have done so much in this pandemic.

The next question is timing. The principle is that the inquiry should be as soon as possible. I understand that a statutory inquiry will take time to set up—of course it will—but why can it not be later this year? Why can it not start earlier? I want to press the Prime Minister on one particular point. The Prime Minister says the inquiry will start in spring 2022. Is that the inquiry opening and beginning to take of evidence in spring 2022, or is that starting work in setting up the inquiry? They are two very different things, and if it is the latter, the inquiry will not then be for many months afterwards, so if it is

to formally open and start taking evidence in spring 2022, I would be really grateful if the Prime Minister made that clear.

Then there is the question of the terms of reference. Obviously, that will take time. There will have to be consultation with the devolved Administrations and, again, with the families and those on the frontline, but crucially with this Parliament. This House needs to be involved in the question of what the terms of reference should be. There will be different views across the House and they need to be heard, because this has to have the confidence of all in this Chamber.

All relevant questions must be asked and answered. That must of course include the decisions made in the last 14 or 15 months—all the decisions made—but there are wider questions of preparedness and resilience, particularly of our public services, that need to be asked. There are reasons why the pandemic hit those in overcrowded houses and insecure work the hardest. They need to be addressed as well, and no inquiry that does not address those questions will give the answers that many deserve.

Finally, there is the question of who chairs the inquiry. Again this is too early, but the wider the engagement on that question the wider the likely support for the inquiry. We need an independent inquiry that has the full support of everybody, so that its conclusions bear real authority. That will be achieved with the widest embracing of the terms of reference and the chair of the inquiry.

Let me be clear: I welcome this inquiry and we will play whatever part we can to ensure that it works well and gets the answers to the questions. Again, we support the commemoration commission and will work on a cross-party basis to ensure that that is fully the sort of commemoration that the families, and others who have lost through this pandemic, feel is appropriate. That should, of course, be on a cross-party basis. It is above politics, and rightly so.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his support for both the measures announced today: the commemoration commission and the inquiry. He asked some entirely justifiable questions about engagement with the bereaved and those who have been on the frontline about the areas in which the inquiry will want to focus—all the background to the growth of the pandemic. I have no doubt that when it is set up the inquiry will certainly look at all of those, and we will make sure to have the widest possible consultation and engagement.

The House should understand that I feel personally very strongly that this country has been through a trauma like no other. It is vital for the sake of the bereaved, and for the sake of the whole country, that we should understand exactly what happened and learn the lessons. Obviously we have been learning lessons throughout, but we need to have a very clear understanding of what took place over the past 14 months.

We owe it to the country to have as much transparency as we can, and to produce answers within a reasonable timescale. I am sure the House will want to see that as well. Clearly that will be a matter for the chair of the inquiry and the terms of reference, when they are set up, but it is my strong view that the country wants to see a proper, full and above all independent inquiry into the pandemic of last year.

[*The Prime Minister*]

I must repeat to the right hon. and learned Gentleman that I think the timing that we have set out is the right timing. I think that it would be wrong to consecrate huge amounts of official time and public health workers' time to an inquiry when they may very well still be in the middle of the pandemic, but clearly, to clarify the point that he raises, the steps taken to set out the terms of reference and establish the chair of the inquiry will happen before the spring of next year. We will be getting it under way and taking some key decisions, but I think that the House will agree that it would not be right to devote the time of people who are looking after us and saving lives to an inquiry before we can be much more certain than we are now that the pandemic is behind us. I hope that that carries the approval of the House.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: Primary care networks have done an incredible job of rolling out the vaccine, but GPs and practice nurses need to return to their surgeries and their patients. As my right hon. Friend said, we have to anticipate a difficult autumn and winter. What reassurance can he give that there will be capacity in the system for second jabs, potentially booster jabs in the autumn and the annual roll-out of the flu jab?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises a very important point, particularly about the flu jab. As she will know, there was not much of a flu pandemic over the last winter period. We are worried about people's levels of resistance to flu, but we have the capacity, and we will also have the capacity for the booster jabs.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for an advance copy of his statement. I was interested to hear him commit to an inquiry. He will be aware that the First Minister has already committed to that; of course, the devolved Administrations have tailored their decisions to their needs.

I think all of us can feel a sense of optimism: the feeling that, after such a difficult year, things are edging towards some normality. The simplest of things—hugging a loved one—have never felt so important, after a year of restrictions in which we have never seen people suffer so much. The vaccines have generated the hope that people are feeling, and that hope is within touching distance—but just as the hope is fragile, so is the economic recovery.

The Prime Minister spoke of lessons, answers and timing, but this morning's Office for National Statistics figures demonstrate the depth of the plummet that has been experienced by the economy and, equally, the scale of the recovery needed. That is why the glaring omission of an employment Bill from yesterday's Queen's Speech was so shocking—a clear signal of a UK Government with no recovery plan.

Let me ask the Prime Minister three questions on concrete measures that would kickstart the economy and help those still in need. First, will his Government reverse their rigid plan to suddenly end the furlough scheme in September, which will result in a damaging cliff edge for millions of workers? Secondly, there is another damaging cliff edge due in September, with the

planned Tory cut to the lifeline of the £20 universal credit uplift. Is he really still planning to rip that lifeline away from the most vulnerable when they most need it? Finally, as people re-enter the workplace, will the Prime Minister commit to supporting legislation, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), that would finally ban the disgraceful practice of firing and rehiring workers?

The Prime Minister: The entire programme of this Government is dedicated to ensuring that we go from jabs, jabs, jabs to jobs, jobs, jobs, as I said yesterday in the Chamber. The hon. Member talks about kickstarting an employment recovery. As she knows, for young people we have the £2 billion kickstart programme to get 18 to 24-year-olds into work, and we have the restart programme for those who are long-term unemployed.

Our campaign and our mission is to use the resources of the state, as we have done throughout the pandemic, to get people into work. Because of the unusual, extraordinary circumstances that we faced, we had to use the resources of the state to keep people out of work. We are now going through a massive programme of investment in infrastructure across the whole United Kingdom to get people into work, and I hope that she will support that.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The whole House will welcome the tone and content of what the Prime Minister has said today, and in particular his proper commitment to the transparency of the inquiry, learning everything we can from the past. There are 3,500 people across my constituency who are involved in the hospitality sector, and many businesses have invested their own money in making covid adaptations to ensure the safety of their customers when they return. Given the very sensible road map that he has outlined, will he emphasise the increasing role of personal judgment and common sense, rather than Government fiat, as greater normality returns, and with it our hugely valued and much cherished civil liberties?

The Prime Minister: As my right hon. Friend knows, the hospitality sector in Sutton Coldfield, which I know from my own experience to be wonderful, will, like the rest of the hospitality sector across the country, be able to open up in full on Monday, including indoors. As we go forward, we hope, and I cannot see any evidence to contradict this, that we will be able to open up fully from 21 June—although people will still clearly need to exercise caution and common sense in the way they go about their lives, because the virus, I am afraid, is still going to be present in our lives for a long time to come.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The public inquiry is very welcome and desperately needed so that the public can understand why the UK has suffered one of the highest death tolls in the world. It is critically important that this inquiry is properly independent and has the confidence of the public, including the bereaved families of the over 127,000 people who so tragically lost their lives. Consulting those families once the inquiry has started is too late. Will the Prime Minister today commit to urgently meeting representatives of Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice to consult them on both the chair and the terms of reference for the inquiry?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly reassure the hon. Lady that the inquiry will be fully independent and that the bereaved and other groups will be consulted on the way it is set up. I meet representatives of the bereaved and indeed bereaved families regularly, and will continue to do so.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I welcome the announcement on the public inquiry and the timings. The Prime Minister will know that the Science and Technology Committee and the Health and Social Care Committee are doing their own inquiry that is hoping to report in July, so the Government will have an early chance to learn immediate lessons.

However, it would be crazy to ask Ministers and officials to spend time with lawyers going through emails, texts and WhatsApps when we want their entire focus to be on the pandemic. As we seek to support the NHS going forward, the pledges on an additional 50,000 nurses are very welcome, but does the Prime Minister know that we also have shortages in nearly every single specialty for doctors? Is now not the moment to overhaul our long-term workforce planning for the NHS so that we can give the public confidence that we really are training enough doctors for the future?

The Prime Minister: Yes, absolutely. The distinguished former Health Secretary will, I am sure, know that there are now 50,000 more people working in the NHS this year than there were at the same time last year, including about 11,000 more nurses, already, and 6,700 more doctors, but we are going to get even more.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement, particularly for those who have lost family members; I am very conscious of my wife losing her mum, and we all grieve for her especially.

The involvement of the Northern Ireland Assembly in the inquiry to look back at this is very important, and I welcome it. Will the Prime Minister outline what discussion has taken place between the devolved regions to ensure parity of travel restrictions so that every area of the UK can be accessed safely? Will he confirm that help will be made available to make travel affordable and encourage people to go to Northern Ireland over the summer so that people can make the most of the great British summer staycation throughout every area of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his excellent question. We of course regularly consult all the devolved Administrations about making sure that travel can continue to flow freely through our United Kingdom. He makes a superb point about the attractions of Northern Ireland as a holiday destination and I hope people take him up on it.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con) [V]: May I thank the Prime Minister for coming to visit the good residents of Stourbridge last week? Cars stopped, horns were honked and people came out in their droves to say thank you for the success of the vaccine roll-out.

Last week, voters made it clear right here in Stourbridge that they want the focus to be on their priorities, not political games, as demonstrated by the fact that I now

have Conservative councils in the traditional Labour bastions of Quarry Bank, Lye and Cradley, with more voters coming out than ever before to say this. Does the Prime Minister share my hope that Labour Members will now act constructively with this Government so that they can deliver on those people's priorities as we build back better?

The Prime Minister: I much enjoyed my trip to Stourbridge, and my hon. Friend is entirely right in what she says. To return to the point I made to the hon. Lady from the Scottish nationalist party—the Scottish National party—the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), we have the right agenda for the country: this is the right time to build back better with the colossal programme that we have and the investments we are making, but we must also learn the lessons from the pandemic and that is why we are setting up the inquiry in the way that we are.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, particularly his commitment to an inquiry at the appropriate time. On that, terminology really does count, so can the Prime Minister confirm that it will be not just independent and judge-led, but a statutory public inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005, with powers to compel witnesses under oath? Most importantly, will bereaved families have a role in setting the terms of the inquiry and be given the full opportunity to give evidence at it?

The Prime Minister: I would not like to accuse the hon. Gentleman, whom I admire greatly, of having missed my opening statement, but of course it will be a full public independent inquiry under the terms of the 2005 Act, and of course it is right that the bereaved, along with many other groups, should be consulted about the terms of reference.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, and especially that the inquiry will be independent. Without wishing to prejudge the inquiry, I am anxious about institutions such as Public Health England and how they responded early on to key workers. I hope the inquiry will also congratulate the fantastic doctors, nurses and volunteers who helped roll out over 1.5 million vaccines in Sussex; I am incredibly grateful to all the staff in Uckfield, Crowborough and Hailsham.

The Prime Minister can do two things immediately for the care homes in my constituency. First, those who want to reside in a care home currently have to spend 14 days isolated in their room. Will the Prime Minister look again at that isolation period because it impacts so greatly on the physical and mental health of residents? Secondly, the care homes have taken such a big hit, so can we consider putting in place a short financial package to support them so they can support our loved ones throughout this period?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is totally right to raise the work of care homes, and we have put in repeated investments; I think another £1 billion went into supporting care homes throughout the pandemic. She is also right to raise the very painful questions of visiting and the ability of care home residents to leave their care home safely, and in that we have to balance

[The Prime Minister]

the risks to them as well. We tried to increase the number of visitors they can have, and we hope very soon that greater freedoms will be possible.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Can the Prime Minister reassure the House that the terms of reference of this inquiry will include those suffering from long covid and the diagnosis, treatment and support for those who will no doubt be suffering for the foreseeable future?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point, and I am sure the chairman of the inquiry will want to consider that as we set up the inquiry in due course. I certainly do not exclude that the inquiry might want to look at long covid.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): The Prime Minister has talked powerfully about the importance of economic recovery, and it is incumbent on those of us who supported the lockdown to get behind that however we can; if we get it wrong, we will pay the costs of the pandemic twice over.

Tomorrow a report will be published describing the opportunities of geothermal investment for our economy, potentially creating over 1,000 new jobs with £100 million of investment by 2025. New jobs, new technologies: that is the key to getting our economic recovery on track. Will the Prime Minister give the report his personal attention and agree to meet me and other MPs who are getting behind this important new industry?

The Prime Minister: I am very excited by and interested in my hon. Friend's geothermal plans: they sound good to me, and we are certainly investing in that kind of technology. With £22 billion going into pure R&D, we are putting in record sums for this country, and I am sure that geothermal could be part of the mix of our green industrial revolution.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Does the Prime Minister agree that the inquiry will have to look at the original decision-making process, which failed to control borders and delayed the lockdown while talking about herd immunity, look at the appointment process for Dido Harding to head up the track and trace system and also look at the billions of pounds' worth of PPE contracts awarded to Tory chums and friends? Will he confirm that the inquiry will have the powers to call for all electronic communications between Government Ministers and their Tory chums who got contracts?

The Prime Minister: Without in any way accepting the premises of the hon. Member's questions, I can certainly confirm that it will be a full public inquiry under the 2005 Act, and there will be full powers to compel evidence.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on his statement and on his announcement that step 3 of our road map to recovery will go ahead as scheduled on 17 May. Like many across Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, I have enjoyed a pint at the Millrace in Milton and

another at the Bulls Head in Burslem, as pubs were able to open outdoors under step 2 of our road map. However, not every publican has been able to open their doors yet, and both they and excellent local brewers such as Titanic Brewery in Burslem have faced a very hard time throughout this pandemic. Will my right hon. Friend create a new draught beer duty rate to provide targeted support for breweries and pubs throughout the UK, which is only possible since leaving the European Union, recognising the important role that pubs play in our local communities?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for pointing out another of the advantages of leaving the European Union. Although we have consulted publicans and brewers on the potential for a differential duty rate on draught beer, we are awaiting the responses from the Treasury, and the Treasury will reply in due course.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): An 11-year-old girl called Mary caught covid in December 2020. Her family used to describe her as bouncing off the walls and full of energy. She loved sport and was excited about starting secondary school in September. Now she is fatigued and lethargic, she walks with a stick and she can only attend school part time. The doctors are baffled because she had no underlying health condition and she seems unable to recover. Please can the Prime Minister help me find for the family the expert advice and support that Mary needs, and provide urgent resources for children suffering with long covid in Hull and East Riding?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising the case of Mary, and I am very sorry to hear about her suffering. If the hon. Member would be kind enough to write to me about her I will see what I can do to make sure that we get the right answers from the Government and see what we can do to get her the medical help she needs.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con) [V]: I warmly welcome the Prime Minister's statement today. I know from speaking to Carshalton and Wallington residents that they are particularly concerned, as we emerge from the pandemic, about backlogs in elective surgery, cancer treatments and looking after the mental health of those who have struggled in lockdown. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that these will be front and centre of our plans for the NHS as we emerge from the pandemic?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is quite right to raise that issue, and I can tell him that we have already invested considerably in mental health, with mental health support and the mental health youth ambassador, but we will continue to do more. As I think I said in the press conference on Monday, this is Mental Health Awareness Week, and people who have been struggling during the pandemic really should not hesitate to seek help.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab) [V]: When does the Prime Minister expect pregnant women and others advised to seek an alternative to the AstraZeneca jab to be able to book one without being passed from pillar to post?

The Prime Minister: To the best of my knowledge, everybody is getting the jabs when they are asked to come forward. If the hon. Member has particular cases where people are worried about the time when they are going to get a jab—whether it is AstraZeneca, Pfizer, Moderna or another one—I would be very grateful if he would send me the details, and we will see what we can do to sort it out.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con) [V]: With a high prevalence of the Indian variants and among the highest infection rates in the UK at 150-plus per 100,000, will the Prime Minister join me in pushing for most of Bolton to be vaccinated ASAP?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the rates of infection of the B.1.617.2 variant, as we should probably call it. At the moment the cases look as though they are about 860 or so, but there may be more. It may be more transmissible—it may be considerably more transmissible. We are looking at all the potential solutions for the surges we are seeing in Bolton and elsewhere, including the one that he describes, though that is not top of the list at the moment.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The Prime Minister said in his statement that the public inquiry, which I certainly welcome,

“will place the state’s actions under the microscope.”

The Prime Minister is, of course, First Lord of the Treasury, and he has said many times before that this Government have put their arms around people financially. Can he tell us why, therefore, people on legacy benefits did not get the £20 uplift that people on universal credit got?

The Prime Minister: This country has done everything it can to support people throughout the pandemic, with the increasing of universal credit, with a furlough scheme, and with loans, credits and grants, which I think most people around the world would consider among the most generous, if not the single most generous regime that any country put in place. I think that was the right thing to do, and we will continue to support people for as long as the pandemic endures.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: Reference has already been made to the unfortunate impact that the lockdown had on treatment for other medical conditions. Has the Prime Minister seen the Stroke Association’s report, “Stroke recoveries at risk”? That demonstrates starkly how, unhappily, every aspect of stroke aftercare and rehabilitation has been impacted by the lockdown. As we emerge and build back, will he undertake not only that we will make it a top priority to ensure that stroke and related therapies are restored to pre-pandemic levels as a matter of urgency, but that we will invest to ensure that we are able consistently to meet clinical guidelines for the amount of therapy given, which we have been struggling to do up until now in any event?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to stress the backlog that we now face in the NHS, and the stroke care and stroke services that need to be

addressed. The weight of work is enormous, but we will make sure that we fund it and we get it done. It is vital that people who have conditions and need treatment—stroke patients and others—come forward now to get the treatment they need.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab) [V]: The Government’s own figures suggest that since March we have built up a stockpile of about 12 million vaccines. During that period, we in London were told that supplies were down and that the vaccination rate would not be as fast as it had been. Can the Prime Minister explain that? What can he do to ensure that we get those vaccines into people’s arms and that the stockpile does not continue to grow?

The Prime Minister: That is a misunderstanding, I believe. We have been vaccinating and continue to vaccinate at a steady rate and as fast as we possibly can. We are secure in our supply, but obviously we do not want to get to the stage where we run out. We are confident that we will be able to offer everybody in this country—every adult in this country—a vaccination before the end of July.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I congratulate and thank my right hon. Friend for the success of the vaccination programme and the road map, which has provided certainty and stability, especially to those planning for the easing of restrictions. My constituents often ask me what the new normal will be like beyond 21 June. Of course, much depends on the outcome of the reviews—those into social distancing and others—which will have a far-ranging impact on what our society will be like for months to come. While we eagerly await their conclusions, can my right hon. Friend assure me that we will have a chance to debate the recommendations before they are implemented?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed I can.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If this inquiry is to achieve everything that we would want of it, then it must be the pre-eminent vehicle by which the voice of those who have lost loved ones in this pandemic will be heard. I am pretty certain that Ministers, officials, health professionals, business interests and others will all have good-quality legal representation in that, many paid out of the public purse. Can the Prime Minister give me some commitment today that bereaved families will also get the necessary support to ensure that they have the same quality of representation, so that their voices will be properly heard?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I believe that is vital, because the inquiry must learn from the direct experiences of the bereaved who have suffered so much. They will provide invaluable evidence for the inquiry. It is also, plainly, a matter of justice and fairness. I fully accept the point that the right hon. Gentleman raises.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): I would like to start by thanking everyone across Radcliffe, Prestwich and Whitefield for their work on the vaccine roll-out, which is allowing us to go through the road map and reopen the economy. There are those who are still asking a few questions, in particular those who are

[*Christian Wakeford*]

about to get married. That should be the best day of their lives, but they are still worried about what the guidance will say, when they can get married from next week. Will my right hon. Friend commit to publishing it, so that we know what social distancing guidance will look like moving forward and they can fully enjoy that best day of their lives?

The Prime Minister: From Monday, the rule of 30 applies to marriages. We will, before the end of this month, set out all the details about the marriage world post-21 June.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab) [V]: I am sure the Prime Minister will want to warmly welcome the newly elected metro Mayors Nik Johnson, Dan Norris and, of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin). As the Prime Minister well knows, serving as a Mayor is an immense privilege, but as covid has proved it is not without its frustrations. May I urge the Prime Minister to use this moment to reset the relationship with the English Mayors, and work more collaboratively and closely with us as we emerge from the pandemic?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I certainly can. I believe the Mayors and the mayoral authorities should also have their say. In my experience there are two types of Mayor. I think the mayoral project is a great one, but it tends to produce either Mayors who champion their area, get on and take responsibility for their area, or people who whinge and blame central Government for things. I much prefer type A to type B.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): While across the country people have retreated to the safety of their own homes, our retail workers have had to roll up their sleeves and get on with it, ensuring we had what we needed and that our shopping spaces were safe. Disgustingly and shockingly, the number of assaults on our retail workers is through the roof. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking our retail workers for their exceptional service to our communities, and ensure we are doing everything we can to protect them and tackle those who would do them harm?

The Prime Minister: I totally share my hon. Friend's disgust at attacks on retail workers and anybody doing their job. It is very important that we work with the retail sector to drive down this type of crime, show zero tolerance for it, and, in the case of serious violence and assault, have appropriate penalties.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): My father-in-law died at the beginning of the pandemic. Our children were not able to go to their grandfather's funeral. Our grief remains raw. Let me welcome the commitment to the families and a memorial.

May I draw the Prime Minister's attention to the scope of the inquiry? We know, do we not, that the fracturing of social care, running the NHS at 90% capacity, and the lessons from the 2014 flu pandemic strategy and from Exercise Cygnus all forewarned of much of what has happened? Those of us who have worked in emergency planning were shocked by the

initial responses. Can the Prime Minister assure us that the scope of the inquiry will go beyond the 14 months that I think he alluded to in one of his previous statements?

The Prime Minister: I am so sorry to hear about the hon. Member's own loss. I assure her that, of course, I cannot imagine that there will be any chair of the inquiry or any terms of reference that we could devise that would not include looking back at the state of preparedness before covid struck this country.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Cleethorpes, like other resorts, is heavily reliant on the coach industry to bring tourists into the resort. Although the support for the industry has been very welcome, there have been one or two anomalies. Some coach operators in my constituency and elsewhere have been designated as tourism operators rather than coach operators, which meant that they did not qualify for some of the financial support. Will my right hon. Friend look again at this issue and perhaps arrange for me and representatives from the industry in my constituency to meet the Transport Secretary so that we can see whether any additional help is available?

The Prime Minister: As ever, my hon. Friend makes what sounds like an excellent point about coach operators and tourism operators. I will make sure that he sees the relevant Transport Minister as soon as possible.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Nurseries are a vital part of community infrastructure, helping our youngest to get a better chance of a good start to life and making it easier for parents to go to work. Given that over 300 shut their doors for good in February and March, will the Prime Minister publish a covid recovery plan for nurseries and early years providers to help to get them back on their feet?

The Prime Minister: We will be publishing a very comprehensive plan for educational recovery shortly.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I welcome today's announcements of both an inquiry and the memorial, but may I also welcome the extraordinary progress that has been made that has allowed us further to lift restrictions? However, there are many individuals, charities, organisations and businesses that are still not confident to commit to further public events. Will my right hon. Friend therefore consider a covid indemnity scheme that will cover the costs of any last-minute cancellations that may occur due to ongoing restrictions to allow the planning of events to continue to avoid a second year of cancellations?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this point; I understand exactly why he says it. The best thing I can tell him is that we want to proceed with the caution and certainty with which we have done so far. All the evidence I have seen at the moment suggests that we will be able to continue with our reopenings, and that the businesses that have done so much to get ready should be able to plan on that basis.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I welcome much of the Prime Minister's statement, although I concur with my right hon. and learned Friend the

Leader of the Opposition; the sooner we can get the terms of reference and invite evidence from those who are able to give it, the better. The Prime Minister said that the end of the lockdown is not the end of the pandemic, and he is absolutely right. Some sectors of the economy will suffer from a longer time lag: travel and tourism; aviation; and, therefore, aerospace manufacturing. May I urge the Government to give support to these sectors in the longer term, because they will be affected long after the rest of us are trying to get back to normal?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member is making an important point, but my strong view is that the best thing possible for all those sectors, including aviation, is to try, cautiously, to make sure that we get through the road map and allow their businesses to grow again. That is the single best long-term and medium-term solution.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I warmly welcome the Prime Minister's statement and the inquiry. As our fantastic vaccination programme continues to be rolled out and our vaccination continues to be effective against all mutant strains, and as other countries catch up, will the Prime Minister look at widening the green list of countries to which travel is permitted? Will he ensure that the airports have the border control and digitisation resources to deal with more passengers? Can he also warmly encourage President Biden, when he sees him next month in Cornwall, that other Americans would like to come over to this great country and, indeed, we would like to go over to theirs?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a good point about the United States of America. We are on that issue with our American friends, but people have to recognise that we are still at risk of importing new variants into this country. We have seen the arrival of B.1.617.2 and we must be cautious. On that basis, the green list—as my hon. Friend knows, some counties are already on that list, and they are very attractive-looking destinations, as far as I can see—will be subject to review every three weeks.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Last summer, covid was almost fully suppressed in Scotland, and on current trends it looks like we are heading, cautiously, in that direction again. However, as international travel reopens, many in my constituency are very concerned about new strains entering the country. Although our First Minister has welcomed the UK Government's current cautious approach to travel, she will not sign up to any plans that might put Scotland's progress at risk, so will the Prime Minister confirm today what will happen in the event that the devolved nations' strategic ambitions are at odds with the UK Government's? In that scenario, how is compromise reached, rather than it simply being England's way or the highway?

The Prime Minister: Actually, I think that, in spite of the differences that are sometimes accentuated or emphasised for whatever reason, the levels of co-operation have been amazing. What is happening in Scotland today is very close to what is happening in the rest of the UK; that is the level of co-operation that we are showing together.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Right at the end of his statement, the Prime Minister echoed the words of his predecessor, Sir Winston Churchill, who said,

“let us go forward together”.—[*Official Report*, 13 May 1940; Vol. 360, c. 1502.]

Of course, precisely 80 years ago, on 12 May 1941, my right hon. Friend's predecessor was standing in this devastated Chamber when he committed us to freedoms in the future. In that spirit, may I ask a practical question about the future? We had compulsory ID cards in the war, and they worked so successfully. Does the Prime Minister acknowledge that, if we had them now, the whole test and trace system would have worked superbly? They could be made to work in future—for instance, it could be made clear on a person's smartphone that they had been vaccinated or whether they had been in touch with infections. It is all very interesting for the future. My right hon. Friend cannot give a definitive answer now, but will he at least have an open mind on how we can deal with future pandemics?

The Prime Minister: I am a long-standing admirer of the libertarian school of thought that I have generally associated with my right hon. Friend. He makes an interesting point about data and the importance of being able to access it fast to help people. Perhaps the idea of ID cards is slightly different, if I may respectfully suggest that to my right hon. Friend, and I think we are still some way off that solution.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) [V]: As has been acknowledged already, it is Mental Health Awareness Week, and it is right that we note the huge impact of the covid pandemic on the mental health of our young people in particular and on their education. Will the Prime Minister reconsider whether imposing a summer of cramming is really the wisest thing to force on students and teachers? Instead, will he look at outdoor education centres—many of which are based in Cumbria, of course—which have been hit worse than pretty much any other part of the entire economy? Will he agree not only to save outdoor education centres but to deploy outdoor education by commissioning professionals from the sector to run an ambitious programme in schools and in outdoor settings, to re-engage young people with a love of learning and help to tackle the mental health crisis?

The Prime Minister: I do not think that “a summer of cramming” is exactly how I would describe our programme for educational recovery. It is generous and broad based and is intended to help students, pupils and kids across the whole spectrum of abilities to make up the detriment to their learning. May I say how warmly I welcome Cumbria's outdoor education approach? The al fresco learning that the hon. Gentleman supports sounds magnificent to me and should be replicated throughout the entire country. I look forward to hearing more about it.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I can tell the Prime Minister that other venues are available and that the Forest of Dean would be fantastically keen to offer itself as a place for outdoor education for children across the United Kingdom.

[Mr Mark Harper]

I welcome what the Prime Minister said about being able to say more at the end of this month about relaxing all restrictions by 21 June, and he will know that I will welcome that, but may I take him to what he said in his statement about the winter? It is inevitable, I think, that, as with other respiratory viruses, we will see an increase in covid, and that there will be some increase in hospitalisations and deaths, although, because of our incredible vaccination roll-out and the effectiveness of our vaccines, that will be at a much lower level and will not overwhelm the national health service. So can he confirm that work is under way in Government to make sure that, even with that small increase—because of the success of our vaccinations—we will learn to live with the consequences of covid, as we do with flu, and that we will not need to shut down the country again in the winter?

The Prime Minister: There is plainly a difference, as my right hon. Friend understands very well, between a disease such as flu, which, every year, sadly causes a number—perhaps thousands—of hospitalisations and deaths, and a disease that has the potential to spread exponentially and to overwhelm the NHS. We need to be absolutely certain that we are right in thinking that we have broken the connection between covid transmission and hospitalisation, or serious illness and death, and that is still the question that we need to establish in the weeks and months ahead. I am optimistic about it, but that is the key issue.

I just want to make one point that I should have said earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) about weddings. It is very important that, for the purposes of the banns, we will be making an announcement within 28 days of 21 June.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: The Israeli Government made the decision not to vaccinate more than 4.5 million Palestinian citizens in Gaza and the west bank, leaving this responsibility to the occupied territories' under-resourced healthcare system. Only several thousand Palestinians have been vaccinated, in contrast to the 4.2 million Israelis. In the light of the shocking and appalling scenes in Jerusalem, where Israeli forces attacked worshippers, the holy al-Aqsa mosque and the healthcare units, will the Prime Minister outline what steps the Government are taking to provide assistance to the Palestinians at this difficult time, and will he condemn the actions of the Israeli forces and accept that the only way forward is a two-state solution to ensure peace, health equality and protection of human rights?

Mr Speaker: That is not in the statement that the Prime Minister made, but I am sure that he would like to answer the question.

The Prime Minister: Yes, Mr Speaker. The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about the situation in Israel. I am deeply concerned by the scenes we are seeing, as is everyone in this House. We all want to see urgent de-escalation by both sides. Let me tell him that the position of this Government is firmly behind his in that we continue to believe that a two-state solution is the best way forward.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's announcement about a public inquiry. When covid first rolled into Barrow and Furness, we had a disproportionate impact from it due to a toxic mix of underlying health conditions. With that in mind, can he confirm that the inquiry will take a look at not just the actions that the Government did or did not take, but what we need to do to make sure that we can build back healthier after this pandemic?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point—it is a very important point. I hope that this is what they call a big teachable moment for the entire country about our obesity, our fitness levels and disparities across public provision not just between affluent areas, but within regions of the country. Levelling up needs to take place, and that is the ambition of this Government.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the Prime Minister's announcement of an inquiry. It is important because of the number of people who died and also because of the millions of people who will live with the consequences of the policies adopted by Ministers on the advice of their chief medical officers. Many people lost their lives because hospitals and surgeries were closed, people's businesses were wrecked because of stop-go lockdowns, and children's education has been disrupted, affecting their life chances. At the same time, there were many credible experts who questioned the modelling on which those policies were based, the impact that this had on the poor, and the appropriateness and the consistency of the actions. Can the Prime Minister assure us that the inquiry will include examining and listening to the views of those experts and the issues that they raised?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman's excellent points serve only to underline the extreme difficulty of the decisions that Governments in this country and around the world were forced to make and the terrible balances we had to strike. I am sure that the considerations he raises will be looked at by the inquiry.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the huge success of the vaccine roll-out. The economy in central London is hurting, partly because of the lack of commuters and partly because of the lack of international visitors. Can he confirm that the plan is to lift the work-at-home guidance as of 21 June, provided that we stay on track?

The Prime Minister: That is certainly our intention, provided that we stay on track, but I want to be sure that people wait until we are able to say that with more clarity a bit later on, because we must be guided by what is happening with the pandemic. My hon. Friend is so right about the dynamism of London. Indeed, London and our other great cities depend on people having the confidence to go to work. I think it will come back, and I think it could come back remarkably quickly, but it does depend on keeping the virus down.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) [V]: On 22 February, the Prime Minister told the House that the PPE contracts

“are there on the record for everybody to see”.—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 638.]

He also said that

“all the details are on the record”.—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 634.]

What the Prime Minister told Parliament was not true. A large number of contracts were neither there for everybody to see nor on the record, including a £23 million contract to Bunzl, which was not published until 8 March. The ministerial code states:

“It is of paramount importance that Ministers give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity.”

So will the Prime Minister finally apologise to the House and the country for this misleading statement, and ensure that the Government’s procurement practices during the pandemic are in the scope of the covid inquiry?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am sure that the hon. Lady means “inadvertently misleading”.

The Prime Minister: I am sure she does, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): As life continues to return towards normality and attention turns to how we can learn lessons from the pandemic, there remains an urgent need to tackle this country’s problem with obesity. Following the Queen’s Speech, what reassurances can my right hon. Friend give me that the Government will continue to pursue that agenda with vigour?

The Prime Minister: I can give my hon. Friend, who is a doctor, every possible assurance. This is a struggle that many of us face. I am afraid that we are one of the fattest countries in Europe, if not the fattest, and that has medical consequences. It is extremely costly, both medically and financially.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: In November, in response to my question on funding for charities throughout covid-19, the Prime Minister said in this Chamber:

“We will be doing much more over the winter to support the voluntary sector”.—[*Official Report*, 2 November 2020; Vol. 683, c. 41.]

He has delivered nothing—absolutely nothing—over the winter. Now, £10 billion in debt and with tens of thousands of jobs gone, charities are scaling back and closing, and our communities are suffering, so will he tell the House why he made that empty promise and what he will not just say but do to support our charities now, at this critical time?

The Prime Minister: We have had huge support for businesses of all kinds—premises, cuts in business rates, cuts in VAT and furloughing. The single best thing that we can do for charities is getting non-essential retail opened again, as we did, and allowing our economy to come back. The British people give huge amounts to charity. We are one of the most generous countries in the world. I have no doubt that that instinct has been there throughout this pandemic and will continue.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con) [V]: The NHS in Kirklees has now given over 50% of people who have been vaccinated their second dose. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking our local NHS, GPs, community pharmacies and the wonderful volunteers at my local Honley vaccination centre, who have all played a magnificent part in this superb effort, which now means that we can proceed to the next step of the road map on Monday?

The Prime Minister: I thank everybody who has been involved in the vaccine roll-out, and particularly those at the Honley vaccination centre.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee published a report last September that recommended that

“the Government should announce the inquiry into the response to the coronavirus immediately to allow time to set up the secretariat and other administrative functions which should mean it could start taking evidence early next year.”

That was eight months ago, so I support the comments made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition that the statutory public inquiry should be set up as soon as possible, before spring 2022. I also seek assurances from the Prime Minister that a key element of the terms of reference will be to investigate why there was a disproportionate impact on our black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, and that any chair of the inquiry will have an expert reference panel that is diverse and has community leaders involved.

The Prime Minister: I agree totally about the need to establish those facts: the impact on black and minority ethnic groups, what was driving it, and what could have been done to mitigate it. I am sure that the inquiry will be suitably set up to address that, among many other issues.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend will be well aware of the tremendous success of the vaccine programme in Harrow; indeed, he visited The Hive vaccination centre very early on during the vaccination programme. What message does he have now for younger people who will be approaching the position where they will be called for their vaccination, so that we can ensure that all adults are vaccinated by the end of July?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend because he is totally right. That is one of the key messages that all of us in this House should be transmitting to adults, who are getting younger and younger now in the groups that we are reaching: “Come forward when you are asked. Get your vaccine. You won’t feel a thing. It is absolutely vital. It is not just good for you; it is good for the whole country, so get it done.”

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) [V]: Earlier, the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), raised the question of the recruitment and retention of medical staff. Throughout the entire health and social care sectors we could be about to see a big increase in the numbers of staff leaving, either because they delayed their retirement in order to stay on and help until the

[Peter Grant]

worst of the crisis was over or, in some cases, because they are simply burnt out with the stress that they have been working under for so long. What specific plans do the Government have to increase the recruitment and retention of staff across the entire spectrum of the health and social care professions?

The Prime Minister: We actually have 60,000 nurses in training. I am reading every day about the enthusiasm with which people now want to go into that wonderful profession. We have, I think, 11,000 more nurses this year than last year, and we are investing massively in social care to ensure that our older people are looked after properly. One of the reasons we will be bringing forward plans for reform of social care is that I want to see proper join-up between health and social care. At the moment, we do not have that as a country, and we need it.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con) [V]: *The Times* reported at the weekend that there are 120,000 people who are immunocompromised—for instance, those having treatment for cancer. For them, the effectiveness of the vaccine is still unknown. What safety reassurances can my right hon. Friend give to those worried and anxious—the clinically extremely vulnerable—as we continue to unlock?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is totally right to raise the immunocompromised and their continuing anxiety. The risks continue to diminish, as he knows—I think, today, one in 1,340 are estimated to have the virus. The number is going down at the moment quite steeply. As I said earlier to the House, it is much lower than at any time since last summer, or even before. But plainly those who are anxious, who are immunocompromised, should continue, as I have said, to exercise caution and common sense in the way they go about their lives for some time to come.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Covid has left tens of thousands of people in this country with problems that are remarkably similar to a brain injury. They are going to need long-term neurorehabilitation. When we add them to the 1.4 million people who, before covid came along, had suffered from a brain injury—from carbon monoxide poisoning, concussion in sport, stroke, a traumatic brain injury or foetal alcohol syndrome—that is a phenomenal financial and medical need. I urge the Prime Minister—there still is not anybody in this country who takes sole charge of this area of brain injury. It is a hidden pandemic, because someone cannot often see that the person across the other side of the room is affected. Maybe the Prime Minister should meet a group of us to talk about it, because it affects every single Department of Government and I really want him to take it on, so that all these people get the support that they need.

The Prime Minister: I am really grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I know that he was going to raise him with me yesterday and I hope that he forgives for me not allowing him to intervene, entirely inadvertently. He has

raised an extremely important point. I believe that not only brain injury—he is right to raise the 1.4 million people—but brain cancer is an area that is too often neglected in our system and may fall through the cracks. I certainly undertake to get him the meeting that he needs, whether it is with me or the relevant Minister. I cannot currently promise that, but he will get the meeting he needs.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Almost every human crisis produces advances in human innovation, and the covid crisis has been no exception. We have seen in the UK what collaboration between academia and the private sector has done in terms of vaccine production. The mRNA vaccines may turn out to be as important as antibiotics in dealing with global disease outbreaks. As soon as we are able to identify the genome of a virus, we will be able to move to rapid vaccine production—something we were unable to do before. What can we in the UK do with our leadership of the G7 and our membership of the G20 and other international organisations to determine global protocols to enable us to be able to move forward in any future pandemic in a less chaotic way than we did on this occasion and to be able to develop global capacity for vaccine productions? Surely if anything is a long-term and valuable legacy of global Britain, it will be this.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend, who is also a doctor, is completely right: necessity is the mother of invention. We have been driven by the pandemic to great, great feats of scientific genius, producing, as he rightly says, the mRNA vaccines at incredible speed—the AstraZeneca vaccine—and the pandemic has meant that the abilities of this country alone to cope have hugely increased. We are now capable of producing a vaccine through the fill and finish plants. We have the new Vaccines Manufacturing and Innovation Centre. We have invested in bioreactors across the country. We are much, much more resilient than we were, but we are also leading across the world in making sure that countries co-ordinate and work together on spotting zoonotic diseases earlier, with the research hubs, and making sure that we co-ordinate data and share data much earlier. We are also making sure that there are not the barriers that have, sadly, sprung up between countries to the sharing of supplies and vaccines, so that we have secure supply chains around the world. So what the UK is doing is not only spending £548 million on COVAX, investing in vaccines around the world—I think that the UK has so far given 40 million vaccine doses to 117 countries—but working on a global response to pandemics. That will be one of the things we will do together at the G7, and it is supported by all the partner countries. So that is what we will be doing.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. I am suspending the House for three minutes, in order to make necessary arrangements for the next business.

1.45 pm

Sitting suspended.

Point of Order

1.48 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier this week, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards published the names of nine Members currently under investigation for breaches of the code of conduct. Their names were published along with the allegations made against them. She was able to do that following a motion passed by the House on 21 April amending Standing Order No. 150. This was brought before the House as part of a package of changes, which passed after a very brief debate, without a vote.

This is a very serious matter. A finding of a breach of the code of conduct can destroy reputations, end careers and, in effect, end the working lives of the individuals concerned. Perhaps most importantly, it can have a devastating effect on their families. Yet under the commissioner's amended power she is able to publish the allegations without the individuals being able to defend themselves or respond publicly. Those who claim that Members can defend themselves are wrong—I have had access to legal advice on the matter.

Paragraph 17 of the report by the Committee on Standards requires any Member's proposed statement in response to be subject to approval by the commissioner; in effect, this is the prosecutor being given the right of veto over the defence. This situation allows information to be issued under the power of privilege of this House, which can then be used by others to attack the reputation of hon. Members without them having the right—the ability—to freely defend themselves. That defies natural justice.

If any one of my constituents were to face such a procedure, I would be raising hell on their behalf. I imagine other Members would do the same for their constituents. It cannot be right that we do not allow to Members of Parliament the same rights that we would fight for for our constituents here in the mother of Parliaments, particularly today, on the 80th anniversary of its destruction by an authoritarian powers. This situation also allows the political weaponisation of a process that is supposed to be fair and just. It is, in my view, in complete defiance of natural justice and accordingly contrary to access to justice under the European convention on human rights.

I would be grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, if you let the House know whether Speaker's counsel has asked for an opinion on compliance with the convention before the vote was put to the Commons, and if not—and it is perfectly proper if not—please can such an opinion be requested, to guide the Committee and the House to ensure that Members' rights are not trampled? I have been party on a number of occasions to the defeat of the British Government in the European Court of Human Rights. I would hate to see the same happen to this Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. He is right to state that on 21 April the House endorsed the recommendations of the Committee on Standards, which included a recommendation that the commissioner should have

authority to publish a list of non-independent complaints and grievance scheme investigations, returning the situation to that before 19 July 2018.

The right hon. Gentleman is also correct that the process endorsed by the House contains a provision in some circumstances for a rebuttal to be issued, but that the wording of any such rebuttal requires the approval of the commissioner. The Committee's deliberations on the report and the advice taken are a matter for the Committee, not for me or the Speaker. As the House has endorsed the process we are discussing, it is also not for me to comment on the right hon. Gentleman's criticisms of it. However, he has put his views on the record and he might wish to pursue the issues he has raised with the Committee itself.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to be helpful to the House on this point, and I have already had a private conversation with the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) about this. The Committee on Standards will obviously consider the matter that he has already raised. I am absolutely clear in my mind, and I am sure the Committee is, both that the commissioner was granted the power to do this by the House—indeed, was required by the House to do this, in returning to the situation that existed before July 2018—and, even more importantly, that the Committee will always consider every single instance that comes before us on an entirely impartial basis, so as to secure justice and fairness for every single Member of this House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Chair of the Committee for that clarification and suggest that we now move on.

BILLS PRESENTED

ADVANCED RESEARCH AND INVENTION AGENCY BILL

Presentation and resumption of proceedings (Standing Order No. 80A)

Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Matt Hancock, Secretary Oliver Dowden, Secretary Ben Wallace, Secretary Grant Shapps and Amanda Solloway, presented a Bill to make provision for and in connection with the establishment of the Advanced Research and Invention Agency.

Bill read the First and Second time without Question put (Standing Order No. 80A and Order, 23 March); to be considered tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 1) with explanatory notes (Bill 1-EN).

ARMED FORCES BILL

Presentation and resumption of proceedings (Standing Order No. 80A)

Secretary Ben Wallace, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Priti Patel, Secretary Brandon Lewis, Secretary Alister Jack, Secretary Simon Hart and the Attorney General, presented a Bill to continue the Armed Forces Act 2006; to amend that Act and other enactments relating to the armed forces; to make provision about

service in the reserve forces; to make provision about pardons for certain abolished service offences; to make provision about war pensions; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First and Second time without Question put, and stood committed (Standing Order No. 80A and Order, 8 February); to be printed (Bill 2) with explanatory notes (Bill 2-EN).

ENVIRONMENT BILL

Presentation and resumption of proceedings (Standing Order No. 80A)

Secretary George Eustice, supported by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Michael Gove, Alok Sharma, Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng, Secretary Robert Jenrick, Secretary Grant Shapps, Secretary Brandon Lewis, Secretary Alister Jack, Secretary Simon Hart and Rebecca Pow, presented a Bill to make provision about targets, plans and policies for improving the natural environment; for statements and reports about environmental protection; for the Office for Environmental Protection; about waste and resource efficiency; about air quality; for the recall of products that fail to meet environmental standards; about water; about nature and biodiversity; for conservation covenants; about the regulation of chemicals; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First and Second time without Question put (Standing Order No. 80A and Order, 26 January); to be considered tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 3) with explanatory notes (Bill 3-EN).

FINANCE BILL

Presentation and resumption of proceedings (Standing Order No. 80B)

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, supported by the Chairman of Ways and Means, the Prime Minister, Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng, Secretary Thérèse Coffey, Secretary Robert Jenrick, Secretary Oliver Dowden, Steve Barclay, Jesse Norman, John Glen and Kemi Badenoch, presented a Bill to grant certain duties, to alter other duties, and to amend the law relating to the national debt and the public revenue, and to make further provision in connection with finance.

Bill read the First and Second time without Question put (Standing Order No. 80B and Order, 13 April); to be considered tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 4) with explanatory notes (Bill 4-EN).

POLICE, CRIME, SENTENCING AND COURTS BILL

Presentation and resumption of proceedings (Standing Order No. 80A)

Secretary Robert Buckland, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Priti Patel, Secretary Grant Shapps, Secretary Oliver Dowden, the Attorney General, Victoria Atkins and Chris Philp, presented a Bill to make provision about the police and other emergency workers; to make provision about collaboration between authorities to prevent and reduce serious violence; to make provision about offensive weapons homicide reviews; to make provision for new offences and for the modification of existing offences; to make provision about the powers of the police and other authorities for the purposes of preventing, detecting, investigating or prosecuting crime or investigating other matters; to make provision about the maintenance of public order; to make provision about the removal,

storage and disposal of vehicles; to make provision in connection with driving offences; to make provision about cautions; to make provision about bail and remand; to make provision about sentencing, detention, release, management and rehabilitation of offenders; to make provision about secure 16 to 19 Academies; to make provision for and in connection with procedures before courts and tribunals; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First and Second time without Question put, and stood committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 80A and Order, 16 March); to be printed (Bill 5) with explanatory notes (Bill 5-EN).

TELECOMMUNICATIONS (SECURITY) BILL

Presentation and resumption of proceedings (Standing Order No. 80A)

Matt Warman, supported by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Dominic Raab, Secretary Priti Patel, Michael Gove and Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng, presented a Bill to make provision about the security of public electronic communications networks and public electronic communications services.

Bill read the First and Second time without Question put (Standing Order No. 80A and Order, 30 November); to be considered tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 6) with explanatory notes (Bill 6-EN).

NORTHERN IRELAND (MINISTERS, ELECTIONS AND PETITIONS OF CONCERN) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Brandon Lewis, supported by the Prime Minister, Michael Gove, Secretary Alister Jack, Secretary Simon Hart and Robin Walker, presented a Bill to make provision about Ministerial appointments, extraordinary Assembly elections, the Ministerial Code of Conduct and petitions of concern in Northern Ireland.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 7) with explanatory notes (Bill 7-EN).

DISSOLUTION AND CALLING OF PARLIAMENT BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Michael Gove, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Robert Buckland, Steve Barclay, Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg, Mark Spencer, the Attorney General and Chloe Smith, presented a Bill to make provision about the dissolution and calling of Parliament, including provision for the repeal of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 8) with explanatory notes (Bill 8-EN).

COMPENSATION (LONDON CAPITAL & FINANCE PLC AND FRAUD COMPENSATION FUND) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

John Glen, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Thérèse Coffey, Guy Opperman, Steve Barclay, Jesse Norman and Kemi Badenoch, presented a Bill to provide for the payment out of money provided by Parliament of expenditure incurred by the Treasury for, or in connection with, the payment of compensation to customers of London Capital & Finance plc; provide for the making of loans

to the Board of the Pension Protection Fund for the purposes of its fraud compensation functions; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 9) with explanatory notes (Bill 9-EN).

NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Ben Wallace, Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng, Secretary Elizabeth Truss, Steve Barclay, Jesse Norman, John Glen and Kemi Badenoch, presented a Bill to make provision in relation to national insurance contributions.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 10) with explanatory notes (Bill 10-EN).

RATING (CORONAVIRUS) AND DIRECTORS DISQUALIFICATION (DISSOLVED COMPANIES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Robert Jenrick, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Michael Gove, Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng, Jesse Norman, Paul Scully and Luke Hall, presented a Bill to make provision about matters attributable to coronavirus that may not be taken account of in making certain determinations for the purposes of non-domestic rating; and to make provision in connection with the disqualification of directors of companies that are dissolved without becoming insolvent.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 11) with explanatory notes (Bill 11-EN).

HIGHER EDUCATION (FREEDOM OF SPEECH) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Gavin Williamson, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Dominic Raab, Secretary Priti Patel, Michael Gove, Secretary Robert Buckland, Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng, Secretary Oliver Dowden and Michelle Donelan, presented a Bill to make provision in relation to freedom of speech and academic freedom in higher education institutions and in students' unions; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 12) with explanatory notes (Bill 12-EN).

Debate on the Address

[2ND DAY]

Debate resumed (Order, 11 May).

Question again proposed,

That an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Better Jobs and a Fair Deal at Work

1.57 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): I am pleased to speak today in support of the Queen's Speech and the measures it contains to make the United Kingdom stronger, healthier and more prosperous than before. Let me first warmly congratulate and welcome the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) to her new position on the shadow Front Bench. Her predecessor and I often had robust debates, but always in the right spirit, and I am sure that that will continue with the hon. Member.

While there is much to debate, the fundamentals of our economic recovery should be a point of consensus in this House: one of the quickest, largest and most comprehensive economic responses to the pandemic anywhere in the world; continued agility throughout the crisis, making sure that, where we can, support gets to those who need it; and now, with our economy reopening, I can say with full confidence that our plan for jobs is working.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): How on earth can it be fair for somebody employed on a long-term contract to be fired and then immediately rehired?

Rishi Sunak: The Government and I strongly believe that firing and rehiring should not be used as a negotiating tactic by companies; that is absolutely right. The hon. Gentleman will know that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has asked ACAS to look into this matter. It is currently doing so, and we await its findings.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Chancellor of the Exchequer give way?

Rishi Sunak: I will make some progress.

Before I turn to the details of the Queen's Speech, let me first update the House on the improving economic context. A year ago today, I stood at this Dispatch Box and told the House and the country that I and this Conservative Government believe in the nobility of work, and that we would stand behind Britain's workers throughout the crisis and beyond. Judge our commitment to those values by our record. When the furlough scheme ends in September, we will have helped to pay people's wages for a year and a half, supporting, at its peak, the jobs of almost 9 million people. We have

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protected the incomes of more than 2.7 million self-employed people; backed businesses to keep people in work with tens of billions of pounds of loans, grants and tax cuts; and supported the most vulnerable through the crisis with a strengthened safety net, increased funding for local authorities and public services, and help for the charity sector.

Gareth Thomas: I notice that the Chancellor of the Exchequer did not mention young people. Recent figures reveal that the kickstart scheme is helping only 5% of unemployed young people who were made redundant during the financial crisis. Given that there are over 600,000 young people out of work at the moment, why did the Queen's Speech not contain more measures to help tackle youth unemployment? Did he just forget?

Rishi Sunak: With the greatest respect, I am only one minute into my speech, so perhaps the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for not mentioning everything in the first 30 seconds. I completely agree with him. As I have said repeatedly from this Dispatch Box, not only are jobs my highest economic priority, but I have, from the very beginning, highlighted the particular impact that this crisis has had on young people because many of them work in the sectors that are most affected, particularly in the hospitality industry, which is why the Government have taken steps to support that industry. As I will come on to say later, the kickstart scheme is a key part of our way to help those young people find work. It is one of many things we are doing, whether it is traineeships, apprenticeships or the Prime Minister's lifetime skills guarantee, and we will continue to focus on that.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Will the Chancellor of the Exchequer give way?

Rishi Sunak: I will make a tiny bit more progress.

Taken together, over the last year and this, our plan for jobs is providing over £407 billion of support for British people and businesses—a historic package of economic support unmatched in peacetime—and the evidence shows our plan is working. GDP statistics published only this morning show that the economic impact of the lockdown at the start of the year was less severe than had been expected and that there are clear signs that we are now on our way to recovery. The Bank of England said last week that it now expects the economy to return to its pre-crisis level by the end of this year—earlier than it previously thought.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend has just given us the excellent news that the economy should have rebounded by the end of this year. He and I have discussed on a number of occasions the importance of international development. In view of that, can he confirm to the House today that he will restore the 0.7% target at the end of the year when the economy has so recovered?

Rishi Sunak: I appreciate all the constructive conversations my right hon. Friend has had with me on this topic, which I know he feels passionately about. As he will know, while our economy will have recovered its pre-crisis levels, the damage to our public finances is

much longer-lasting. That is what led the Government to make the difficult but I hope understandable decision to temporarily divert from the 0.7% commitment, with a full intention to return to it when the fiscal situation allows, but in the meantime to remain one of the leading donors to the causes that both he and I are passionate about.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Rishi Sunak: I will make a tiny bit of progress.

In the labour market, it is worth reminding the House that at the start of this crisis, unemployment was expected to reach 12% or more. It is now expected to peak at about half of that level. That means almost 2 million fewer people losing their jobs than previously feared. Our unemployment rate today is one of the lowest in the G7—lower than those of Italy, France, Canada and the United States. Our plan has protected incomes, too.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The Chancellor mentions countries in the G7. It is, without question, good news that our economy is back into positive growth territory, but why does he think that the British recession was so much worse than in all the countries he has mentioned and at the bottom of the G7 during the coronavirus?

Rishi Sunak: I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising this point; I have addressed it previously, but am happy to do so again. As the Office for National Statistics and others have said, is difficult to make accurate cross-country comparisons—

Peter Kyle: You just did it!

Rishi Sunak: It is difficult to make such comparisons on GDP figures specifically, for the simple reason that the way in which we calculate GDP in this country uses different deflators for the public sector. That has been explained by the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Office for National Statistics, and it actually means that we are disadvantaged relative to peers. If we look at it on nominal GDP, which corrects for that difference in calculation, as the ONS has said, our performance actually looks very comparable to all our major competitors. I could point the hon. Member to the box in the Office for Budget Responsibility report—an independent organisation that would verify what I have just said.

It is worth bearing in mind what I have always said—that GDP is of course important, but it is abstract. What matters to people are their jobs and livelihoods, so the fact that unemployment is as low as it is compared to the projections at the beginning of this crisis is something that everyone in this House will welcome.

Our plan has protected incomes too. The latest statistics show that real household disposable incomes in the last quarter of last year were only 0.2% below the same period the year before. Of course, many families are facing profound difficulties, but it is an extraordinary relief that in the face of one of the largest falls in output in 300 years, we could broadly maintain household incomes. In turn, that has meant that some people have saved more, with household savings last year £140 billion higher than the year before, and surveys now showing that consumer confidence is returning to its pre-crisis levels.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I spoke to the Chancellor beforehand about this. During the lockdown, covid loans were made available to companies. Companies in my constituency have indicated to me that the repayment scheme is not over a flexible period of time and they have to pay back large amounts of money in one go. To ensure that those companies can survive beyond the lockdown and into next year, may I ask the Chancellor whether it is possible to make some flexibility in the repayment of those loans for those companies?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. It is one that, I hope, we have already addressed. He is right about the importance of companies having the cash flow to bounce back strongly, which is why late last year we introduced something called “pay as you grow” to help the 1.3 million small and medium-sized companies that have taken bounce back loans. It means that automatically, at their choice, they will be able to turn those loans from five-year repayment loans to 10-year repayment loans, which almost halves the monthly repayments. Furthermore, it gives them the option to go for interest-only repayment periods of six months or for payment holidays, none of which will impact their credit rating as long as they do it in advance. That should be automatically communicated to businesses by their bank. I hope that is helpful to the small and medium-sized companies in his constituency.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): All the pressure on my right hon. Friend has been from one direction, so let me try to right the balance. When this is over, in terms of a smaller state, deregulation and lower taxes, are there any Thatcherites left in the Government?

Rishi Sunak: Well, my right hon. Friend and I strongly agree on the role of the private sector in driving our recovery. What is important, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, is businesses having the confidence to invest, which is why the Government have provided support for businesses not just to get through the crisis, but, through tax cuts such as the super deduction, to help them invest and drive our recovery forward. Both my right hon. Friend and I know that the prosperity that we all want can only be created by those private sector companies. I hope that gives him the reassurance that he is looking for. I should make some progress.

Talking of those businesses, I do believe that they are also now beginning to feel more confident. Although many firms have been hit hard by the pandemic, the latest data shows that the number of businesses becoming insolvent actually fell by nearly a quarter last year compared to the year before, and in aggregate firms have been able to build up an extra £100 billion of corporate deposits since the start of the pandemic. Since we announced our super deduction tax cut, businesses now have a virtually unprecedented incentive to invest and create jobs. Bank of England surveys show that businesses expect to invest around 7% more than they would have done over the next two years, and Deloitte’s recent survey of business leaders shows that their intention to invest is stronger than it has been at any point since 2015.

It is, of course, going to take this country and the whole world a long time to recover fully from the shock that saw the largest fall in output in 300 years, but although our recovery will be long and difficult, it is

beyond doubt now that our plan is working. We will, however, never be complacent. Eight hundred thousand people have lost their jobs through this crisis, and no Chancellor could guarantee that there will not be more jobs lost. People losing their jobs is the thing that weighs most heavily on me. Work is the best route out of poverty. It brings people financial independence. It improves long-term outcomes for families and children. Work is not just another economic variable—it provides us all with purpose and fulfilment. That is why every job lost is a tragedy. That is why jobs are our highest economic priority. That is why we have a plan for jobs, and that plan is working.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman may have noticed that we recently elected a new Mayor of the West of England region who has pledged to commit to jobs, green jobs and bringing people together across the west of England. Will the right hon. Gentleman commit to working with the new West of England Mayor to deliver that promise, because no one from the Government has currently been in touch to ensure that that promise is delivered on?

Rishi Sunak: The Government believe in devolution and have worked successfully with Mayors across the country. I have a very productive relationship with Mayors. I commend all Mayors who have recently been re-elected, particularly Andy Street in the west midlands and Ben Houchen in the Tees Valley. I believe that all leaders want to drive jobs and growth in their areas. I look forward to working with anybody who shares that goal, and I look forward to working with that new Mayor.

When it comes to supporting work, what also matters is that we reaffirm our commitment to ending low pay by increasing the national living wage to £8.91, an annual pay rise for someone working full time of almost £350. We are providing targeted support to young people, who, as has rightly been identified, have been hardest hit in the pandemic. The £2 billion kickstart scheme will create hundreds of thousands of jobs for 16 to 24-year-olds who would otherwise be at risk of long-term unemployment.

Mr Perkins: The kickstart scheme is not reaching nearly as many people as the right hon. Gentleman suggests. Labour has proposed an apprenticeship wage subsidy funded by the underspend in the apprenticeship levy, which would ensure that companies that took on young people would be putting a lot more into them than under the kickstart scheme. Rather than continually pushing the kickstart scheme, which is much more expensive than the apprenticeship wage subsidy, why will he not adopt the apprenticeship wage subsidy that Labour has proposed?

Rishi Sunak: The kickstart scheme has now created almost 200,000 job placements for young people in record time, given that the scheme was only announced in July last year and operational in autumn. Its ramp-up compares very favourably with the future jobs fund, which preceded it, and with which the hon. Member will be familiar. Now that the economy is reopening, many more young people can start those placements over the coming months. I commend all people both at the Department for Work and Pensions and at the

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thousands of companies involved for their participation in a scheme that will transform the opportunities of young people up and down the country.

With regard to apprenticeships, we already have an incentive for employers to take on apprentices. In the crisis, the Government introduced a £3,000 hiring subsidy for small and medium-sized businesses to take on a new apprentice—a significant 35% subsidy, I think, of an apprentice at the apprenticeship median wage. It also pays for 95% of all training costs for apprentices employed by SMEs, as well as improving the quality of those apprenticeships. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that apprenticeships are important, but we took action in July last year.

To help people of all ages to get back into work, we have doubled the number of work coaches in jobcentres and provided over £3.5 billion to help people to search for work or retrain, and we are launching the restart programme, with £2.9 billion to provide intensive support to over 1 million people who are long-term unemployed. This Queen's Speech goes even further to turbocharge our economic recovery and get people into decent, well-paid jobs. The plan set out in the Queen's Speech creates more jobs, and jobs where people live. The levelling up White Paper will set out bold new interventions to improve livelihoods and opportunities. We are strengthening the Union with record investment in new infrastructure, such as road, railways and broadband. We are turning Britain into a science superpower, with our plan for growth making this country the best place in the world for inventors, innovators and engineers.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): First, may I wish the Chancellor a very happy birthday? The scale of his ambition on levelling up is absolutely right, but the scale of the challenge is also huge. The economic gap between London and the south-east and the north-east, in relative terms, is as great as it was between East Germany and West Germany prior to reunification, and it took 30 years to narrow that gap. Does he agree that it will take more than one Parliament and more than the significant investment he has already committed to truly to level up this country?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for his warm words, and I agree with him. This is the task that this Government will meet head-on, and it is right that it needs to be an ambitious goal that we set ourselves to meet. Like him, I share an eagerness to get on with it and keep going—and he will know, like me, that we are already doing it. Indeed, we are making the most of our new-found Brexit freedoms to launch freeports, for example, creating jobs and growth in innovative new industries in places such as Teesside, which both he and I know very well.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the Chancellor give way?

Rishi Sunak: I must now make some progress, because I am running out of time.

The Queen's Speech gives people the skills they need to get good jobs and progress in their careers. Right now, 11 million adults in this country, nearly a third of our entire workforce, do not have a level 3 qualification.

The Prime Minister's lifetime skills guarantee will change that, giving every adult flexible access to fully-funded, high-quality education throughout their lives, and this will have a transformational impact on people's lives and livelihoods.

This Government believe that we should value equally every path to a good career, not just a degree, so the Queen's Speech provides landmark reforms to post-16 education and training. As I have mentioned, we have doubled to £3,000 the incentive payments for employers to hire new apprentices, and we are reshaping the system around the needs of employers so that people can get training in the skills we know the economy will need now and into the future.

This Queen's Speech delivers two critical pieces of Treasury-sponsored legislation. The National Insurance Contributions Bill will introduce new reliefs to encourage employers to employ veterans, to incentivise regeneration and job creation in freeports, and to provide relief on NHS Test and Trace payments. The public service pensions and judicial offices Bill will make sure that dedicated public servants are fairly rewarded for their service, while making sure that the system is affordable and sustainable into the future.

Peter Kyle: Will the Chancellor give way?

Rishi Sunak: I am just going to wrap up.

In conclusion, it is apt that today the Opposition broke with a minor tradition, choosing to debate economic matters first, not last, and specifically to cite jobs as a focus—not the wider economy, as is the norm. I have been saying for over a year, since the very outset of this crisis, that protecting jobs and livelihoods was this Government's No. 1 economic priority. It has shaped my decisions and actions and I have said it over and over again, to leave the British people in no doubt that this Government are on their side.

Last week's results showed that, from Hartlepool to Harlow, the people heard us, so I cannot welcome enough today's debate to share with the Labour party our plans to continue protecting the jobs of the British people and to defend a record that has seen millions of livelihoods protected and hundreds of thousands of businesses supported, and has created the conditions for one of the strongest economic recoveries anywhere in the world. We have a plan, and that plan is working.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I remind hon. Members that there is a five-minute limit on Back-Bench contributions.

2.18 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I am proud to open today's debate on behalf of the Opposition. I am conscious that one of the basic tenets of qualification for Government is to be trusted by the public with their money. If we do not meet that test, then none of our ambitions and none of the changes we seek can come to pass, so let me make one thing clear at the start: it is a test that I intend to meet.

The recovery from the pandemic represents a crucial moment for Britain. This really is not the time for just wallpapering over the cracks; instead, we must match the scale of the moment that faces our people and also our planet. We need a Government who back Britain, and that means an ambitious and bold plan for good

jobs. We must end the insecurity and lack of opportunity that there is in our economy for far too many, and seize this moment to create a brighter future for people in all parts of our United Kingdom.

This last year has been like no other. Families have given up so much; so many have lost loved ones. Coronavirus has shone a spotlight on what matters to all of us—our families and friends, our communities, our health and our security. After a decade of Conservative government, our public services were underfunded and underprepared for the pandemic that came—a shortfall of intensive care beds; unfilled vacancies in our NHS; a fragmented and underfunded social care system; and personal protective equipment stockpiles run down, despite all the warnings. This Government have allowed the public square to become degraded, and we all now know the cost of that.

Meanwhile, the failure to increase statutory sick pay in the middle of a deadly pandemic put far too many low-paid families in the impossible position of having to decide whether to go to work and put food on their table or to self-isolate and protect public health. The Government could and should have done so much more for those people.

The truth is that for too many people wages have stalled over the past decade; household debt is rising and too many people live pay cheque to pay cheque. And many of those people do the crucial everyday jobs that keep our economy running and our public services going. They have been overlooked and undervalued. The Government have done nothing for them and nor does this Queen's Speech.

Instead, £2 billion of public contracts have been awarded to companies with close links to the Conservative party. We are led to believe that this is all one massive coincidence that they got those contracts. How did it happen? Who knows? The Government are taking the public for fools. What taxpayers deserve is for their money to be used to best effect, not for it to be squandered on contracts that do not deliver or used to line the pockets of friends and donors of the Conservative party.

The Government say they want value for money, but they have failed to claw back the millions of pounds wasted on contracts that did not deliver for the NHS and did not deliver for taxpayers either.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady talked about people with connections to the Conservative party trying to get their favoured contractors to the front of the queue. Does she remember emailing me in the Cabinet Office to ask for one of her constituency companies to get to the head of the queue for exactly the same purpose?

Rachel Reeves: The job of a constituency MP, as the hon. Gentleman—a good constituency MP himself—knows, is to look out for our constituents. But I was not pocketing the money: I was not giving contracts to donors of my party, and I was not giving my local pub landlord a contract. Maybe our local pub landlords are really good at delivering contracts for the NHS, even though they have no track record of that—or maybe this one was a mate of a Conservative party Cabinet Minister.

Kevin Hollinrake: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Lady seems to be accusing Members of this House of personally pocketing money. Will you ask her to explain exactly what evidence she has in that regard?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): That is not really a point of order; it is part of the debate, and I do not want the debate to descend into points of order. I am sure that if the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer feels she needs to say anything further in response to the hon. Gentleman, she will do so.

Rachel Reeves: Two billion pounds-worth of contracts to friends and donors of the Conservative party—I will leave it at that, and let the record speak for itself.

Let us be clear about this Conservative Government's record. They talk in this Queen's Speech about a skills guarantee, but it was a Conservative Government who cut the education maintenance allowance; my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, was a beneficiary of that and has spoken powerfully about the difference it made to her. And this Government have overseen a fall in the number of apprentices, leaving millions of people without the skills they need to thrive. They speak in this Queen's Speech about investing in all parts of our country, but it was this Conservative Government who scrapped the regional development agencies—the very bodies designed to ensure that every part of our country could prosper.

The Government talk in this Queen's Speech about levelling up, but it is this Conservative Government who have cut 60p from every £1 of funding to local councils, forcing them to close Sure Start and children's centres, and to cut back on social care, libraries and leisure centres, degrading the very fabric of our local communities. The Government want the public to think that they have been in power for only a year. They have not; they have been in power for 11 years, and they need to take responsibility for their own record.

Throughout this crisis, the Chancellor has pitched our health against our economy, treating it as if it were a zero-sum game, with health on the losing side. To do so was short-sighted, misguided and dangerous, and he must take responsibility for that. In a pandemic of this kind, public health and the economy are two sides of the same coin. The Government's failure to act speedily, pushing ahead with "eat out to help out" without sorting out test and trace, and the refusal to back an October circuit break or to level with the public about the risks of mixing at Christmas, have caused huge loss and huge suffering, as well as the largest economic decline in the G7.

Mr Perkins: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the Government seem to be railing against the incompetence of their own government, and policies that they have been voting for in the last 10 years. I would add to her list that the lifetime skills guarantee that they are now trumpeting is merely the reintroduction on a smaller scale of what existed under a Labour Government. This Government voted for these things for 10 years, and now say that they are the answer to the problems that they have created.

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend puts it very well.

There is a gaping hole in the furlough scheme, meaning that several million people have inexplicably been excluded for support. The self-employed—painters and decorators, plumbers, freelance musicians and fitness instructors—all work hard and pay their taxes, but for many there has been no safety net and no support. Why has the Chancellor ignored their cries for help? Is it because they did not have his telephone number? Is it because they cannot WhatsApp him—signed off with “Love Dc”?

The revelations yesterday about the bombardment of pressure on Greensill’s behalf by David Cameron are astounding: 45 text messages—nine to the Chancellor and 12 to the permanent secretary. When the former Prime Minister did not get his way, he threatened to phone the Chancellor, “Gove” and “everyone” else. What an appalling way to bully Government officials, and what did they get? [HON. MEMBERS: “Nothing!”] That is not true. They got access to the NHS patient records through the Earnd scheme, and access to other Government lending schemes. Government Members know that.

The Chancellor said that he would push his team, so let me ask him how they were pushed. What were they asked to do? This is not just a political row; this is about how our country is run, and for whom, and it is about real jobs and livelihoods that are now at stake. Instead of trying to help out dodgy finance companies with wheezes for making money off the back of the NHS and small businesses, the Labour party is fiercely proud of British-made goods and services, and the people who make them. We champion our industries—from manufacturing to retail, our farmers, restaurants and pubs and our great cultural sector, to businesses starting up now and during the pandemic. We want and need them to succeed.

British industry is vital to our economic recovery, and the Government should be working hand in hand with it, not scrapping their own industrial strategy.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Reeves: If the hon. Gentleman wants to explain why the Government have scrapped their own industrial strategy, he can be my guest.

Aaron Bell: The hon. Lady is rightly praising British businesses. Will she therefore condemn the comments of her neighbour, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who in March said that business was “the enemy” and that he would refuse to meet with them?

Rachel Reeves: I can say that business is our friend and that we will back British businesses and British workers.

The label “Made in Britain” is a sign of quality, a stamp that marks British manufacturing as among the very best in the world, yet the Government do not make the most of our assets. Over the past decade, they have failed to support our manufacturing base: so many jobs did not return after the financial crisis; and short-term sticking plasters have left sectors such as steel and shipbuilding as an afterthought. We still have not heard a word about the Government’s vision of how we will

become global leaders in manufacturing and industry outside the EU or how we will help our cultural industries. We are talking about our musicians and performers, our farmers and fishermen, who are suffering because of the huge gaps in this Government’s deal with our European neighbours. In the last quarter, exports to the EU were down 18.1%, and exports to countries outside the EU were up by only 0.4%. This Government are lacking in ambition and they are in denial about what businesses need to thrive in this new environment. For example, our automotive sector is the jewel in the crown of British manufacturing, yet the UK has only one planned electric vehicle battery gigafactory. It is not yet under way, yet many are springing up all over Europe and around the world. We cannot afford to be in the slow lane, which is why Labour is calling on the Government to part-finance, in collaboration with the private sector, three additional gigafactories by the end of this Parliament, putting Britain back in the fast lane of car manufacturing. The truth is that if the batteries are not made here, the danger is that the cars will not be either. There is an irony here: in the year we are hosting the COP26 climate conference, the Conservative Government were pursuing new coal mines in Cumbria and have failed, through sheer incompetence, to deliver their own green homes grants that they promised. For the green future that we need to tackle the climate emergency we can choose to be world leaders or we can allow our communities, businesses and workers to be left behind. Tackling the climate crisis and creating the high-paid, high-skilled jobs in every corner of our country would have been front and centre of a Labour Queen’s Speech.

Let us consider another national challenge. More tax gets paid by shops on the local high street than when we buy online. Some big businesses have made billions extra this year, while other businesses are on their knees. The Government must level the playing field between physical high street shops in our town centres and the online retail giants. Yet none of this is in the Queen’s Speech. The UK has lost nearly 10,000 shops, 6,000 pubs, more than 7,000 bank and building society branches, and more than 1,000 libraries in the past 11 years. All of that happened under the watch of a Conservative Government, who stood by. These things matter to people, and I can tell the House that they matter to Labour. My hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) has made that clear time and again, and I will do so too. Action was needed these past 11 years and yet there was none. It is needed even more now, yet there is none in this Queen’s Speech.

Alongside thriving businesses, we also need an economy that delivers for working people. That is what the Labour party is all about. This pandemic has shown so clearly who our country’s key workers are. After all, we were not clapping and banging pots and pans for management consultants; we were cheering the delivery drivers, posties, supermarket workers and our public service heroes, especially those in our NHS and social care. They have kept our country moving and our families safe, and they should be rewarded with a pay rise and not a pay cut. Any meaningful recovery means a new deal for key workers, with investment in their skills, fair pay for a fair day’s work, security and a voice in the workplace. The British people were promised new legislation to protect and enhance workers’ rights now that we are outside the EU, making Britain the best place in the world to work. The British people were told by this

Government that there would be fairness in the workplace, better support for working people, and measures to protect those in low-paid work and in the gig economy. The Government said that they would protect

“the majority of businesses who...do the right thing...from being undercut by the small minority who seek to avoid their responsibilities”

to society. That was the absolute minimum that we were promised, yet the Government have not even delivered on that. Why is that? It is because improving workers’ rights has never been, and will never be, the priority of a Conservative Government. And who knows that more than any? Workers at British Gas. They have played a vital role in the last year, but have been fired and rehired on worse conditions. Apparently the Conservatives say that it is wrong. The Chancellor has said that today. We agree. But if it is wrong, why do they not do something about it?

Creating good jobs in all parts of our country, for all people; tackling the climate emergency; making sure that all our town centres are thriving and prosperous; supporting British industry and rights for workers—those would have been Labour’s economic priorities in the Queen’s Speech. They are clearly not the priorities of this Conservative Government. The challenges and the opportunities facing our country are great, yet what the Government are putting forward is so small. After just 24 hours, we can already see how thin this Queen’s Speech is. The foundations were not strong enough going into the pandemic, and people deserve something better than what they had before. The Conservatives have taken for granted those who have kept our economy and our essential services moving this last year, and they continue to undervalue all that our key workers do.

I believe that all our high streets, towns, villages and cities can thrive again if people have more money in their pockets and if we keep more wealth in our local communities. We need jobs that people can raise a family on, and rights that give people dignity, respect and support at work when they need it. Those who work hard should reap the rewards, not just those with access to Ministers or those who believe they can avoid paying their fair share of tax. I believe that we will only truly help our country to meet its full potential when people’s opportunities are not defined by what their start in life was, where they live, or what their accent or job is. We must be ambitious for all of our country, with real and lasting change. These should be the tests of any Government right now, and they are the tests that we will hold this Government to. But from what we have heard this week, and from what we have heard from the Chancellor today, these are tests that this Government look set to fail.

2.38 pm

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): It would be remiss of me not to start by congratulating the new shadow Chancellor on her role. She will be cognisant of the fact that she has replaced an Aberdeen quine, so she has very big boots to fill indeed.

It is important when we look at the wider discussion of the Queen’s Speech to reflect on what it actually means. Of course, it is the Government’s legislative programme—a programme that they believe they have a mandate to put forward, and a mandate that the Conservatives got in the 2019 general election, when they won 365 seats in

this place on 43% of the vote. Of course, in the 2019 general election they won just 25% of the vote in Scotland and hold just six Scottish seats in this House, yet over the last year we have seen the UK Government use that mandate to drag us out of the European Union against our express wishes. They introduced the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 to ride roughshod over devolution, alongside the levelling-up fund and the shared prosperity fund—all a blatant attack on devolution. It is not just us nationalists saying that; it is the Labour party in Wales as well, because it is cognisant of the fact that the Welsh Assembly is also under attack.

What do we see planned for the year to come? We see a Conservative Government with a mandate in Scotland of 25% from 2019 seeking to introduce new legislation in relation to immigration—even more draconian than it already is—that will only make things worse, despite the express wishes of the people of Scotland to have a tailored immigration system fitting Scotland’s needs. Of course, we will also see legislation aimed solely at suppressing the right of people to vote by making them take photo ID to the ballot box. The Government are seeking to fix a problem that nobody knew existed, and they are doing it for their own nefarious means.

Of course, in Scotland we had an election last week. The Chancellor failed to reflect on that in his remarks; I do wonder why. On the constituency ballot—first past the post, which Members of this House are extremely familiar with—the SNP won an unprecedented 47.7% of the vote, and 62 constituency seats. In comparison, the Scottish Conservatives won 21% of the vote and just five constituency seats—six if we include Dumbarton, but I would not wish to do that—yet we are told we have no mandate to implement our policies.

Of course, in Scotland we do not just have a first-past-the-post system; we have a proportional Parliament. That has allowed the Labour party to gain some seats; I do not think the Liberal Democrats gained anything on the list this time; and of course the Conservatives gained some more seats on the list. That list vote was remarkable, because a majority of voters in Scotland voted for parties that had an express wish for the people of Scotland to have their say—to have a second independence referendum to decide our own future. A majority of voters on that list vote voted for such parties.

What we have ended up with is a Parliament in Scotland where 72 of the 129 seats are taken up by people who support Scotland’s right to choose. And has that right to choose ever been more important than it is at this moment in time? Has it ever been more important, as we seek to overcome a decade or more of Tory austerity, as we seek to overcome being dragged out of the European Union against our will, and as we seek to build back from the pandemic? But of course we have no mandate, because a Conservative party that has not won an election in Scotland since 1955 tells us that we will not get to decide our own future.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I am listening to the hon. Gentleman’s speech, which is typically passionate. The trouble is that it is a speech that he could have given in any debate. May I urge him to bring his mind back to the criticism of the Conservatives for their appalling Queen’s Speech, rather than giving us the usual stuff, which we hear most days—day in, day out?

Stephen Flynn: I think that is the first reaction to the Scottish Parliament elections that I have heard from the Member—a Labour Member, I believe.

Christian Matheson *indicated assent.*

Stephen Flynn: He is a Labour Member. That is astonishing, because I have yet to hear what the Labour party's views are in respect of the Scottish Parliament. The people of Scotland voted in favour of having that right to choose. I think he should reflect on the fact that the Labour party won just two constituency seats in Scotland. It is perhaps because of its arrogance when it comes to these serious issues of Scotland's votes that that is such a thing.

I will turn to the Queen's Speech now; if the hon. Member had bided his time, I would have got there. The reality is that the people of Scotland face the starkest of choices—a choice between deciding their own future, or the legislative agenda of a party that we did not vote for. What does that mean in real terms? It means that, as it stands, the people of Scotland will not have the power to borrow—we have been denied that throughout the pandemic by the Chancellor—that we will have to have nuclear weapons on the Clyde, despite our express wishes not to have them there, and that we will not be able to have climate change put front and centre. If we look at the Queen's Speech, we see that there is just a cursory mention of net zero. That is simply not on. It is simply not right.

I appreciate that Government Members will likely point to the Prime Minister's 10-point plan. I imagine that they will even point to the delayed energy White Paper. They might even point to the North sea transition deal, but the legislative footing needs to be more ambitious and the money required for change needs to be there. That has never been more important in the north-east of Scotland. Last year, we saw the price of oil and gas plummet—it collapsed—and the Chancellor did not lift a finger to help. What was the consequence of that failure to act? It was that a third of all job losses in Scotland came from the city and the wider region that I am fortunate enough to represent.

We now have the opportunity to go down the path of net zero, to invest in our future, to put carbon capture and storage into fruition and to make sure that the hydrogen economy is built—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) says, "We are doing it." How much money are you giving to the north-east of Scotland to make that happen? I asked the Secretary of State that very question and he was unable to answer. The point I am making is that, while we remain within the United Kingdom, that investment must be targeted at the north-east of Scotland.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I ask the hon. Gentleman to acknowledge that every time he says "we" in reference to Scotland, he is not respecting the fact that, in the election last week, approximately half of the population did not vote for independence and did not vote for the SNP. It is unfair to stand in this House and not reflect on that.

Stephen Flynn: We can, of course, take that wider question to the Scottish public in a second independence referendum. I am sure that the hon. Lady, whose party was roundly destroyed in the elections last year, will back up that support for independence.

I was talking about climate change and its importance in the context of the north-east of Scotland. That investment is important when it comes to securing jobs. The Scottish Government have one hand tied behind their back when it comes to energy, because it is this UK Treasury that has coined in in excess of £350 billion of oil and gas revenues over the decade, and it is this UK Treasury that has a responsibility now to act and to ensure that the north-east of Scotland is protected.

It is not just a case of making sure that there are job opportunities for those whose jobs have gone or whose jobs are now at risk because of the transition that will be made; it is also about protecting those who are currently in employment. If someone is in employment and they look at the Queen's Speech, they will be asking, "Where is it—where is the Employment Bill that was promised? Where is the protection of workers' rights?" More than that, they will be asking, "Where is the action that this Government are intending to take when it comes to fire and rehire?" We heard warm words once again from the Chancellor, but my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) has had a Bill before the House for many months now seeking to outlaw the practice of fire and rehire. Where has the Government's support for that Bill been? They could end that practice and they could end it now, but, of course, they have chosen not to do so. They are not interested in protecting people's employment rights.

There is one group who deserve to have their rights protected more than any other moving forward and who deserve to have jobs and opportunities and that is our young people. Although there has not been much agreement on a lot of what I have said so far today—that is an understatement—I think that we can all agree that young people have been perhaps the hardest hit by the pandemic. We should not forget, of course, that it is not just the pandemic that is before them. Many people are still feeling the difficulties of the global financial crash of 2008. They are the same people who have had their ability to live, work and study in the European Union taken away from them. These are the people who deserve our support. In Scotland, we are seeking to support them from the earliest of ages.

We are going to ensure that young people have the freedom to go to university without paying any money. In stark contrast to the Conservatives, we are going to make sure that our young people are fed with free school meals. We are going to make sure that the digital divide is ended for our young people, as they are going to have the opportunity to have a free laptop or iPad, all in contrast to the UK Government, and of course we are introducing a jobs guarantee to ensure that every 16 to 24-year-old in Scotland has the opportunity to go to university or college—

Kevin Hollinrake: Of course, jobs depend on economic growth under the stewardship of the SNP. Over the past eight years, average UK GDP growth has been 2% a year, and in Scotland it has been 1.2%. What is the hon. Gentleman going to do about driving the Scottish economy to grow more quickly?

Stephen Flynn: I appreciate we are not allowed to use prompts in the Chamber, but I refer the hon. Gentleman to page 4 of the SNP's manifesto, which I am sure he has read. It outlines exactly the next steps as we build back.

Our young people deserve our support, and they have our support in Scotland. More than anything, our young people deserve not just investment but a right to define their own future. We know that in Scotland our young people back independence in their droves. They deserve the right to choose their own future. The people of Scotland deserve the right to choose their own future, and they will have that choice.

2.51 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Two goals—economic recovery from covid and levelling up opportunity in every part of our country—are at the heart of this bold and ambitious Queen’s Speech. There are proposals to give millions of people the skills they need to make a success of their lives, proposals to upgrade our infrastructure, particularly 5G and faster broadband, proposals to create green jobs in the industries of the future and proposals to lead the world in life science and new medicines. All these will help to deliver progress on those two crucial goals.

I warmly welcome the return of the Environment Bill, with its ambitious framework to set rigorous new targets on matters such as protecting nature and improving air quality, and I am pleased to see action to bring an end to the live export of animals for slaughter or fattening, which is something I have campaigned against for nearly two decades. My time as Environment Secretary gave me some insight into the legal complexities of the issues around live exports, so I will be scrutinising the Bill carefully to ensure it does everything possible to bring an end to that cruel trade.

I sound a note of caution on one aspect of the Gracious Speech: planning reform. In December last year, more than 2,000 local councillors signed an open letter against key proposals in the “Planning for the future” White Paper. The White Paper would see England divided into growth, renewal and protected zones. Local democratic input into planning decisions would be removed altogether in areas designated for growth. That means there would be many thousands of developments over which local people would have no say at all. There would be no planning application to which to object, so the big campaigns led by residents, with which we are all so familiar, would become a matter of history.

The White Paper’s proposed substitute for the planning process in such growth zones is greater community input into the local plan, but that is just not an adequate replacement. It will require people to anticipate, potentially years in advance, proposals that might conceivably affect them in the future. Moreover, a drastic reduction is envisaged in the time allowed to complete a local plan, inevitably meaning less input from the public, not more.

Even in areas where planning applications would still be necessary, the White Paper proposes that, under the guise of simplifying and speeding up the process of creating a local plan, general development management policies should be set nationally. Deployed at local level, those policies currently perform a vital role in preventing overdevelopment. Removing this tool from planning committees and subjecting the whole of England to a one-size-fits-all model, imposed centrally, could give the green light to many high-density building proposals previously blocked by locally elected councillors.

In the weeks ahead, as Ministers—including, no doubt, the Chancellor—take final decisions on the planning Bill, I urge them to drop those aspects of the White

Paper that reduce democratic involvement in the planning system. It is not too late to come up with planning reforms that help us to deliver the homes we need but do so with the consent and support of local communities, not by imposition against their will. I urge Ministers to do that, and I look forward to working with them on this important goal.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Speakers Nos. 6 and 7 have withdrawn, so I call David Davis.

2.55 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): When I saw that I was number 7a on the call list, I thought perhaps I was the first reserve for my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown); I did not realise that I had promotion rights too, so thank you for that, Madam Deputy Speaker.

One of the effects of the shock of the pandemic, along with other geopolitical changes, is that after 50 years of global trade liberalisation, the world is facing a long period of aggressive mercantilism, and we have to deal with that. The Government are to be congratulated on their ambitious agenda, including record increases in research spending, which has not been mentioned today, the employment drive, the freeport programme, the campaign for ambitious free trade agreements and the bold infrastructure plans. On the non-economic front, I also welcome the excellent proposals to guarantee free speech on campuses. However, I have serious concerns about several aspects of the Queen’s Speech.

Mr Mitchell: Do those concerns include the issue of the 0.7%, on which my right hon. Friend and I have not always agreed in the past?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend is quite right: I opposed the increase to 0.7% because I thought that it was too fast and that it would encourage inefficiency, but, once you are at 0.7%, reducing it will lead to the loss of lives, so I absolutely agree with him on that.

The most important of the domestic issues that concerns me is the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. The Bill reverses the reforms that we put in place in 2017 after the scandal of the treatment of Paul Gambaccini, who was on police bail for well over a year before not being charged. Even now, after that reform, far too many suspects are still bailed for years on end. I currently have a case in front of me where an individual has spent five and a half years on bail without an end in sight. This is crippling to an individual’s life—it is like a loose house arrest—and the National Crime Agency shows zero understanding of the cruel damage that is being done to a person’s life by its ridiculously slow investigation. The Bill, as it stands, will make those problems worse by relaxing the current restrictions on police bail. I give notice to the Government that I will aim to amend the Bill.

The Bill also contains a proposal for the mass collection of data under the auspices of preventing and reducing serious violence. Here we have the Government countenancing pre-crime, and to deal with pre-crime, they have to have someone’s medical data, health data and education data—there is no restriction on it. It imposes a duty on an array of authorities, including

[Mr David Davis]

health providers, to share data with the police. We know from history, including from when people have their phone confiscated, that once the police have this data, getting them to delete it and give it back is the devil's own job. Indeed, it is near impossible; anybody who has tried it knows that. We are talking here about massively enhancing the powers of the state or an agent of the state to collect as much data on as many individuals as they see fit. I want to see that restricted.

I am concerned about the threat to the right of protest, which this country has enshrined in our national fabric for over 800 years—the right to peaceful demonstration. The Home Secretary promised me from the Dispatch Box that we will be incredibly careful to protect that fundamental right. However, I am afraid that the wording of the Bill, as it stands, simply does not do that. It needs reform and I will endeavour to ensure that it is put right.

Finally, my name, along with that of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), is on the amendment to the Queen's Speech that calls on the Government to obey the law in areas where the courts have ruled that they are acting illegally. There are a number of cases where the Government have not done what they have been told to by the courts three or four years ago. Many of these cases affect the rights of children. Rule of law is not a theoretical constitutional concept. It affects lives and living standards of bereaved adults and deprived children.

We should, as a Conservative party and a Conservative Government, stand up for the rule of law, even when it is inconvenient and when the Treasury finds it unpleasant because it has to pay out a few hundred million pounds. This Conservative Government should limit the power of the state rather than enlarge it, celebrate freedom rather than curtail it, and operate under the law rather than under ministerial fiat. I hope that this Parliament and all the parties will hold the Government to that. Otherwise, we will risk betraying the ideals of the country that we live in.

3.1 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I had not planned to speak today, but last Thursday the good people of the west midlands decided that they needed me fighting their corner from the cockpit of the west midlands, rather than from the office of the Mayor, so this afternoon I plan to crack on with a word for the Mayor and a word for Ministers.

To the Mayor, Andy Street, I offer my warmest congratulations. In a year of tragedy, he, too, was hit by personal tragedy, but despite that he continued to work and campaign with grace under pressure. Grace under pressure is what Ernest Hemingway called courage, so I congratulate the Mayor both on his conquest and his courage. He has now earned the right to lead and, I hope, also heard the duty to listen. Forty-six per cent. of my region voted Labour. Labour controls the three great cities of the west midlands, along with the borough of Sandwell.

We also now have challenges, which are multiplying. Healthy life expectancy was falling in our region before covid hit. We have the worst youth unemployment in the country. We have the worst unemployment in the country. Exports were falling £2 billion a year before covid struck. That is why we need the Chancellor of the

Exchequer and his colleagues in Cabinet to work with the Mayor and Labour leaders in the region to now back some of the most popular ideas that we proposed, which were to lead green Britain and to bring back industry. Once upon a time, our region was the workshop of the world. In this century, we have the potential and the ambition to become the green workshop of a greener planet. There is a win-win to be had with the Government's 10-point plan, but there are five action points that we need the Minister to drive through in the weeks and months ahead.

First, as the shadow Chancellor, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), said in a brilliant speech, we have to get the gigafactory built at Coventry airport. There are 16 gigafactories already up and running or being built in Europe. In jeopardy are 110,000 jobs in the automotive industry. The window is closing fast and, Chancellor, we need to act quickly.

Secondly, we have to devolve the budget for retrofitting. The green homes grant is what is known in Treasury parlance as "a shambles". We have to devolve at least £4 billion to the west midlands so that we can make sure that everybody not only has a roof over their head, but has a home that is warm and a home that is green. In so doing, we could create hundreds of thousands of jobs for people without work.

Thirdly, we need a new deal on skills. Apprenticeship numbers have collapsed by 40%. We will have to retrain a generation or two of workers, but at the moment we have the ridiculous situation of the Department for Education handing unspent apprenticeship budget back to the Treasury. We have budgets such as the national skills fund and the national prosperity fund all being dictated from Whitehall. Just hand the whole thing over to the west midlands and trust the people of the west midlands to implement these plans properly.

Fourthly, we need to devolve energy powers, because there are currently firms in the Black Country that have power cuts in the middle of the day because our energy system is so outdated. Fifthly, we need a new deal on transport, because there is a £1.1 billion black hole in our transport spending proposals. Those are the five necessary steps for which the Chancellor should be taking personal responsibility if he is serious about levelling up not simply the country but regions like the West Midlands.

Finally, I wish to make an unashamed special plea for the people of east Birmingham, the part of the country I serve, where five generations of my family have lived and worked. It is the place with the worst unemployment in Britain. I want to work with the Mayor, Labour leaders and the Chancellor to drive through the proper gateway around the new hospital for Arden Cross, because we know that health policy is economic policy. We need the new east Birmingham tramline—all 13 km of it—finally to be built. We need to retrain workers for an ambitious programme of retrofitting. High Speed 2 needs to be instructed to hand back the land at the second biggest industrial site, at the heart of three constituencies with high unemployment, so that we can crack on with building jobs. Crucially, we need the Chancellor's support for a new towns fund based around the Bordesley action plan.

East Birmingham is a place the size of Nottingham—it could be the fifth or sixth biggest city in the country. Not all fairy tales begin with the words "Once upon

a time”; some fairy tales begin with the words “When I am elected”. What we now need from the Government, the Mayor and Ministers is action, not words.

3.6 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne). We do not agree on everything and I have spent the past two years working hard for his opponent, Andy Street, who was elected last Thursday, but I thank him for what he said and for what was a decent and fair campaign in the West Midlands that dignified democracy and did all the main candidates considerable credit.

First, I am a fan of the mayoral system and think that Andy Street will be best placed to secure the right economic judgments and the jobs, training and levelling up. As has been said already in this debate, levelling up is not just geographical but generational. This is first young generation since the world war one that does not believe it will be better off than its parents’ generation. That is an important issue. The devolution of power—which is, of course, part of the answer to the constitutional questions about Scotland, Ireland and the United Kingdom—is very important and it works well in the West Midlands. I strongly encourage the Chancellor to give Andy Street every possible support in the work that he is doing.

In particular, in the royal town of Sutton Coldfield we would like levelling-up funds. I hope very much that we will be in the second tranche, because public spending is critical to securing successful development, sometimes in places that are ostensibly quite well off but need that spending if they are to succeed. Areas such as mine have to go through Birmingham City Council and there are inevitably political difficulties and differences of emphasis. I urge the Treasury to consider that.

Secondly, on the 0.7% aid target, I very much hope that the Chancellor will have heard yesterday the words of the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May); the Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley); and others in the House. The Gracious Speech quite rightly calls for girls’ education, which is probably the most effective way of changing the world, but on girls’ education—the Prime Minister’s particular priority—we have seen a 25% cut, with funding set to fall from £789 million in 2019 to a projected £400 million this year. That is a very substantial cut. Funding for UNICEF, which looks after children and was assessed in the British Government’s multilateral aid review to be the best UN agency, has been cut back by 60%. These are very serious issues.

Liam Byrne: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind words. Does he agree that at the G7 and later this year at COP26, Her Majesty’s Government would stand a far better chance of encouraging sign-up to the new International Development Association programme if, ahead of those important events, they were prepared to commit to the 0.7% target?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman knows very well my strong support for the 0.7%. The point that I am making is that the damage being done to Britain’s

reputation, quite apart from the damage to the poorest people in the world, is very severe indeed. I worry that the Treasury does not fully appreciate these factors.

The Chancellor generously gave way to me earlier and I asked him whether he would consider reinstating the 0.7% once the economy reaches pre-covid levels. He said that the damage that was done might be too great for that. I hope very much that he will think about those words. He also mentioned that we have given £400 billion of taxpayers’ support—quite rightly and highly effectively, thanks to his successful stewardship—to our efforts to combat covid. On the cut that he has made to 0.5%, we are talking of 1% of that £400 billion, but the damage that this is doing to Britain’s reputation, quite apart from the damage it is doing to the poorest people in the world, is very savage indeed.

I therefore urge the Chancellor to announce as soon as he can that we will stand by our promise that we made just a year ago in the general election and by the promise that the British Government made on the floor of the General Assembly at the UN, and that we will no longer seek to balance the books on the backs of the poorest people in the world.

The third point that I wanted to make was mentioned in the Gracious Speech, and it is about social care. I am obviously disappointed that the Government have not yet set out quite how they wish to proceed on this matter, but it seems to me that this is a major and important reform that needs to be agreed by all parties. Like pensions legislation, it has a long tail. However, much of the work has already been done by Sir Andrew Dilnot. I hope that the Government will look carefully at those plans and decide whether they are able perhaps to tweak them, but to implement them.

In my constituency, we have big plans for the Royal Sutton Coldfield Cottage Hospital, but those plans require us to understand what the national social care priorities will be. I hope that this legislation will come forward, possibly with the assistance of my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) and his experienced Select Committee, who might have a role in assisting the Government in refining those plans and aspirations.

The final point that I want to make is about assisted dying. I am the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on choice at the end of life, and I know that there are very strong feelings in the House on this issue. I greatly respect those who completely disagree with me on the matter, not least since I have completely changed my own mind since I first entered the House many years ago.

Those of us who are supporting Dignity in Dying want a very tight and narrow change made to the law. We believe that this could be the great liberal reform of this Parliament; 84% of our constituents want to see this sort of reform introduced. Significant advances are being made in southern Ireland, Scotland, New Zealand, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Germany and Australia, so I ask that we as parliamentarians consider allowing our constituents who are terminally sick and within six months of dying to be able to exercise their own choices, and not be forced to endure a level of pain and indignity that they do not wish to suffer.

3.13 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). I strongly share the view that the decision to move away from 0.7% of our national income being spent on development is the wrong one. Not only is it damaging for Britain's reputation abroad and for numerous programmes such as the girls' education programme that he highlighted, but ultimately, in the context of covid, it is self-defeating. We will not be able to be to feel secure in a world free from the risk of covid unless we help to build up other countries' ability to fight covid. Aid is part of that solution.

Britain's financial services industry is world leading. It generates huge wealth for our country, creates thousands of jobs and delivers considerable soft power in its wake. Hidden in plain sight in the City and beyond are financial mutuals: friendly societies, building societies, credit unions. They are like the steel girders in the Shard; they are not glamorous but their role is critical. Their savings products, life assurance, pensions, mortgages and other products are rarely beaten for value, and as a result they make a huge difference to the quality of life of so many of our constituents. They play another critical role: they keep traditional financial businesses such as banks—shareholder and investor owned—from the temptation to take ever more value from customers' savings. The City and the financial services industry, as this House knows only too well, have seen enough stories of excessive fees, ridiculous levels of executive remuneration and excessive profit taking. Without mutuals—without that corporate diversity—the industry would be even more open to the consequences of excessive market power.

Sadly, little has changed since the Competition and Markets Authority investigated the banks back in 2016. For all the talk of challenger banks, the big banks that swallowed up all the building societies that demutualised before the financial crash still dominate. Given the obvious lack of appetite for taking on the banks, that market power will not abate any time soon, but Ministers could have used the Queen's Speech at least to prevent the situation from getting worse. First, they could take the needs of financial mutuals even more seriously by modernising the rules by which they are governed, helping the smaller mutuals to raise capital more easily. Australia is a great case study, as the Economic Secretary is aware. Why on earth has the long-promised deregulation of credit unions not happened?

Secondly, Ministers should investigate the takeover of Liverpool Victoria. The former managing director of the Post Office, Alan Cook, now the chairman of Liverpool Victoria, is selling this 178-year-old friendly society, which was originally founded to help working people in Liverpool to avoid the Victorian scandal of a pauper's funeral. Presumably Mr Cook expects to make millions from the deal. It is the first major demutualisation of a financial mutual since before the financial crash. Mr Cook cleverly proposed the conversion of LV= to a company limited by guarantee and got the Financial Conduct Authority to agree, all the while telling his owners—his customers—that he was not going to demutualise Liverpool Victoria. Remarkably, that is exactly what he is now proposing to do.

To be fair, the FCA did make it clear to the all-party parliamentary group on mutuals that there would be some boxes it needed to tick as the sale of LV= proceeded.

Serious questions are now being asked about the FCA. It was asleep at the wheel when London Capital and Finance was collapsing, again asleep at the wheel when Greensill tottered into insolvency, and now seems determined to take sleeping tablets as a thriving, well-capitalised British success story is being handed over lock, stock and barrel to one of America's most controversial private equity giants. I urge Ministers to take the opportunity to investigate.

I share the concerns, too, about the proposed complete overhaul of the English planning system. It will drastically reduce the role of councils and communities, such as those in my constituency, in our ability to stop inappropriate development. It will make it harder for councils to make sure that the right sorts of homes are built to the right standard and in the right sorts of places. I urge the Government to think again.

3.18 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I strongly welcome the focus in the Gracious Speech on jobs, skills, progression and careers. Since 2012, at the peak of unemployment, we had something of a jobs miracle before the start of the pandemic as a result of the creativity of British business, the favourable investment conditions, our flexible labour markets and our effective labour market policies. Now our focus, quite rightly, is on keeping people in jobs, as far as possible, and helping those out of work to return as soon as possible. To call the most recent projections from the Monetary Policy Committee encouraging would be something of an understatement: they are really quite dramatic if they can be realised. All the support that has had to be put in place to make that possible has obviously been very expensive, but it looks as though the record will come to show that that investment will have paid off fiscally as well as in reducing the human cost on individuals, families and firms.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), I hope that we will soon be able to return to our 0.7% commitment, not only for the reasons he rightly set out, but also in terms of our shared prosperity as a world because of the effect that co-ordinated ODA can have on areas such as improving health outcomes, reducing conflict and general economic development.

Despite the good projections we have seen, we are not out of this yet. We are rightly especially focused on youth unemployment because of its potential scarring effect, and I very much welcome programmes such as kickstart. However, as we look beyond the very short term, we should reflect that the one problem we never cracked in the jobs miracle, despite the great growth, was productivity. The productivity problem did not just exist in the 2010s, or under Tony Blair, or under Margaret Thatcher; we have had a yawning productivity gap against the United States, Germany and France since before I was born. Academics used to talk about a low skills, low wage equilibrium, although we do not hear so much about that now: firms design jobs around the skills that they think are available, and then there is little incentive for individuals to upskill because there are not the jobs available for them to upskill into. We need to break that cycle, and I am confident, with the momentum from this programme, that that can be done.

There have been important reforms such as universal credit, with progression at its heart and removing things like the 16-hour rule, as well as the national living wage, the apprenticeship levy and the growth of high value-added industries, and the plan for growth can help in that, but we need to ensure that growth and opportunity are evenly spread. We have significant challenges to address. Some 11 million adults in England have missed out on A-levels or their equivalent, and a much lower proportion of people reach what is called in the technical jargon levels 4 and 5, which are the higher-level technical qualifications—people not going on to do a degree, but doing those qualifications that can be worth so much.

There is so much change going on in the world, with, for instance, robotics, artificial intelligence, machine learning and voice computing. Any one of these things on their own could constitute an industrial revolution, but right now they are all happening together, and on top of that we have the opportunities and changes that come from leaving the European Union, what we have to do around the net-zero ambition and then of course the new challenges that we face as a result of this pandemic.

I am therefore pleased that skills and investment in human capital are at the heart of this approach. Quality standards and intensiveness of courses were already being addressed through steps like apprenticeship reform, the creation of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and the institution of T-levels, and I am pleased that that is going to be taken further with a statutory role for employers in the design of qualifications and in the skills accelerators. I also very much welcome the bold plan to significantly reform student finance, which up until now has been very much centred on traditional three-year, away-from-home undergraduate degrees, by making it much more flexible and enabling people to do things in manageable chunks so as to work with their careers and to do more learning from where they live.

We clearly need to go further and build on all of this, and although we are of course focused on young people we must not forget older people: whenever there is a slowdown, there is always the danger that people leave the labour market earlier than they would otherwise have done. We can do more on returnships and helping people get back into the labour market. Sometimes a short, intensive type of training is all that is required, and I would finally just reflect from my time as an Employment Minister and also when we were doing the national retraining scheme that what we heard most in terms of the things that hold people back was not some specific skill but confidence, and helping people through that journey has to be at the heart of what we do.

3.23 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds).

A short time ago I had to remind myself that this debate is about the Queen's Speech and about better jobs and a fair deal at work for people throughout the United Kingdom, as I did wonder at one point whether I had stumbled into yet another SNP Opposition day debate on independence. They did, however, have one thing in common with today's debate on the Queen's Speech, because each of those debates was a missed

opportunity—a missed opportunity to scrutinise the Government, question their policies and make proposals as to how they could better reform the world of work and create a fairer deal.

In this Queen's Speech the Government have missed an opportunity to bring forward an employment Bill. We speak at a time, as has already been mentioned, when the economy has shrunk by 8.7% since before the pandemic and unemployment is standing at 4.9%. That is why I believe and the Liberal Democrats believe that this was an opportunity. We have had many vague promises and hints about employment measures, but an employment Bill would have been welcome, perhaps with something for unpaid carers and something to make flexible working the default position in British society.

I believe it has become clear, with the proposals we have heard this week, that the Government have no long-term strategy for jobs. We are still in a position where the Government are giving us a knee-jerk reaction and patchwork responses to the economic crisis we will be facing later this year. Earlier this year, the Conservatives tried to water down workers' rights with the post-Brexit review of employment law, but thankfully that effort was stopped in its tracks. Now it looks as if the Government have passed on an opportunity to legislate for the post-pandemic world of work.

The pandemic has created huge shifts in how people work, whether they are office workers working remotely or gig economy workers experiencing a spike in their workload. We need to ensure that, in the post-pandemic world, people can keep on working flexibly where that is right for them, while receiving the support they need from their employers wherever they live and work in the United Kingdom. We also need new protection for vulnerable workers in the gig economy, such as the right to paid breaks and leave, plus a 20% higher minimum wage for zero-hours contracts.

Our recovery must start with small businesses. Small businesses employ more than 16 million people across this country, and it is acknowledged that they are the backbone of our economy. Much of our recovery could come from green jobs if we are to make real progress in tackling the climate crisis, such as long-term programmes to refit homes, cutting bills and emissions, as well as investing in public transport and supporting our farms to plant trees and restore peatland. All that would create jobs, and I believe the recognition of that is also missing from measures set out in the speech.

There are two specific things I would like to appeal to the Government to think about on work. One is giving asylum seekers in this country the right to work. Not only would it give them dignity, but it would contribute to the economy. They would be making a contribution in the workplace and paying tax and national insurance, and they would become valued members of our community. I would also at this time, when we are thinking about recovery from this pandemic, appeal to the Government to think about all those working in the national health service on visas, and offer them indefinite leave to remain as a thank you for what they have done for this country in this crisis.

One last step would be a revenue compensation scheme that would reimburse struggling small businesses for the money they have lost due to the pandemic by covering

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up to 80% of their fixed costs—rent, insurance, loan payments, bills and so on. Let us send a message to this country that we care. The Government could send the message too that they care about small businesses and that they are thinking about the people who have made such a contribution in this crisis. In September, when furlough is due to come to an end, they could think about tapering it and allowing it to continue until we are truly out of this pandemic, not miss the opportunity to support people building a new future.

3.28 pm

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), and unlike her, I find much to welcome in this Gracious Speech.

It will not surprise the House at all if I pick out the draft Online Safety Bill—a Bill that has had a long journey so far, some of which I have walked myself, and has further to go. Of course, I warmly welcome its publication, and although it is true that the fact that it is a draft Bill means that much of its impact will be delayed, I do appreciate the Government's determination to get it right, especially if, as I believe to be the case, they are open to refining and improving the Bill as it makes its way through pre-legislative scrutiny. The detail of course needs to be scrutinised, but we can already say what this Bill is not. It is not a full-frontal assault on freedom of speech, as some would claim. It is a way to address the fact that restrictions on bad behaviour and protections for the vulnerable that exist in other environments do not exist at all online, and that is more and more unacceptable, the more of our lives we spend online. Also, the truth is that freedom of speech is not, and has never been, unlimited offline. We cannot say anything we want in print, in broadcast media or on the street. The criminal law confines us, and so do other standards, of decency or protection of children for example. The same should be true online.

We must of course ensure that we define carefully a duty of care on online platforms to keep their users as safe as they reasonably can, but these are highly capable companies, and systems or business models that permit or even promote harm can and must be changed. Although we should recognise and commend the progress that platforms are already making, we know, and they know, that self-regulation is no longer sufficient. We need an independent regulator with the capacity and the tools to do the job. That is what the Online Safety Bill can achieve, and we have an opportunity to lead the world in doing it.

Of course, in other areas of policy we already lead the world. I was pleased to hear in the Gracious Speech an ongoing commitment to overseas aid, but I noted, too, the absence of any proposed legislation to change the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015. I hope that means that any reduction in the percentage of our national wealth spent on aid is an aberration and a temporary failure to meet the current target in the exceptional circumstances envisaged by, and set out in, the 2015 Act, rather than a policy change. Urgent clarification of that, and of the circumstances in which we will return to 0.7%, would help those of us who could not support a deliberate,

strategic and long-term reduction in aid and help to reassure the rest of the world that we will remain a global leader on this subject.

Finally, I come to social care. The problem is evident, but there is a reason why we have not for decades had a functioning social care policy solution. It is because any such solution will be very complicated, and elements of it are likely to be very unpopular. However, this is a collective failure of policy across the political spectrum, and resolving it must be a shared responsibility, because the implementation of any serious social care reform will outlast any single Government. It is also likely to require more of the taxpayer and more of individuals to save for their own care when they can afford to do so.

Mr Perkins: I agree entirely with what the right hon. and learned Member is saying about the complexity of the care issue and the need to work together on it. However, the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and told us that he had a plan that he would bring before us if he was elected. If we are to start a debate, surely the starting point ought to be that plan. Why do we not all see the plan, if indeed it exists, and then we can discuss the bits we all agree on?

Jeremy Wright: I am tempted to agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman. He is right that all of us, including the Government, have to be braver than we have been and more willing to recognise the urgency of the situation. He is right that this reform cannot wait.

The truth is that our emergence from the covid-19 crisis demonstrates both the need for social care reform and also the political opportunity for it. Let us take the lesson from the election results we have just had. I think we can conclude from those that the different parties in office across the UK have all been rewarded by the electorate for addressing the crisis before them, even when doing so required difficult and unpopular measures. The challenge facing social care is also a crisis, just one unfolding at a slower speed. It is time, surely, to ask the electorate the support the right response to that crisis, too. Finally, I remind my colleagues on the Front Bench that they have considerable political authority to do this. This is a Government who have, as the hon. Gentleman has reminded us, promised to fix social care and who have a substantial parliamentary majority, there to be used, surely, to keep our promises. So let us get on with it.

3.34 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab) [V]: The welcome retreat of covid masks the enormous damage it leaves in its wake and the colossal underlying problems it displaced from the public consciousness. Amid an almost unprecedented economic contraction, more and better jobs is perhaps the most urgent of those issues, but it is far from the only one. The giants of deprivation, division and environmental crisis have not slept while we fought the pandemic. They have grown ever greater to the point where they threaten to do unprecedented damage and perhaps even disintegrate our country. What this Queen's Speech has again made clear is that this Government lack the ambition and the vision to meet this great challenge as they should. This Administration are about show more than substance, about politics more than purpose. They give the impression of action, while offering half measures so compromised and politicised that they are all too likely to fail.

That is especially evident in South Yorkshire, which already has large areas of deprivation. The long neglect of my region is a great injustice, but it is also a waste of colossal potential and an act of national self-harm that harms us all. In response, we have developed a road map for genuine transformation: not just recovery from covid, but a fundamentally stronger, greener and fairer region. It is the ambition we need for the whole country. We have leveraged devolved funding to create a £500 million renewal fund. We will be investing massively in everything from active travel and buses to our businesses and our young people. But transformation, at least with the urgency we deserve, needs the Government to do their part, too. They say that they are, but scratch the surface and things look different.

The Government's flagship levelling-up fund is worth significantly less than the local growth fund it replaced. It puts the Chancellor's Richmondshire constituency in a higher category of need than places such as Barnsley and Sheffield. A third of the English areas it will support are not among the top third of the most deprived regions. The vast majority of them are Conservative areas: penny pinching, pork barrel politics dressed up as transformation. It is a confidence trick.

It is not just about the money, however. We cannot level up without a clear goal and a coherent plan to get there. The Government are yet to even define levelling up beyond vague aspiration. Their investments are scattershot, not strategic. It is welcome that they have appointed a levelling up adviser and are planning a White Paper, but the fact it took them 18 months to do that speaks volumes. We need a fundamental rethink of levelling up.

Critically, that needs to happen alongside a fundamental strengthening of devolution. Even senior Conservatives such as George Osborne agree that we cannot recovery from covid or tackle deeper challenges from Whitehall, but the Government seem to have forgotten their promised devolution White Paper, along with their commission on wider constitutional change. Their fundamental lack of interest is evident in their imposition of piecemeal competitive funding pots, which open the door to politicisation, are poisonous to long-term strategic planning, and force local authorities to dance to Whitehall's tune and not the needs of their own local community.

Devolution is needed as part of a much wider renewal of politics. The election in Scotland, while not the mandate the SNP is claiming, means the risk of the country disintegrating remains very real, but disillusionment cuts across the whole country. Rather than fight the problem at its roots with a genuine national conversation on reform, the Government are pushing voter ID and undemocratically forcing first-past-the-post voting on mayoral elections out of naked electoral self-interest. Responsibility for the country appears an afterthought compared to staying in power. Amid deprivation and division, our future really is on the line, and our Government are playing politics. I ask them to change course before it is too late.

3.39 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I rise to welcome the measures announced yesterday in the Gracious Speech, and I do so in the wake of a hard-fought Scottish parliamentary election, whose result has led to a Parliament in Edinburgh with no overall

majority. That is a clear message from the people of Scotland that they wish the political parties in that place and this to work together to rebuild from the devastation wrought to so many aspects of our lives as a result of this awful pandemic. I will briefly touch on the Scottish election, although I do not want to be told off, as one Scottish National party Member was earlier. Obviously, I congratulate the SNP on its re-election as the largest party in Holyrood, but it should also be recognised that the Scottish Conservative party achieved its highest number of votes in the age of devolution and matched its highest number of MSPs returned to Holyrood, with 31. They include my brilliant counterpart representing Aberdeenshire West, Alexander Burnett, who trebled the Conservative majority in his constituency, something we were delighted to see.

In poll after poll in the run-up to last week's election, we saw the Scottish people place the economy, jobs, education and health at the top of their priorities for the Scottish and UK Governments to work on. I hope that that is what the SNP will do, because it is certainly what Conservative Members aim to do. As this is a one nation Government, governing for the entire nation, we are determined to deliver opportunities and build back better, wherever in our wonderful, diverse, dynamic and inventive United Kingdom people live.

The subject of today's debate is jobs, which is apt because no single action by this Government, other than our incredible vaccine roll-out, has demonstrated the strength and flexibility—the broad shoulders—of our UK more than the job retention scheme, which has saved close to 1 million Scottish jobs since it was launched. That is an incredible achievement, and one of which we can be rightly proud. But now, as we look to recovery, it is time to be bold and to invest in new technologies and unleash the full potential of people and places across the UK, driving this country forward and enabling businesses to create the jobs of the future, for my constituency in the north-east of Scotland and across the whole UK. That is what this country is doing.

I listened intently to the speech by the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) earlier, and it is a shame he is no longer in his place. Although I did not agree with most of it, there was one part I did agree with, which was that the north-east of Scotland has had a torrid half-decade or so, above and beyond covid. The oil price crash of 2014 to 2016 saw the price drop by 70%, and many jobs were lost. Supply chain companies were only just recovering when the pandemic hit. However, unlike him, I recognise and welcome what this and previous Conservative Governments have done for the industry and our region: £2.3 billion of direct investment; the Oil and Gas Technology Centre created; the global underwater hub created; the creation of the Oil and Gas Authority; and fiscal stability in the North sea, making it the most attractive basin in the world in which to invest.

Do we need more? Does the region need more? Do we need to invest more to see the transition succeed? Of course we do, which is why I welcome the groundbreaking, ambitious and world-leading oil and gas transition deal, unveiled just before prorogation in this Parliament. This is investment of £16 billion by 2030 in new technologies, supported by business models to enable carbon capture and storage and hydrogen at scale. All the while it is protecting the jobs of my constituents and supporting

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up to 40,000 direct and indirect supply chain jobs in decarbonising the continental shelf production and in the CCS and hydrogen sectors, and all while we reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the industry, to ensure that the North sea is a net zero basin by 2050—that is ambition.

This plan, along with the others announced yesterday to make the UK a global science superpower, to support young people in education and with the kickstart scheme as they enter the world of work and to transform our transport and digital infrastructure across these islands, is exactly what this country needs and it will deliver for the people of West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine.

It is quite obvious that I am very proud to represent my constituency in this place and to represent the wider north-east of Scotland. I am proud to be both Scottish and British. I am proud to sit here as part of this one nation Conservative party that is determined to level up our entire country and provide opportunity to all, keep our country united and lead our world forward. Today, I am very proud to support our plan for this coming Session of Parliament, and I cannot wait to see it in action.

3.44 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: It would have been an even bigger pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) if he had announced what actually happened in the Scottish elections last week, which in fact resulted in a majority for people absolutely supporting independence. However, I want to talk about this Queen's Speech, which is more notable for what it does not include than for what is in it, especially in relation to employment issues and even more especially in relation to employment issues experienced by people with disabilities, who, according to this Government's own figures, equate to 20% of the UK population.

This Government have failed to deliver the employment Bill that they promised in the last Queen's Speech, and they are missing the opportunity to protect workers' rights and close the disability employment gap. They must ensure that all employment schemes such as Kickstart and Restart are fully accessible to disabled candidates on an equal basis. A failure to do so further increases the disability employment gap.

Time and again, disability groups have called on the Government to make disclosure of disability pay gap information mandatory, so that a full assessment can be made of the pay inequalities in the workplace. The re-elected SNP Government are committed to expanding the specific duties that require a listed public authority to publish gender pay gap information to include disability and ethnicity pay reporting and to ensure that these are included with equal pay statements, but without action from the UK Government, we will never gain a full picture of the level of equalities that disabled workers face.

This Queen's Speech does nothing to address statutory sick pay, which is wholly inadequate. It is one of the lowest in the OECD and a barrier to disabled workers remaining in employment. Disabled workers who experience ongoing illness often give up employment as they cannot live on SSP. If the UK Government are serious about

closing the disability employment gap, they must provide sick pay that treats workers with dignity. The SNP continues to demand that the UK Government increase SSP in line with the real living wage, that they make it available to everyone by removing the requirement to be a qualified worker and the earning requirement, and that they extend it to 52 weeks instead of 28.

For many disabled workers, flexibility in their working hours enhances their ability to successfully continue in employment. It was said that the employment Bill in the 2019 Queen's Speech would encourage

“flexible working, ensuring that both employers and employees get the maximum benefits from flexible working”

and that

“the Bill will make flexible working the default unless employers have good reason not to.”

Why is that not in this Queen's Speech? The SNP would also like the UK Government to provide guidance to employers on reasonable adjustments and create statutory timescales for implementation. Too many disabled workers either struggle in work or leave because they are ignored when they request adjustments. A legal responsibility must be placed on employers to meet disabled workers' needs.

The pandemic has exacerbated the barriers that disabled people face when looking for and staying in employment, which has had a disproportionate impact on disabled employees. That has led to an increase in the disability employment gap. What is in this new legislative agenda for disabled people in terms of economic recovery and employment support? There is nothing new to help those who have suffered disproportionately.

Given the commitment and ambitions of the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament, it is obvious that employment powers would be better utilised by them, as opposed to being in the hands of another Tory Government who have prioritised the wealthy over the workers. That is why the SNP continues to call for the devolution of employment law. Scotland's ability to tackle unfair working practices and fully protect workers' rights remains limited while employment law is reserved to Westminster.

It costs someone more to live if they are disabled—an average of £530 a month or more—and this Queen's Speech does nothing to correct that. Nearly 1 million disabled people still receive income-related support allowance, rather than universal credit. There is no uplift for them during this pandemic. That means that, on average, £100 for a non-disabled person is equivalent to just £68 for a disabled person. Let us just think about that. There is still an opportunity for the UK Government to deliver for disabled workers, and for workers generally, by implementing Members' asks on statutory sick pay and mandatory reporting and by extending the uplift in universal credit—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I have to interrupt the hon. Lady. I hope that she was about to come to a conclusion, but she has significantly exceeded her time, so I am afraid I have to stop her there. I do not think that she can hear. I do not know quite how the system is working today. I was trying to give her some leeway, but I have to stop her now. I call Tobias Ellwood.

3.50 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. You articulate why it is so important for us all to return to this Chamber in person, as I hope we will before too long.

I am thankful to be able to address the Queen's Speech, which is significant not just in mapping out the legislative programme, promoting UK strengths, building businesses and jobs and so forth, but in marking the transition from managing covid-19 to actually defeating it and returning to some form of normality. Simply put, the 2019 election manifesto was put on hold as the focus tilted towards economic intervention and of course the amazing vaccine roll-out, so that we are finally able to come to terms with this pandemic. Now, however, we can return to that agenda.

The incredible electoral success that we had on Thursday, marked not least by the totemic win in Hartlepool, confirmed something so important for us Conservatives: that we are adapting, and learning to advance and appeal way beyond our normal areas. We are not just connecting but cementing bonds in parts of the country where I never thought we would be able to do so. That is very much a positive, but it is now time to prove that levelling up is not just a slogan and that it is, in fact, a philosophy.

The legislation in the Queen's Speech that we have heard in the last couple of days allows us to do just that, with a united approach, but building on regional and complementary strategies. There is limited time to discuss that in today's debate. I will focus on one particular aspect, which I hope the Minister will perhaps comment on in his wind-up, to do with the Northern Ireland legislation. I tried to pursue a solution to the vexatious claims that have troubled veterans for decades and I was never able to find the legal instrument that would allow us to support veterans alone.

The Queen's Speech mentioned that there will be consideration of advancing a truth and reconciliation process that looks to support those on both sides of the aisle. I absolutely believe that that is the way forward. We cannot just support one side of the argument. That is against international humanitarian law. It would also never pass the Northern Ireland Assembly. These are very difficult questions, but if we are to build on the good work of the Good Friday agreement and finally conclude this, I hope that the Government will make it a priority.

More widely, covid-19 has cast a dark shadow over all our lives. Our nation has been tested before, but certainly we have come through it even stronger and more united. However, the post-covid world that we now wake up to is very different from the pre-pandemic world that we remember. Our adversaries and competitors have taken full advantage of this global distraction to further their own agendas. As I have reminded the House many times, global threats are increasing. The world is getting more dangerous than during the cold war. Why? Because of the diversity and complexity of those threats, and the rise of states pursuing a very different interpretation of international world order.

There is a 1930s feel to where we are today, with weak global institutions, rising powers, global economic challenges, and of course a lack of western co-ordination. I put it directly to the Prime Minister: "You now have

the opportunity, as we emerge from covid-19 not only to rebuild Britain but to help a latterly risk-averse and distracted west to regroup and re-establish what we stand for, what we believe in and what we are willing to defend." I pose the question: "Do you think the world will be safer or more dangerous over the next five years?" Privately, we all know the answer to that.

How we handle the changing international dynamics over the next five years will likely have repercussions for the rest of the century. So I say to the Prime Minister that with the empowered mandate that Government now have, they must use this opportunity, as the cloud of covid starts to pass, not only to rebuild and strengthen Britain but, as we host the G7 group of nations, to commit to playing a more concerted leadership role on the international stage. I give warning that if we do not invest more in our hard and soft power, we will lose our influence as a force for good on the international stage.

3.55 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab) [V]: The Government failed Britain's workforce yesterday, with no mention of an employment Bill in the Queen's Speech. I have read the briefing notes, including the section on living standards and the plan for jobs, but without an explicit employment Bill there is a major gap in the Queen's Speech.

Clearly, we need a recovery plan from the covid-19 pandemic, and there must be change. It is uppermost in workers' minds that furlough ends at the end of September, but once again we see the usual Conservative party response, wanting a return to business as usual. For many workers, that means low pay, insecure employment, zero-hours contracts or limited-hours contracts, and a gig economy with few employment rights and no right of redress against rogue or unscrupulous employers. Labour wants better jobs and a fair deal at work, but that cannot be achieved within the current balance of power, which is skewed so heavily against working people.

The Government have turned their back on workers' rights in the package of Bills announced yesterday, but I hope that in the private Members' Bill ballot, which is opening shortly, we have the opportunity to bring forward a Bill to ban the appalling and increasingly common practice of industrial blackmail that is fire and rehire. I declare an interest and thank my own trade union, Unite, and, indeed, all the other trade unions, for highlighting this appalling practice and doing all in their power to campaign to defend the wages, terms and conditions of working people. The Prime Minister will have received a letter from Unite the union signed by over 140 hon. and right hon. Members of this House, by peers and by 20 trade union leaders calling on him to outlaw the shameful practice of fire and rehire. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the letter has been met with stony silence.

To make matters worse, the Government are still refusing to release the publicly funded ACAS report on this practice. If I may, I want to take issue with the Chancellor of the Exchequer's opening remarks. I am sure that he would not deliberately mislead the House, but he said quite clearly that Ministers were awaiting the report from ACAS. In fact, Ministers received the report on 17 February, so they are already in possession of it. I wonder what inconvenient truths lie in that report that are causing them not to publish it.

[Grahame Morris]

This issue needs immediate action. Ministers have allowed a situation to develop where one in 10 workers will be threatened with fire and rehire, with disputes ongoing at a number of companies and organisations, including Go North West, Jacobs Douwe Egberts, Goodlord and Heathrow airport. Indeed, yesterday, the National Union of Journalists condemned an attempted case of fire and rehire at the *Oxford Mail* and *The Oxford Times*. The UK lags behind countries, including Ireland, Spain and France, that have already banned it. If a Government committed to protecting bad employers does not make people angry, people should know that many of the companies engaged in this practice have received large sums of public money. Some have seen profits increase substantially, yet this Government place no conditions on the support that they have received.

Many ordinary working people are suffering, so yesterday I was proud to join Unite members, representatives and officers, and Labour MPs to make it plain that we stand with working people. I am immensely proud to do so as a Labour and trade union MP.

4 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris). I totally agree with him that levelling up has to be very much about better jobs and a fairer deal at work.

The scale of the challenge of levelling up is huge. As I said in my intervention on the Chancellor, the economic disparity in productivity and economic output per capita between the north-east and London and the south-east is, in relative terms, as large as it was between East Germany and West Germany prior to reunification. It took 30 years and \$2 trillion in investment and incentives for businesses to narrow that gap, and it is still not fully narrowed.

The other lesson from Germany is that this cannot be done just by public sector spending; the private sector has to invest too. According to Andy Haldane, the chief economist at the Bank of England, there is an economic gap: overall economic activity per capita is £45,000 in London and the south-east, and £18,000 in the north-east. That leads, of course, to a gap in prosperity, which is what levelling up has to be about. Average wages are £41,000 in London and the south-east, and £28,000 in the north-east.

This is a huge challenge. It is great that the Government have a real ambition and the right scale of ambition. The good news is that this is not a zero-sum game. If we get the whole economy firing on all cylinders, the very fact that household consumption accounts for 58% of overall spending in our economy means that it will be a self-fulfilling prophecy: when all areas become more prosperous, there will be more spending—more economic activity. That has to be good for everyone.

The Government have made a historic start, not just in the amount of money they are spending—they have pledged to spend £600 billion on infrastructure over the five years of this Parliament, a 50-year high; the highest public sector net investment in the past five decades—but in where they will spend it. In the past, the Green Book has allocated expenditure principally where the well-paid jobs are. Creating 100 new jobs in London and the

south-east, at £41,000 each, will mean a much better return in terms of value for money than creating 100 jobs in the north-east, so obviously, the Green Book has always prioritised investment in London and the south-east.

The Government have quite rightly changed that; strategic objectives are now part of the equation of where money is spent. I very much welcome that. It is critical to this discussion. The Government have also promised to change where we invest in infrastructure for housing through the housing infrastructure fund, on pretty much the same basis. That is a really good start in terms of public sector investment in infrastructure—roads, railways and other things.

The Government are also moving jobs around the country, with the UK infrastructure bank coming to Leeds and Treasury North to Darlington, and the Cabinet Office going to Glasgow. That just shows what we can do with public sector moneys in terms of levelling up. Of course, there is also the huge green investment that the Government are going to make with taxpayers' money.

The key thing, though—we must learn the lesson from Germany—is that this cannot be about one Parliament. It cannot be subject to electoral cycles; it has to be a much longer strategic investment. This has to happen over 30 years—and, as I said, it cannot just be about public sector investment.

Mark Littlewood, the director general of the Institute of Economic Affairs, wrote a very interesting article about this in *The Times*. He asked, if this is all about infrastructure—if prosperity is about connectivity, in terms of roads and railways—why is Doncaster not more prosperous? The shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), will no doubt reflect on that. Why is Doncaster not more prosperous? It is very well connected. We need the private sector to invest alongside; that is the key thing. We can do that through devolution and get our excellent metro mayors, from either side of the political divide, to attract more private sector investment in their areas. It would help tremendously to have greater tax incentives in some of these areas to attract foreign direct investment. We do not have a regional policy for foreign direct investment. That would help tremendously. Enhancements of things such as the enterprise investment schemes for those regions, which would encourage private investors to invest in their region, could have a transformational effect on the public sector investing in those areas. Finally, regional mutual banks could have a transformative effect on local investment by connecting investors with SMEs in the regions that need investment.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): After the next speaker, the time limit will reduce to four minutes, but with five minutes, I call Caroline Lucas.

4.5 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. This was the first Queen's Speech of this decade, but also the last one ahead of the UK-hosted COP26 climate summit in Glasgow. So it was a vital moment to set out a bold, ambitious plan for a greener, fairer future, in which we can all thrive; to redesign the economy so that its express purpose is delivering the wellbeing of people and the planet; and to create millions of good-quality green jobs in every corner of the country. Instead of that, we got a reheated Environment Bill that currently is not fit for purpose, a

planning Bill that robs people of the right to shape the places where they live, and a voter ID Bill that ignores the real problems with our democracy, in favour of trying to solve a problem that frankly does not exist.

The Government's legislative programme is a recklessly wasted opportunity. It is not as if we did not know what needed to be done. More than 100 cross-party Members of this House have come together to support a new Bill—the climate and ecological emergency Bill—to address the climate and nature crises together, and more than 40 have so far backed my amendment calling on the Government to introduce it. The Bill would ensure that the UK does its fair share to limit global heating to 1.5° by taking responsibility for our entire greenhouse gas footprint, with imported emissions and those from international aviation and shipping included, and by focusing on cutting emissions at source. At the same time, it will protect nature and restore abundant biodiverse habitats, and establish a citizens' assembly to advise Ministers and Parliament on a strategy to achieve those goals. Such legislation would create the foundations for a future in which humankind and the planet can survive and, crucially, thrive as well.

Let me briefly highlight four more Bills that need to form part of any green recovery worthy of the name. The Secretary of State's refusal to rule out issuing new North sea oil and gas licences is the very opposite of climate leadership. We need a fossil fuel non-proliferation Bill to break our deadly addiction and give backing to a global treaty that would end all exploration and production of fossil fuels, phase out existing stockpiles and work with local communities to deliver a just transition. I pay tribute to the work of Platform, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth Scotland for their pioneering work on this.

Transitioning away from a fossil-fuel powered economy to one that is green and fair is also the primary purpose of a green new deal. It would create more than 1 million well-paid, good-quality green jobs, where everyone has a role in laying the foundation for a fairer, sustainable future. There have been countless research reports making the case that investing in the green economy is the fastest and most cost-effective way to recover post covid. Recent data from Green New Deal UK has revealed the potential for this jobs-rich green recovery in every constituency. To save Ministers' time, there is already a green new deal prepared, which the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) and I presented in the last parliamentary Session, and we would be delighted if the Government were to take it over.

Crucially, a green new deal would give businesses the long-term certainty that they need to thrive. It is time to harness the pioneering role played by many companies and create an environment that promotes and rewards doing good business. A better business Bill would amend the Companies Act 2006 to require firms to operate in a way that benefits all stakeholders, including workers, communities and the environment, as well as shareholders. More than 500 businesses have already come together to demand these changes to UK law to enable companies to thrive in partnership with people and nature, not at their expense. But we need to do more than that, shifting not just the focus of business but the focus of our entire economy, because we will not build back better by doubling down on the same outdated economic system that is fuelling the fires of the climate crisis and making society more unequal and less resilient. The Treasury's

own Dasgupta review of the economics of biodiversity is a clarion call for urgent change in how we think, act and measure economic success. A wellbeing economy Bill would shore up the foundations on which we build a better future. It would require the Government to adopt new economic goals that put people and planet first, and that would include the Treasury, so that the economy serves society, not the other way around. To better reflect that new purpose, the Bill would make the health and wellbeing of people and nature the main measures of economics, not GDP growth.

There is a gaping environment and climate-shaped hole at the heart of the Government's legislative programme. The five Bills that I have outlined are critical to filling those holes and setting us on the right course as we go forward.

4.11 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure, as always, to speak today and represent the residents of the Clacton constituency.

There is much to welcome in the Queen's Speech: a fairer immigration system; new protections and support for victims of crime, and increased sentences for serious and violent offenders; the strengthening of the armed forces covenant; the modernisation of renting and planning; and the end of anomalies with leaseholds, which can be so exorbitant. This is a programme that reflects a Government who are listening to and delivering on people's priorities.

I am particularly pleased with new measures to help people into better jobs, especially the revolutionary lifetime skills guarantee, which will be extremely valuable for the Clacton constituency. Our area, as I have said in this place many times, relies heavily on tourism for jobs. Prior to the pandemic, it represented about 17% of all employment in our area. The results of my recent covid recovery survey showed that this heavy reliance on tourism continues.

Yes, the Government are helping businesses back to normality with restart grants, the business rates holiday, a VAT cut and the "Welcome back" fund, and of course the next stage is the wonderful unlocking next Monday, which will also do so much to help hospitality. Sadly, however, there will still be casualties. There will still be businesses that do not reopen, despite our best efforts. That is true not just for tourism but for all industries, which is why the lifetime skills guarantee scheme is so vital. It will help people to retrain after the pandemic, while equalling out opportunities for training and employment in the future, and setting people up on the route to better, well-paid jobs. It will do this across a wide range of job-relevant courses, including training in industries that will be of central importance as we build back better. We are helping people to get the skills that employers are looking for, thereby giving them the best chance of finding better jobs.

Those who vote against the motion or legislation to enact the scheme will do nothing but rob those hard-working, aspirational people of valuable opportunities to reskill—opportunities that until now have been out of their reach. I will not do that. I will support the motion and the skills and post-16 education Bill, when it arrives in this place, to ensure a levelling up of opportunities. Of course, I will also do all I can in this place to help those businesses as they reopen.

[Giles Watling]

There is still much that the Government can do in this area, including by introducing a differentiation in beer duty to help hospitality, helping our arts, cultural and sporting institutions back on their feet, maintaining that help until they are welcoming back full houses once more, and promoting the wonderful destinations we have here in the United Kingdom, which includes the wonderful sunshine coast of Clacton. Our best beaches are here, and I am proud to represent them. The way to help businesses in Clacton is to get people visiting our seaside destinations regularly. Create demand and, I believe, we create jobs.

On jobs, I also welcome the Bill to create the freeports, which include a site at Harwich and Felixstowe. That is another thing that will help the Clacton constituency, with jobs that will be filled by an increasingly upskilled workforce. Further, I recognise the importance of the Bills to improve the NHS and the Bill to improve the highest standards of animal welfare—two issues that I know my constituents care deeply about, as do I. I look forward to supporting that legislation in due course.

Finally, I thank the Government once again for prioritising the environment in this Queen's Speech. We will set binding targets, but we will build back greener, creating highly skilled jobs as part of the green industrial revolution. I have no doubt that the Clacton constituency will be a part of creating and filling those new employment opportunities.

4.14 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is very interesting to follow the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling), who appears to have made it all the way from Clacton to Portcullis House but not quite managed to get over the final 200 yards, which is quite an interesting metaphor for the Government's Queen's Speech. It promises so much, as the Government have over the last 11 years, yet, as is so often the case, there is less to it than originally meets the eye.

This is an entirely incoherent Government, and, most importantly, it is a Government who do not do what they say and who do not mean what they say. We had the stunning statistic from the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake)—I thought this was very interesting—that the gap between London and the south and the north of England is bigger than the gap between West Germany and East Germany before unification. What a stunning demonstration of the failure of the northern powerhouse, which we were all told to celebrate seven or eight years ago.

Kevin Hollinrake: The point is that we need to put political differences aside on this issue. Decades of underinvestment have brought us here. The hon. Gentleman is trying to make a cheap political point, but that is not at all what I was saying.

Mr Perkins: I am making a political point because we have had a Conservative Government for 11 years and I see videos on television showing people who have decided to vote Conservative because they are fed up about the health service or about ports closing, not realising that it is the policies of a Conservative Government, which Government Members have been voting for all these years, that have caused these problems.

When we look at what is in front of us, we see, for example, the lifetime skills guarantee. The lifetime skills guarantee existed under a Labour Government. In 2013, this Government got rid of it and now they want us to celebrate their bringing back, in a less ambitious form, exactly what existed previously under Labour. We have the apprenticeships levy. Since the introduction of the apprenticeships levy, apprenticeship numbers have fallen. We have a Prime Minister who, two years ago, stood on the steps of Downing Street and said, "On social care, trust me—I've got a plan." The reality is that he is now coming back and saying, "Well, let's have a chat about it because I'd like to work together on it." The reality is that this Government have said one thing and done another.

The Government are talking about a revolution in skills. We have had 11 years of funding cuts. We have had cuts to adult education of over 50%. They are absolutely monumental, and now the Government have the audacity to stand there and suggest that they are the way that we solve the skills crisis. Hon. Members have spoken in this debate about the productivity gap between Britain and some of our European competitors. When we have had the cuts that we have seen to work-based learning and adult education—not just to funding, but to the numbers—and the impact that the introduction of the trebling of tuition fees has had on work-based learning and on people bettering themselves, is it any wonder that we have this productivity failure in front of us?

The Queen's Speech talks about infrastructure. HS2 is an important infrastructure project, which was envisaged under the Labour Government. Never before has there been a Government spending as much money as they are on HS2 yet simultaneously looking so unenthusiastic and so incompetent in delivering it. I firmly believe in HS2 but I wish that we had a Government who believed in it as much as I do, and they are the ones actually spending the money.

The Government have abandoned smaller businesses. The Queen's Speech talks about increasing the amount of trade that we do with the Gulf, Africa and the Indo-Pacific. I entirely agree with that, but the reality is that we have a large market on our doorsteps and the current arrangements that we have as a result of Brexit prevent small manufacturers from being able to trade with those companies. Companies in the UK say to me that if they do not have enough for an entire lorryload to export, it is impossible for them to do so. Recently, Sir David Frost, the architect of the UK-Northern Ireland protocol, said that the protocol is not "sustainable for long". This is a Government who in every regard are telling us one thing, failing to deliver, and then coming back and suggesting that they are the solution to the very problems they have created.

Small businesses have been left in a very difficult situation. We have seen the number of apprenticeships that small businesses are able to get involved in completely reduced as a result of the complexity of the apprenticeships system. Many small businesses have really struggled through the pandemic because their directors were excluded from the self-employment support scheme.

The self-employment scheme was great for those who qualified, but the reality is that there were many people in many sectors who carried on working right through the pandemic and were also able to pocket a very

generous pay-out from the Government, but there were also 3 million people who, for a variety of different reasons, were excluded. The Government spent huge amounts of money on a scheme that missed many people for different reasons, and which simultaneously gave a huge amount of money to some people who were gratefully able to receive it, but who, it could be argued, were not necessarily the right people.

We have a Government who do not mean what they say and who do not deliver what they say they will. This Queen's Speech is an incoherent example of all their failings.

4.21 pm

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con) [V]: It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) on behalf of the people of Mid Norfolk, and to speak a little more optimistically and positively about this country and its future, and reject the narrative of doom and gloom from the Opposition Benches.

In particular, it is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Chancellor at the end of a year in which he has inherited a crisis like no other, and, in the eyes of my constituents, passed the test with flying colours by announcing with speed last year a commitment to “do whatever it takes” and to take unprecedented measures to ensure that this country comes through the pandemic.

It is in no small part due to the Treasury's commitment—to the 9 million people in employment the Treasury has helped and the 2.7 million in self-employment; with the tens of billions of pounds for small and medium-sized companies, and the £407 billion of relief moved at pace to support our economy—as well as the genius of our life sciences sector and the huge success of the Government's vaccination programme that we are now in a position to lead the recovery post pandemic. It would be nice to hear Opposition Members at least pay some tribute to some of that extraordinary leadership this year. The polls last week show where the public have their trust, and the Opposition would do well at least to acknowledge that the Government are dealing very well with a historic crisis.

I particularly welcome the announcements on science in the Queen's Speech, including the £22 billion commitment and the creation of our new Advanced Research and Invention Agency. I also welcome the skills guarantee, so that everyone around the country has a chance to take part in the new economy that we are creating, and the commitments to go further and faster on infrastructure.

I mentioned the figure that the covid crisis has cost us: £407 billion has been the total Government support, although the total cost will be much higher. I wanted to address the real question that we must all face: who pays for this debt? It is simply not fair for us to bequeath the debts of this crisis to the next generation, and that means it is incumbent on us to find the mechanisms to drive up prosperity, growth and opportunity. As we leave the European Union and take sovereignty over our regulatory and trade powers, it is important that we grip that opportunity and unleash the full genius of British science, innovation and engineering to create new sectors and new jobs.

Earlier this year I was delighted that the Prime Minister asked me and my right hon. Friends the Members for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and for Chiping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) to lead a

taskforce on innovation, growth and regulatory reform. We reported this week and our recommendations go to the heart of the measures in this Queen's Speech—a new framework for regulation in the UK to be able to lead the world in the regulation of new sectors, and to use regulation to lead in innovation across the life sciences, clinical trials, digital health, agri-tech, nutraceuticals, the decarbonisation of transport, mobility as a service, satellites, and scale-up finance in the City. If we make such reforms, we can create here in the UK a genuine innovation nation—a small country, yes, but one that punches above its weight in developing the clean-tech, agri-tech and med-tech solutions that the world desperately needs as it faces an agricultural and industrial revolution in the next 30 years like the one we led here more than 200 years ago.

All that will be good not just for Britain but for local communities, because new sectors of growth create clusters right throughout the country—from hydrogen in Aberdeen to plant breeding in Aberystwyth and immunotherapies at Queen's University Belfast. The Queen's Speech is a speech for opportunity, regeneration and recovery as one nation, strengthening the Union and creating opportunities for people whoever and wherever they are. On behalf of the people of Mid Norfolk, I strongly commend it to the House.

4.25 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Ahead of the Queen's Speech, Opposition Members called on the Government to prioritise jobs in the recovery from the pandemic. As the Leader of the Opposition said yesterday, after a year of sacrifice we needed a Queen's Speech that rose to the scale of the challenge and was transformative for our economy, public services and society, but what we got lacked ambition and a plan to meet that challenge.

For example, we did not get an uptake on the long-awaited and much needed employment Bill. It is imperative that the Government take swift action to deal with the scourge of insecure work, including by putting an end to exploitative working practices such as fire and rehire. I know constituents who have been caught in such traps—most recently at British Gas—and met some of them during the recent election campaign. Their accounts of the way they have been treated, often after years of loyal service, are deeply unfair. It is a reminder of the urgent need to reform employment practices so that everyone is treated with dignity and respect at work.

The Queen's Speech was notable for what it excluded as much as for what it included. For all the talk about levelling up, there was no meaningful indication of support for an industry that should be at the very heart of that agenda: steel. Steel communities are a key part of our industrial future. There cannot be an advanced economy or an economic recovery from the pandemic without a resilient steel sector. Our steel producers need action on industrial energy costs—we have been going on about that for ages—and we need to ensure that British steel manufacturers, such as those in Newport East, are at last at the front of the queue for Government contracts.

Platitudes about levelling up across the regions and nations of the UK are popular with Government Ministers, but these Ministers are less keen on talking up Wales,

[Jessica Morden]

and there was scant mention of Wales in yesterday's Queen's Speech. We are still waiting on assurances from Tory Government Ministers on their "not a penny less" promise on the replacement of European structural funds and on long-overdue investments in our transport network. It is wrong that Wales accounts for 11% of the UK rail network but receives only 2% of rail investment enhancement from the Department for Transport.

I express my deep disappointment, and that of campaigners and charities throughout the country, that the Queen's Speech failed to incorporate long-awaited reform of the benefits system for terminally ill people. We are now approaching the two-year anniversary of the Government's review of access to welfare benefits for the terminally ill and we are still no closer to the scrapping of the cruel six-month and three-year rules that force people to spend their final months grappling with a complex and uncaring system.

We have continuously raised the issue with Ministers over the past year, alongside the Motor Neurone Disease Association, Marie Curie and other campaigners, to whom I pay tribute for keeping it high on the agenda, especially on social media. The responses have been vague and non-committal, with promises of updates "soon" followed by inaction. Ministers say that they are receptive to the campaign and acknowledge the need for reform, but I question why we are stuck in this limbo. Two years since the review was announced, thousands have died while waiting for a decision on their benefits claim, so will Ministers on the Front Bench today convey to the Department for Work and Pensions people's anger and frustration and ask the Department to sort the situation out?

Finally, on policing, despite warm words from the Government, the truth is that they have still not addressed the impact of their swingeing cuts to policing over the past decade. Today, the police workforce nationally has 23,824 fewer personnel than in 2010. Operation Uplift is welcome, but it still does not take things back to 2010 levels or beyond. The Government must do better for our police services and for communities such as Newport East.

4.29 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): There is so much to welcome in the Queen's Speech, which will make our great country safer, stronger and fairer. I am particularly pleased to welcome the legislation to support the introduction of the UK's first freeports. We have already seen the impact of this Budget announcement in the Tees Valley, where GE Renewable Energy has committed to creating 2,250 jobs, mostly within the confines of the freeport zone.

Speaking of the Tees Valley, it would be remiss of me not to congratulate my friend Ben Houchen on his astounding victory in the mayoral election last week. To win re-election with 73% of the vote represents a huge personal mandate but also a resounding endorsement by the people of the Tees Valley of this Government's plan to deliver on their priorities. That stands in stark contrast to the remarks of the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), which were so typical, I am afraid, of the doom and gloom that characterises the Opposition's

approach not just to the crisis and our handling of it but to the wider prospects and outlook of this country. That goes to the heart, I fear, of their electoral dilemmas.

Creating a more prosperous country where someone's life chances are linked not to where they come from but to who they are capable of being lies at the heart of the mission of levelling up. A good job, a good school for their children and a good home of their own are what millions of people rightly yearn for. On the last point, the planning legislation in the Queen's Speech is vital if we are to deliver the number of homes required where they are most needed.

In constituencies such as mine, an ordinary family can, with hard work, aspire to own a really nice home of their own. Sadly, however, we need to acknowledge that in too much of the south of our country, our housing system is more less, as a market, completely broken. People working hard, even two-earner couples, are priced out of any realistic prospect of owning the home that they want and are instead trapped in an overpriced and heavily subsidised rental market, which further diminishes their ability to save.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The issue of planning is particularly important for my constituency, which is growing at three times the national average already. Does my hon. Friend accept that one welcome aspect of reform would be that for the 1 million housing approvals already in place, the economic incentives are there and the pressure is there for those to be implemented?

Mr Clarke: I absolutely take my hon. Friend's point. He is quite right that this is a complex problem and we need to address aggravating factors, including land banking by developers, which undoubtedly makes the situation harder to address.

We must confront the difficult reality that this is fundamentally a problem of supply. We should not privilege the interests of those who have homes over those who do not. In 1979, the green belt was 721,000 hectares. It has since more than doubled to over 1.6 million hectares, much of which is not genuinely green. Up to 11% of UK brownfield land, over 4,000 hectares, lies within the constraint of the green belt. The Government are proposing sensible steps to release some more land, a fraction of the total, to build the homes that are so badly needed while protecting areas that local residents cherish and choose to exclude.

Striking that balance deftly is vital. I am not advocating a planning free-for-all, and nor is anyone on the Government Benches, but I make a serious appeal to the House to recognise the urgency of the problem that we are storing up in the south-east corner of England, in particular, and to take action to address this. Fundamentally, land scarcity is the problem. Today the land that houses are built on accounts for 72% of its sale value. In 1995, it was 55%, while in the 1950s it was roughly 25%. The pattern is clear. From a centre-right perspective, we cannot be surprised if it becomes harder to make the case for popular capitalism in communities where too many people, particularly younger people, cannot see a realistic route to build that capital in their own lives.

We have to fix this, and I make a plea for us to do so. The most important thing we can do is to focus on sensible solutions to this planning impasse, because if

we do not get it right, we will cut a generation of people out of home ownership, and there will be very serious consequences that we are already starting to see in the capital. We ought to look at how we distribute the burden of planning more sensibly. Rather than there being some additional homes in almost every community, perhaps we should be looking more at garden towns and even cities, because that might concentrate some of the pressures and some of the agglomeration advantages of creating those new communities.

However we choose to address this problem, we cannot ignore it, and the Government are right to be addressing it as part of a strong Queen's Speech that will ultimately deliver on the promise of levelling up not just in communities such as mine, which are the typical centre of attention, but in the wider sense, recognising that if we do not get this right there will be exclusion and deprivation in parts of the country that are typically associated with being much more successful and affluent.

4.34 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Northern Ireland benefits from being part of the United Kingdom. Its people benefit and its economy benefits—they are part of the fifth-largest economy in the world. By contrast, after 100 years of independence and almost 50 years of membership of the European Union, the Republic of Ireland remains the poorest region of the British Isles. It has no national health service, 11% of its employees are in the public sector, and the rest of its economy is essentially a tax haven model, which washes through huge amounts of money for US corporations.

By contrast, Northern Ireland has significantly higher employment levels and a 20% higher standard of living than the Republic of Ireland, and of course we have the benefits of being part of the welfare state. Yes, we have a large public sector, which has cushioned us considerably during the pandemic, and which could not be supported by the Republic of Ireland if there was any move whatsoever towards a united Ireland. Therefore, Northern Ireland's economic and social future rests surely and squarely with the Union. So, for all the talk of Irish unity, the stubborn fact remains that the Republic of Ireland could not afford Irish unity because the Union offers the people of Northern Ireland so much more.

It is important to say that during this year of our centenary because of the amount of attacks on the very existence of our country. Earlier today we had a question in this House about the state of Israel and Hamas wishing to wipe it off the map. As a member of a small state, I get that—I understand that—because there is clearly an agenda to abuse Northern Ireland by saying it should not really exist. Well, I am proud it exists, and I am proud that this Queen's Speech will help us continue to grow our economy as part of this Union. It is important to say that.

However, the first and second quarters of this year have created significant challenges for Northern Ireland. One of the issues was dealing with the pandemic, which was well beyond the Government's control, but the second issue is, of course, the Northern Ireland protocol, which unfortunately has blighted business opportunity for the first two quarters of this year.

I welcome Lord Frost's comments earlier this week that the protocol is not sustainable, but once again we need more than just words. We have had lots of words.

The Prime Minister told businesses they could “bin” the protocol; well, they can't. The Secretary of State told us it would be light touch; it isn't. We are now being told it is not sustainable. Well, if that is the case, I and my country would like to see actions over the unsustainable protocol. It needs to be put away, to put businesses out of their misery in Northern Ireland. I urge the Government to invoke article 16 and make sure we can move on from the societal and economic hardship that has been caused single-handedly by that protocol. I hope we can do that and do it fast. The people and parties who want to keep the protocol for a political points-scoring exercise while businesses suffer only seek to prove that Northern Ireland is somehow different, without realising that it is that difference that prevents the normalisation of both politics and our economy.

I hope we can build on the promises in this Queen's Speech, and I hope we can build on the bus building promises. The Government have an awful lot to do to meet the predicted 4,000 buses to be built during this Parliament, so they really need to get a move on.

4.39 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): They say that success has 100 fathers, and as we have seen over the last week, in any election 100 reasons are put forward as to why one side won and another lost. But I think it is beyond question that one of the reasons why yesterday's Queen's Speech set out the legislative programme for a Conservative Government is that one of our pivotal arguments was about how we can level up the United Kingdom. That was one of the key arguments at the last election, and it is a key reason why last week Conservatives were successful in local authorities such as Dudley and Conservative Mayors such as Andy Street in the West Midlands were successful.

It is about the need to level up, to ensure that every part of the United Kingdom enjoys our success and prosperity and that no area gets left behind, including my constituency of Dudley South. In 1997, Dudley's gross value added per head was around 78% of the national average. By 2010, that had fallen to just 64%. My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) alluded to the disparity between East and West Germany as a comparator. I do not have a similar analogy, but clearly a 36% gap with the national average cannot be allowed to continue.

Action has been taken over the last 11 years to start to address that gap, to the extent that before the pandemic, in the five years leading up to 2019, salaries in Dudley had increased more quickly than anywhere else in the country. We have seen investment in areas such as Dudley South, including in the west midlands metro tram extension, which will link my constituency in Brierley Hill and Netherton through Dudley to Birmingham's national rail network; in our enterprise zones, to create jobs; and in the future high streets fund, to get our town centres back on their feet. But there is still a wide gap, and many of the measures announced by Her Majesty yesterday will see concrete action to start to close that gap further and ensure that people have opportunities to succeed, regardless of where they live or who their parents are.

For example, the skills and post-16 education Bill is particularly important for my constituents in Dudley South. For years, if not decades, we have talked about closing the gap in the level of skills and qualifications in

[Mike Wood]

the Black Country compared with elsewhere in the country. The Bill will help to address that gap and ensure that my constituents have the skills that firms need for the jobs they have and, at least as importantly, the skills that will be needed for the jobs that we want to attract and create. I went to state schools in Dudley, but few of the people I was at school with in the 1980s and 1990s still live in the area, because so many have had to move away for work. We cannot allow that to happen infinitely.

The House will be aware that I chair the all-party parliamentary beer group. Hospitality is one of the largest employers in the country, particularly among under-25s, so the support given has been necessary. I hope the Treasury will look at differential duty rates and reforming the duty system to support draught beer, which will support thousands of beers—sorry, thousands of jobs—in every part of the country according to the economic model, and perhaps thousands of beers, too.

4.43 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) when he is talking about his work on the all-party parliamentary beer group, of which I am a proud member, but less of that for now.

I welcome the Government's commitment to ban conversion therapy. I hope that that legislation will sail through the House, as long as the Government get it right. I also give a cautious welcome to the draft Online Safety Bill, for which we have been calling for many years. I just hope that the Government avoid their usual failing of caving in to the demands of foreign big tech companies.

I am extremely worried about the Government's proposals to introduce a requirement for photographic voter ID. Let us call it what it is: it is voter suppression. It is straight out of the Trump playbook. It is sinister and authoritarian, and it will be opposed in this House.

Ian Paisley: I understand some of the hostility about this, but it was a Labour Government who imposed photographic voter ID on Northern Ireland, and it has actually increased voter turnout and reduced fraud. Let us not scare-tactic people out of their democratic franchise.

Christian Matheson: It was introduced in Northern Ireland because there was a specific issue, which the hon. Gentleman obviously knows about, concerning another political party, where there was clear, identified fraud. In the 2019 election, 49 million votes were cast and there was one conviction for fraud. This is not a problem and it does not require a solution.

There is too much left out of this Queen's Speech. There is nothing on cladding for fire safety victims and those who are trapped in housing that is now worthless. There is very little on leasehold. It is good to see my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), my constituency neighbour, in his place. His leading work on this issue, along with others including the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), has been outstanding, and I pay tribute to him. Instead, we get a planning

free-for-all, which Government Members have referred to, that will cause chaos locally and, frankly, line the pockets of big Tory donors. There is nothing on energy-neutral building standards and changes to building regs to make housing built to tougher environmental standards. In fact, as we have heard, apart from rolling over the Environment Bill, there is very little on environmentalism and a green recovery.

There is nothing in the Queen's Speech for local government, which has been at the forefront of the community pandemic response. The Government have chopped £9 billion off social care and local government has had to pick up that tab. I say to Ministers that they must not use local government to pay off the debts from the pandemic that will need to be paid off. In Cheshire West and Chester, we have lost £337 million in the past decade. Just recently, the Government cut 20% from the money to fix potholes, which is one of the Government's big schemes.

We know the *modus operandi* of this Government when it comes to cuts. They cut the budget of the local council or the public authority—police or fire, for example—and then, when the local authority is unable to deliver the services, they criticise the local authority for having to reduce the quality of service. If that public authority has to increase council tax, the police precept or whatever it is as a result, they criticise it for putting up council tax to make good on the cuts the Tory Government have imposed. It is dishonest, and there is a dishonesty that runs through this Government.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister said from the Dispatch Box:

“We understand this crucial point: we find flair, imagination, enthusiasm and genius distributed evenly throughout this country, while opportunity is not. We mean to change that, because it is not just a moral and social disgrace, but an economic mistake and a criminal waste of talent.”—[*Official Report*, 11 May 2021; Vol. 695, c. 18.]

He is absolutely right, but the Conservatives have been in power for 11 years and the Prime Minister has been a member of the Government for most of that time. Since I have been here, they change their leaders every couple of years like some kind of tinpot regime and try to pretend that all of a sudden they are a new Government. But just as a snake will change its skin, slither away and is still the same snake, it is still the same Conservatives in charge trying to deny everything they caused in the first place. It is dishonest. They cannot abrogate their own failings. They should stop blaming everyone else for their own failings.

Finally, let me turn to fire and rehire, which has been a scandal of this pandemic. If employers came to trade unions and said, “We've got a problem. The bottom has fallen out of our business. Let's work together and solve this together,” then trade unions would have gone for that. Instead, we see this awful practice. One of my hon. Friends spoke earlier about British Gas. Loyal and skilled employees with 15 to 20 years of service are being fired and rehired on worse conditions. There is nothing in the Queen's Speech on that. The Minister responsible himself called it “bully boy tactics”, and he is absolutely right, but now is the time in the pandemic when it is becoming so common that legislation must be brought forward to ban this dreadful practice. If I am fortunate enough to win the private Members' Bill ballot, I will bring forward legislation. I hope the Government will back me.

4.48 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It was an engaging speech by the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), and he made some important specific points that I am sure the Government will bear in mind. I wonder, however, whether he will accept this more fundamental point. In the 2019 election, when the country was looking for a person who could identify opportunities as the country went through substantial changes to its economic relationships by leaving the European Union, and a person who had the ambition and drive to fulfil those opportunities, it chose my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. As we reflect on the elections last week, will he also accept that although there was a substantial amount of support for the successful vaccine roll-out, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor's support for such a vast array of activity across Government was also rewarded by the public? Those fundamental points of trust in the Prime Minister and in his ambitions for this country are resonating with the public and are reflected in the Queen's Speech, which I wholeheartedly support.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the only person to whom the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) should be directing his comments in respect of fire and rehire, as the events of the weekend showed, is the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer)?

Richard Fuller: My hon. Friend, as is customary, makes a poignant point, which I am sure will be reflected on with glee by those on the Opposition Front Bench.

The longer context for this Queen's Speech is that, since 2010, the thread all the way through has been a focus on the value of work. In the first period of 2010 to 2015, a lot of that was about benefit reform, so that people who had to go out to work did not look at their neighbours and think, "Well, they've got a better life living on benefits". The second part was the Conservative Government implementing a living wage commitment—a commitment this Government continue with. The third, which we are seeing in this Queen's Speech, is the identification that ultimately what we are looking for is a lifelong commitment from the Government to support people's skills development.

What is so exciting about the skills and post-16 education Bill is that it is starting to focus on potential. It does not matter who someone is, where they are, how rich they are or how poor they are; what matters is what their potential is for this country. However, I would urge the Government to look at three ways of going a bit further. First, can we broaden even further the scope of what we understand as potential? As we have seen, potential can come in academic potential and it can come in skills potential, but it can also come in commercial potential and it can come in artistic and creative potential. Where are the mechanisms—creative mechanisms—for those talents and for unlocking that potential?

Secondly, can we also get a better balance of where the risks for taking part in these programmes comes? At the moment, all of the financial risk lies on the person choosing what they decide to do. As a paper by Peter Ainsworth on the education, enterprise and giving-back grant suggests, institutions should have more skin in the

game. There should be a sharing of risks between the institutions that are trying to tap into and unlock that potential and the individual who is seeking such forward movement.

Thirdly, why is there not an opportunity now to have more competition both between types of providers for Government resources—between the academic track or the skills track, and potentially the commercial track or the artistic track—and within those types, between universities, based on an accountability of how well institutions are fulfilling potential?

There are a number of measures in the speech that are particularly relevant to the people of Bedfordshire. The commitments on air pollution will be particularly relevant to people in Sandy and other parts of the community along the A1 corridor. I welcome, cautiously, the Government's obesity strategies, but I worry that some of the measures may inadvertently harm certain producers, including Jordans, which is a manufacturer of healthy cereals in my constituency.

I firmly welcome the Government's commitments to drug and alcohol rehabilitation in criminal justice, which was such a crucial part of the successful election of Festus Akinbusoye as police and crime commissioner of Bedfordshire last week. On planning, I echo the concerns that other Members have mentioned.

I do think the Government need to make sure that the 1 million existing approvals are actioned—that there is a tax and build schedule—otherwise the Government will not just face a northern powerhouse group on the Back Benches, but have a southern alliance to tackle.

Finally, looking across the Atlantic, one wonders how powerful countries and empires end. There are two substantial ways they do so in peacetime: the first is that Governments spend too much, and then tax their populations beyond their tolerance to take it; and the second is that Governments debase their currency, and then inflation lets rip and destroys savings. Let us make sure that, as a fundamental part of this, we maintain and hold up the probity of public finance.

4.54 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): There have been many criticisms of what is contained in the Queen's Speech, but I will focus on one of the glaring omissions: the much promised employment Bill. This was an opportunity to shape the future of work and address the difficulties facing those whose employment is increasingly precarious, and other disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in the workplace. The pandemic has shown just how badly the UK protects its workers. The degree of inequality, including labour market inequality, that the pandemic has exposed is stark. The Government have an obligation to tackle that, but instead they have gone backwards, removing even the promise of an employment Bill from their legislative programme.

We in the Scottish National party favour a different approach: raising the floor of protection and welfare, focusing on equality, and providing transitional support for workers. That is what should be getting urgent attention from the Government, but when Ministers praise the UK's flexible labour market, they are really praising an increasingly exploitative market where many have been stripped of basic rights. I have spent the past year talking about the future of work and how we must

[Kirsten Oswald]

deliver positive change, so that post-pandemic work is fit for the future, but that appears far from the Government's thoughts. Instead, they are intent on pursuing a furlough cliff edge, the withdrawal of the £20 universal credit uplift and their chaotic Brexit. They are choosing inaction on employment, and the inequality that hampers the future of so many will simply get worse because of that.

For instance, pregnant women and new parents still have no protection from widespread discrimination and unfair redundancy, which even this Government have accepted exists. Maternity Action says that pregnant women and new mothers are facing a wave of unfair redundancies this year. Why will the Government not protect them? Where is the action to protect workers from the fire and rehire tactics so powerfully highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands)? Why will the Government not act to stop that?

The Prime Minister promised an employment Bill containing measures on flexible working. The recent experience of workers, particularly those with disabilities or parenting or caring responsibilities, makes the need for that clear. Businesses and trade unions back the ability to work flexibly as the default. It must become a right from day one for all employees. Where is the Government action on that? Where is the action on zero-hours contracts? Where is the action on workers in retail and other services on the frontline during the pandemic who were excluded from effective health and safety representation and protection? The Government must act to create a level playing field on health and safety, regardless of employment status.

The failures of the UK's employment protection legislation affect much of the social care sector, whose workers on the frontline in the pandemic served such a key role. The contrast between the Prime Minister's vague promises on reforming social care and the actions of the Scottish Government are stark. The SNP Scottish Government will legislate to create a national care service on an equal footing with NHS Scotland, and have pledged a new fair national care wage for staff, with national pay bargaining. That is the bold, decisive action that people expect as we emerge from a pandemic.

The Scottish people know that this Tory Government are making empty promises on work, and are instead working to deliver a post-Brexit race to the bottom. Last week, people in Scotland returned a Parliament committed to fair work and equality. Increasingly, as we see very well from the SNP landslide result, they recognise that the only way to build that fairer society that protects and enhances workers' rights and supports equality is for Scotland to have the full powers of an independent country.

4.58 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Good jobs and decent working conditions have always been central to the Labour party's core mission. Prosperity and patriotism are the mutually reinforcing foundations upon which our Labour movement is based, and although we in the Opposition recognise that good pay is utterly crucial we also know that work is about dignity, pride and contribution. It is about being part of something bigger.

In my Aberavon constituency, I see that desire to be part of something bigger every day—from the NHS workers who have saved so many lives to the manufacturers who have provided them with PPE, and the steelworkers who have continued to build the foundations of our modern economy. Yet over the last 11 years we have seen an exponential increase in insecurity across all sectors of our economy—from the two in five adult workers who do not yet know their shift hours for next week to the exploited gig economy workers denied holiday pay, the workers sacked by British Gas and then rehired on worse conditions, the high street workers with the threat of internet shopping looming over them, and the factory workers who could be the latest victims in the erosion of our manufacturing base that we have seen over the last 11 years.

British workers are the greatest asset that this country has, yet successive Conservative Governments have utterly failed to value their contribution. Many on the Conservative Benches celebrate flexibility and fluidity, yet flexibility without real choice means insecurity, and fluidity without proper investment in reskilling means mass unemployment. Tackling insecurity at work should therefore be a top priority for any Government, so where on earth is the long-promised employment Bill? Its omission from this Queen's Speech is simply unforgivable.

It is important to recognise that during the pandemic 50% of the workforce did not work a single day from home. It is many of those workers, who are still going into work or who have been furloughed, who are the most likely to be at the sharp end of the job market, with their jobs often the most at risk from automation, the digital economy and the green revolution. It is these trends—and, crucially, how the Government respond to them—that will define Britain's success in the years ahead. Of course, the trade union movement must be at the heart of this response. The modern job market will evolve, but the basic principle will always remain: the most productive and competitive companies are those that give their workforce a strong voice. Good industrial relations deliver good business results.

I therefore suggest that there should be three core principles at the heart of the Government's response: first, dignity at work with new legislation protecting the rights of employees, not least to outlaw fire and rehire; secondly, partnering with business and trade unions for a new kind of growth to deliver the jobs of the future, recognising where Britain can be competitive but also that the less celebrated foundational industries such as steel are critical for our security; and thirdly, a properly resourced programme of training and retraining aimed at the jobs of the future. There is no point in trying to address the productivity crisis if we keep cutting the workforce out of the conversation; there is no point in investing in further education if the jobs are not there; and there is no point in decarbonising our industrial base if the local workforce is not trained up and if jobs and carbon emissions are simply offshored. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), the shadow Chancellor, has so rightly said, our communities do not need sloganeering about levelling up; they need good jobs. She said:

"We need jobs you can raise a family on".

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Richard Holden. Is the hon. Gentleman appearing virtually? No. I call Wendy Chamberlain.

5.2 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): We heard in the Queen's Speech that the Government plan to create jobs and support lifetime training, and on the surface these are good intentions. I am not here to argue against employment or education; few, if any, in the Chamber would do so. But what was striking was what was not mentioned in the Government's legislative agenda, where there remains no support for those who needed it before the pandemic and during it and who are still in need of support now.

Before the pandemic, it was well established that disabled people faced significant barriers relating to the labour market, and we have seen throughout the pandemic that disabled people have been disproportionately impacted, notably through the Government's continued refusal to create an uplift to legacy benefits in line with the universal credit uplift. We were told it was too complex to do this quickly at the outset of the pandemic. A year on, it is clear that this Government simply have no appetite to do it. Some have benefited financially during the pandemic, and the Government are relying on them to kick-start the economy.

Kirsten Oswald: I am interested in the hon. Lady's comments about legacy benefits. This morning at the Dispatch Box, the Prime Minister told me that what needed to be done would be done and that the arms of the UK state would be put round all those in need. Does she agree that I am correct in saying that that is simply not what has happened?

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. I agree that the Government seem to have no appetite to do this. She will hear as I go on to talk about the transition to universal credit that I am in agreement with her.

The failure to do this uplift means that an estimated 1.9 million disabled people are missing out on much-needed support. The delays in the managed transition programme to universal credit have also meant that a number of people have inadvertently transitioned. I have raised the case of a constituent of mine in the House before: having volunteered during her nursing studies to work in the NHS, the unintended consequence was the loss of legacy benefits and ineligibility for universal credit. Research by the Leonard Cheshire Foundation has found that there has been an impact on 71% of disabled people's employment since the start of the pandemic. Not only are disabled people more likely to suffer job loss, but employers are simply more reluctant to employ them, with 42% of those surveyed stating concerns about doing so.

I turn briefly to universal credit again. Claimants whose payments are assessed based on their monthly earnings lose out when their pay dates do not match the Government's ideal of being paid on a strictly monthly basis. The Secretary of State is likely to respond by saying that after a legal challenge last year the regulations were changed to allow some degree of flexibility, but those changes did nothing to help those on other payment cycles, such as every two weeks or every four weeks, who continue to be incorrectly awarded varying levels of support. Again, I have a constituent who has experienced this difficulty and lost passported local authority benefits as a result and may do so again in future. This system must be amended so that it is suitable for the real world of work, which the Government say they want to support.

I ask where women are in the Government's plans for jobs and better work. Evidence given to the Select Committee on Women and Equalities on the gendered impact of the pandemic showed that women were more likely to be working in sectors that were completely shut down during lockdown, more likely to be in insecure work and less likely to receive topped-up earnings if furloughed.

One of the first things the Government dropped as a result of the pandemic was gender pay gap reporting; we know that what is measured gets attention, and with this decision the Government highlighted what their priorities were and were not. The Queen's Speech talks about the creation of green jobs. Women account for less than 25% of the STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—workforce. More needs to be done to encourage greater diversity in our high-value sectors, where the Government want to drive and are expecting growth.

We do not yet know the impact of long covid on employment and whether sufferers will need the same support as many disabled people do now. We do not yet know how the bereavements experienced by so many families will change the number of single parents needing support. I join my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) in asking the Government to extend bereavement support to unmarried couples. We do know the devastating impact on the employment of young people and in sectors such as hospitality and tourism, which are so important to constituencies such as mine, but we do not know what the future of those sectors looks like. Finally, what we do know is that what has been promised by the Government in the Queen's Speech is limited in its vision of both support and growth.

5.7 pm

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): There is no greater priority for me than the jobs and livelihoods of my constituents. The most anxiety-inducing aspect of the past year has been watching unemployment nearly triple in my constituency, notwithstanding the nearly 22,000 people whose wages were supported by furlough. That is why I wish to start by welcoming the measures in the Queen's Speech that go to jobs and, in particular, to our ambitions in science and technology as it applies to defence, healthcare and telecommunications.

In addition, I welcome the huge research and development opportunities that will come from the Advanced Research and Invention Agency Bill and the opportunities they will create for people in West Berkshire. Let me start by saying that the vote of confidence the Government have expressed in those industries is already reflected in recruitment decisions. At the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston, where they are tasked with developing the new warhead, 300 jobs are being created. At a new test and validation laboratory at Vodafone's headquarters in Newbury a further 30 jobs are coming. At the Harwell science park, just up the road from us, where they have opened the vaccine manufacturing and innovation centre but also have plans for bioscience, artificial intelligence and genomics, there is a prospect of another 5,000 new jobs in the coming years.

The Labour party always describes itself as the party of working people, but that often feels as though it is rooted in the old, industrialised, unionised industries.

[*Laura Farris*]

What are the people who do these highly skilled, highly paid jobs if they are not also working people? What are a one nation Conservative Government for if it is not to make sure that the opportunities in those jobs are as accessible to old and young, to male and female, and to those resident in any part of the country?

We in Newbury measure our success in part by the success of the students at Newbury College, who provide our best local apprentices—be that in green energy, technology or engineering. But all those courses are brand new to the college, and there are many who live locally who would not have had the same opportunities. That is why I fully support the lifetime skills guarantee and the supporting loan entitlement, to give workers the chance to develop new skills, irrespective of age—or, I may add, gender. In this brave new world of science and tech, we know that women have been historically under-represented, often because of educational choices they made when they were at school. Therefore, it is crucial that further training opportunities are available to them, so that they have an equal opportunity to seize those chances.

If there was one thing missing from the focus on jobs, for me it was a new solution for childcare, the need for which has been revealed particularly in the course of the last year. I look forward to speaking to Treasury Ministers in the coming days about what I think that ought to look like.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will forgive me if I end by briefly swerving on to Home Office territory, because another notable mention in the Queen's Speech was the safety of women and girls. This is a work in progress for the Government. The Government have done such important work in this area and deserve credit for their unflinching approach to things such as stalking; for creating new offences to tackle some of the most pernicious forms of domestic abuse; and for tackling new crimes of sexual violence to protect the Tinder generation, when for too long we were too embarrassed to talk about it.

However, serious issues remain—the safety of women in public, street harassment and, most recently, what happens to girls at school and the sexual exploitation that they have experienced. I look forward to supporting the Home Secretary's work on that this year and to the strategy on violence against women and girls that will be published in the autumn.

5.11 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I would like to start with last year's Humble Address, which promised a right for workers to request a more predictable contract, presumably aimed at the many people on zero-hours and flexible contracts. However, it was never introduced—so here we are, another year on and another opportunity missed to deal with those parasitic, unfair contracts, which are more befitting to the 19th century than the 21st. Until we begin to challenge the very existence of zero-hours contracts, we will only ever be tinkering at the edges of an unfair and fundamentally unbalanced labour market. Levelling up will just be a fantasy until we put in place the building blocks that people need for a better life. That means permanent, secure, well-paid jobs. Too few new jobs at the moment offer none of those.

The Taylor review is nearly four years old, and the vast majority of its recommendations are still gathering dust on the shelf. The truth is that this Government have no intention of improving workers' rights, but they should, because the security of a job should be valued as much as the creation of that job. Why is it that whenever a multinational is looking to cut its workforce, we always seem to be at the head of the queue? Why are we seen as a soft touch? Why are British workers seen as easier and cheaper to get rid of than just about everyone else in western Europe? We need to end the culture of weak employment rights, avaricious corporations and a Government who are indifferent to the importance of job security. Without job security, people have no security.

Nowhere is that indifference more apparent than in the Government's failure to address the scandal of fire and rehire. Ministers repeatedly tell us that they do not agree with it, yet they do absolutely nothing to tackle it. ACAS sent them its findings on the options several months ago, but since then we have had radio silence. In a vain attempt to find out what was happening, I sent freedom of information requests to both ACAS and the Department. ACAS told me that it was not in the public interest to release the report and the Department said that, if the report were made public, "we believe the nature of such frank discussion and debates on key public policy issues would be inhibited and the Department would be prevented from taking decisions based on the fullest understanding of the issues. We take the view that, on balance, the public interest is better served by withholding this information."

What utter nonsense! Thousands of people are having their livelihoods ripped away from them and it is apparently not in the public's interest to even reveal what options the Government are considering to deal with it. Not in the public interest? I think what they meant to say is that it is not in the interests of the greedy employers who are boosting their profits by cutting people's pay. Those of us on this side of the Chamber think it is in the public interest to support working people. The clue is in the name: the Labour party.

We do need more housing, but tinkering with the planning system will lead to more of the same. The problem is not developers being able to get planning permission; the problem is that there is a big cartel at the top. We get the wrong types of houses built in the wrong types of places, because that is where the money is made.

I thought we were going to take back control, but I see precious little of that. Instead, there is legislation to stop people and councillors having a say on the future of their areas. The Government are denying people a voice. That is a fundamental threat to democracy, but the biggest threat is of course the plan to stop millions of people from voting in the future. Why do that? There were 32 million votes cast at the last election and only six cases of voter fraud. This is all about moving the goalposts for party political advantage, and it is part of a wider pattern to suppress and reduce accountability. We also see proposals to restrict the right to protest, the continued use of emergency powers when they are not justified, and an increasingly distant relationship between the Government and the truth. We see the lining of mates' pockets with public money while kids go hungry, and there is plenty of talk, too, about simplifying procurement. Just who is going to benefit from that?

The Government are deliberately embarking on a course of action that will damage our democracy. While I welcome the announcement of a public inquiry into the pandemic, it is clear that it will be delayed until after the next election; again, party political advantage is being sought. If there is one thing that sums up the Government more than anything else, it is their complete failure to take responsibility for absolutely anything.

5.15 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): In this Queen's Speech, I am encouraged to see the Government rise to the challenge of setting out the blueprint for the economy that we aim to build after the pandemic, restoring our freedom and prosperity while embracing innovation and the big challenges of the future. It is especially important, in my view, that our national recovery goes hand in hand with addressing the socioeconomic, health and educational disparities across our country, and puts levelling up at the heart of the Government's agenda.

The pandemic has highlighted the value that people give to place. In the past, the connection between London and the northern regions has been seen as a gateway for people to leave the north, but the pandemic has changed that wrong thinking and demonstrated that it is not the case. The Government's commitment to legislating in this Session to provide for the Crewe to Manchester section of HS2, together with Northern Powerhouse Rail, will ensure that the north is not only well connected but even more attractive to job creators.

In addition, the plans to improve local connections through the national bus strategy, together with the towns fund and the levelling-up fund, will address the inadequacies of local public transport that have been a barrier to our communities' prosperity. As a member of the Cheadle towns fund board, I look forward to the building of a new train station in Cheadle town centre, which will reconnect my constituents with the rail network. I hope that the Chancellor will support my bid for Restoring Your Railway funding to further facilitate that key connection. These projects will boost our infrastructure and bring jobs to our region.

Many of my Cheadle constituents work in the Cheshire life sciences corridor, and I welcome the Government's continued support of that sector. I hope that the new Advanced Research and Invention Agency will bring about another step forward for life sciences in the north-west and across the country.

I also welcome the upcoming skills and post-16 education Bill, which will underpin the lifetime skills guarantee. As someone who completed a degree when married with a family, I know how important it is that education does not end when someone is 18 or 21. As the world of work evolves, it is crucial that people have access to education and training that will help them to adapt and thrive in their careers and to access new opportunities as they emerge. That is how we will back the innovative industries that will form the backbone of our levelled-up northern economy and place this country at the forefront of global innovation.

The pandemic has changed the nature of work, and we have to be prepared for the effect that will have on our wider economy. Pre-pandemic, the imminent death of the high street had been widely predicted, but more people are working from home and have learned the

value of their local high streets, and the levelling-up fund will provide an opportunity to rebuild and rethink them. Across our high streets, there are still shops such as Waterhouse's in Cheadle Hulme, a family greengrocer celebrating 100 years on the high street this month. Those are the businesses that have been there for people throughout the past year, and now we should be there for them.

Whether on the high street or in high finance, we must value and support people in the workplace, because they are the key to the success of business. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for whistleblowing, I am constantly reminded of the importance of supportive workplaces that value those people who speak up when things are not right. I hope that the Government will listen to our calls for reform of the law and enhanced protections for whistleblowers.

This Queen's Speech will provide better jobs, skills and infrastructure, and I look forward to working with the Government to ensure that people in my constituency and across the north see the positive benefits of levelling up. As we emerge from the pandemic, there is much to be done, but I am confident that this Government have laid the foundations for a strong recovery.

5.19 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson).

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) said in February that

"you shouldn't have to leave your home town to get a good job".

That really resonated with me. Equality of opportunity will always be a myth when jobs are unevenly distributed throughout the UK. That is despite the excellent work by the previous Labour Government in bringing Siemens to Hull and ensuring that we have that much-needed direct rail route to London.

That uneven distribution of jobs has been made worse by a decade of Conservative cuts to infrastructure and public services. The pandemic has only exposed the inequality that has always existed. But now is the moment for a clear, bold vision to ensure that our economy works for everyone. There is a revolutionary change happening right now in the way that we work. We must seize this opportunity to bring more jobs home to Hull and the east riding, and you can do this just by clicking a button. So the Queen's Speech was very disappointing. I did wonder whether it was written for the world that was rather than the world that is right now.

Let us look at what other countries are doing around the world. The Irish Government have just announced a target to move 20% of Ireland's 300,000 civil servants to remote working by the end of the year. Spain is looking into that as well. Ireland has seen the revolution in home working, which was brought about by the lockdown, and recognised that an opportunity exists to redistribute jobs across the country, bringing the same opportunities to everyone, regardless of where they live. That approach is the right one.

I am proud to say that Hull is already prepared for this home-working revolution. Not only do we have low-cost housing—people living in London will be astounded to know that they can buy a beautiful property

[Emma Hardy]

in Hull for around £168,000— but, in 2019, we were declared the first full-fibre city in the UK. KCOM now provides 99% gigabyte speed coverage through its fibre optic broadband network and the fastest upload speeds in the country. However, we do not just offer affordable living and nice broadband; our Labour group on the city council had the vision to make Hull the City of Culture in 2017. Since then, it has continued to regenerate the fruit market area, and secured £30 million for our maritime history project and the £130 million Albion Square development. There is also exciting private investment in the old shopping centre, Princes Quay, which includes a clubbing space in the basement, which looks like brilliant fun.

These developments recognise that the retail landscape has changed and that it will not change back. We need the Government to back councils such as Hull which have the vision to reinvest in their retail opportunities and to re-imagine their city centres. I would like to take this moment to thank council leader Steve Brady for all that he has done for the city, as he prepares to step down later this year.

People can truly take the opportunity of this revolutionary change in working to live in Hull and work anywhere. All the Government need to do is to look at what is happening in Ireland and Spain. It costs very little—it could in fact save the Government money—and it brings jobs to Hull.

Of course, not all jobs are suitable for remote working and many require face-to-face communication. I have said many times in this place that Hull is the caravan-building capital of the UK and I am incredibly proud of that. What I would like to see, as the Government move forward, is legislation on fire and rehire and a look at increasing the minimum wage. All our key workers deserve a reward. All those people who have, let's be honest, put their lives at risk going to work face-to-face deserve some benefit from it. So I hope that the Government will think again. They should write a Bill and a Queen's Speech for the world that is right now and not miss this opportunity.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The next two speakers are both participating virtually and they will continue with the time limit of four minutes. Starting with the hon. Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi), the time limit will be reduced to three minutes—yes, I can see him tearing up the final page of his speech.

5.23 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con) [V]: The Queen's Speech yesterday placed at its heart recovery from the pandemic and restoring the public finances, much as the Budget did a few months previously. Protecting jobs and businesses and driving economic growth will deliver that, and the Queen's Speech brought forward a wealth of Bills and means by which to achieve it.

It is worth remembering that, throughout the pandemic, this Government have gone further than virtually all other national Governments to protect livelihoods, with extensive financial support packages, including furloughing, grants and loans. A total of more than £300 billion is being spent. The economic forecasts point to optimism.

The Bank of England predicts a faster than expected recovery, with growth predicted to be over two percentage points better than the forecast made at the start of just this year. Unemployment, which at one point was forecast by the Office for Budget Responsibility to peak at 12%, is now expected to peak at nearer 5.5% by the autumn. One should bear in mind that the rate was 4% pre-pandemic.

However, the economy is materially smaller than it was and this will take time to rebuild. A raft of Bills will help to achieve that, but how? Through investing in green industries—we are already paving the way in North Norfolk with plans to push for hydrogen research at Bacton gas terminal, which needs to transition, and that is happening around the country. A wise business invests before the uptick in economic growth, ready to take advantage of a surge in demand. The Government are no different, investing now in connectivity through the high-speed rail Bill and pouring money into 5G and gigabit broadband connectivity. We have already seen the east put on the map with the new freeport that has been granted to deliver thousands of jobs and innovation to the area.

But perhaps the jewel in the crown is the right to have an opportunity to retrain in later life at any stage through the lifetime skills guarantee. The pandemic will, and has, affected people like never before and it will make people re-evaluate what is important to them in life. Now, having the chance to take more control and to improve access to the funding and opportunities—too many people in later life do not have the freedom to explore new avenues—is a centrepiece in supporting every citizen throughout the country.

I have said that my constituency will bounce back, and it will bounce back swiftly, but North Norfolk is perhaps luckier than most. We will be propelled by high levels of domestic tourism to a beautiful corner of the country. Not every part of the country has the same beaches, but the Government are doing all they can to create that level playing field and opportunity for all.

It is quite simple. History teaches us many things. In politics, a Government who mismanage the economy are one that the electorate will not forgive. It appears that even the most pessimistic of observers recognise that the mood is confident and, as such, the country is poised to get back on its feet. These Bills will give us the tools to do so.

5.27 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Prime Minister has given the United Kingdom the highest covid death rate in the world and the deepest economic recession of the G7 and given billions to Tory donors for procurement contracts. On top of that, we have a Brexit deal that will cut our economy by 4% and 1.4 million jobs. Now, we have a Queen's Speech that attacks our fundamental values: democracy, human rights and the rule of law. His Bills in this Queen's Speech will mean that he decides when the general election is called. They will make it harder for poorer people to vote, harder to challenge Government decisions and harder to protest against them. Alongside this, we have seen the weakening of the BBC, the civil service, the universities—our fundamental institutions. Meanwhile, as we loosen the ties with Europe, our biggest and closest market and friend, that will weaken both our economy and our values.

Millions of voters from poorer and more diverse communities will now be required to have voter ID, and that will reduce voter turnout. That is, in essence, voter suppression. In addition, the abolition of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 means that the Prime Minister can call the election when he likes. The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill opens the door for right-wing intolerance in our universities. The judicial review Bill and the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill allow the Prime Minister to suspend our parliamentary democracy without the Supreme Court being able to intervene, as it had to in 2019 to safeguard us, and reduce the ability of the courts to challenge the Government's decisions, which is fundamental to our democracy.

Our devolved democracy, in Wales, Scotland and elsewhere, is also under attack from the centralisation of economic and political decision making, which risks creating a divided economy in the name of the Union, despite the fact that, in last week's elections, we saw a mandate for more, not less devolution. To top it all, we have the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which would undermine or stop peaceful protest. Such protests have been the lifeblood of our democracy, promoting democratic change whether through the suffragettes, peace campaigners, trade unionists, EU supporters or climate change activists. We have now seen in the Clapham Common vigil and the Bristol protests against the Bill that the police have enough power and there is an issue of accountability.

These changes are the hallmarks of an emerging authoritarian state, so let us remember that our Queen Elizabeth gave her first Queen's Speech when Winston Churchill was Prime Minister and the architect of the Council of Europe to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Yet now, 70 years later, she must present an agenda that puts these fundamental British values at risk. It is for all of us and people across these lands to defend those values, and I hope in the weeks ahead Members will do just that. *Diolch yn fawr iawn.*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The time limit is now reduced to three minutes.

5.30 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): "Your name isn't English, why don't you go back to where you came from?" That is a recent Facebook comment from an articulate but clearly limited left-wing activist, so I took some pleasure in replying in Italian "Che in realtà sono nato da un minatore di carbone del black country"—that I was in fact born to a Black Country coalminer.

More condescending left-wingers recently said this:

"You'd think Marco would understand why Brexit is bad. He's lived in Italy and EVEN his Dad is Italian. Why is he such a strong Brexiteer? He must be stupid."

Well, brownie points for working out that my dad is Italian. I did explain at length why Brexit is vital, but it became clear to me that there was a limit to their thinking, too—I mean Marco, Italian, therefore remainer, otherwise stupid is a bit of a "micro-aggression", and is rather limited thinking isn't it, Mr Deputy Speaker?

Here is my suggestion for the Labour party: set up an internal limited-thinking focus group to eradicate it from among their ranks, because how can they represent people who are clearly not limited? They may want to

start in Amber Valley where the Labour leader blamed voters for their election results; it might prove more useful than rearranging the deckchairs on their Front Bench.

So, yes, my name is Marco, and, yes, my father is Italian, but here I am. How did I get here? Two words: *opportunità e lavoro*—opportunity and graft. My grandfather's story is one of rags to riches and my parents are examples of blue-collar workers who for years lived hand to mouth. They bent over backwards to give me opportunities, and I put in the work.

Opportunity and work are two pillars of Her Majesty's Gracious Speech. People out there do not want handouts; they want a hand getting back on their feet. More than anything, they want opportunities to do well. The lifetime skills guarantee is a massive investment in education and apprenticeships, readying people for the jobs coming their way. We may remember the Prime Minister—or "our Boris" as they say back home—visiting Dudley and going to the site of our new Institute of Technology, where he delivered his "jobs, jobs, jobs" vision. The pandemic has shown that fish can be necessary, but fishing rods are what people really need, and that institute will provide the rods.

The Queen's Speech contained a vast array of steps that will take us out of the clutches of the pandemic, freeing us to be even stronger than when we entered it. The commitment to our NHS and continuing with our investment in the vaccination programme and in private sector life sciences are huge bonuses that this country will benefit from.

The roaring '20s are upon us. *Dio salvi la Regina*—God save the Queen.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The Annunciator screens in the Chamber say there is a four-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches after No. 20; can we change that to three minutes now please?

5.34 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): This Queen's Speech was most notable for what it lacked. It was the thinnest of gruel for a nation hungry for ambition and a plan to get back on track, but there was no plan for our economy, nothing of substance on jobs or opportunities for young people, and—perhaps most troubling of all—no plan for social care. Normally a Government wait until after the speech has concluded to start breaking their promises, but this Government's refusal to confront the ticking time bomb of social care, despite the Prime Minister's repeated assurances, shows that they are willing to break new ground on broken promises. There was no need for the Prime Minister to bring his ID to the Chamber yesterday; this speech had his fingerprints all over it.

In Bristol, 6,000 people are supported by adult social care, most of them at home. This accounts for around 40% of council expenditure, but that is the tip of the iceberg because most of us are trying to support our older relatives and give them the dignity they have earned through their lives. We are frustrated, we are tired, but we are resolute in supporting our old people and we need help.

A care home manager wrote to me yesterday. I do not have time to go through her whole heartbreaking letter, but at the end she said: "It is a travesty that such a

[Karin Smyth]

skilled role, involving caring for people and ensuring that medical and all care needs are met, is often paid less than a supermarket worker.” I agree with every word. Let us be honest about the cost of social care. We need a cap on care costs. We need to increase tax or national insurance contributions as an insurance against future costs. We need to learn from the low transaction and bureaucracy costs in the NHS, make the same provision for social care and end the artificial divide.

We now have a Labour metro Mayor in the west of England, so I hope that we make progress on training and educating local people for the jobs that come from a green recovery. We have been left behind in recent years. The Tories have been good at scrapping green initiatives, but putting nothing in their place.

I would like to make two further points. First, I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on choice at the end of life. I would like to see this country have a compassionate law on assisted dying, rather than only people who have £12,000 being able to make the choice for themselves. The statistics that have now been commissioned by the Secretary of State on the number of dying people who end their own lives by suicide alone would be really helpful for that debate.

Secondly, I welcome the inquest findings into the events in Ballymurphy in 1971 and the vindication of those families who tried to clear their loved ones’ names. The Prime Minister must now apologise, after 50 years, and accept the failings of successive UK Governments under successive Prime Ministers that have caused such untold damage.

There is something deeply unsavoury about a Queen’s Speech that ignores issues such as social care—happy to allow millions of citizens to face the uncertainty of those end-of-life years—and younger adults, but that is instead far more concerned with denying millions of people their democratic rights. It tells us everything we need to know about this Government, and their priorities and values.

5.37 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth). Mr Deputy Speaker, I hope that your break was as good as mine, because I got a vaccine in my left arm and three new county councillors in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

I welcome the Queen’s Speech, and the speech made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of Exchequer in opening the debate today, in which he pointed to the outstanding record of support that the Government have given to my constituents and to everybody’s constituents across the country—for jobs, the self-employed and businesses. What we have done in the last year, with both that and with the medical advances, is absolutely astonishing.

I will highlight a few Bills in the brief time that I have available, partly because I have already had a hand in some of them. The ARIA Bill, for which I served on the Committee, is coming back; I see that the Business Secretary is in his place. It is a truly exciting and innovative idea. I hope that it will harness some of the breakneck innovation that we have seen during the

pandemic, and help us to build back better with new innovations at the cutting edge of technology. I look forward to speaking on the Bill when it returns on Report.

I also welcome the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill, because I served on the Joint Committee under the noble Lord McLoughlin. I think it will restore our constitutional arrangements around elections to the situation from which we should never have departed. I realise the reason that that situation was departed from when we had a coalition, but this Bill will put things back so that we cannot ever again have the mayhem that we saw during the 2017-19 Parliament—thank goodness I was not here.

I welcome the Electoral Integrity Bill, because people deserve to know that all votes will be counted properly and that nobody can impersonate people at the polling station.

I also welcome the return of the Environment Bill. I have not yet had a hand in that legislation, but I have to bring to the House’s attention again the matter of Walley’s Quarry in my constituency—an appalling landfill, where the odours are out of control and the operator is out of control. The Environment Agency has not been strong enough; it has been behind the curve. I brought forward a ten-minute rule Bill on the issue in the last Session and will be speaking with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about how we might include some of those ideas in the Environment Bill.

As the Chancellor of the Exchequer said, we are building back better, we are levelling up and we are investing in towns like Newcastle-under-Lyme. I am looking forward to our towns fund bid announcement by the end of the month. We have also reached the next stage of the Institute of Technology process with Newcastle College. We are turning the red wall blue one brick at a time, and I welcome my new hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer) to her place.

Far be it from me to give the Leader of the Opposition any advice, but perhaps the Opposition should listen to a former red wall MP of their own, a Mr Anthony Blair, who wrote this morning:

“People like common sense, proportion and reason. They dislike prejudice; but they dislike extremism in combating prejudice. They support the police and the armed forces...it doesn’t mean that they think those institutions are beyond reproach. Not at all. But they’re on their guard for those who they think use any wrongdoing to smear the institutions themselves. And they expect their leaders to voice their own opinion, not sub-contract opinion to pressure groups, no matter how worthy.”

If the Labour party wants to be taken seriously again in places like Newcastle-under-Lyme, it should listen to Mr Blair and start by backing the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which my constituents support. And Labour should not have MPs shouting “Kill the Bill”—it is disgraceful.

5.40 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): I am glad we are now at the stage of talking about building back and not just mitigation of the worst of the pandemic. I thank the NHS for the success of the vaccine roll-out and look forward to the eligibility criteria reaching my age group later this year.

Social mobility and security at work have both gone backwards over the past decade, and this has been accelerated by the pandemic. The opportunities for those who are lucky enough to have wealth, property, high-paying jobs or, indeed, the ear of Government Ministers have rarely been greater, but for people without those privileges—those stuck on benefits, surviving week to week in insecure employment, just getting by or, indeed, the millions of self-employed and others who were excluded from the Government's pandemic support—prices outstrip wages year on year and things get tougher. An ambitious Government could do so much—from banning zero-hours contracts and fire and rehire tactics to properly supporting people in setting up their own businesses and realising their potential.

I wish to focus my comments on three key sectors, the first of which is social care. The Government are again stalling their years-delayed promise to fix social care. As well as the financial hardship and heartbreak that so many families suffer, social care staff remain shockingly underpaid. Before being elected to this place, I represented social care workers as a trade union officer. They are truly dedicated and caring, doing the jobs that we choose not to, yet the average care worker in England is paid £8.80 an hour, and a third of care workers are employed on zero-hours contracts. They deserve so much more than empty applause.

Secondly, we know about the repeated body blows that all parts of the hospitality have suffered over the past year, but there has been a particular impact on young people just starting their careers. Two weeks ago, I met representatives from Greene King who said that 50% of their 40,000 employees are under the age of 25. Hospitality is part of the answer in that the sector can employ and train new staff swiftly, but we should also recognise the gap that has been left in the past year, when so many young people and students never had a chance to earn as they studied. As you will know, Mr Deputy Speaker, my constituency manufactures one fifth of the world's gin. From speaking both to producers in the wine and spirits sectors and to smaller breweries locally, I know that the limited support that pubs have had has not flowed through to the on-trade suppliers that have faced the knock-on impact of closures.

Finally, I want to bring up nuclear. I am proud that Warrington North has the fourth highest number of nuclear jobs in the country. They are highly paid, highly skilled, solid, secure, unionised jobs—the gold standard for what we should aim to expand. The Government are not doing enough to commit to new nuclear or to the new high-tech opportunities it would bring. We deserve better, and real ambition to improve the lives and life chances of British people. I worry that the agenda announced yesterday will not be enough, or ambitious enough, to build back better.

5.43 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): There is so much to welcome and so much ambition, yet I have so little time to welcome, on behalf of the constituents of Arundel and South Downs, what was in Her Majesty's Speech yesterday. There were tougher sentences for dangerous drivers; fairer immigration; an ambitious environment Bill to clean our air, purify our rivers and boost biodiversity; and, for so many people, the lifetime skills guarantee, giving them a second chance at a first-class life.

As a member of the Science and Technology Committee, I look forward to a record £22 billion of funding coursing through our labs and catapult and research centres while the Advanced Research and Invention Agency brings disruptive and dynamic thinking to play in that world.

Every citizen and taxpayer should celebrate and quiver with excitement about our new plans to reform procurement; to cut red tape; to allow small businesses to participate on an equal footing; to allow us to buy British; and to streamline the 300 different regulations through which people who are trying to sell services to Government currently have to jump. Over the life of this Government, £1.5 trillion of spending will be procured—that is a great opportunity to improve the quality of services for our citizens and value for money for taxpayers.

Let me conclude on a subject that Her Majesty mentioned that I am very passionate about. We can all be proud that Britain is a world leader on climate action. While some Opposition Members talk about the climate emergency, we are getting on and solving it. We were the first to put a 2050 net zero target into law, and our target of a 68% reduction on our 1990 emissions is one of the most ambitious of any country on the planet.

We have the fastest growth in renewable energy of any G20 nation and some of the most ambitious targets. By contrast, a German child born today will be leaving school before her country stops burning coal, in the year 2038. It is not just energy; we are an automotive green leader in the world. The last combustion engine in the UK will be sold in 2030, while across the channel our French friends will be rolling out combustion-engine-driven vehicles for another 10 years, until 2040.

The reason we can make so much progress so quickly is that we Conservatives believe in the ferocious problem-solving power of free enterprise and free markets—that human ingenuity and innovation are the answer, not delaying ambulances with street protests or blockading a free press. With the right frameworks, business is the solution not the problem, and just as global capitalism has lifted billions out of poverty and transformed the length of human life, and just as we have seen with the vaccine development, so too will it be business that actually solves the climate crisis.

5.46 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak on better jobs in the week that the task of improving skills in Cambridge—indeed, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough—has been taken up by the excellent Dr Nik Johnson, our newly elected metro Mayor, and in the week that Cambridge United secured promotion to league one. No need for skills improvement there—Paul Mullin's 32 goals are the most ever scored in a league two season, and we are very proud of the team's success—but in the east, as elsewhere, we have a skills challenge.

The Government have known for years about the skills gap. They have estimated that we will have a shortfall of some 4 million highly skilled workers across the country by 2024. Adult participation in learning is falling and continues to be unevenly distributed, with the poorest adults with the lowest qualifications still the least likely to have access to training. Under the Conservatives, the number of colleges has declined by a quarter, and we are down 350,000 further education

[Daniel Zeichner]

students in the last five years. A simple question for the Government: will they listen to the Sixth Form Colleges Association, which speaks for excellent colleges in my constituency, and raise the rate to at least £4,760 per year, and will they protect threatened applied general qualifications, such as widely respected BTECs?

For Cambridge and the area around it, there is a particular problem, because future economic success can never be taken for granted. For our universities and world-leading life sciences and tech sectors, we need to attract and retain people—people who have choices because they can go elsewhere, here or abroad. If homes are too expensive, and transport too difficult, the environment becomes stressed and unattractive. Those are not only problems in themselves; they threaten the very engine at the heart of a future green UK economy.

We have not yet seen the details of the Government's planning proposals, but if they in any way reflect last year's White Paper then the row over housing numbers will be as nothing when people realise that for huge swathes of our country the Government are giving a green light to developers to build. "Newt counters" is how the Prime Minister described us. Every person who cares about our countryside, and there are millions upon millions of us, had our concern and our love of our precious land disrespected by him. "Build, build, build," he says, in his ignorance of what it is that makes our country special.

Homes for all, yes, but without proper regulation and enforcement we know where it leads. Given the appalling experience of so many of my constituents trapped in homes that are unsellable because of the cladding scandal, and facing rocketing insurance costs and huge fees and charges, it beggars belief that the Government's answer is less regulation—unbelievable until, as *The Sunday Times* has expressed, one notes the unhealthy and close relationship between the Government and their developer friends. No wonder they want to curb the right to protest and fix the voting system. That is why these proposals should be rejected.

5.49 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): With the greatest respect to the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and to what was initially my home county, I hope it is just one year that Ipswich will have a local derby against Cambridge and that very soon we will be at least a couple of divisions higher than Cambridge.

There is a huge amount to welcome in the Queen's Speech, but I only have a short period of time to speak. It is right that we are robust in tackling illegal immigration. There is nothing compassionate about sending out a message that it is worth the risk, fuelling an evil trade in human lives and limiting the capacity of this country to help the most genuine refugees who are fleeing actual areas of conflict, not other safe European countries such as France. I welcome that, but we really do need to deliver, because—like many other Members, I imagine—my inbox is pretty full of emails from constituents who are quite angry about that.

I very much welcome the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which will introduce tougher sentences for some of the most serious offenders and has good stuff on protests. There is nothing that threatens peaceful

protest, but it gives the police the powers they need to curb excessive protesting, which causes a huge nuisance and disrupts the lives of the law-abiding majority on far too many occasions.

There is a lot further to go on criminal justice. Many of my constituents feel that the system is not far away from being broken, and I cannot blame them, when we find out that the person responsible for killing Richard Day in Ipswich not long ago received only four years and will be let out automatically after only two years. This is an individual who punched my constituent in the neck, which led to his death, and was seen laughing over a dying man, going through his pockets and stealing his belongings. Understandably, my constituents are sickened by that, and I will take that up in the debates we have.

As for skills, we are in a great place to benefit from a freeport in Felixstowe, but I am determined that Ipswich people benefit from that freeport as much as possible. We have to have an ecosystem approach when it comes to skills and education. We need to create a framework for business, FE colleges and our university, and we need to start careers advice early, so that there is a clear sense early on that there are multiple pathways—there is an academic pathway but also a technical pathway—and that no one route is superior to any other. There needs to be that common sense of purpose.

The lifetime skills guarantee is a huge benefit and a huge plus. Ipswich will also benefit from a town deal. In Ipswich we have Spirit Yachts, which designs some of the world's most in-demand, elegant yachts that are sold across the world, but in the past it has been people from outside the area coming to Ipswich to make them. The maritime skills funded by the town deal will make sure that it is local people who get those jobs and sell products from Ipswich—the greatest town in the country—around the world. I very much welcome this Queen's Speech. I cannot say any more about it, but it is a good job.

5.52 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): We all know the challenges that we face following covid, particularly those facing our young people due to the loss of economic opportunity and the loss of opportunities through our withdrawal from the EU, including the right to live, work and study freely across the continent. They, above all others, needed something particularly special in this Queen's Speech, and this simply was not it.

Throughout the debate, we have heard tales of electoral success and triumph, and I am sure that by this stage in the afternoon, Government Members' appetite for hearing tales of how the SNP secured twice as many MSPs in the Scottish elections as the Conservatives is quite sated. Nevertheless, the contrast between the sparse content of the programme before us and the ambitious prospectus on which the Scottish National party secured 48% of the votes and 49% of the seats could scarcely be starker.

In the time I have, I would like to focus as best I can on three areas: 5G, broadband and the delivery of infrastructure spending. The Government say that they aim to ensure that 95% of the UK's geographic land mass has 4G coverage from at least one operator by 2025 and that the majority of the UK population has 5G coverage by 2027. In other words, that is an ambition to have 4G coverage by 2025 that is no better than the 3G coverage we have at present, which still misses out

large areas of the land mass, and to take another six years to have 5G coverage that barely extends out of the main urban centres.

If that leaves my constituents in Gordon distinctly underwhelmed, imagine how they will feel hearing that the Government only plan to ensure 85% coverage of gigabit broadband by 2025. As ever, the challenge is not about claiming credit for what the commercial build was going to do anyway. It is about building from the outside in and ensuring that people have the economic capability—the financial wherewithal—to pay for the services they need and to have the access. There is absolutely no indication that that is what the Government intend to do.

On infrastructure spending, instead of trying to grab powers and agency away from our Government in Edinburgh, who have a proven track record for delivering major road and rail projects, the UK Government need to be working with the Scottish Government on these things.

Once this crisis is over, there will be a referendum to put Scotland's future in Scotland's hands rather than in the hands of the Prime Minister. This Conservative Government might be determined through their actions and inactions to hold back Scotland's recovery, but they cannot and will not stand in the way of our democracy.

5.55 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I will focus on three key areas given the time available.

Despite the Government's talk on creating good, secure jobs, it was disappointing not to hear in the Gracious Speech any indication of action to finally outlaw fire and rehire practices, especially since these tactics have been used by companies throughout the pandemic and the Prime Minister himself declared them "unacceptable". This is by no means a new practice. However, it is shameful that as many as one in 10 workers have been subjected to these shameful tactics over the course of the pandemic, with companies meant to represent core British values instead using this crisis as an excuse. Mere talk on this issue is simply not good enough. We need action to give hope to the many thousands of workers who continue to be bullied and pressured by these disgraceful tactics by confirming that decisive action will finally be taken. I urge the Government to act.

On the Government's plans for voter ID at general elections, let us remind ourselves that electoral fraud is a tiny problem. There were only 164 alleged cases of any kind at the 2019 general election, with only one conviction. Across all elections in 2019, the police found it necessary to issue a mere two cautions. The Electoral Commission itself has confirmed that the

"UK has low levels of proven electoral fraud",

and even senior Conservative MPs have denounced the new voter ID policy as a complete waste of time and public money.

About one in five British citizens do not have a form of photo ID, and they are disproportionately from young, low-income and black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. There is no low-cost or free option of photo ID available to people in the UK, with a passport costing upwards of £80 and a driving licence upwards of £40. This is a cynical and ugly attempt to rig the system to disempower the poorest and most marginalised

groups, and at an estimated cost of £20 million per election to enforce. The Government must be in no doubt that this policy is unwarranted and unnecessary.

The Queen's Speech did nothing to address concerns over future funding for Wales. Despite the vague rhetoric and buzzwords around levelling up across the UK, we have no real clarity around the criteria for the levelling-up fund or the community renewal fund. For example, part of my constituency lies in the Caerphilly county borough and has a number of the poorest and most isolated communities in Wales, but under the community renewal scheme, Caerphilly county borough has been excluded as a priority area. Yet the Chancellor's constituency, where houses have been sold for more than £2 million, is included and prioritised for funding ahead of more deprived areas. Does the Minister think that this is fair or will address obvious need?

It is deeply concerning that instead of a strategic, joined-up approach to investment and tackling the urgent issues affecting our communities with Welsh local authorities, which have been in partnership with the Welsh Government to deliver the investment Wales needs, we will now see a centralised, Whitehall-led approach with no real understanding of the needs of Welsh communities, no record of working with communities in Wales, no understanding of the priorities of those communities, and a complete bypassing of devolution—a real step backwards.

5.58 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con) [V]: Jobs, in a constituency such as Sedgefield, are the key to the equalisation of opportunity that the Prime Minister has promised. Jobs are the foundation from which we can deliver opportunity, opportunity stimulates aspiration, and giving people aspiration is the key to them supporting the whole build back better and levelling up agendas. We have to remember that jobs deliver not only a source of income for people, but are also the key to giving them the self-worth that enables them to feel they are contributing to society, as opposed to just taking from it.

That means that we need to consider jobs in as holistic a context as possible. We need to facilitate the creation of high-level, well-paid technical jobs as well as roles in support and voluntary organisations, with the opportunity to deliver these through the green agenda. The community infrastructure fund is a step in the right direction, but I would like further consideration to be given to support for local social infrastructure, as proposed by the all-party group for "left behind" neighbourhoods, which I co-chair, and the desire to see a community wealth fund delivered to support the provision of capital resource that enables voluntary organisations to deliver both volunteers and support staff, rather than just spending time sourcing grants to enable them to survive.

The development of the economic hub in Darlington, which neighbours my Sedgefield constituency, is a critical platform to deliver more high-value jobs in an area ready for this stimulus. This is levelling up, not giving up, by any agenda. The key rail infrastructure project I support, the reinstatement of Ferryhill station, is a perfect example of how we deliver opportunity. It will connect people in Ferryhill and the surrounding villages through this rail link to the freeport and all the other outstanding employment initiatives being delivered by the Tees Valley Mayor in Teesside.

[Paul Howell]

On local industry, I look at companies such as Cleveland Bridge, Cromex, Filtronic, 3M and myriad small and medium-sized enterprises that need our focus on improved Government procurement processes, which will deliver greater resilience for our critical national supply needs and be a platform to encourage investment. A lot of the representations I get suggest that the best thing the Government can do to stimulate growth is utilise their purchasing power and place orders. An acceleration of Government procurement programmes can send key critical messages to sectors, encouraging private sector investment. The procurement Bill needs to deliver a programme that drives towards a more resilient and robust UK-based manufacturing platform, and ensures that public sector expenditure is strongly encouraged to support our UK business.

On stimulating jobs, there is no better place to start than with the entrepreneurs of this country, who have seen the stimulation of young employment through the kickstart scheme. I and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) have proposed an enterprise kickstart scheme, whereby instead of funding apprentices we fund entrepreneurs to allow them to kickstart a small business—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am sorry, Paul, but I have to interrupt you. I know you are speaking remotely and probably could not see the clock, but sadly your three minutes have expired.

6.1 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) [V]: This is a thin Queen's Speech that fails to grasp the nettle of the challenges we face and is an example of a Government short on ideas and low on energy. While President Biden is demonstrating bold policies in the US, lighting the way for a green-focused recovery with investment in new industries, technology and research and development, this Government are tinkering around the edges, with 11 years of austerity leaving the country unprepared and underfunded to deal with the pandemic. We need transformative action to ensure that our economy works for the whole country. I want to focus on two issues: green jobs and a sustainable social care sector.

We all know that we have less than a decade to make the bold changes demanded by the UN's climate body to limit temperature rises, but this Queen's Speech is bereft of any programmes or resource allocation to implement the green jobs plan we need to meet the target. In fact, the Government completely scrapped their only green jobs scheme, the green homes grant, after it was outsourced to a private American firm which botched the roll-out. Ministers will trumpet the newly announced national infrastructure bank, which we have been calling for for a long time now, but the Office for Budget Responsibility has said that the new bank will provide less than half the funding we used to receive from the European Investment Bank and offer a fraction of the funding recommended by the National Infrastructure Commission to tackle the climate emergency.

With an ageing population, the social care sector is vital to our social and economic health. Successive Conservative Governments have starved local authority budgets by £8 billion in real terms since 2010. We now have a welfare state in the 2020s built on the life expectancy

of the 1940s. With the unlocking of society, now must be the time to deal with the social care challenge, not the time to kick it into the long grass. When he entered office in 2019, the Prime Minister promised on the steps of Downing Street that the Government would fix social care. Instead, we have the wet proposal in the Queen's Speech. This failure has a real impact every single day in constituencies such as mine, with undervalued and poorly paid social care workers, no security or protection for residents from questionable care home owners, and families worried sick about the quality of care of elderly and disabled family members.

It does not have to be like this. We need to tackle unemployment with a new jobs promise; we need a 10-year plan for investment and reform to provide security as we emerge from covid; and we need green investment to be brought forward to create 400,000 jobs. A better future is possible—somewhere we can feel proud to grow up in and safe to grow old in—but it will not happen with the Government's lack of a comprehensive plan for green jobs and a sustainable care sector. After the pandemic we have been through, this is the least we can expect.

6.4 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): There are so many aspects of the legislative agenda set out in the Gracious Speech that I would like to speak to, but underpinning all of them is the need for a strong economy and investment in the jobs and skills that are its foundation. In the past year, I have seen businesses close and people lose their jobs as a result of the pandemic, and our priority is rightly to get people back into work. We have supported people with furlough and a range of other schemes including universal credit, but furlough must come to an end, and in-work benefits such as universal credit rely on a buoyant job market where everyone has the opportunity to get a job.

Even before the pandemic, automation and technological advances showed that it was difficult to predict the future of work, so our workforce needs to be nimble. I welcome the Government's commitment to prioritise education and access to skills and training. Enshrining the lifetime skills guarantee in law will ensure that education does not stop at school, so that everyone has the opportunity to achieve their potential, not only improving lives but creating a skilled and flexible workforce that attracts business and drives continued growth and prosperity.

I shall digress for a moment and turn to health, which, as Members know, is an area close to my heart. I remind the House of my previous employment as a doctor and of my wife's current employment as a doctor. Our proposals rightly drive forward the reforms we need in the NHS and in mental health care, but I say again that there are few interventions better than getting someone into work to improve their physical and mental wellbeing. It is through jobs and a thriving economy that we create the funds to invest in our public services, to fund the ongoing improvements in St Peter's Hospital, to rebuild the Weybridge health centre, to train up more nurses and doctors and to invest in the science and research that drive medical advances.

Turning to science and research, next week I will get my covid vaccine. Surely we need no better example of the critical and central role science plays in our society

than the covid vaccination programme. Science and innovation drive progress, and it is through our commitment to supporting and investing in research and development that we provide jobs and opportunities for the future. This allows us to tackle the great challenges of our day such as climate change, where our commitment to innovation is driving efforts to develop new biofuels supporting jet zero. This is not only directly attracting investment in jobs in R&D itself but supporting sustainable aviation, which many jobs and businesses in Runnymede and Weybridge rely on.

In fact, my constituency of Runnymede and Weybridge is a great example of the opportunities available when we combine great people, great business and great infrastructure, but the vision set out by the Government improves even on this. Our investment in infrastructure, both digital and physical, will create better connectivity and the conditions for growth, and I look forward to the roll-out of ultrafast broadband, as well as to improvements to our road and rail networks. That will support our SMEs, providing local employment that will in turn increase footfall to local high streets, creating even more jobs and strengthening our vibrant and close-knit communities.

6.8 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow my colleague on the Work and Pensions Committee, the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer). I want to start by congratulating Humza Yousaf and Nicola Sturgeon on their emphatic victories in their re-election to Scotland's Parliament last Thursday. They are both back with increased majorities, and I look forward to working with them to ensure that we deliver the best service we can to my Glasgow South West constituents. I also look forward to the Government's other measures when the crisis is over, including granting a section 30 order so that Scotland can decide its own future.

As well as the great domestic issues that we are dealing with, there are a number of worrying international developments. I want to express my solidarity with the people of Gaza, as well as with the Kurds in Turkey, where a quite disgraceful situation is happening. There are also worrying trends in Colombia, and the Colombian Government must immediately end all violence targeted against protesters. I look forward to the Government telling us that the protection of human rights will be that at heart of their international response.

The last two Queen's Speeches, in 2017 and 2019, committed to legislation in response to the Taylor review and the good work plan. The pandemic has exposed even further the issues and inequalities in the world of work. The lack of an employment Bill has, according to the TUC, rowed back on the Government's promise to boost workers' rights. It is three and a half years since the Government responded to a joint inquiry by the Department for Work and Pensions Committee and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee by promising a response to the Taylor review. Workers urgently require legislation to ensure that they have the right to a written contract. They should also have the right to a fixed-hours contract, ending the practice of zero hours, and the right to know in good time and with adequate notice their hours of work for the days and weeks ahead.

What this pandemic has exposed is the high number of workers without access to statutory sick pay. Workers should never again have to choose between going to work and possibly passing on sickness to colleagues, and going without finance and being unable to pay their bills. An employment Bill is urgently required to address the status of "worker" or "employee", and to define what self-employment is and who the self-employed are. As the Taylor review says, the meaning of the term "worker" is ambiguous and the legal definition is excessively vague. I join colleagues from across the political parties and trade unions such as GMB and Unite in seeking to end fire and rehire. Never again should workers have to face that exploitative practice. The Government need to put an employment Bill before the House, or allow others to do so and provide time for it, in order to ensure dignity and fairness at work. If they fail to do so, many of us will demand the time and will be putting our names in for ballots to ensure that we get this Bill through.

6.11 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on the Queen's Speech. The Government have had a great deal to say about levelling up, but there was very little in the Queen's Speech to help our thousands of small businesses all over the country with the real help they need to recover from the pandemic. Our small businesses are the lifeblood of our communities, and the need for strong local communities has been highlighted as never before.

Small businesses and our town centre businesses have already been struggling with high business rates, outdated property leasing arrangements and increasing competition from digital services. Although the Government did a great deal to alleviate some of the problems the pandemic presented, it was unavoidable that many businesses, especially in our retail, hospitality and cultural sectors, should have lost a great deal of income over the past 13 months. Consequently, many small businesses have taken on a great deal of debt. The overall debt burden for businesses in this country is estimated to be more than £100 billion. The Federation of Small Businesses has said that 40% of its members describe that debt as "unmanageable". I am sure the Prime Minister has a great deal of sympathy for all those struggling with debt repayment, so it is extremely disappointing not to see more action from the Government to support these businesses with the debt burden they are struggling with. Additional support would save many jobs.

I welcome the Government's announcement yesterday that they plan to continue to open up the economy according to the dates in the road map, and I very much look forward to the next step on Monday. It will deliver a huge boost to businesses up and down the country, and I very much hope we will see a dramatic increase in economic activity in the second half of the year to help struggling sectors recover some of their covid losses.

But beyond the post-covid bounceback, what are the Government's long-term plans for economic growth? Only sustained growth can help businesses to pay down their debts and deliver secure, skilled, long-term employment. The only thing we have heard about so far is freeports, which are set to be delivered in hand-picked parts of the country and cannot deliver jobs and growth everywhere. They rely on special customs status and are appropriate

[Sarah Olney]

for only limited forms of economic activity. Evidence shows that their effect is to divert economic activity from elsewhere, rather than generating new activity of their own.

The Government do not appear to have any further ideas. The Liberal Democrats want to see investment in green growth and real action on the fight against climate change, in the form of upgrading our homes, investing in renewable energy infrastructure and reducing carbon emissions from transport. There was nothing in the Queen's Speech to indicate how the Government plan to progress towards their own goal of net zero by 2050—that is an alarming omission, given how urgent the need for action is. In particular, we need to see the Government's plans for replacing the green homes grant, to encourage householders to invest in zero-carbon homes, which will encourage the construction sector to invest in the skills, apprenticeships and workforce to deliver this. That work needs to start now.

The most recent figures from the Official for National Statistics show that our trade with the EU has recovered since the low level of exports recorded in January, but exports to the EU in March 2021 were still 20% below the March 2019 levels. The Government need to abandon their flag waving, look seriously at the obstacles that the trade and co-operation agreement presents to trade, and make a start on addressing them if they want this country to recover economically.

6.14 pm

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I warmly welcome the Queen's Speech and the measures within it. Its timing marks a real turning point in the pandemic. As we cautiously roll back the restrictions that have blighted our lives, I for one am overjoyed to be holding meetings again in person and to be meeting constituents once again face to face.

As we talk about jobs in this debate, there has been one job change in Brecon and Radnorshire that I very much welcome and celebrate. James Evans was last week elected to represent us in the Senedd, finally ending 22 years of stale Liberal Democrat control.

Knocking on doors throughout my constituency, people told James and me that the one thing they wanted was jobs. My constituency has no general hospital, no high-rise office buildings and no large corporations, but I firmly believe that we can be at the heart of the green jobs revolution. With £12 billion of investment funding unlocked by the 10-point plan that the Prime Minister unveiled last autumn, this is a real moment to give rural businesses every chance to create the jobs we so desperately need to keep our young people close to home.

On that, can I urge those on the Front Bench to prioritise hydrogen? This is an industry that the Government acknowledge could create up to 8,000 jobs by 2030, with the potential for many tens of thousands more over the coming years, and Brecon and Radnorshire's very own Riversimple could be at the forefront. Based in Llandrindod Wells, Riversimple is an award-winning manufacturer of the UK's leading hydrogen fuel cell car. It wants to recruit some 80 additional engineers for its research and development centre and to build the most sustainable manufacturing plant in the world. Eventually, it hopes to employ 220 people.

These are the types of opportunities that areas such as mine need. I very much welcome and encourage the Secretary of State to come to Llandrindod Wells to see what Riversimple does and see the difference that jobs such as those could create in an area like mine.

Rural areas do not want to stand still; they want every opportunity to embrace new technologies. This Queen's Speech empowers businesses. It is important to remember that it is businesses that create jobs and wealth. It is the Government who give them the tools to do that, and that is exactly what this Queen's Speech does.

6.16 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab) [V]: Earlier this year, I engaged proactively with the Government on the plight of domiciliary care workers who are so often and routinely not paid for travel time between home visits. Ministers said that they recognised the scale of underpayment of the national minimum wage across sectors such as social care and childcare. They underlined their opposition to my Bill on the very basis that these issues would be tackled head-on by their own legislation, not mine, in the form of an employment Bill. So I must ask: where is the Bill?

The basis of my private Member's Bill that never was was to secure beyond doubt that the lowest-paid would receive their full entitlement under the law. That was it—nothing more, nothing less. It was hardly a sweeping change. However, this small but significant change, which would have made a difference to hundreds of thousands of care workers across the country, was rejected on partisan lines.

This type of issue is one of the many that could have been addressed by the Government's employment Bill—one that many Opposition Members expected to be on the parliamentary calendar during the coming autumn. So too could it have been an opportunity to address the many other inequalities that exist among the modern workforce. Young workers, for example, often find themselves at the mercy of low pay and precarious employment in sectors such as hospitality, the service sector and the wider gig economy.

As with many things, this is yet another example of the Government talking a big game, but when it comes to the crunch leaving our people wanting. Furlough will soon end, and HR departments will be pumping out redundancy notices. While the pandemic has ripped through our communities, with the economic shock waves to be felt for some time to come, too many bosses have used this moment in time—a moment of unrelenting human misery—as a smokescreen to mount an outright assault on their workers. So too could the Government have brought forward a commitment to end the practice of fire and rehire, the likes of which we saw most recently with British Gas, at the heart of any employment Bill.

Above all else, the Government talk their biggest game on levelling up, particularly for the regions of this country that have for far too long been left behind by the politics of austerity, deindustrialisation and the rampant privatisation of our public services. How can they look my constituents in the face, asking them to take their levelling-up agenda seriously, when too many in our great northern towns and cities remain at the

sharp end of the labour market? Without a genuine and meaningful offer to workers, there will be no levelling up, only words and empty slogans, and it is my people—my constituents—who will pay the price.

6.19 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): In yesterday's programme for government, Bills that will make it harder for people to vote, scrap fixed-term Parliaments and reduce judicial oversight of the Government were announced. Yet the Government found no room in their programme for a clear and unequivocal pledge to make fire and rehire illegal, and this at a time when workers' rights are under attack from some of the biggest businesses in the land. The results will be all too predictable. Continued inaction will inevitably lead to yet more companies telling their staff to accept wage cuts, with no negotiation or discussion, or face the sack.

Minister after Minister has condemned the practice. The Prime Minister himself said earlier this year that using threats to fire and rehire was unacceptable as a negotiating tactic. Questions from myself and many other Opposition Members have been met with the response that the Government are studying the ACAS report that was delivered to them—a report that has now been sitting on their desks for three months. We do not know what is in the report—the Government have not published it—but I have to ask: what is the point of commissioning ACAS to produce it if nothing is to be done with it?

Given the indignities that millions of employees have been expected to tolerate over recent months at the hands of unscrupulous and immoral employers, it is shocking that there is no employment Bill or any reference whatever to workers' rights and dignity, nor any mention of levelling up for those subject to employment practices that are more reminiscent of the Poor Laws than those of a 21st-century society—and this despite the fact that back in November the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), said of the employment Bill that it was a matter of when, not if.

In recent weeks, as we have heard others mention, hundreds of British Gas workers have lost their jobs because they refused to be fired and rehired. Where is their levelling up? Sites are filled to bursting with British Gas vehicles—van graveyards, deliberately created by the company because no one is left to work in them—with the entirely predictable result that service visits and repairs are hugely behind schedule.

Last year it was British Airways telling staff to sign on the dotted line or join the dole queue, just weeks into lockdown. In Ireland and Spain, where BA's parent company also operates, these tactics would be illegal. Workers in those countries were safe from fire and rehire, but in the UK, BA saw no legal obstacle to effectively telling staff, in some cases with decades of service, to take 40%, 50% or 60% wage cuts, or face the sack, all while BA was using money from those same taxpayers to stay afloat.

Ultimately, the state has a responsibility to ensure that the rights of workers are protected by the force of law against the deep pockets and power of huge corporations. By failing to act yet again, the Government are abandoning that responsibility and instead appear to be content with issuing stern lectures from the Dispatch

Box about how naughty these companies are. Lectures do not level up for workers. Lectures do not pay mortgages, they do not pay the bills and they do not protect jobs.

6.22 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Over the past year, workers across the country have risked their lives to keep us safe and our country moving, but workers' rights and the long overdue employment Bill were not mentioned once in the Queen's Speech. It shows that workers' rights are nothing but an afterthought for this Conservative Government when they have to quickly put out a statement saying:

“We will introduce the Employment Bill when the time is right”.

However, the employment Bill could not be more urgent.

The pandemic has exposed appalling working conditions in the UK, which have left workers unprotected. Zero-hours contracts and the exploitative working practice of fire and rehire must be banned through legislation. The TUC has found that nearly one in 10 workers have been told to reapply for their jobs on worse terms and conditions or face the sack. We need proper rights for every worker from day one, an increase to statutory sick pay and the living wage to be raised to at least £10 an hour—something that would have increased pay for 8.6 million workers.

The Government's commitment to investing in access to education and training throughout people's lives rings hollow when the same Government are cutting the union learning fund, which supported more than 200,000 learners in workplaces across England in 2019-20. It is a complete fallacy for the Government to state, on the one hand, that they want to level up the country but, on the other hand, to fail to legislate to support the one in eight workers trapped in in-work poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said that it is

“deeply concerned that providing security for low-paid workers was not a priority”

in the Queen's Speech, and this exposes the central point. The Conservative party is not acting to fix the system, as for the past 11 years it has enacted the policies that have exacerbated the inequalities and insecurities at the heart of our economic system.

There is no new deal for workers, as there was no pay increase for public sector workers in the Budget. Instead, as workers continue to suffer from exploitative practices, the Government have prioritised the introduction of completely unnecessary voter ID plans, which will lock millions of people—predominantly elderly, low-income, and black, Asian and ethnic minority voters—out of our democracy. In 2019, a year with a high-turnout general election, the UK saw just one conviction for impersonation out of over 59 million votes. It is a total waste of money that will cost the taxpayer £20 million every single election. Voting is a right, not a privilege.

However the Government choose to spin it, fundamentally, their programme plans on levelling down our democracy and the living standards of workers. “Levelling up” is nothing more than a marketing slogan, and it is certainly no call to action. My constituents in Luton South and communities across the UK deserve much better than empty platitudes. We deserve a transformative, interventionist strategy that prioritises improving living standards through well-paid, secure, unionised jobs and strong public services.

6.25 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): As the Prime Minister made clear yesterday, we need jobs, jobs, jobs, and following the hardship that many people, especially the young, will have felt over this year, I know that we need them more than anything else.

We do not just need any jobs; we need quality jobs—jobs that will keep aspiration in Doncaster. After all, decades of Labour party dominance in my borough and across the north of England have left an entire population feeling left behind and deprived. “Left behind” and “deprived”—hardly words that entice new investment. Generations have therefore been left behind, not because of any lack of talent, but because of lack of opportunity and aspiration from local political leaders.

In Doncaster, we are expected to cheer when yet another a fast-food restaurant announces that it is opening, or when a new warehouse is built. It is no wonder that we in Doncaster have experienced a brain drain. That is why I want to state to all my wonderful constituents that I will do everything I can to make sure that, in the future, they will have more exciting job prospects, just like their fellow citizens in the south.

We live in a great country, yet the chances of someone like me, from the north, with my working-class background, have been limited at best. Put simply, a young person with my type of background has for too long found the odds stacked against them when trying to enter this place and other prestigious institutions. Luckily, with this re-energised one nation Conservative party that is committed to levelling up, we can reverse that trend.

If it is possible for me, why should it not be possible for anyone in Doncaster not only to work here but to get any job they dream of? That should not mean that they must attend a Russell Group university or get a job down south. Why can they not find success in the area where they were born? We want innovation, with research and development companies setting up in Doncaster, as well as new manufacturing companies, software design companies and gigafactories. With those in Doncaster, I see no reason for a continued brain drain from our town.

I therefore hope that, with my voice, and with the Government’s investment in research and development and commitment to establish ARIA, we can bring the new digital revolution to Doncaster. As this Government build back better, I will work hard in Don Valley and here to champion our borough.

If I may, I will speak directly to my constituents. We might be behind at present, but we will not be left behind any longer. I say to industry leaders: if you want a vibrant workforce, come to Doncaster; if you want a loyal workforce, come to Doncaster; and if you want an MP to champion your investment, come to Doncaster. Let us stop the brain drain and inspire the young. That way, everyone can feel valued, needed and part of a community that pays its way and contributes to all the services we have relied on so much these past 18 months.

6.28 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: Yesterday, my constituents and millions of people across our country desperately needed to hear a Queen’s Speech that rose to the scale of the challenges our country is facing. In a year when the pandemic has been particularly brutal for

the poorest and the most vulnerable, millions of families are no more than a pay packet away from disaster, with children out of school going hungry, and the elderly and disabled have suffered at the hands of a deeply inadequate social care system. Instead, the programme for government we were given showed just how far removed this Government’s priorities are from tackling the widening inequalities, poverty and insecurity that define the lives of so many of my constituents and millions more across the country.

The Government outlined detailed initiatives for a shameful new plan for immigration, voter suppression, legislation and constitutional reform to repeal the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, but they dedicated a mere nine words to their plans for social care. That speaks volumes about the warped priorities of the Government, as they seek to increase their powers and to limit accountability, at a time when they have presided over a catastrophic pandemic response resulting in more than 130,000 deaths.

This Government talk big about levelling up. I asked the Prime Minister how he could say those words with a straight face. He has missed an historic opportunity to level up workers’ rights and end disgraceful fire and rehire practices—legal loopholes that allow bosses to undercut workers’ rights and conditions with absolute impunity. Nearly one in 10 workers have been told to reapply for their job on worse terms and conditions since the first lockdown in March. One in four workers in the adult social care sector are on zero-hours contracts. Care workers in the independent sector earn barely half the average UK annual wage. That is a disgrace, not least after the sacrifices that they have made to keep our elderly, disabled and vulnerable cared for during this difficult year.

When I asked the Prime Minister last month whether he would commit to legislating against the draconian fire and rehire practices that are already outlawed in several countries, stunningly, he did not even know what I was talking about. Instead of bringing forward legislation to lift millions in work out of poverty, this Government have betrayed working families on low wages and precarious contracts.

The task before us is immense—to rebuild from the ashes of the pandemic a society that prioritises health, education and wellbeing. The lessons from the past year have shown just how undervalued our key workers are. In their name and in recognition of the sacrifices that they have made for all of us this year, we must continue to fight for a society run by them and for them.

6.32 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): This is a Queen’s Speech that fails working people and seeks to further curtail people’s rights and freedoms. In 2019, the Government promised to bring forward an employment Bill, which, they said, would make the UK the best place in the world to work and include measures to strengthen workers’ rights and protections. Many of these measures were also promised back in 2018 on the back of the Taylor review.

Yesterday, the Government put out a statement saying that they have taken all steps to protect workers, so why has this Queen’s Speech failed to deliver an employment Bill that would repeal the current anti-trade union legislation and make it illegal once and for all for

employers to fire and rehire their staff on much worse pay, terms and conditions? It has shown that the Government are not prepared to do anything about how weak employment rights have caused unsafe workplaces and economic insecurity, all of which have been an issue for many years but have been exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic.

This Government's inaction—they have not done anything—on rogue employers using fire and rehire practices is, once again, a clear example of how they are not the party of working people. Fire and rehire is a disgraceful practice where employers, who have often made millions, or even billions, during the past 12 months or so, are now using the pandemic as a cover to reduce pay, strip back pensions and steal holiday entitlement from their hard-working staff.

We have had plenty of lip service from the Prime Minister and his Ministers on fire and rehire. On 13 January, the Prime Minister said:

“We regard fire and rehire as unacceptable, and we will continue to make that point and seek further means of redress.”—[*Official Report*, 13 January 2021; Vol. 687, c. 294.]

On 23 March, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), said:

“We will not kick this into the long grass. We will tackle it. We will not allow bully boy tactics.”—[*Official Report*, 23 March 2021; Vol. 691, c. 790.]

Just today, the Chancellor said that fire and rehire should not be used as a negotiating tactic. He went on to say that the Government await the findings of the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service report—but the Government have had the report since February.

I am afraid that this Queen's Speech has shown that the only thing that workers can expect from this Government are empty words. Can the Government seriously talk about levelling up across the country when they are doing nothing about the fact that pay and terms and conditions are being levelled down across the sectors and the economy because of the Government's failure to protect and enhance employment rights?

If the Government really cared about working people, they would have used this Queen's Speech to protect workers, to strengthen their rights and to end fire and rehire once and for all.

6.34 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab) [V]: I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Yesterday, the Government had an opportunity to show people living in left-behind communities, such as my Birkenhead constituency, that they are serious about building a fairer and more prosperous economy in the wake of this terrible pandemic. My constituents desperately needed decisive action to create jobs, rebuild our local economy and high street, and support our struggling public services. Instead, they got the shortest Queen's Speech in five years and one that says nothing about the most important issues of our time, from protecting workers' rights in the workplace to fixing our crumbling social care system and creating the green jobs of the future.

Not for the first time, the Government's promises to build back better have been exposed as nothing more than empty rhetoric. We cannot hope to build back better while millions of people remain trapped in precarious

work and so vulnerable to exploitation in the workplace. The foundation of an economic recovery has to be secure, well-paid employment, which today is all too scarce in the communities that I have the privilege of representing, but yesterday's speech made no mention of the employment Bill that British workers were promised two long years ago, nor did it contain any measures aimed at stamping out despicable fire and rehire tactics, despite these measures being routinely condemned by senior Cabinet members from the Dispatch Box.

The promises to level up the country are utterly meaningless without immediate support for the 600,000 young people who have felt the fall-out of the pandemic most of all, yet the Queen's Speech did absolutely nothing for the more than 50% of young people living in my constituency who are out of work. A year into the pandemic, it is clear that the job schemes introduced by the Government last year are just not working. The kickstart scheme has created jobs for a measly 3% of young jobseekers and, too often, these positions come without the quality training that is so essential to prosper in a fast-changing job market. That is why I urge the Minister today to adopt Labour's pledge of a jobs promise, which would guarantee young people the right to training, education and employment opportunities after six months of unemployment.

As we build back better, we must build back greener, too. A green industrial revolution has the potential to breathe new life into towns such as Birkenhead. In my constituency, we can create thousands of new jobs through investing in the Mersey tidal project, the expansion of offshore wind in Liverpool bay and the development of a world-leading hydrogen industry. However, just months away from the UK hosting COP26, the Queen's Speech had nothing to say in support of low carbon and green industries and on getting the green homes grant back on track. That was a total dereliction of responsibility.

There is no clearer illustration of how twisted the Government's priorities are than their plans to drive through discriminatory voter ID laws that risk disenfranchising 2 million predominantly young and black, Asian and minority ethnic voters—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): It's a wrap. Sorry. I call Richard Holden.

6.38 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): There is a huge amount to welcome in the Queen's Speech this year. The core of it is our levelling-up agenda to unite the country, and that has particularly been the case in North West Durham. We have already seen people really getting on board with that in our recent local elections; we have gone from zero to six seats in the council elections and fourth to first in the share of the vote over the last four years. There is some other great stuff as well, including our commitment to the NHS; safer streets; getting immigration under control; modernising our criminal justice system, including reforming bail; reforming leasehold; online safety; a higher education Bill to ensure that there is free speech on our university campuses; and a real push on our violence against women and girls strategy, which I will hopefully be working cross-party on in my push to get virginity testing and hymenoplasty banned.

[Mr Richard Holden]

The core of the Gracious Speech for me is really three things on the levelling-up agenda. It is about skills and post-16 education; getting the subsidy control Bill in the UK, which means that we are making our own decisions about that; and the procurement Bill, which means that we can finally put British at the heart of everything that the Government do.

I would like to say a couple of small things to the Front-Bench team. It was great to hear my hon. Friends the Members for Dudley South (Mike Wood) and for Clacton (Giles Watling); we have spoken to the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury about beer duty and how we want to see a differential for draught to help our pubs build back. I also want to see the gambling review come into legislation, if not this year, then in the next Queen's Speech, because I am very passionate about that, along with other members of the all-party group on gambling-related harm.

Finally, I just want to say that this is a Queen's Speech that really helps deliver on our levelling-up agenda, a one nation agenda. I will be supporting it at Divisions in the future.

6.39 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): We have had an excellent debate with noteworthy contributions on all sides. I particularly want to congratulate my hon. Friend the new shadow Chancellor, who made an excellent speech and will do a brilliant job in her new role. I also want to commend the excellent speeches of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), for Easington (Grahame Morris), for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), for Newport East (Jessica Morden), for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymer (Gerald Jones), for Hornsey and Wood Green (Charmine West), for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker), for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) and for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley). I also congratulate all other hon. Members who spoke in this debate.

The central question facing this Gracious Speech is whether it can rise to the moment in which we find ourselves because, while life is starting to return to a semblance of normality, and we are all thankful that that is happening, we cannot just go back to business as usual. Exposed in this pandemic we see millions of workers in deeply insecure jobs, the key workers in our country underpaid and undervalued, public services under deep strain, and an economy not working for too many people in our country and characterised by deep inequalities of wealth, income, power and place. And on top of that we face the challenge of economic recovery from covid and the climate emergency.

I welcome the fact that after 10 years in power some of the issues I have mentioned are at least being recognised by the Conservative party finally; I am old enough to

remember when it was controversial to do so. But acknowledging the problems is not the same as solving them, so the test of Government and this Gracious Speech is whether they can address them. Last October, the Prime Minister said they would. Indeed, he invoked the spirit of the post-war Labour Government:

“In the depths of the second world war...when just about everything had gone wrong, the Government sketched out a vision of the post-war new Jerusalem...And that is what we are doing”.

Let us be absolutely clear, therefore, about the scale of change that the Prime Minister is claiming he can deliver: a new economic and social settlement for our country. We agree this is necessary. The question is: will the Government deliver?

What would that mean as a start? It would mean five things: tackling insecurity at work with a new deal for workers; responding to the climate emergency with a genuine green industrial revolution; supporting our businesses to recover from the pandemic; rewriting the rules of our economy to shift wealth and power towards ordinary people and their communities; and rebuilding our public services. On those five issues, the British public deserved a Queen's Speech that met the moment, but on each of those tests the Gracious Speech failed to deliver.

Let us start with the insecurity that millions of workers face. There is no greater symbol of this than the scourge of fire and rehire tactics—at British Airways, at British Gas and at many other employers—now spreading through our economy. We would never want this for ourselves or our families, so why should we ask the British people to put up with it? The Prime Minister says it is unacceptable, so where is the legislation to outlaw fire and rehire?

In the 2019 Queen's Speech, we were promised an employment Bill. What about this Gracious Speech? No employment Bill. The Government have sufficient legislative time to seek to disenfranchise millions of voters with a voter ID system, but they do not have sufficient legislative time to tackle the insecurity that millions of workers face. It is shameful. Never mind a new economic and social settlement—a Government committed to basic rights at work would have brought forward this legislation. The obvious conclusion is this: the problem is not a lack of legislative time; it is that they have not changed their minds about how an economy succeeds. They still believe that insecurity masquerading as flexibility is the route to economic success: treat people worse, give them fewer rights and they will work harder. The rhetoric is changed, but the reality is more of the same.

Let us consider the climate emergency. There has been lots of talk about jobs and skills in this debate—lots of good rhetoric. What do we see in the United States? President Biden has a \$1 trillion green stimulus over the next decade. We have called for a £30 billion stimulus over the next 18 months to create 400,000 green jobs. What do this Government offer? Investment that, even on their own dodgy analysis, is one 60th the level of Biden's stimulus.

This has real consequences for our manufacturers. There was talk of the automotive sector, and that is the litmus test for any green recovery. Germany is investing billions and France the same, in a global race to build the new gigafactories of the future. We need to start

financing three additional gigafactories in this Parliament, public and private together. Where are the resources from Government? Nowhere near the scale required. It is the same in aerospace and in steel. We have a new clean steel fund that is hopelessly inadequate and will not even come on stream until 2023.

This illustrates a wider truth about industrial policy. In the Gracious Speech, there are new measures on subsidies—what was called state aid—as part of our post-Brexit arrangements, and there are some sensible changes to the old EU regime, but let us understand the truth here. What was holding back Government from giving industry the support it needed was not the previous rules but their prevailing ideology. In 2019, under the old system, Denmark invested 1.5% of GDP in industrial support and Germany 1.4%. The UK invested 0.38%—among the lowest in Europe. The real fear is that this will not change.

What about our businesses? Businesses can breathe a sigh of relief as our society reopens, but many face a long road to recovery. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised the real issue of the unmanageable debt facing businesses. We have been calling for months for that debt to be restructured. I do not think that the Chancellor has done enough. At the end of June, the moratorium on evictions from commercial properties will be lifted, and I really worry about the issue of rent. It is often the largest cost for a small business, and commercial tenants in the UK have paid just a fifth of the rent they owe in the last quarter. We needed a comprehensive plan for British business, including meaningful debt restructuring. The Gracious Speech failed to deliver.

Rebuilding in a fairer way for business is not just about cash. Too many of our rules favour anti-competitive monopolies. Nowhere is that clearer—and I think there is agreement on this on both sides of the House—than in relation to big tech. It is good that a Digital Markets Unit has been established in the Competition and Markets Authority, but it needs new legislation; where is it? We need a new competition Act that establishes a statutory code of conduct for tech giants and gives the CMA real powers to act on behalf of consumers and small businesses. My hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor spoke very well on the issue of online retailers versus the high street. Again, there have been years of promises but no action. It is another missed opportunity to build a new economic and social settlement.

As we rewrite the rules of our economy, we also need to change our vision of what a successful economic future looks like. Industrial policy is about manufacturing, but it is also about what my hon. Friend has called the everyday economy in which so many people work. Nowhere is that more true than in relation to care. We need to get away from the idea that care is somehow a burden and understand that it is a crucial part of our economic infrastructure. That is true of care for the young—one of the best economic investments we can make and in which we still lag way behind other countries—and care for older generations. We are now two years on from the Prime Minister saying that he had a plan to fix social care “once and for all” and 10 years on from the Dilnot report on social care. It is shameful that the Government are still not making any concrete proposals in the Queen’s Speech and are letting down our care workers.

We cannot ignore the wider context of the Gracious Speech in terms of public spending. The Chancellor has acted in the pandemic to help businesses and individuals, as it is right to do, and we have welcomed the furlough, but let us be clear about the truth of the plans for public spending in future years. In the so-called unprotected Departments—in other words, the majority of Government Departments—there are cuts programmed in from April 2022. There will be further cuts to local government on top of the 50% cut that some parts of the country have already seen, cuts to the justice system, cuts to transport and cuts to the majority of Departments after 10 years of austerity. There can be no greater sign that they have not learned the lessons. We cannot build a new economic social settlement with these kinds of cuts after 10 years of austerity.

This Gracious Speech fails to meet the challenge of this moment. The Government claim to have changed and to want to offer something different. The truth is that it is a very thin Queen’s Speech from a Government in power for more than a decade. There are no measures on insecurity at work; they are not stepping up on the climate challenge; there is inadequate support for British businesses and industries; there is no plan for social care; and there is continued austerity in many areas. The country demands a Government who meet the moment, but the Gracious Speech does not remotely measure up. It has failed in the task at hand.

6.59 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): I was struck by the speech from the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). He said at one point that the Government had not changed; in fact, the one thing that had not changed was the right hon. Gentleman. I listened to his speech and was taken back to when I was a Back Bencher in 2014 and he was the Leader of the Opposition—he could have said exactly the same thing. It is always the same thing: he does the country down and says that we always talk about austerity. How can he talk about austerity when he himself acknowledged that the Chancellor has spent £350 billion on unprecedented support—on furlough and for British business? The world that he describes is the world of his tenure as Leader of the Opposition—there may well be a vacancy; who knows whether he could come back?—but it is not a world that many millions of people in this country recognise.

We continue to protect the lowest-paid workers: we have raised the national minimum wage and again raised the national living wage—having been the first Government to institute it, we raised it only in April, but perhaps the right hon. Gentleman forgot that. He has certainly forgotten the immense help and the grants that have supported businesses that would otherwise have closed. The bounce back loan scheme has approved more than £46 billion of loans for 1.5 million businesses. As we follow the Prime Minister’s road map out of lockdown restrictions, new recovery loans and restart grants will help businesses in urban areas.

The country that I see is completely different from the gloom and doom that the Leader of the Opposition—forgive me; the right hon. Gentleman is not the Leader of the Opposition any more, although he may be in future—paints. It is not recognised by millions of our fellow subjects. The Queen’s Speech builds back better

[*Kwasi Kwarteng*]

and delivers on real people's priorities. We are embracing a green, vibrant economy. It was extraordinary to hear the right hon. Gentleman again denigrate our achievements in the green industrial revolution. Only a month ago, John Kerry said to me—and he was good enough to say this publicly—that the efforts of this Government and this country had been extraordinary and we were world leaders in the fight against climate change. That is acknowledged. The right hon. Gentleman cited the United States: their target is a 50% reduction by 2030 from the 1990 level; our target for 2030 is a 68% reduction. It is far in excess of the United States' target, yet the right hon. Gentleman once again points to other countries with the assumption that here in Britain we are terrible and everybody else is doing it better, whereas in fact the reverse is the case. It is Britain that people look to as leaders on climate change. Inwardly, the right hon. Gentleman probably acknowledges that.

Let me move beyond the histrionics of the right hon. Gentleman's speech. We have laid legislation for the UK's sixth carbon budget which, I am delighted to say, proposes a target that would reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 78% by 2035 compared with 1990 levels. It is by far the most ambitious reduction plan in the G7 and the right hon. Gentleman knows that. He knows that the 10-point plan has been acknowledged throughout the world as a world-leading and world-beating proposal. [*Interruption.*] They scoff and laugh, as they scoff and laugh at their own voters. They scoff and laugh at the country endlessly, and I am afraid they have suffered from their scoffing and mocking attitude.

The right hon. Gentleman was good enough to mention the EU's proscriptive state aid regime, which we have jettisoned, and welcomed the fact that we have a subsidy control Bill that will create a new domestic subsidy control system. He accepted that, which did require a measure of realisation that we are moving on from the EU. I am delighted that, among his colleagues, he at least accepts that Brexit is finished and that we can move with confidence beyond EU membership. I very much welcome that but, again, to hear his speech one would think that the United Kingdom was a place of irredeemable squalor and poverty, when in fact the opposite is the case. When people look at the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine and the way in which we have conducted the vaccine roll-out, they see a country that has been extremely successful. Only today I was speaking to Ministers from Japan and Italy, who mentioned, without any prompting whatever, the extraordinary work that our scientists, nurses, health service and, in fact—dare I say—our hard-working Ministers and civil servants had put in to effect a successful roll-out. People are looking at Britain and they see a successful country that is regaining its place in the world.

This country is home to a powerful combination of elite research institutions, thriving life sciences companies, superb research charities and, of course, an excellent national health service. This winning combination has led the world's fight against covid and saved many thousands of lives while creating a high number of high-quality jobs across the United Kingdom. These

are things of which we should be proud and which our Government are hoping to—and will—build on. Yet the right hon. Gentleman is looking back to the past, simply repeating all the tired old phrases of five, six or seven years ago.

The ARIA Bill, which will become an Act in this Session and formed part of the Queen's Speech, is a world first. It is a great innovation. The Department is delighted to have introduced this Bill to create an Advanced Research and Invention Agency, which will fund high-risk, high-reward research with the potential to produce new technologies, new industries and new jobs. ARIA represents the very best of British ingenuity and creativity, but the right hon. Gentleman and his friends wish to pretend that we are the very worst—that nothing we can do is any good and that nothing we can do can compete with France, Germany and all the other countries that he mentioned. In fact, in science and innovation the opposite is true. The Ministers from the countries I mentioned were actually saying the opposite of what the right hon. Gentleman is saying.

I see a huge difference between Government Ministers and MPs and our people across the country, and the Opposition—a fundamentally different outlook about the future and possibilities of this country. Time and again as a Minister and even as a Back Bencher, I have heard nothing from the Opposition but a litany of complaint and, frankly, a dirge of abuse about the country. The Government have huge optimism and belief in the abilities of this country and of our people to overcome difficulties—

Gavin Newlands *rose*—

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am not going to take any interventions. All I hear from the Opposition is scoffing, mocking and abuse. The truth is that across innovation with the vaccine roll-out, across net zero with the 10-point plan and the opportunities for COP26, and across enterprise, we have a Government who are committed to bringing progress and driving success across the entirety of the United Kingdom.

It would be indecent of me not to mention the latest addition to our parliamentary forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Jill Mortimer). Consider this, Mr Deputy Speaker: this was a constituency that had never returned a Conservative Member of Parliament. Indeed, a former Labour Member of Parliament who is not so popular on the Opposition Benches these days, Peter Hartle—I can't even remember his name! Peter Mandelson, now Lord Mandelson, said quite clearly that this was a seat that would never vote Conservative, but of course it did. And why did it vote Conservative? I suggest that, listening to the dirge-like pessimism of many Members of the Labour party, the people of Hartlepool took a different approach. They believe in the future of the country and of their community. We as a Government are determined to repay their faith in their country and their hard work, and to ensure that we not only level up but build back better.

Ordered. That the debate be now adjourned.—
(*David T.C. Davies.*)

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Grassroots Football: Feltham and Heston

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(David T. C. Davies.)

7 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I am very grateful to Mr Speaker for granting me this Adjournment debate. Covid-19 has had a serious and detrimental impact on football, from premier league teams all the way down through the pyramid structure of football. The giants of the game have received much media attention recently, and not all for good reason. I joined colleagues on both sides of the House in condemning proposals for a new European super league. It is one of the reasons why I sought this debate.

May I start by sharing our deepest condolences with the family of Jordan Banks, a nine-year-old boy who was killed in a tragic incident last night playing football in Blackpool? Our hearts go out to him and his whole family at this time. That could have been anybody, anywhere. It is a tragic incident, and our thoughts are with them.

Football is so much more than just a sport, and it begins at grassroots level. When we talk about grassroots football, we need to truly appreciate what that means. Grassroots football is about every park and every playing field across the UK. It is about giving every club and every individual of all ages and genders who has the desire to be involved in the game the opportunity to do so. Even in the face of financial pressures and the disappointment of not being able to play due to the covid pandemic, the response from football clubs at all levels has been remarkable. It shows the integral place that clubs have at the heart of our communities, bringing people together and supporting one another on and off the pitch.

The Football Association's latest report on the social health and economic value of grassroots football found that more than 14 million people play grassroots football in England alone, which equates to a quarter of the population. It contributes more than £10 billion to society each year, while childhood football participation helps with the reduction of more than 60,000 cases of depression and anxiety, and more than 200,000 cases of childhood obesity.

The grassroots game, as we emerge from the pandemic, is uniquely positioned to have a positive impact on not only the nation's mental and physical health, but our economy. The benefits extend further, with social interactions that will help people to develop confidence, communication and resilience. The comradeship, friendship and values of teamwork are all crucial in helping to shape people's identities, supporting emotional wellbeing and dealing with difficult times, and I will illustrate that through the particular stories of two local clubs.

I thank all involved in grassroots football clubs in Hounslow and across the country, on behalf of myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury). Clubs in our constituencies are supported by the Brentford FC Community Sports Trust, which delivered more than 1,000 activity packs to children and families, supported more than 100 young carers who were shielding, ran virtual youth clubs and provided mentoring support. Starting in June, in partnership with Premier League Kicks, there will also be a new football

development centre, which will be delivered at Springwest Academy in Feltham for students from local schools currently receiving free school meals and from low-income families. In partnership with Bedfont Sports FC, it also delivers a girls-only weekly training session.

In my constituency, clubs include Bedfont Sports FC, with Bedfont Eagles in the Isthmian League south central division, Hanworth Villa FC and CB Hounslow United FC in the Combined Counties premier division, and Bedfont and Feltham FC and FC Deportivo Galicia in the Combined Counties division one. Collectively they have been able to support thousands of children and young people playing each year. Everyone, from young people all the way up to people in their 60s, is able to join a club and play either on a Saturday or Sunday. At the vast array of clubs in these leagues, we have seen at first hand all ethnicities, ages and religions playing together. We also have the incredible Feltham Bees supporting football for children and young people with disabilities, run by the incredible Ray Coleman at Springwest Academy.

I want to recognise the amazing leadership that comes from within our communities to help grassroots football. I pay tribute to Dave Reader from Bedfont, who sadly passed away with covid in November last year—a legend to whom the community has not yet been able to pay proper tribute. He gave a lifetime of service in grassroots football, from the local Sixth Hounslow Cub Scouts football club in Cranford 35 years ago, to the work with Bedfont Eagles and, over the years, support for other clubs, including Whittton Wanderers and CB Hounslow United.

Last night I spoke to Dave's son Terry about his father, who had even won a BBC Unsung Hero award. Over 35 years, he helped to build local grassroots football. Dave and Terry worked together, and Terry continues so much of that work today. They have led on the ground and working in partnership with the local authority and others. A lease and a chance are what Hounslow Council gave Dave and Bedfont many years ago.

Since then, through partnership and sheer hard work, love and commitment, they also managed to raise over £3 million in partnership with the Football Foundation and others. About 350 children play each year and about five adult teams see 80 to 100 playing also. The club has had a partnership with Kingston College for a programme for 16 to 19-year-olds, but with the football played at Bedfont. The club now even has dance classes and boxing classes. Over the years, Dave touched a lot of people and has left a huge legacy.

But the issues on the frontline have been devastating post covid. The impact on children has been a lot more than people have seen, with children suffering mental health issues, becoming reclusive, not wanting to be active, or putting on weight. Clubs have described to me the joy of children being able to reunite with their friends and said how brave they have been. The first ask from local clubs is about support to help in dealing with the rise in mental health issues. They say they are learning as they go to support each other and their young people, but they are not trained in mental health and would really appreciate guidance and support on what best to do.

I was told the story of one nine-year-old boy impacted by anxiety and the strain of the pandemic whose mental health deteriorated so much that he was hospitalised.

[Seema Malhotra]

Only recently he came back to the club. The huge impact of a short video from his young team-mates saying how much they needed him gave a massive boost, and they are working together to support his recovery. As Terry described it to me, he tells the coaches, “You are their second dad.”

The second ongoing issue for so many of our clubs is financial support and the financial consequences of the pandemic. Clubs have been able to benefit from grant support that has been hugely welcomed. Hounslow Council’s thriving communities fund has also been vital, and is helped with other bits of support, like that from the Mayor of London’s Laureus project, which have been vital to helping local clubs get through. However, they have raised with me the ongoing impact of having no income for a year. There is facilities upkeep and other costs, and the worry that now lockdown is ending, these challenges may be put aside as everyone thinks that things have returned to normal. For clubs to continue to grow and thrive, ongoing strategy and support is going to be needed.

The third issue is the stability of home grounds and places to play casually. One of my local clubs, started by Frank James and supported daily by Vijay Kumar and other coaches and supporters, has struggled to keep access to its home ground at Green Lane in Hounslow. My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth has said that she is saddened about the situation having, as a councillor before becoming an MP, helped CB Sports with the lease and subsequent grant application to transform a little-used piece of grass into a fine set of facilities.

The club is supported very closely by Middlesex FA, which has been assisting in efforts to make sure that it has the pitch hire agreement needed to satisfy the conditions of the Combined Counties football league. The lease for the past few years, however, has been with Hounslow Sports Club, run by Mr Stephen Hosmer, which has been continuing to put obstacles in the way of an agreement even though it is a condition of its own lease with Hounslow Council. Hounslow Sports Club under Mr Hosmer has failed to maintain pitches. Shockingly, just two weeks ago, Hounslow Sports Club was prosecuted by Thames Water for offences to which it pleaded guilty relating to using an illegal water connection at the premises and a water fitting that caused or was likely to cause an erroneous measurement of water. It is surely unacceptable for the ability of children to play football and to be in supportive environments to be held back by such behaviour.

I have seen the work of CB Hounslow United. I have met the young footballers. I have spoken to the parents and I have seen the devastating impact the situation has had: the drop-off in players, because they do not know week to week where their next game or training will be; and parents trying to plan their complex lives juggling work and home. How are they going to get their children to and from practice and games? It is a really difficult and challenging situation.

Stability for play is vital to help to build the relationships that hold clubs together, and to build the family connections and wellbeing which so often support young people going through difficult times and give them the space and the support they need. What these stories also show

is that local authorities are vital. There is no statutory requirement for local authorities to support grassroots football. Currently, they must provide essential services for their residents. However, sports and recreation facilities, and the delivery of community sport services, are not a requirement.

I may also raise here—I have discussed this previously with the Minister—the side issue of families using local parks for parkruns at the weekend. They have struggled to get parkruns going as lockdown ends. Jon in my constituency raised the issue of the Government’s position on when parkruns will be able to restart, so I would be grateful for the Minister’s response on that.

We must also ask the way to make sure how local authorities can be better supported to help grassroots football thrive. Hounslow Council developed a welcome local football facility plan in 2019 for pitches, changing room pavilions, clubhouses and other priority projects, but that is only deliverable alongside a national strategy and integrated place-based support. We also need a more localised approach to grassroots football that removes barriers to issues such as pitch access for training and fixtures, and engagement in the women’s game.

A localised approach to address the barriers they face should target increased funding into grassroots football and help to ensure that football remains affordable. Football clubs should never have to call off a game because their regular playing field is overbooked, or because they cannot afford the costs of the football pitch. Nor should they need to postpone fixtures due to the pitch not being of adequate quality. The popularity of the grassroots game is not yet matched by the facilities. Only one in three grass pitches is of adequate quality, and about 150,000 matches are called off every season due to poor pitch quality. This is what grassroots football needs to ensure that no one and no club gets left behind.

In March, I was pleased to attend the launch of the Football Association’s new grassroots football strategy. This is an excellent basis on which to address some of the challenges we face. I am pleased to see a commitment to ensure pathways into and through the male and female games, including disability provision, with bespoke participation opportunities as needed. Looking ahead to ensure the game thrives, they emphasise not only encouraging new participation at every age group and from historically underrepresented groups, but harnessing the power of digital to better connect participants to the game they love. It also means ensuring the game is played in a safe, welcoming and inclusive environment free from racism and discrimination.

On that point, earlier this month Ian Wright shared a video on social media where he discussed, with Alan Shearer, the racism he receives as a black ex-footballer and football commentator, showing how important it is to foster a more inclusive environment throughout football. I have heard from young people in my constituency about the racism they face which on occasion has forced them out of clubs. I know it is very much a problem that is still live, and there needs to be accountability and action to address it. There needs to be support for those who are victims of racism, so that they are not the ones who have to leave, but those who perpetrate racism. The Premier League’s social media blackout over the bank holiday weekend was a welcome show of solidarity to those suffering from racism, but we need tangible action,

not just symbolism, if this issue is to be tackled effectively and I would be grateful for the Minister's response on this issue, too.

In conclusion, I hope the Minister will join me in celebrating the contribution of grassroots football for millions across our country as the base from which national players are first given the opportunity to play. Volunteers such as Dave and Terry Reader, Ray Coleman, Frank James and Vijay Kumar in my constituency are second to none, but in the challenges that they all face, they need greater support to provide the service that our communities need and to support the volunteers who work with them to do so.

I would be grateful for the Minister's response on the issues I have raised, particularly on extra support and guidance to train volunteers in helping to deal with mental health issues; on sustained funding and support post-lockdown, because things will not be returning to normal overnight; and on the delivery of an inclusive national grassroots football strategy, free from discrimination, that also supports local authorities in their key role in working with the FA and the Football Foundation in delivering the opportunities for the game on the ground.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): At the beginning of your speech, Seema Malhotra, you mentioned the tragic death of the nine-year-old lad from Lancashire, young Jordan Banks. On behalf of the Speaker and the British Parliament, I should like to send our condolences to his family, to all his team mates at Clifton Rangers junior football club and to all his friends. The hearts of the British Parliament, and our love, go to you all.

7.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): I congratulate the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) on securing this Adjournment debate and on raising the important issue of grassroots sport, and football in particular, as well as the role that local authorities can play in supporting sport, the role of sport in local communities and a wide range of other issues. It is a pleasure to respond to her.

Following the sentiments expressed by the hon. Lady and by you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton), whom I spoke to earlier, I would also like to express on behalf of the Government and many others in this House our condolences to the family and friends of Jordan Banks, the nine-year-old boy who it would appear was tragically struck by lightning and killed while out playing football on Tuesday evening at Clifton Rangers junior FC. The club and the local community are clearly devastated by his loss, as evidenced by the outpouring on social media, and our thoughts and prayers are with his family and friends at this incredibly difficult time.

It is clear from the hon. Lady's comments that she shares my view that sport and physical activity are hugely important for our physical and mental health, and I really appreciate the focus that she put on mental health. Indeed, that is why the Government have ensured that people can exercise throughout the national restrictions and why we have prioritised sport to open first when easing those restrictions. The road map out of lockdown

in England laid out by the Prime Minister included a step approach to the return of outdoor and indoor sport. In March, school sport was allowed to resume, recreation or exercise outdoors with your household or one other person was permitted, and outdoor sports facilities were able to reopen. On 12 April, indoor leisure facilities including gyms and swimming pools were able to reopen for individual use, and on 17 May, almost all the rest of the sector will be able to reopen, including remaining indoor leisure facilities and adult indoor group sports and exercise classes, as well as some large events.

The hon. Lady mentioned parkruns. I have met recently members of the leadership of Parkrun, and they take their responsibility to run those events incredibly seriously, with volunteers and others throughout the country. There is nothing to prevent them from starting very soon, and I understand that their plans are to start again nationally from early June. I encourage local authorities that work with Parkrun to ensure that these events can open safely to take the applications seriously and sympathetically, because I think we would all like to see parkruns start again very soon. Looking forward, no earlier than 21 June, we hope that the remaining settings will open, including even more large events.

As the hon. Lady said, football is our national game, and it plays a really special part in many people's lives up and down the country. It is clear from her comments that grassroots football clubs in her constituency have a really important role to play. It is the same in my constituency and in many others. Football is often the social glue that binds a community together, with young and old getting behind their team and supporting together come thick or thin. I saw many of those benefits at first hand when I was put through my paces—literally—during a visit to Rectory Park in west London to celebrate the reopening of grassroots sport last month. More recently I also visited Solihull and, at the end of the spectrum, Everton, and saw the great work done in those communities.

Football has important physical and mental health benefits, which are rightly being recognised as we emerge from the pandemic with a fresh determination to be a fitter and healthier nation. I completely agree with the emphasis that the hon. Lady put on the importance of sport and football in improving mental health. She also rightly focused on financial support. It is in recognition of the benefit of grassroots sport, including football, that the Government have provided a large amount of financial support. That includes pan-economy support to businesses through tax reliefs, cash grants and employee wage support, which community clubs up and down the country have also drawn on to help them through the pandemic.

Sport England has also provided £220 million directly to support community sports clubs and exercise centres through the pandemic through a range of funds, including its £35 million community emergency fund. As the hon. Lady knows, three football projects in the Feltham and Heston area have received funding from the community emergency fund: the Indian Gymkhana football club, Bedfont and Feltham football and social club, and Hanworth Villa FC. More support has recently been announced with the publication of Sport England's "Uniting the Movement" strategy, which commits an extra £50 million to help grassroots sports clubs and organisations affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

[Nigel Huddleston]

It is important to recognise that, as well as standing behind local clubs during the current coronavirus crisis, support for grassroots football long precedes the pandemic. The Government have consistently invested significant sums through the Football Foundation over the past few years, as part of an established partnership with the Football Association and the Premier League that is focused on investing in community facilities, with the Government contributing £18 million each year. This three-way partnership sees a combined £70 million going to new facilities delivered by the Football Foundation charity every year. I am pleased to say that this investment is being felt directly in the hon. Lady's constituency, with the Football Foundation awarding 10 facilities grants in the area totalling more than £750,000 since 2009.

We intend to build on that good work in the future, which is why in our 2019 election manifesto we pledged an additional £550 million investment in community sports facilities over the next 10 years. This will build a strong foundation for the bid for the 2030 men's FIFA World cup. At the last Budget we announced the first tranche of that investment, with £25 million to be spent across the UK. I would like to recognise the Football Association in particular for the huge role it continually plays in encouraging and cultivating grassroots football across the country.

The hon. Member also mentioned the stability of clubs and challenges around leases. I cannot comment in detail about the particular circumstances mentioned, but I am alarmed to hear about some of the difficulties and I sympathise over the concerns she has expressed. I certainly hope that all stakeholders involved in the discussions can find a route towards a long-term future for the club. Unfortunately, I am also hearing about similar patterns across the country.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the important issue of racism in sport. She and I agree—in fact, the whole House agrees—that there is no room for discrimination and racism in sport. Recently I met with footballers, social media companies and many other stakeholders, as well as football authorities, to discuss racism and discrimination in sport. The Government are taking action, including through the draft Online Harms Bill announced this week.

We should also bear in mind that a lot of harassment is already illegal and it is not all online, although unfortunately, a large amount of it is. I encourage all

those who suffer discrimination and abuse, online or offline, to make sure that they report it to the police and indeed to the social media companies, who do take their responsibilities seriously. Of course, with the new Bill we will be encouraging them to take those responsibilities even more seriously—there is the potential for fines if they do not remove inappropriate content. So further action is being taken, and I look forward to working with the hon. Lady and others in progressing that Bill.

It goes without saying that the past year has been like no other. I am determined that the sport sector, including grassroots football, emerges from the pandemic even stronger than ever. This Government made sure that grassroots sport was the first to return after lockdown, and they will continue to invest in the game to ensure facilities for all.

Seema Malhotra: I am grateful for the Minister's responses on some of the issues raised. I wonder whether he would say a little more about mental health support and the experience of clubs at the moment, and whether more can be done to give advice, training and guidance on what they are clearly now doing on the frontline, which is supporting children in our community.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the hon. Lady for that comment. She raised an important point during her speech, and I would be happy to continue the dialogue with her on this. I have spoken to many clubs and, as I say, the work they already do in providing additional support, often in association with support facilities—local councils and others—is vital. Unfortunately, we have seen real challenges, particularly for children, and the suffering they have gone through with mental health challenges during coronavirus. It is important that we all do more. There is a role for Government, for local authorities and for sport, which has stepped up to the plate. The clubs have stepped up to the plate and are extremely innovative. I have been very impressed with some of the initiatives I have seen at clubs up and down the country. I would like to see more, and we would be happy to work with the sector to see more.

The hon. Lady raised many important points and we will not be able to address them all today, but I thank her for her commitment and for all the points she has raised. I look forward to continuing the dialogue with her and others.

Question put and agreed to.

7.26 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 12 May 2021

CABINET OFFICE

Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): Today, the Government will introduce the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill and, alongside this, will publish our response to the report of the Joint Committee on the Fixed-term Parliaments Act.

In delivering on the Government's manifesto commitment to repeal the Fixed-term Parliaments Act (the 2011 Act), we have welcomed the valuable contributions of Parliament, noting in particular the work of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, the Lords Constitution Committee and the debates in the last Parliament.

It is in this context that the Joint Committee was appointed to fulfil the statutory duty to conduct a review of the operation of the 2011 Act, and also to conduct pre-legislative scrutiny of the Government's draft Bill and Dissolution principles paper. The Government are particularly grateful to the Committee for how it has balanced its statutory responsibility to conduct a review of the current legislation alongside its scrutiny of the draft Bill, and its consideration of whether the Government's proposal will put in place constitutional arrangements that allow for the effective operation of our parliamentary democracy.

To put in place arrangements that deliver increased legal, constitutional and political certainty around the process for dissolving Parliament, the draft Bill makes express legal provision to revive the royal prerogative powers relating to the Dissolution of Parliament (and the calling of a new Parliament) that existed prior to the 2011 Act.

In returning to this tried and tested system (where the Prime Minister is able to request a Dissolution from the Sovereign), a core constitutional principle is that the Government of the day draw their authority by virtue of their ability to command the confidence of the House. The Government of the day are drawn largely from the membership of the House of Commons, and accordingly the House of Commons will continue to play a key role in our constitutional system.

Consensus and a common understanding of the principles that underpin the relationship between Parliament, Government, the Sovereign and the electorate is a fundamental part of our democracy. It is for this reason that, alongside the draft Bill, the Government published a draft statement of the constitutional principles that underpin the exercise of the prerogative powers to dissolve Parliament and call a new Parliament. In response to the Joint Committee report, the Government have also set out their view on the Joint Committee statement of "Principles and conventions on Confidence, dissolution, government formation".

The Government welcome the opportunity to continue a constructive dialogue with members of the Joint Committee and, of course, all parliamentarians during the course of the debate on the Bill.

[HCWS8]

CABINET OFFICE

Preventing Electoral Fraud: Legislation

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): Electoral fraud is a crime that strikes at a core principle of our democracy—that everyone's vote matters. In our current system, there is undeniable potential for electoral fraud and the perception of this undermines public confidence in our democracy.

In 2016, Sir (now Lord) Eric Pickles conducted an independent review of electoral fraud in the UK, highlighting cases such as Tower Hamlets—in which the 2014 Mayoral election was declared void because of corrupt and illegal practices—as evidence of vulnerabilities in our system which must be addressed.

Building on the recommendations of the Pickles report, the Queen's Speech on 11 May 2021 set out that we will go further to protect the integrity of our democracy. Measures in the forthcoming Elections Bill will tighten the rules for absent voting and tackle voter fraud and intimidation.

Postal voting

For those who do not wish to or cannot cast their ballot in person, our system should continue to offer choice. Voting by post or proxy are essential tools for supporting voters to exercise their rights. However, we need to be vigilant in ensuring that they are not exploited.

We will bring forward in the Elections Bill a series of measures to give greater protection to all persons with an absent vote arrangement. We will set reasonable limits on the number of ballots a person can hand in on behalf of others and make sure that those people have a legitimate need to be involved.

Currently, once their application has been processed, a voter can hold a postal ballot indefinitely with no further checks or confirmations. We will require those registered for a postal vote to reaffirm their identities by reapplying for a postal vote every three years, adding an additional safeguard to reduce the risk of postal votes being appropriated and stolen from legitimate voters.

Proxy voting

Similar to the changes to postal voting, we will set a reasonable limit on the number of voters a proxy can act on behalf of. These measures will improve the integrity of the absent vote process by reducing the opportunity for individuals to exploit the process and steal votes.

Undue influence

Reflecting the recommendations of the Pickles report, I updated the House in March on the Government's intention to legislate to clarify and improve the offence of undue influence of an elector. Although this is already an offence, the outdated legislation requires modernising, in order to ensure there is adequate protection for electors and that the offence is effective for enforcement agencies.

Voter identification

Asking voters to prove their identities will safeguard against the potential in our current system for someone to cast another person's vote at the polling station. Showing identification is something people of all backgrounds do every day.

Northern Ireland has used voter identification in its elections since 1985, and expanded this in 2003 during the last Labour Government. In the first general election

after photographic identification was introduced in Northern Ireland by the then Labour Government (2005), turnout in Northern Ireland was higher than in each of England, Scotland and Wales. Since then, the experience in Northern Ireland has shown that once voter identification is established as part of the voting system the vast majority of electors complete the voting process after arriving at the polling station. A wide range of countries, such as Canada and most European nations, require some form of identification to vote.

New research published yesterday on www.gov.uk clearly indicates that the vast majority of the electorate of Great Britain, 98% of electors, already own an eligible form of identification, which includes a broad range of documents and expired photographic identification. As part of our implementation plans we will also offer a free, local voter card if any elector needs one. The associated documents have been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.

Safeguarding the security and integrity of the ballot

Overall, the package of measures introduced in this Bill will reduce the risk of electoral fraud and reassure voters that appropriate safeguards are in place to protect the security and integrity of the ballot, giving the public confidence that our elections are secure, modern, transparent, inclusive and fair.

[HCWS10]

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Advanced Research and Invention Agency: Recruitment of CEO and Chair

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Amanda Solloway): Given the unusual autonomy placed on the CEO and chair roles for ARIA, it is vital we source the best possible candidates, and get them started as soon as possible. We have planned an extensive outreach strategy to ensure we maximise the size of the talent pool. We will expand and enhance the search for the right individuals, including by procuring the services of a respected international executive search agency from the Government's commercial framework. This agency will not have any part to play in candidate selection or interview sifting—these activities will be the responsibilities of BEIS Secretary and the ARIA recruitment panel, respectively.

Parliamentary approval for additional resource of £200,000 for this new service will be sought in a main estimate for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £200,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS3]

East Anglia ONE North and East Anglia TWO Offshore Wind Farm Development Consent Applications

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): This statement concerns applications for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by East Anglia ONE North Limited and East Anglia TWO Limited for the installation, operation and maintenance of the proposed East Anglia

ONE North Offshore Wind Farm and the proposed East Anglia TWO Offshore Wind Farm respectively, their related offshore infrastructure off the coast of Suffolk and their related onshore electrical connections within this county.

Under section 98(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the examining authority must complete its examination of an application by the end of the period of six months beginning with the day after the start day of the examination unless the Secretary of State sets a new deadline under section 98(4) of that Act. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it.

A request has been made by the Planning Inspectorate to extend the examination periods for the proposed developments. The reasons given for this request were that some interested parties, local authorities and statutory bodies have had their resources and capability reduced due to covid-19 restrictions, and that extensions would enable all interested parties sufficient time to engage properly and effectively in the examination processes.

Taking these reasons into account and after careful consideration, the Secretary of State has decided to reset the statutory timescale for the examinations. The examination periods for both applications are now extended by three months—from 6 April 2021—so that the examinations must be completed by no later than 6 July 2021.

However, mindful of the need to avoid unnecessary delays to the development consent processes, the Secretary of State requests the examining authorities make best efforts to complete the examination processes as soon as is reasonably practicable within the extended periods.

The decision to set the new deadlines for the examinations of these applications is without prejudice to the decisions on whether to grant or refuse development consents.

[HCWS4]

Norfolk Boreas Offshore Wind Farm Development Consent Application: Statutory Decision Deadline

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): This statement concerns an application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by Norfolk Boreas Limited for the installation, operation and maintenance of the proposed Norfolk Boreas Offshore Wind Farm, its related offshore infrastructure off the coast of Norfolk and its related onshore electrical connections within that county.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) of the Act to set a new deadline. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a Statement to Parliament to announce it. The deadline for the decision on the Norfolk Boreas Offshore Wind Farm application was 12 April 2021.

The Secretary of State has decided to set a new deadline of no later than 10 December 2021 for deciding this application to allow an opportunity for further information in respect of cumulative impacts of the onshore substation and of offshore environmental effects to be provided and considered.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS5]

TREASURY

Sale of Government-owned NWG Shares

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

I can today inform the House of the disposal of £1.1 billion worth of Government-owned NatWest Group plc—NWG, formerly Royal Bank of Scotland, RBS—shares, representing 5% of the company, by way of an overnight sale via a competitive accelerated book build—ABB—to institutional investors. The Government's remaining shareholding represents 54.8% of the company.

Rationale

It is Government policy that where a Government asset no longer serves a public policy purpose, the Government may choose to sell that asset, subject to being able to achieve value for money. This frees up public resource which can be deployed to achieve other public policy objectives.

The Government are committed to returning NWG to full private ownership, given that the original policy objective for the intervention in NWG—to preserve financial and economic stability at a time of crisis—has long been achieved. The Government only conducts sales of NWG shares when it represents value for money to do so and market conditions allow. This sale represents a further step forward for Government in exiting the assets acquired as a result of the 2007 to 2008 financial crisis.

Format and Timing

The Government, supported by advice from UK Government Investments (UKGI), concluded that selling shares by way of a competitive ABB process to institutional investors represented value for money for the taxpayer. The sale involved wall-crossing, an established market procedure designed to improve the chances of reaching the widest possible range of investors, executing successfully and achieving the best price for the taxpayer. Wall-crossing is commonly used in transactions of this sort and involves contacting a number of institutional investors hours before the transaction launch on a confidential basis to give them more time to consider participating in the sale and to provide UKGI with feedback which can be used to optimise the offering. The institutions were selected on the basis of objective criteria and do not receive preferential treatment in the allocation. UKGI intends to keep disposal options under review and will continue to consider further transaction options that achieve value for money for the taxpayer.

ABBs are a well-established method of returning Government-owned shares to private ownership, while protecting value for the taxpayer. The first two sales of NWG shares were completed by way of ABBs—in August 2015 and June 2018, and this method was also used in the sell-down of the Government's stake in Lloyds Banking Group.

This is the fourth sale of NWG shares undertaken by the Government, following previous disposals in August 2015, June 2018 and March 2021.

The sale concluded on 11 May 2021, with institutional investors purchasing a limited number of Government owned shares. A total of 580 million shares—5% of the bank—were sold at the price of 190p per share. This represented a 3.6% discount to the 10 May 2021 closing price of 197.05p. A small discount to market price is necessary and expected in a market facing the sale of

such a large volume of shares overnight. UKGI's view, having taken advice from their privatisation adviser, Goldman Sachs, and their capital markets adviser, Rothschild & Co, is that the final price achieved in the transaction represents fair value, based on the current and future prospects of NWG, and that the transaction achieved value for money for the taxpayer. Following this transaction, the Government's shareholding will stand at 54.8%.

Details of the sale are summarised below:

Government stake in NWG pre-sale	59.8%
Total shares sold	580 million
Sale price per share	190.00p
Share price at market close on 10/05/2021	197.05p
Discount to close price	3.6%
Total proceeds from the sale	£1,102 million
Government stake in NWG post-sale	54.8%

Fiscal impacts

The net impacts of the sale on a selection of fiscal metrics are summarised as follows:

Metric	Impact
Net sale proceeds	£1.1 billion
Retention value range	Within the valuation range Uncertain
Public sector net borrowing	There may be future indirect impacts as a result of the sale. The sale proceeds reduce public sector debt. All else being equal, the sale will reduce future debt interest costs for Government. The reduction in Government's shareholding means it will not receive future dividend income it may otherwise have been entitled to through these shares.
Public sector net debt	Reduced by £1.1 billion
Public sector net financial liabilities	Increased by £40.9 million
Public sector net liabilities	Increased by £40.9 million

[HCWS11]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Online Safety Bill Update

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden): Today the Government are publishing the draft Online Safety Bill. This groundbreaking piece of legislation will deliver our manifesto commitment of making the UK the safest place in the world to be online, while also, crucially, protecting freedom of expression.

The Government's overarching approach to digital regulation will promote competition and innovation, keep the UK safe and secure online, and promote a flourishing, democratic society, all while driving growth. The Government will also ensure that their approach to governing digital technologies is streamlined and coherent, within Government itself and across the regulatory

landscape. Within this, our Online Safety Bill is a key Government priority, which takes a proportionate approach that promotes innovation.

The need for this legislation is clear: in recent weeks we have seen the sporting community hold a mass boycott of social media to demonstrate the cost of abhorrent online racist abuse, while at the same time we have heard legitimate concerns that social media platforms have arbitrarily removed content or blocked users online. It is crucial that we bring consistency, transparency and fairness into the online sphere.

In line with the full Government response published in December 2020, the draft Bill will place duties of care on companies and will give Ofcom the functions and powers to oversee the regulatory framework. The aims of this legislation are to ensure online platforms keep their promises by:

- Protecting children.
- Tackling criminal activity.
- Upholding freedom of expression.

The strongest provisions in our legislation are for children. All companies in scope of this legislation will need to consider the risks that their sites may pose to the youngest and most vulnerable members of society. This Bill will require companies to take steps to protect children from inappropriate content and harmful activity online, from content such as pro-suicide material. Today I can also confirm that the final legislation, when introduced to Parliament, will contain provisions that will require companies to report child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) content identified on their services. This will ensure companies provide law enforcement with the high-quality information they need to safeguard victims and investigate offenders.

Our legislation also makes clear that all in-scope companies must tackle criminal content and activity on their platforms, and remove and limit the spread of illegal and harmful content such as terrorist material and suicide content.

The largest social media platforms will need to set out what types of content are unacceptable, and will be held to account for the transparent, consistent and effective enforcement of these terms and conditions. We have heard from many parties, including the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, which has done excellent work in this area, how damaging online abuse can be. These provisions will help to address the abusive and unpleasant content online which does not reach the threshold of criminality.

Since the publication of the full Government response in December 2020, there has been significant concern about the exclusion of online fraud from the legislation. This Government understand the devastating effect that online fraud can have on its victims, so today we are announcing that the Online Safety Bill brings user-generated fraud into the scope of the regulatory framework.

This change will aim to reduce some specific types of damaging fraudulent activity. In tandem, the Home Office will be working with other Departments, law enforcement and the private sector to develop the Fraud Action Plan, including the potential for further legislation if necessary.

This legislation tackles a number of online harms, but it does so while also protecting core democratic rights—particularly freedom of expression.

While the internet has revolutionised our ability to connect with one another—enabling us to exchange views with people all over the world—the majority of online speech is now facilitated by a small number of private companies who wield significant influence over what appears online. We must make sure they cannot use that influence to suppress free debate, arbitrarily remove content or stifle media freedoms.

Therefore this legislation will not prevent adults from accessing or posting legal content. Rather, the major platforms will need to be clear what content is acceptable on their services and enforce their terms and conditions consistently and effectively. Companies will not be able to arbitrarily remove controversial viewpoints, and users will be able to seek redress if they feel content has been removed unfairly.

This legislation also includes new protections for journalistic content and content of democratic importance. We have been clear that news publishers' own content on their own sites will not be in scope, and nor will user comments on this content. In addition, news publisher content that is shared on other services will not be in scope, and this draft bill also now includes robust protections to ensure wider journalistic content is not adversely affected. The largest platforms will also have a statutory duty to safeguard users' access to journalistic content shared on their platforms.

When it comes to content of democratic importance, the legislation will also include protections to safeguard pluralism and ensure internet users can continue to engage in robust debate online.

We will require the largest platforms to put in place clear policies to protect content of democratic importance, and to enforce this consistently across all content moderation. This will include, for example, content promoting or opposing government policy or a political party ahead of a vote in Parliament, election or referendum, or campaigning on a live political issue.

The threat posed by harmful and illegal content and activity is a global one and the Government remain committed to building international consensus around shared approaches to improve internet safety. Under the UK's presidency of the G7, the world's leading democracies committed to a set of internet safety principles in line with the main themes in the UK Government's Online Harms White Paper. This is significant as it is the first time that an approach to internet safety has been agreed in the G7. We will continue to collaborate with our international partners to develop common approaches to this shared challenge.

This Bill is the culmination of years of work and is truly novel. It is vital that we get it right both in order to create a framework that delivers for users and that maintains the UK's reputation as a tech leader. This balance has been struck. During the pre-legislative scrutiny process, which I hope will start as soon as possible, my Department and the Home Office will continue work across both Houses to develop some areas of the legislation. This will include measures on user advocacy, and exempting educational institutions that are already regulated from scope. As we move forward, I would like to thank colleagues for their valuable contributions and continued engagement as we prepare this world-leading legislation.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): This Government were elected on a manifesto that committed to setting up a new independent Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) and to have the

“most ambitious environmental programme of any country on earth”.

DEFRA is seeking a further repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund (CFA) of £6,713,000 to proceed with setting up the OEP in advance of Royal Assent of the Environment Bill (the Bill). This new CFA is in addition to the advances of £215,000 and £536,000 notified to Parliament on 21 July and 23 October 2020 which covered essential set-up expenditure up to 31 March 2021.

Under “Managing Public Money” rules, providing a Bill has successfully passed Second Reading, then expenditure to make preparation for the delivery of a new service prior to Royal Assent requires an advance from the Contingencies Fund.

The requirement for this third CFA has arisen because the Environment Bill has been carried over and is still completing its parliamentary passage. The CFA is for the period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 to provide sufficient contingency cover until the end of the financial year. This CFA covers essential set-up costs which include estates, recruitment and HR, and all interim OEP operational costs from 1 July 2021 until the end of this financial year, or until the OEP is legally established if earlier.

Regulations are required to commence the Bill provisions relating to the OEP, and we expect those regulations to be made shortly after the Bill receives Royal Assent.

Ministers have agreed on the need to set up an interim OEP from 1 July 2021. The interim OEP will be set up, in non-statutory form, within DEFRA and will ease the introduction of the full OEP. The interim OEP will be led by the chair-designate, Dame Glenys Stacey, and the interim chief executive-designate.

The interim Office for Environmental Protection will be able to:

- produce and publish an independent assessment of progress in relation to the implementation of the Government’s 25-year environment plan

- develop the Office for Environmental Protection strategy including its enforcement policy

- receive, but not investigate, complaints from members of the public about failures of public authorities to comply with environmental law

- take decisions on operational matters such as staff recruitment, accommodation and facilities

- determine approaches for how the Office for Environment Protection will form and operate, establishing its character, ways of working and voice.

The need to spend now in advance of Royal Assent will allow the interim OEP to commence on 1 July 2021, and smooth the transition so that the OEP can begin its statutory functions as soon as practical after Royal Assent.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £6,713,000 for this new service will be sought in the main estimate for Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £6,713,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS7]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Consultation on 12-month Rule in Regulation 12 of the Police (Injury Benefit) Regulations 2006

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): This Government have made clear our commitment to giving our world-class police the resources, powers and tools they need. They show remarkable courage and dedication to duty every day, which deserves our utmost respect, recognition and support.

In doing their duty, police officers put themselves in harm’s way to protect us. Sadly, this can lead to injury, which in some cases has a lasting impact on an officer’s own health, and there are well-established provisions in place to support officers who are injured in the line of duty. Where a police officer suffers a serious injury on duty, which leads to total and permanent disablement, it is right that they are appropriately compensated.

The Government are today launching a consultation on the compatibility of the 12-month rule in regulation 12 of the Police (Injury Benefit) Regulations 2006 with statutory obligations under the Equality Act 2010 and its suitability for inclusion in regulation 12. Regulation 12 governs the provision of disablement gratuities for police officers totally and permanently disabled by an injury suffered on duty.

The 12-month rule in regulation 12 of the Police (Injury Benefit) Regulations 2006 limits the granting of the higher police injury gratuity to only those individuals for whom total and permanent disability manifests within 12 months of suffering an injury on duty. It has been argued that this rule may result in a difference in treatment between police officers who suffer physical conditions and those who suffer mental health conditions. The Government are committed to ensuring that the police injury benefit regulations are fully compliant with its obligations under the Equality Act 2010.

The consultation will be available from 12 May 2021 until 7 July 2021 at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/regulation-12-of-the-police-injury-benefit-regulations-2006>. A copy of the consultation will also be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS9]

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

The Government’s Legislative Programme 2021

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Following the state opening of Parliament, and for the convenience of the House, I am listing the bills which were announced:

- Animals Abroad Bill

- Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill

- Advance Research and Invention Agency Bill

- Armed Forces Bill

Borders Bill
 Building Safety Bill
 Counter-State Threats Bill
 Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill
 Dormant Assets Bill
 Electoral Integrity Bill
 Environment Bill
 Health and Care Bill
 Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill
 High Speed Rail (Crewe - Manchester) Bill
 Judicial Review Bill
 Kept Animals Bill
 Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Bill Legacy Bill
 National Insurance Contributions Bill
 Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill
 Planning Bill
 Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill
 Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill
 Professional Qualifications Bill
 Procurement Bill
 Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill
 Skills and Post-16 Education Bill
 Subsidy Control Bill
 Telecommunications (Security) Bill

The programme will also include Finance Bills to implement budget policy decisions. This list does not include draft bills or Law Commission bills.

Detailed information about each of these bills can be accessed from the Gov.uk website at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/985029/Queen_s_Speech_2021_-_Background_Briefing_Notes.

[HCWS6]

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Government's Legislative Programme (Northern Ireland) 2021-22

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Brandon Lewis): The legislative programme for the second Session was outlined by Her Majesty on 11 May. Twenty five of the 29 Bills announced in the Government's legislative programme contain a wide range of measures that will apply to Northern Ireland either in full or in part.

This ambitious legislative programme, and the delivery that will flow from it, underlines the importance that the Government places on the Union, and Northern Ireland's integral part within it. It also reinforces the Government's commitment to levelling up right across the UK, delivering for people and businesses across Northern Ireland, as part of a strong United Kingdom, to ensure we can build back better and recover from the covid-19 pandemic by strengthening economic growth and opportunities right across the UK.

It also builds on the unprecedented action the Government have taken to support individuals, businesses and communities in Northern Ireland to get the Northern Ireland economy back up and running. This includes £4.2 billion funding through the Barnett formula to tackle the pandemic—over and on top of £3.5 billion investment we are already making in Northern Ireland through the new deal for Northern Ireland—ambitious city deals, PEACE PLUS and the New Decade, New

Approach financial package. This financial boost, together with further funding streams and legislative action will continue to lay the foundations for delivering prosperity, safety, ongoing support for communities right across Northern Ireland, and working with the Executive to ensure the effective delivery of public services.

My Department will also lead on two of the Bills within the legislative programme which have a specific focus on matters at the heart of Northern Ireland. These are:

The Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill which will deliver aspects of the New Decade, New Approach deal agreed by the five main Northern Ireland political parties when the Executive was restored in January 2020;

A Bill to address the legacy of the Troubles in a way which focuses on reconciliation, delivers for victims, and ends the cycle of investigations.

The Bills that will extend in whole or in part to Northern Ireland are:

Advanced Research and Invention Agency Bill
 Armed Forces Bill
 Animals Abroad Bill
 Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill
 Borders Bill
 Building Safety Bill
 Counter-State Threats Bill
 Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill
 Dormant Assets Bill
 Electoral Integrity Bill
 Environment Bill
 Health and Care Bill
 Judicial Review Bill
 Legacy Bill
 National Insurance Contributions Bill
 Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill
 Planning Bill
 Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill
 Procurement Reform Bill
 Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill
 Professional Qualifications Bill
 Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill
 Subsidy Control Bill
 Skills and Post-16 Education Bill
 Telecommunications (Security) Bill

In line with the Sewel Convention and associated practices, the Government will continue to work constructively with the Northern Ireland Executive to secure the legislative consent of the Northern Ireland Assembly where appropriate.

[HCWS15]

SCOTLAND

The Government's Legislative Programme (Scotland) 2021-22

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): The legislative programme for the second Session was outlined by Her Majesty on 11 May. This statement provides a summary of the programme and its application to Scotland. It does not include draft Bills, Law Commission Bills or finance Bills.

This Government will continue to deliver for people and businesses across Scotland, as part of a strong United Kingdom. The UK Government have ensured citizens and businesses across the UK benefit from our £352 billion package of support since the start of the pandemic, which has supported one in three Scottish jobs, as well as providing access to tests and key medicines and ensuring every part of the UK continues to receive its fair share of one of the world's largest and most diverse vaccine portfolios.

The legislative programme for this Session will support our collective covid-19 recovery, ensuring the whole of the UK can build back better by focusing on increasing job opportunities, productivity and long-term investment in people.

To help with this recovery, we are boosting funding for communities in all parts of the UK. Our community renewal fund will invest £220 million in local areas ahead of the launch of the UK shared prosperity fund in 2022. We have also set up the £4.8 million UK levelling-up fund which will invest in infrastructure which improves everyday life across the UK. We are committed to levelling up across the whole of the United Kingdom, to ensure that no community is left behind as we recover from the covid-19 pandemic.

We will build back greener, and we are committed to leading the way in tackling climate change and to see the low-carbon economy support up to 2 million green jobs by 2030 as part of the Prime Minister's green industrial revolution. This legislative programme will combine our ambitious plans to level up across the country with making strides towards the UK's net zero by 2050. We are working with local authorities, businesses, and citizens across the UK to inspire action ahead of hosting the COP26 summit in Glasgow in November. COP26 will be the moment we secure our path to global net zero emissions by 2050 and define the next decade of tackling climate change.

The Government are committed to protecting and promoting the strengths of the United Kingdom, building on hundreds of years of partnership between the regions of our country, the most successful political and economic union in history and the foundation upon which all our businesses and citizens are able to thrive and prosper.

The following Bills would apply to Scotland (either in full or in part).

- Advance Research and Invention Agency Bill
- Armed Forces Bill
- Animals Abroad Bill
- Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill
- Borders Bill
- Building Safety Bill
- Counter-State Threats Bill
- Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill
- Dormant Assets Bill
- Electoral Integrity Bill
- Environment Bill
- Health and Care Bill
- Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill
- High Speed Rail (Crewe-Manchester) Bill
- Judicial Review Bill
- Kept Animals Bill
- National Insurance Contributions Bill

- Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill
- Planning Bill
- Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill
- Procurement Bill
- Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill
- Professional Qualifications Bill
- Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill
- Subsidy Control Bill
- Skills and Post-16 Education Bill
- Telecommunications (Security) Bill

In line with the Sewel convention and associated practices, the Government will continue to work constructively with the Scottish Government to secure the legislative consent of the Scottish Parliament where appropriate.

[HCWS13]

TRANSPORT

Traffic Light System: Safe Return to International Travel

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): We have made enormous progress this year in tackling the pandemic across Britain. That progress has been hard won and it is important that we do not risk undermining it now. Yet we are also a nation with ties across the globe.

In 2019, UK residents took over 93 million trips abroad, for business, leisure and to visit friends and family. International travel is vital. It connects families who have been kept apart, boosts businesses and underpins the UK economy. It is absolutely essential that any steps we take now, lay the groundwork for a sustainable return to travel. That is why on 7 May, I announced the first steps towards unlocking international travel.

I have confirmed that, from 17 May, the "Stay in the UK" regulation will cease and international travel will be allowed to restart, governed by a new traffic light system. The system will allow the public to understand covid requirements when travelling to England. Health measures at the border will vary depending on whether travelling from a green, amber or red country. You can see the full list of countries in each category on gov.uk.

The traffic light system

As the virus is still spreading in many parts of the world, people should not be travelling to amber or red countries.

Given the need for caution, the green list will initially be modest with only the following 12 countries and territories on the initial list when international travel resumes on 17 May:

- Portugal (including the Azores and Madeira)
- Israel (and Jerusalem)
- Gibraltar
- Iceland
- Singapore
- Australia
- Brunei Darussalam
- Falkland Islands
- Faroe Islands
- New Zealand
- Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha
- South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands

Countries on the green list pose the lowest risk, therefore passengers who have only visited or transited through a green list country will not be required to quarantine on arrival in England. They will be required to fill in the passenger locator form, provide a valid notification of a negative test result prior to travel and take a sequencing test on day 2 after arrival.

The Maldives, Nepal and Turkey will be added to the red list from 4 am on 12 May, a sign of our ongoing vigilance in protecting against the virus and from the importation of variants. International visitors who have visited or transited through any red list country in the previous 10 days will be refused entry into England. Only British and Irish citizens, or those with residence rights in the UK, will be allowed to enter and they must stay in a Government approved quarantine facility for 10 days.

All other countries will remain on the amber list. Passengers who have visited or transited through an amber country will be required to fill in the passenger locator form, provide a valid notification of a negative test result prior to travel, quarantine at home for 10 days, and take a test on day 2 and day 8 after arrival. Passengers will also have the option to opt into test to release at day 5.

While the number of countries on the green list is initially low, I anticipate it will grow over time as the situation improves globally, meaning further opportunities for international travel will open up.

The risk posed by individual countries will be continuously monitored and the green, amber and red lists will be updated every three weeks. The Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC) will produce risk assessments of countries and territories. Decisions will be taken by Ministers, who take into account the JBC risk assessments, alongside wider public health factors. Key factors in the JBC risk assessment of each country include:

- Genomic surveillance capability
- Covid-19 transmission risk
- Variant of concern transmission risk

A summary of the JBC methodology has been published on gov.uk, alongside key data that supports Ministers' decisions.

If the situation in a country changes dramatically, we will not hesitate to act swiftly and decisively to protect the health of the UK public and our progress on vaccination.

Demonstrating covid-19 vaccination status

From 17 May, people in England who have had the vaccine will be able to demonstrate their covid-19 vaccination status for outbound travel using the NHS app or letter. In due course, the app will allow people to show evidence of negative tests as they travel out of the country.

The Government are working with the devolved Administrations to ensure this facility is available to everyone across the UK.

Messages to passengers

Given the virus is still spreading in many parts of the world, the public are recommended against travel to amber and red countries, and instead should only travel to countries on the green list.

Reopening international travel while maintaining checks of health measures for every passenger at the border means queues are inevitable. We understand that queues are frustrating but undertaking proper checks is the right thing to do to reduce the chances of a new variant of the virus entering the country.

We have updated the guidance on gov.uk setting out the requirements of all passengers. We will continue to promote messages on how to prepare for travel via all our usual channels. You should check the gov.uk/travel-abroad page to help plan your journeys.

Future reviews

The traffic light system will be reviewed through a series of checkpoints in June, July and October, taking into account the latest domestic and international data.

The Government are committed to giving people the freedom to travel with confidence and supporting the wider travel industry.

[HCWS1]

M25 Junction 10 Roundabout Planning Application

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): I have been asked by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State (Grant Shapps), to make this written ministerial statement. This statement concerns the application made under the Planning Act 2008 for the proposed alteration and upgrading by Highways England of the existing M25 junction 10 roundabout.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make his decision within three months of receipt of the examining authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) to extend the deadline and make a statement to the Houses of Parliament announcing the new deadline. The Secretary of State received the examining authority's report on the M25 junction 10/A3 Wisley interchange development consent order application on 12 October 2020 and the current deadline is 12 May 2021 having been extended from 12 January 2021 by way of my written ministerial statement of 12 January 2021.

The deadline for the decision is to be further extended to 12 November 2021 (an extension of six months) to allow further consideration of environmental matters.

The decision to set a new deadline is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant development consent.

[HCWS2]

WALES

The Government's Legislative Programme (Wales) 2021-22

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): The legislative programme for the second session was outlined by Her Majesty on 11 May. This statement provides a summary of the programme and its application to Wales. It does not include draft bills, Law Commission Bills or Finance Bills.

The United Kingdom has faced many unexpected and difficult challenges over the past year. The UK Government have supported communities in Wales with an extra £7.9 billion to tackle the pandemic; in addition to over £2.75 billion in direct support to businesses in Wales.

We are slowly emerging from the worst public health crisis in over a century and this Government's focus will be on increasing job opportunities, productivity and long-term investment in the people of this great nation. This legislative programme will support our collective recovery from the covid-19 pandemic and support our efforts to build back better, strengthening the ties between all parts of the UK and unleashing its potential.

By focusing on the key areas of growth, infrastructure, skills and innovation, our legislative programme will directly contribute to levelling up the whole of the UK and delivering a global Britain.

The following Bills will apply to Wales (either in full or in part):

- Animals Abroad Bill
- Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill
- Advanced Research and Invention Agency Bill
- Armed Forces Bill
- Borders Bill
- Building Safety Bill
- Counter-State Threats Bill
- Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill
- Dormant Assets Bill
- Electoral Integrity Bill
- Environment Bill

- Health and Care Bill
- Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill
- High Speed Rail (Crewe - Manchester) Bill
- Judicial Review Bill
- Kept Animals Bill
- Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Bill
- Legacy Bill
- National Insurance Contributions Bill
- Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill
- Planning Bill
- Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill
- Procurement Bill
- Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill
- Professional Qualifications Bill
- Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill
- Skills and Post-16 Education Bill
- Subsidy Control Bill
- Telecommunications (Security) Bill

The Government take their responsibilities in Wales incredibly seriously and will continue to work constructively with the Welsh Government to secure the legislative consent of the Senedd Cymru where appropriate.

[HCWS14]

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 12 May 2021

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

Amendments to the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme

The following is an extract from the debate on amendments to the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme on 28 April 2021.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) went back to his fundamental point, and I want to give him clarification on who may appeal to the IEP. There is one category of Member or former Member that is excluded, and that is a former Member who had the good fortune—if it is a good fortune—to go to another place. They would not be able to use the IEP. Anybody who brings a complaint

against a Member is able to appeal to the IEP, and any Member or former Member **except a peer** is also able to take their case to the IEP.

[Official Report, 28 April 2021, Vol. 693, c. 467.]

Letter of correction from the Leader of the House of Commons, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg).

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope).

The correct response should have been:

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) went back to his fundamental point, and I want to give him clarification on who may appeal to the IEP. There is one category of Member or former Member that is excluded, and that is a former Member who had the good fortune—if it is a good fortune—to go to another place. They would not be able to **be sanctioned by** the IEP. Anybody who brings a complaint against a Member is able to appeal to the IEP, and any Member or former Member is also able to take their case to the IEP.

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Wednesday 12 May 2021

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No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Wednesday 19 May 2021**

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Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

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Bill presented, and read the First and Second time

Telecommunications (Security) [Col. 162]

Bill presented, and read the First and Second time

Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) [Col. 162]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Dissolution and Calling of Parliament [Col. 162]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Compensation (London Capital & Finance plc and Fraud Compensation Fund) [Col. 162]

Bill presented, and read the First time

National Insurance Contributions [Col. 163]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) [Col. 163]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) [Col. 163]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Debate on the Address (Second Day) [Col. 164]

Debate adjourned

Grassroots Football: Feltham and Heston [Col. 251]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Written Statements [Col. 1WS]

Ministerial Correction [Col. 1MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
