

Thursday  
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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

Thursday 20 May 2021

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# House of Commons

Thursday 20 May 2021

*The House met at half-past Nine o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

## BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

### MESSAGE FROM THE QUEEN

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That Her Majesty, having been attended with its Address of 12th April, was pleased to receive the same very graciously and give the following Answer:

*I thank you most sincerely for your expression of sympathy in the great loss which I have sustained by the death of my beloved husband, the Duke of Edinburgh. I am greatly moved by your kind comments and by your sincere condolences, which bring me comfort at this time.*

## Oral Answers to Questions

### DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Football Governance: Fan-led Review

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to progress the fan-led review of football governance. [900230]

**Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): What steps he is taking to progress the fan-led review of football governance. [900234]

**Zarah Sultana** (Coventry South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to progress the fan-led review of football governance. [900237]

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What steps he is taking to progress the fan-led review of football governance. [900245]

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden)**: Football is nothing without fans, so it has been a joy to see them back cheering on their teams this week, and we stand unequivocally on the side of fans. Our manifesto committed to putting them front and centre of our review of football governance and we are delivering on that. That is why I appointed my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) as chair and, this weekend, I will

announce the membership of the expert panel, which will include players, management, regulators and, of course, fans. This is a serious review; I know people want to see change and this review will deliver it.

**Dame Diana Johnson**: I am sure the Secretary of State will join me in congratulating Hull City on being league one champions this year. Hull City are one of many examples in recent years of where football club owners have not had the best of relationships with their fans. The recent breakaway attempt by the European super league cartel of greed brought many of the issues that concern fans to a head. Fans do not just pay a lot to support their clubs; they are custodians of their heritage and they deserve respect. To avoid taking his eye off the ball, will he explain a bit more about exactly how fans will lead the fan-led review and when it will report back to the House?

**Oliver Dowden**: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. First, of course, I join her in congratulating Hull City. She is absolutely right that football clubs form the heart of their communities and, indeed, our heritage. It is essential that fans play a significant role in the fan-led review, and I have been discussing that extensively with my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford.

In terms of explicit engagement, the chair will be engaging extensively with supporter trusts and fan groups over the coming weeks, but I understand that that will not work for everyone, so there will also be a consultation process, which we will set out. Of course, the chair, the Sports Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston)—and I will be engaging with parliamentarians as part of the review as well. On the question about timing, I would expect an interim report by the summer and a further report by the autumn.

**Tony Lloyd [V]**: There are two football teams in my life: Manchester United, who are No. 2 in the premiership, and Rochdale, who are sadly heading for league two of the football league. The idea that they are part of the same football pyramid has frankly been a nonsense for many years, but what unites the supporters of both those clubs and many more is the demands that we will never again see the ability for a European super league to take place, that the clammy hand, the dollar-studded fingers, of the corporates such as the Glazers be taken off the throat of football—that is so important—and that, once again, we will recreate a proper pyramid of football in this country. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that he will legislate to bring about those kinds of ends?

**Oliver Dowden**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The points he made about the football pyramid are precisely why the terms of reference of the review, which we set out to the House, explicitly covered examining “the flow of money through the football pyramid, including solidarity and parachute payments, and broadcasting revenue.”

I have said before, and am happy to say again, that I have set up this review with someone who is genuinely independent in the form of my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford. I fully hope and expect to accept the recommendations, and should those require legislation, we will find time to do that.

**Zarah Sultana** [V]: As an MP for Coventry, where, in recent years, our football club has repeatedly forced fans to drive miles from the city to watch home matches, and as a diehard Liverpool fan, one of the clubs involved in the proposed breakaway European super league, I know fans' anger at owners' decisions all too well. Ultimately, this will be changed only with fan ownership, like the 50+1 rule in Germany, but the Government could make a more immediate change to improve this. On major decisions such as moving ground or forming a new league, they could require clubs to secure a 50% plus 1 majority of season-ticket holders. Will the Government heed that demand or will they just kick the problem into the long grass?

**Oliver Dowden:** The hon. Lady mentions the governance structures in other countries. The terms of reference of the review explicitly say that we will be exploring

“governance structures in other countries, including ownership models, and whether any aspects could be beneficially translated to the English league system”.

The review will proceed at pace, as I set out in a previous answer, and we will then proceed at pace to implement any recommendations that follow from it.

**Mr Dhesi:** The greed of the super-rich club owners who wanted to destroy the football pyramid, which benefits everybody, and proceed with their botched plans for a European super league has been well and truly kicked into touch by the power and solidarity of football fans across our country, but this Government helped to create the crisis by ignoring Labour's calls for years and by failing to progress with a fan-led review of football governance, so would the Secretary of State like to apologise on behalf of the Government for failures and missed opportunities and tell us exactly when the review will report back to this House?

**Oliver Dowden:** I do not intend to apologise. I would have expected the hon. Gentleman to welcome the robust action that this Government took, standing behind fans and standing alongside the nation, in stopping these outrageous proposals. On the fan-led review, while Labour has talked for years and years, it is this Government who are actually delivering on it.

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to the Chair of the Select Committee. I call Julian Knight.

**Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

“Guess what? Next time you come into the stadium you will be paying, son, not playing.”

That is how one youngster of my acquaintance had his dreams crushed by a Premier League club when being released as a player. With the fan-led review into football, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), under way, does the Minister agree that it needs to be more than about the architecture of our national game and that it needs to incorporate a review of how clubs treat the 98% of young people who do not make it, how they equip them for life beyond football, and how they safeguard them and their mental health?

**Oliver Dowden:** My hon. Friend raises an important point, which I have discussed with him. As ever, he is absolutely right. Clubs clearly owe an obligation and a

duty of care particularly to the young people they work with, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford will consider those points. As my hon. Friend is aware, the Football Association has recently received a report on safeguarding and has committed to implementing all its recommendations. We will certainly be holding the FA to account for doing that.

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): Given that there was a Select Committee report and a Government response saying that they would legislate 10 years ago, it is a bit rich for the Secretary of State to claim that he is acting swiftly—but anyway, that aside, given the announcement only last week that the Government are prepared to set aside competition objections to preserve the status quo for three years, he will understand the healthy scepticism at the idea that the Government genuinely want change. So to answer that scepticism, will he confirm that, by the end of this Parliament, we will see a better model of redistribution in football that will see more money shift down the pyramid—yes or no?

**Oliver Dowden:** The hon. Lady is conflating two issues about competition law and the Premier League. The Sports Minister has set out the Government's position in a written ministerial statement. This is about securing football finances during a period of crisis, and it is essential that we do that. Clearly we will all have an open mind as we get the response, but the reason for considering this is that we want to ensure that money keeps going into the game.

On the point about change, of course that is precisely why I asked my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford, who I know the hon. Lady has worked closely with in the past, and I think we can trust her to come up with serious recommendations to address precisely the issues that the hon. Lady raises. I do not want to pre-empt the outcome of that review, but I can give an assurance that I will deliver on the outcome of the review as much as we possibly can. I am not pre-empting it, but we will find legislative time for doing so.

#### Broadband and Digital Connectivity: Rural Areas

**Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve digital infrastructure and connectivity in rural areas. [900232]

**Imran Ahmad Khan** (Wakefield) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve digital infrastructure and connectivity in rural areas. [900235]

**Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve digital infrastructure and connectivity in rural areas. [900238]

**Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the roll-out of gigabit broadband. [900241]

**Dr Dan Poulter** (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve digital infrastructure and connectivity in rural areas. [900242]

**Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the roll-out of gigabit broadband. [900243]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman)**: The Government are making huge progress on our ambition to deliver gigabit broadband across the whole country. Only last week, Openreach increased its planned investment target and it has set itself a target of 25 million premises to connect in the next five years. Some 40% of UK premises can already access gigabit broadband, and we expect that to rise to 60% by the end of this year. That is on top of the shared rural network commitment that will see mobile coverage increase across the whole country.

**Sally-Ann Hart**: A number of rural areas have been recategorised as urban for the purpose of broadband community vouchers. While the majority of premises will retain their eligibility under the new voucher conditions, premises in an area where Ofcom believes a gigabit-capable network is likely to be built commercially—including Ofcom area 2—will not be eligible for a voucher. Does my hon. Friend agree that that lack of certainty risks villages such as Three Oaks in my beautiful Hastings and Rye constituency ending up being missed out? What steps can he take to ensure that this cannot happen?

**Matt Warman**: It is of course welcome news that a commercial roll-out will reach more of the country than ever, but my hon. Friend raises an important point. This Government will make sure that no part of the country is left behind on that roll-out, which is why there is flexibility in the voucher scheme that she describes and why Project Gigabit is there to scoop up all the remaining premises. I am happy to discuss the villages that she mentions in person as well.

**Imran Ahmad Khan** [V]: I am pleased to see the Government delivering on their pledge to level up connectivity across the UK, including through the £1 billion deal to bring better mobile coverage across the country and banish rural hotspots. That will greatly aid constituencies such as Wakefield, which suffers from poor mobile coverage in some rural areas. Will the Minister confirm that his Department has already begun using this funding to improve mobile coverage in rural areas?

**Matt Warman**: It is good to see that working from home can provide a grander backdrop than this place. My hon. Friend is right to welcome the shared rural network. The roll-out has already started to benefit a large number of constituencies. It began in Wales and we will be talking in the coming weeks in much more detail about where it is going to benefit in coming years.

**Lee Anderson**: Residents in the rural part of Ashfield suffer from a lack of access to superfast broadband and feel that accessing it through the community fibre partnership scheme is far too expensive. When will areas such as Teversal in my constituency get access to this much-needed service?

**Matt Warman**: My hon. Friend is right to say that community fibre partnerships, although they work well in some places, do not work well everywhere. That is why Project Gigabit is so important; that £5 billion of Government money will be coming down the tracks

very quickly. We published plans in April and there will be more detail in June, and Ashfield certainly will not be left behind.

**Mr Speaker**: Jack Brereton. Not here. That is one down on his score.

**Dr Poulter** [V]: I thank the Minister for his helpful answers so far in response to the substantive question. I want to ask him specifically about access for homes in very rural areas, which have historically had not much better than dial-up speeds. How will he help those homes? In Suffolk, we have found that fibre-to-cabinet is not adequate in improving broadband speeds in many of our more rural parishes and villages. What will he do for very rural areas that need better than fibre-to-cabinet?

**Matt Warman**: The universal service obligation is a help in the situations my hon. Friend describes, but of course we need to go further. That is why the Government are consulting on what we do in the very hardest-to-reach premises, and I look forward to talking more about what satellites and other solutions can offer in the near future. We have already seen some commercial roll-out, for instance, from Starlink, and interesting work is being done by OneWeb to make sure that absolutely no premises in this country is left without the connectivity it deserves.

**Mark Fletcher**: I strongly welcome the Government's commitment to rolling out faster broadband, but I constantly get letters from people in parts of my constituency, such as Barlborough, Clowne, Heath and Shirebrook, saying that the broadband connections are not good enough. Will the Minister meet me to discuss those areas and what more we can do to improve their broadband connections?

**Matt Warman**: I am of course happy to meet my hon. Friend, but he will also know that in the Project Gigabit plans that we have laid out Derbyshire is very much already on that road map. That is good news and I look forward to talking about it in more detail with him.

## Digital Inclusivity

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to (a) increase digital inclusivity and (b) tackle the digital divide. [900233]

**The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage)**: Our 10 tech priorities include building a tech-savvy nation so that no one is left behind in the digital revolution. Adults can, free of charge, undertake qualifications designed to build digital skills up to level 1, and the Government are encouraging broadband providers to roll out low-cost-broadband social tariffs for lower-income households.

**Rachel Hopkins**: Recently published Office for National Statistics data showed that in the first quarter of 2020, some 22% of people in Luton who were over 16 had not used the internet for three months—that is more than double the national average. Many of my constituents were severely disadvantaged at the start of the pandemic, particularly as work, school and social lives moved online. To support my constituents—who had to choose

between data and dinner—I would like specific information about whether the affordability of access to broadband and online services will be adequate.

**Caroline Dinéage:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the fact that the pandemic has demonstrated how digital inclusion and accessibility have been fundamental to our ability to learn, work and meet our friends. Social tariffs are already available that offer low-cost landline and broadband services for those on certain means-tested benefits. However, the Government are now encouraging all fixed-broadband providers to introduce a social tariff.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]: The Minister says that no one should be left behind, but 60% of over-50s with household earnings under £20,000 per year are not online; more than half of adults who are not online are disabled; 2 million households in the UK have been without internet access during lockdown; and there are up to 900,000 children without devices. Yet the Government's digital inclusion strategy was last updated in 2014 and there is still no target for inclusion. Why will the Minister not tell us what proportion of the population she is happy to leave behind in this digital age?

**Caroline Dinéage:** I feel that that is a massive under-representation of the huge amount of work that has happened over the past year. The Government agreed a set of commitments with the UK's major broadband and mobile operators to support vulnerable customers during the covid-19 period. A whole heap of extra laptops—1.3 million of them, on top of the 2.9 million that were already in schools—have been rolled out to young people. In February, to tackle the disproportionate impact of covid-19 on disabled people, the Department launched a £2.5 million digital lifeline fund to support 5,000 people with learning disabilities to access devices, connectivity and digital skills support.

#### Protection of Online Users

**Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to (a) protect users online and (b) improve the accountability of technology companies. [900236]

**The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinéage):** Last week we published the Online Safety Bill. For the first time, tech companies will be held accountable by an independent regulator for keeping their users, especially children, safe from harmful content and behaviours online. If companies fail to keep their users safe, Ofcom will have the power to fine companies up to £18 million or 10% of their annual global turnover.

**Rob Butler:** I thank the Minister for her answer. This is an incredibly important policy area. As well as the online harms that she mentioned, an increasing number of people throughout the country, including in my Aylesbury constituency, sadly fall prey to online financial scams, which can not only have a profound impact on somebody's financial status but result in great anxiety for victims. Will the Minister outline the action her Department will take to ensure that technology companies really step up and play a full part, alongside the police and banks, to protect us all from online fraud and identity theft?

**Caroline Dinéage:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue, which he is absolutely right to do, because we know that scams of this kind can ruin lives and, as he says, a growing number of people are encountering them online. The Government are approaching the issue in three ways. First, we are working closely with law enforcement, technology companies and banks to tackle online fraud at source. That work is led by the Home Office, which is currently developing an ambitious fraud action plan, on which we have been providing support. The Online Safety Bill that we published last week will tackle any kind of fraud that is facilitated through user-generated content. On top of that, we are consulting on tougher advertising regulation and will be doing that later this year.

#### Football Super League

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): What assessment he made of the potential effect of the super league on levels of competition in professional football in the UK. [900239]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston):** The Government were vocal in their opposition to the European super league, which would have been detrimental to the entire football pyramid.

In fact, the whole House was united in opposition. I am glad that all the English teams that were to be involved have now withdrawn from the project, and that was the right result for football fans, clubs and communities right across the country.

**Mr Bone:** The super league was based on the American model of football, which does not have promotion and relegation. It has other criteria such as the draft and salary caps to make it a more competitive league. Will the Minister give an assurance to this House—in fact, prejudice the review if you like—and promise that, whatever happens, there will be promotion and regular relegation between the different football leagues?

**Nigel Huddleston:** I thank my hon. Friend for those comments. I know that he shares my passion for American football, but it is not necessarily a model that we would wish to emulate. It has strengths and weaknesses, but, at heart, football—in fact, all sport—is about competition and fairness, and those should underlie the sport. We are conducting the fan-led review. I am afraid that I cannot pre-empt the conclusions of that review, but I think that we are all looking forward to the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), a highly regarded and respected Member of this House, will be conducting over the coming weeks, and I am sure that he will contribute to that debate.

#### Tourism Industry: Covid-19 Recovery

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the tourism industry's recovery as covid-19 lockdown restrictions are eased. [900240]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston):** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this timely topic ahead of

English Tourism Week, which kicks off this weekend. In total, we have provided more than £25 billion already to the tourism, hospitality and leisure sectors to see them through this challenging period. With large parts of the sector now reopened, we are working with partners to champion the UK's tourism offer through the "Escape the Everyday" marketing campaign, for example. Businesses can also benefit from the VAT cut, business rates relief and other measures. Our tourism recovery plan will set out the role that the Government will play in accelerating the tourism sector's recovery from covid-19.

**Andrew Jones:** I thank my hon. Friend for that answer and for his excellent work in promoting this sector, an important part of which is business tourism, which is also getting going again. For example, keeping it very local, Harrogate Convention Centre will host Clarion Events' Home & Gift Buyers' Festival in July, and that will bring many thousands of visitors to the town. This sector of the industry is large in scale and consequently has a significant supply chain, both directly and indirectly, including, for example, hotels and guest houses in Harrogate. Will my hon. Friend assure me that he will do all he can to ensure the best restart possible for this important business sector?

**Nigel Huddleston:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I pay tribute to his support for the tourism sector—business tourism as well—both in his constituency and right across the country. Business events are indeed highly valuable to the UK economy, directly contributing more than £31 billion each year before the pandemic, supporting a vast supply chain and filling hotels, often in the tourist off-season. The Events Research Programme held its first business event pilot in Liverpool last month, which I was delighted to attend. That is a big step forward in our work to fully reopen the sector. Our tourism recovery plan will soon set out more detail on how we will support business events with their long-term recovery.

### Leaving the EU: Touring Creative Workers

**Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What recent steps have the Government taken to fix the red tape issues for touring creative workers caused by Britain leaving the EU. [900255]

**The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage):** We are working flat out with the industry to support creative workers to tour the EU, and we have a dedicated DCMS-led working group to achieve that. Our priorities are to provide clarity for artists on any rules, to work bilaterally with other EU nations to ensure that the new processes are as easy and straightforward as possible, and to try to secure transitional funding support.

**Alex Cunningham:** We are extremely proud of our Stockton International Riverside Festival, which, as well as attracting street acts from across the world, commissions its own work to showcase what our own talented people can do. Now those same people face those barriers of fees and all other manner of problems—and they are still barriers today—if they want to take their work into the EU. That is due to the Government adopting that attitude of "it'll be alright on the night". Well, it will not. I heard what the Minister said, but

what guarantees will she give artists from Stockton and the rest of the country that the Government will sort out the travel problems soon and that we can share our art and culture with the world?

**Caroline Dinenage:** As I have already explained, we have been working non-stop since the transition period finished to make sure that we were working through those issues. We have confirmed that portable musical instruments do not require carnets. We have confirmed that touring artists will not be double-charged social security contributions, and we have published new guidance for touring to other EU nations. Through bilateral discussions, which have been taking place at official level between me and the Secretary of State and our opposite numbers in the EU, we have established that at least 17 member states allow some visa or work permit-free touring activities, and we are continuing to do that work on a daily basis.

### Events Research Programme: Liverpool Pilots

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What steps he plans to take in response to the pilots held in Liverpool and London in May 2021 as part of the events research programme. [900252]

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden):** My top priority has been getting back to the things that we love. We have now moved to step 3, but I know that it is essential that we return to events without social distancing at step 4. That is why we have undertaken the events research pilot programme. Pilots including sporting events at Wembley, the Brits and music events in Liverpool have been building up a picture of how the virus spreads in different settings, and we have been looking at a range of factors, including ventilation, testing protocols and people's behaviour.

**Christine Jardine [V]:** The successful and safe reopening of events is, of course, vital to individuals and the economy generally, but particularly in my constituency of Edinburgh West. We have already lost the impact of Edinburgh International Festival each year, but also specifically the Royal Highland Show, which contributes £65 million to the economy, and more than a year of international rugby events at Murrayfield. With the measures that the Secretary of State has outlined, I hope that we will soon be able to host these events again, but will he assure me that the impact of these trials and the lessons learned will be shared with the Scottish Government to ensure that they can also take them forward?

**Oliver Dowden:** Yes, I am very happy to give the hon. Lady that assurance. This programme has been world-leading. I do not think that any other country in the world has done quite such extensive piloting of events, and the outcomes of the pilots are helping to shape the sort of guidance that we will impose at stage 4 of the road map.

### Topical Questions

[900320] **Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden):** Earlier this week, I joined millions of people up and down the country in sharing the joy of seeing great sporting, cultural and tourism venues open again. I was delighted to reopen the National Gallery, and to visit Tate Modern and the English National Ballet. However, those institutions and others can only operate sustainably if we move to step 4 and remove the remaining restrictions. We set up the events research programme to examine safe ways of doing that. I can tell the House that we have had positive findings from the pilots at events such as the Brits, the FA cup final and at the Crucible, and this will inform our approach to reopening at stage 4.

**Mr Betts [V]:** The proposal for the European super league was driven by a small number of clubs wanting greater financial power and control, which in some ways was exactly the reason that the Premier League itself was set up in the first place. I was somewhat disappointed by the Secretary of State's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), when he described the £4.8 billion deal that the Premier League has just done on TV rights—with only £100 million coming to the rest of football—as money flowing “through the...pyramid”. May I seek reassurance from the Secretary of State, therefore, that his support for the financial status quo will not in any way compromise the ability of the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) to recommend in her review the radical changes to governance, regulation and the distribution of finance in football that the vast majority of fans want to see?

**Oliver Dowden:** The short answer is yes, of course I will look at the outcome of the inquiry that I have commissioned. I have specifically asked my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) to look at football financing and the pyramid, because I know all the challenges with it. That is separate from the interim measures that will cover the next three years. That will ensure that money flows through the pyramid, because it is not just the additional £100 million; it is all the other payments to the English Football League that will be secured through that announcement, should it go ahead.

[900321] **Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con): The shared rural network is a fantastic initiative. What good news can we have for the notspots of Hampshire?

**Oliver Dowden:** Yes, our £1 billion shared rural network is eliminating mobile coverage notspots across the country, including in East Hampshire. Operators have already announced the first 333 upgrades and 54 new sites in England. We will shortly be announcing the next stage of the programme. Although I cannot give full details now, I very much expect this to contain more good news for my right hon. Friend's constituents.

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): More than 3 million people participate in parkrun in England, and it plays a major role in the physical and mental wellbeing of participants. Parkrun has had legal permission to return since 29 March under the covid framework from the Government and Public Health England, but there is completely inconsistent decision making across authorities, and the situation is threatening parkrun's future. As Great Britain Olympian Greg Rutherford has said:

“If we're all allowed to go and pile into restaurants and pubs again why on earth would we not be allowed to run about outside?”

Will the Secretary of State give a clear, simple statement here today and say that local authorities and landowners need to recognise and accept the nationally approved framework and allow parkrun to start again?

**Oliver Dowden:** Yes. I completely share the hon. Lady's frustration that this is not happening. I have discussed it with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and he and I will shortly be sending a very clear message and signal in writing to local authorities about our expectation that those events should proceed.

**Jo Stevens:** I am delighted with the Secretary of State's response and grateful for it.

Singing also makes a positive difference to the health of over 2 million people who sing in amateur choirs. The go-ahead was given for indoor rehearsals from Monday of this week, following step 3 of the roadmap, but on Tuesday, literally as conductors were on their way to rehearsals, late guidance was issued by DCMS limiting indoor rehearsals to just six people in total. This news was devastating to choir members but also to their conductors and directors, who lose their income because of it. I am afraid that confusing and contradictory communication is the hallmark of this Government. Last year it was the Secretary of State encouraging rehearsals for pantos that were never going to happen; this year it is choral concerts with no rehearsals. What is going on? Why the late guidance? Will the Secretary of State publish the evidence that led to his decision? Thank goodness his Department is getting an experienced director of communications, because he needs one.

**Oliver Dowden:** I share the frustration of many Members of this House that we have not been able to permit more people to participate in amateur choirs. I can tell the House and reassure Members that that decision was made on the basis of very clear public health guidance. Ultimately, the Prime Minister and I did not feel that we could contradict that public health guidance. Of course we published the guidance, and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies recommendations are regularly published. I very much hope and expect that by step 4—all going well, we will proceed with that on 21 June—we will be in a position to remove all legal limits on social contact and ease restrictions on large events and performances, including those that apply at step 3.

[900322] **Cherilyn Mackrory** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con) [V]: Next month Falmouth is welcoming the world's media as part of the G7 summit and showing off the very best of Cornwall's heritage and culture. As my right hon. Friend will know, Falmouth University produces some of the world's best graduates in the creative arts industries. Will he meet me to discuss how best we can nurture this talent to potentially grow the film, TV and post-production elements in Falmouth in order to provide these quality industry careers here in Cornwall?

**Oliver Dowden:** As my hon. Friend knows, I am a great supporter of Cornish culture and heritage, and I know of the outstanding reputation of Falmouth University.

We have done a huge amount to support this country's film industry, which is currently probably stronger than it has ever been, notwithstanding covid. I or one of my ministerial colleagues would be delighted to meet her to discuss what more we can do to support the Cornish film industry.

**John Nicolson** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: Last week the Culture Secretary boasted that his Government were defending heritage. If only that were so. Cuts have led to almost 800 library closures, the Whitehall Bell Foundry has been passed by Tory Ministers into the hands of commercial developers after 450 years of continuous existence, and we have heard nothing of what will replace Creative Europe culture funding. What is the Culture Secretary's focus in telling museums what statues they can have and blocking trustees that he does not like? As one museum curator said, "arm's length" Government interference is now becoming "knuckle length" interference. Should the Culture Secretary not be focusing on sorting out the Brexit visa mess rather than on petty culture wars and museum meddling?

**Oliver Dowden:** There were an awful lot of questions wrapped into one from the hon. Gentleman, but in terms of what I am doing and where my primary focus is, it is about returning the things that we love and ensuring that we move from stage 3 to stage 4 of the road map to enable heritage attractions, theatres and companies up and down the country to operate normally again. We have given £2 billion-worth of support—the single largest injection by any Government ever—but I make no apology whatever for standing up for this country's heritage against a small and noisy minority that wants to tear down the things that we enjoy as a nation.

**Mr Speaker:** I am disappointed we did not get through more topical, folks, because it means there are disappointed Members.

## ATTORNEY GENERAL

*The Attorney General was asked—*  
**Domestic Violence Prosecutions**

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What steps he has taken to increase the number of prosecutions relating to domestic violence. [900280]

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): What steps he has taken to increase the number of prosecutions relating to domestic violence. [900288]

**The Attorney General (Michael Ellis):** The Crown Prosecution Service published an ambitious 12-month domestic abuse programme in January, which aims to help to narrow the disparity between reporting and criminal justice outcomes through a focus of co-ordinated multi-agency action and specialist support for victims. The CPS has also taken steps to increase domestic abuse prosecutions at a local level. For example, since the start of the pandemic, CPS Thames and Chiltern has increased lines of communication with police forces to ensure domestic abuse cases are appropriately prioritised.

**Jessica Morden:** The criminal justice system is facing unprecedented backlogs, with survivors of domestic abuse and sexual assault forced to wait more than a year for their day in court. The Queen's Speech was an opportunity for the Government to address these failings, but it was an opportunity missed. Labour's "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls" green paper was announced this week and is ready to go. Will the Attorney General support it?

**The Attorney General:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question, which focuses on an extremely important issue of domestic abuse, which is one that I and the entire Government feel strongly about. In fact, I am sure everybody in this Chamber does. It is this Government who introduced the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. In a recent case that I conducted myself in the Court of Appeal, the offender's sentence for extremely violent domestic abuse was increased from nine years to 15 years on my application. That is how seriously we take domestic abuse, and that is how seriously it is taken in terms of punishment and the crime. The point that the hon. Lady makes is that we should prioritise domestic abuse in the criminal justice system, and I can confirm that we do that. It is a very high focus for this Government and for the criminal justice system.

**Rachel Hopkins:** The "Evidence led domestic abuse prosecutions" report states that "the domestic abuse caseload for both the CPS and the police has increased by 88% against the backdrop of a 25% reduction in police and CPS funding."

Does the Attorney General think that the current level of resourcing to tackle domestic abuse is sufficient?

**The Attorney General:** The hon. Lady is right to point to the case load. In fact, the Crown Prosecution Service's case load has increased considerably. It is also right to point out that the conviction rate rose to 78.7% in quarter 3 of 2020-21, up from 77.4%. The Government have recently announced, as I am sure she knows, several funding packages specifically on domestic abuse, including funding to deal with the effects of the covid-19 crisis as it relates to domestic abuse. The decrease in the volume of overall prosecutions due to the impact of covid-19 is a factor, but this Government are funding this area and giving particular focus to it.

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The number of domestic abuse-related prosecutions fell by 22% in the year ending March 2020, despite a 9% increase in recorded crimes. When I asked the Secretary of State for Justice how many specialist domestic violence courts have been in operation over the past 10 years, he could not give me an answer. Will the Attorney General commit to our proposals, set out in our "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls" green paper, to introduce properly funded specialist domestic violence courts across the country?

**The Attorney General:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question, which is an astute one, and she recognises, as we all do, the importance of this area. It is of course this Government who have already put the Domestic Abuse Act on the statute book, so we are ahead of her party in prioritising this area, and that is a simple fact. The reality, I have to say, is that the CPS's domestic abuse

best practice framework seeks to address the withdrawal rates. She talks about the number of prosecutions, and of course prosecutions have gone down across the board because of the impact of the covid pandemic. However, we want to deliver a high-quality service to victims, and the work that is being done on the framework encourages more timely court listings to get these cases on more quickly and reduce victim attrition, which I know is something the Ministry of Justice and the whole criminal justice system are working very strongly on.

**Ellie Reeves:** It is interesting that the right hon. and learned Gentleman says his party is ahead when it is Labour that has set out a green paper to tackle these issues head-on. What is even more worrying is that domestic abuse prosecutions now seem to be going the same way as rape prosecutions, which are at their lowest recorded level, and new figures show that 44% of rape victims give up before their trial even begins. Will the Attorney General adopt our fully drafted survivors support plan for rape victims and will he commit to backing Labour's violence against women and girls green paper, or will he continue to sit on his hands and allow the continued systemic failing of the criminal justice system for women and girls in England and Wales?

**The Attorney General:** I do not think it is accurate to refer to the criminal justice system as failing women and girls. It is a high focus for the criminal justice system, and there are a lot of people—thousands of people—working very hard, day in and day out, in the courts, the Crown Prosecution Service and police forces around this country, with a very high priority to focus on this area. It is this Government who have allocated another £76 million to support victims of domestic abuse, sexual violence and modern slavery, as well as vulnerable children. It is this Government who have put the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 on the statute book. It is this Government who are creating 20,000 more police officers, and who have already funded the Crown Prosecution Service to over £85 million—closer to £100 million. It is this Government who recognise that we have to do better. We have to do more, and I accept that. There is always more that can be done, and in such an important area, one can never sit back. We have received 180,000 responses, as I am sure the hon. Lady knows, following the tragic case of Sarah Everard, to the consultation that the Government set up, and we will be looking very closely at those responses.

**Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP):** According to the Centre for Women's Justice, one woman every week for the last two years has reported domestic abuse by their police officer spouse or partner, and every woman it spoke to said that the police had failed to investigate their case. Given the severity of these statistics, how confident is the Attorney General that the correct processes are in place in the Crown Prosecution Service to ensure that complaints involving the police are investigated objectively?

**The Attorney General:** Of course, the issue of the police is a matter for the Home Office, but I would say that I know the police are working very hard to prioritise and focus on these domestic abuse cases, and they do seek to achieve the very best possible results in all circumstances. There are tried and tested mechanisms

for making complaints against the police, and clearly they are available to anyone who feels that a complaint would be appropriate and justified. We have worked very hard to produce the Domestic Abuse Act, which covers a number of areas that, as we have already rehearsed, will protect women and girls, and we will continue to do so.

#### **Crown Prosecution Service: Communication with Victims**

**Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con):** What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to improve communication with victims. [900281]

**Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con):** What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to improve communication with victims. [900294]

**The Solicitor General (Lucy Frazer):** How we communicate with victims is absolutely critical to the delivery of justice. Having spoken to the Director of Public Prosecutions and others at the CPS, I know that they are fully committed to and understand the importance of clear and open communications to victims, giving explanations about their cases. That is why the CPS is carrying out a root and branch review to assess how best to deliver on its commitments to victims.

**Simon Jupp [V]:** I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for her response. What steps is the CPS taking to ensure that, in cases where the victim is known to have autism and other mental health conditions, they receive priority communications so that their mental health is not put under yet more pressure?

**The Solicitor General:** My hon. Friend raises an important question. In 2019, the CPS published its revised guidance on prosecuting cases where the defendant may have a mental health condition or disorder. Furthermore, where the CPS is aware that a victim has autism or mental health issues, it will consider writing in addition, or instead, to a guardian or parent, to deal with that case. For cases of rape or serious sexual offence, the CPS ensures that either the police officer overseeing the case or the independent sexual violence adviser is present to help explain to the victim any decision taken by the CPS in relation to the case.

**Simon Baynes [V]:** It is essential that victims receive justice for the crimes committed against them. How is my right hon. and learned Friend ensuring that victims in Clwyd South, and elsewhere in the UK, are aware of their right to challenge unduly lenient sentences?

**The Solicitor General:** I am pleased that my hon. Friend has highlighted the importance of the ULS scheme. The Attorney General's office promotes that scheme on social media, and we are working with the Ministry of Justice to raise awareness of the scheme as part of the revised victims code that came into force last month. For example, the code now includes a requirement for the witness care unit to inform victims of the scheme promptly when sentencing takes place. That will help improve awareness of the scheme, including for my hon. Friend's constituents in Clwyd South.

**Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]:** Would my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the draft victims Bill provides an important opportunity to

place the victims code on a proper statutory basis? Will she consider whether the Justice Committee would be suitable to carry out prelegislative scrutiny? Does she agree it is important that the code includes communication pre-charge by the police, as well as by the CPS post-charge, as both are equally important?

**The Solicitor General:** My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of the victims Bill. As he says, that Bill will have prelegislative scrutiny, and we welcome the Justice Committee's views on that. He is right to highlight the importance of the work that goes on pre-charge, as well as post-charge, and we will be looking carefully at those matters.

#### Prosecution of Hate Crime

**Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the CPS's work to improve community confidence in its prosecution of hate crime. [900282]

**The Attorney General (Michael Ellis):** I thank my hon. Friend for his question on hate crime. I have been appalled by recent examples of hate crime, which are an utter disgrace. I warn racists and antisemites alike that the Crown Prosecution Service recognises the devastating impact that hate crime has on victims and communities, and it is committed to bringing offenders to justice. That is evidenced by the continued rise in sentence uplifts. This year, increases in sentences for hate crime reached the highest rate yet of nearly 80%. Outreach has continued throughout the pandemic with a range of community organisations to increase community confidence and improve the prosecution response to hate crime.

**Ian Levy:** I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his response. Recently in my constituency, the owner of the Delaval Tandoori was physically and verbally assaulted by two men. The wonderful community of Seaton Delaval has rallied around to support that family-run business in the wake of the attack, but I know they will join me in looking to my right hon. and learned Friend for his assurance that the CPS will do all it can to bring those responsible for hate crime before our courts.

**The Attorney General:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The Crown Prosecution Service will prosecute cases referred to it by the police and other law enforcement agencies, and where the test set out is met, it will prosecute those offences. Those who commit such offences must understand that their sentences have an 80% likelihood of being uplifted as a consequence of the hate element of their crime. According to one media report, we have recently seen a 600% increase in antisemitic crimes. We recognise that any form of hate crime against any group is obnoxious and antithetical to the interests of this country, and cannot be tolerated. The CPS recognises the devastating impact. Everything will be done and continues to be done to check those offences.

#### Prosecution Decision: Kettering

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** For what reason the Crown Prosecution Service decided not to prosecute the organiser of a large funeral held in breach of covid-19 regulations in Kettering in November 2020. [900283]

**The Solicitor General (Lucy Frazer):** I understand my hon. Friend's concern about this issue, which he has already brought to my attention. The CPS makes its charging decisions independently, with every case judged on its own merit, based on the tests set out in the code. In this particular case, my understanding is that the CPS reviewed it and determined that there was insufficient evidence to continue with the proceedings. That was because there was no evidence that the suspect was responsible for the excess numbers present outside the church.

**Mr Hollobone:** There is widespread dismay and outrage in Kettering that the organiser of that huge Irish Traveller funeral, held during the covid lockdown, has in effect got away with it. Clearly, however, the Crown Prosecution Service cannot successfully prosecute on any criminal case unless it is provided by the police with sufficient formal evidence against the accused. Given that the court hearing was held five months after the funeral took place, will the Solicitor General confirm when the CPS received the case file from the police?

**The Solicitor General:** I understand the concern of my hon. Friend's constituents, as of many around the country who are abiding by the rules, which is what has managed to get our infection rates down. To answer his specific question, the first hearing was at the Northampton magistrates court on 19 April. The police had not previously sent the file through to the CPS due to a technical error on the part of the police. The file was received at 11.30 am on the morning of the hearing.

#### Criminal Justice System: Covid-19 Recovery

**Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service's contribution to the criminal justice system's covid-19 recovery. [900284]

**Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab):** What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking with partner agencies in the criminal justice system to reduce the backlog of cases resulting from the covid-19 outbreak. [900286]

**Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service's contribution to the criminal justice system's covid-19 recovery. [900295]

**The Attorney General (Michael Ellis):** I am pleased that inspections in both June 2020 and March 2021 found that the CPS responded well to the challenges caused by covid-19. Those inspections were by Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service inspectorate. The CPS has made a significant contribution to supporting the criminal justice system during an exceptionally difficult time, working closely with partners. I am proud of prosecutors and staff who have continued to deliver their essential services, both virtually and in person where necessary, throughout the pandemic.

**Laura Trott:** I thank the Attorney General for his answer and for his welcome focus on domestic violence, which he demonstrated throughout this Question Time. Will he reassure me that the Crown Prosecution Service

will do all it can to prioritise cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse in the backlog, as those types of cases have a higher drop-off rate the longer the delay?

**The Attorney General:** Yes, tackling domestic abuse, as I have been saying, is a key focus of the Government. In my hon. Friend's constituency, the CPS south-east region, which covers her area, identifies domestic abuse cases, working with the Courts and Tribunal Service, to ensure that they can be listed before the court as a priority and that trial dates can be brought forward to avoid any unnecessary delay. She is right to focus on the issue. Work is being done in support of her point.

**Catherine West:** While a defendant typically has legal representation following the reporting of a rape, the victim has to wait months before an independent advocate becomes available. Even then, the independent sexual violence advocate is not permitted to go into the court to support a woman at the time she desperately needs it. First, why is there a three to six-month wait for an advocate to become available to deeply stressed individuals who have been assaulted? Secondly, will the Government undertake to review the situation in which the advocate, who is meant to support the victim, has to stay outside the courtroom? It is ridiculous!

**The Attorney General:** As the hon. Lady may know, a rape review is due to be published soon. Together with the police, the Crown Prosecution Service introduced an interim charging protocol in April 2020 to prioritise the most important cases, to which she is referring, through the criminal justice system. Those are high-harm cases, including rape and domestic abuse. I am proud of the CPS's response. I am sure she recognises that the exigencies of the pandemic have affected backlogs to a significant extent in many areas of public and private life, but a huge amount is being done to ameliorate that backlog. Particular priority is being given to the sorts of cases to which she is referring.

**Sally-Ann Hart:** What learning will the CPS take forward from its pandemic response to increase resilience in the future?

**The Attorney General:** One of the things that we will be looking at is the cloud video platform. The CPSI report published recently recognised the flexibility and adaptability of the CPS in responding to the pandemic. The cloud video platform was enabling around 20,000 virtual hearings a week, and post pandemic I am sure we will be looking at that among many other things.

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab) [V]: If the Government are serious about tackling the backlog of court cases, will the Attorney General explain why his colleague in the Ministry of Justice has halved the amount spent annually on recorded sitting days in the past five years, from £19 million to £9.5 million?

**The Attorney General:** I have actually discussed the issue of recorders very recently with the senior judiciary. The Ministry of Justice has recently arranged for an unlimited amount of sitting days—I think I am right in saying—so that the judiciary and the courts system can keep up with all the work that is going on. That is a very generous arrangement to allow the courts to make dramatic progress, and that includes recorders and the judiciary generally.

**Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Although it is important that partner agencies in the criminal justice system do everything possible to eliminate the delays caused by covid-19, some of these problems stretch back much further than the start of the pandemic. In 2017 we reformed pre-charge bail to introduce time limits on how long suspects could be on bail before being charged. That came after the terrible treatment of some individuals, including Paul Gambaccini, who was held on bail for a year without being charged. Today, a number of people are still being bailed for a shocking length of time—years on end. I currently have a case where the National Crime Agency has kept an individual on bail for almost six years. That has ruined her life. The Government are now seeking to undo even the inadequate protections in the Police and Crime Act 2017 with the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. Will the Attorney General tell the House what the Government will do to protect against these injustices in coming legislation?

**The Attorney General:** I thank my right hon. Friend for the point he makes. He thinks of the defence position, and is right to do so, and I am very grateful to him for raising it. I recognise how distressing delays can be, both to defendants and, of course, to victims, but these have been unprecedented times.

On the case my right hon. Friend refers to, decisions on whether to impose or extend pre-charge bail are operational and are not therefore something that Ministers can interfere with, but he makes a powerful point. It is right that those decisions are independent of Government, and it is important to note that the length of pre-charge bail is separate from the length of the investigation. There may be particular circumstances that cause concomitant delays in individual cases that are outwith my immediate knowledge or ability to intervene, and nor would it be appropriate for me to do so, but I recognise the point he makes. If he wishes to write to me about that individual case, we can certainly forward it to the relevant authority.

**Mr Speaker:** I now suspend the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business to be made.

10.33 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Business of the House

10.36 am

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the future business?

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg)**: The business for the week commencing 24 May will include:

MONDAY 24 MAY—Motion to approve a Ways and Means resolution relating to the Finance Bill followed by, remaining stages of the Finance Bill.

TUESDAY 25 MAY—Remaining stages of the Telecommunications (Security) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 26 MAY—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Environment Bill (Day 2).

THURSDAY 27 MAY—General debate on dementia action week followed by, general debate on implementing the 2020 obesity strategy. Both debates were previously recommended by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the Whitsun recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 27 May and return on Monday 7 June.

Provisional business for the week commencing 7 June will include:

MONDAY 7 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Advanced Research and Invention Agency Bill.

**Thangam Debbonaire**: I thank the Leader of the House for the business.

We all share the horror at the reports of antisemitic hate speech and attacks this week, yet some people are falsely defending antisemitic hate speech on university campuses under the guise of free speech, which the Government plan to make into some sort of law. Can I ask the Leader of the House, genuinely, if he will ask the Secretary of State for Education to consider working with, rather than against, universities on how to respond to antisemitism? The priorities of free speech and protecting people from incitement to racial hatred are both important, and his Government will need to exercise care, not a blunt instrument, if our universities are able to call out antisemitism “at every stage”, as the Prime Minister rightly said we should do yesterday.

It is Dementia Action Week. One in three of us will develop dementia in our lifetimes and 1 million people in this country will have the condition by 2025. There was moving testimony this week from people living with dementia at the Health and Social Care Committee. No one here can ignore the heartbreak of this cruel disease: those who live with it and those who love them. This last year has been awful for everyone, but people living with dementia and its consequences have had a particularly difficult time with isolation, people caring at home and those in residential care. And yet, 666 days since the Prime Minister promised the people of this country that his plan for social care was ready to go, yesterday he was unable to answer a simple yes or no question from my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) on the whereabouts of the plan. Could the Leader of the House help?

Last week, the Leader of the House said at business questions in response to the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) that the Government can do anything

they want because they have a majority of 80—it was that or thereabouts. Well, if they say they can do anything they want, we can only assume that if they do not do something, it is because they do not want to. This week, as well as deciding not to fix social care, the Government have decided not to fix building safety. After telling the House—and, more importantly, the thousands of people across the country affected by this scandal, some of them constituents of Government Members—that residents would not be left to pay for the mess made by some parts of the building industry, the Government voted down Labour’s amendment to the Queen’s Speech this week to sort this out urgently. People across this country who have been so profoundly let down by the Government on this issue will have noticed that their Tory MP has failed them yet again.

This was also the week that the Government continued not to reward dedicated key workers, including nurses and NHS staff, with an adequate pay rise. Yesterday my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) asked the Prime Minister what he thinks when he hears Jenny McGee, the nurse who cared for the Prime Minister when he was so ill with covid, say of NHS staff:

“We’re not getting the respect and now pay that we deserve. I’m just sick of it. So I’ve handed in my resignation.”

But all the Prime Minister could do was trot out a load of waffle, and clearly that does not pay the bills. What does the Leader of the House have to say to Jenny and other key workers, so that they might feel valued, protected and respected?

Finally, may I wish the right hon. Gentleman an advance happy birthday? I am fascinated to discover that he is, in fact, my junior—“No, no!” Members cry—but what to give the man who already has a hedge fund of his own? Perhaps some legal advice, so that he can sue all those shocking websites selling shoddy goods featuring his likeness—the calendars, the mugs, the folderols. Or perhaps a session for the Cabinet with the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, to try to work through their many and varied disagreements—whether or not Brits can travel abroad, for what reason and under what circumstances, or to help the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the International Trade Secretary and the National Farmers Union decide which of them knows more about food and farming.

I could take the right hon. Gentleman for a parkrun. Surely there is a pent-up runner lurking in there, longing for release. If he could only get his Government to give parkruns the green light—and we all know about green lights—so that we can all taste again that joy of running 5 km up a hill together; he looks puzzled, but I can tell him that it is fun. The nation’s fitness and mental health would benefit, as could his.

But no, it is obvious. For his birthday, I hereby present the right hon. Gentleman with the happy knowledge that, despite his Government’s continued failure to fix social care, reward key workers or act urgently on climate change, his constituents—the good people of North East Somerset—have had another week under the transformational leadership of the man they voted for as his metro Mayor and mine: Labour’s Dan Norris. Happy birthday to the Leader of the House.

**Mr Rees-Mogg**: I am absolutely delighted and honoured to receive such kind birthday wishes from the hon. Lady. I do not think anybody in the House will believe

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

that I am younger than her. That simply cannot be true, although it would be improper of me to suggest that the House has been misled. If looks are anything to go by, I have aged less well than her.

The hon. Lady suggests all sorts of excellent presents. They are already there, wrapped and splendidly arrayed, because we know exactly what the Government's position on travel is. The law is clear, and the guidance is clear. The law is that people may travel if they need to and there are requirements when they get back. There is a testing environment if someone goes to a green country; there is a quarantine regime at home if someone goes to an orange or amber country; and there is further quarantine if someone goes to a red country, whereby they have to stay in places approved by the Government, to ensure that people are kept safe. It is a very sensible way of approaching these things and accepts that people will be making choices for themselves, which is inevitable as we come to the end of this pandemic.

Free trade is one of the greatest advances of prosperity that has ever been known. We saw this in the 19th century, which reminds me that my birthday is also the anniversary of the birth of Queen Victoria. In the good old days, it used to be Empire Day, and we got a public holiday, but alas, no longer; I was rather sorry that the hon. Lady did not call for the public holiday to be restored. Free trade has been absolutely essential to this nation's prosperity, and the more free trade we have, the better it helps consumers and producers alike. It helps producers to become more efficient and more globally competitive while providing lower-cost goods and food and so on for consumers.

On parkrun, I am not quite sure I see myself in running kit. I was surprised that the hon. Lady did not mention the football that is coming up—the euro games, with England, Scotland and Wales all involved. The selection of the Scottish team caused greater interest, I understand, than the reshuffle of the Scottish Administration. That will be fun and fancy for people to have.

Let me come to the really serious points that the hon. Lady raised. I entirely agree that this Government and this country must root out antisemitic hate speech. It has no place in a civilised society. It is the most wrong and wicked of all the unpleasant and wrong prejudices that people have, bearing in mind the history of Europe over the past 100 years. There is absolutely no place for it. Incitement to racial hatred is illegal, and that is not in contradiction to the right to freedom of speech.

On Dementia Action Week, the hon. Lady is again so right in saying that dementia is the cruellest disease. It is sometimes crueller on those who are caring than on those who are suffering. The long time it has to be borne can seem endless. It is a great burden for families, and the last year has been simply horrible for people with family members suffering from dementia whom they have not been able to see in the normal way. However, I reassure her that a social care plan is being brought forward; there will be one by the end of the year. It is not easy, and everybody recognises that. The last Labour Government—although that is now, by the grace of God, some years ago—had a royal commission and two Green Papers on the subject. If it were easy,

it would of course have been done already, but it is difficult, and it is important that it is got right, and it is therefore right that time has been taken to do it.

The building safety Bill was in the Gracious Speech, which we have thanked Her Majesty for with an Humble Address, which will be delivered in due course to Her Majesty. I do not quite know whether it has gone yet. The Whips take it in fine fettle and parade, and they will come back at some point carrying a wand; we will see it all splendidly done. However, the building safety Bill will be brought forward, and there will be a clear declaration of policy as to how the paying for the difficulties with the removal of unsafe cladding will be taken forward. Buildings taller than 59 feet in the social housing sector that have cladding of the type that Grenfell had have either already had it removed or a plan for it to be removed is in place.

Finally, the hon. Lady mentions nurses' pay. A 1% pay increase is being given to nurses. Over the last year, 56,900 more people have begun working in the NHS. That is a real success. It shows that the recruitment is right, which usually indicates that the pay is right.

**Shaun Bailey** (West Bromwich West) (Con): I have been inundated with correspondence from residents in Tividale in my constituency who are unable to access GP appointments. A campaign is now being spearheaded by Emma Henlan, a local campaigner trying to ensure that her community can get GP appointments. We know that the Government are committing £1.5 billion to primary care, but can we have a debate in Government time on the future of primary care? We know that our GPs want to step up, but we need to ensure that there is a real integrated strategy that allows them to provide the services and ensures that people like Emma and her residents and my constituents can access those vital GP appointments.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Let me reiterate what I said last week: all practices should offer face-to-face consultations where appropriate. That is absolutely right. They have an obligation to do that. To help expand general practice capacity, Her Majesty's Government have made available an additional £270 million of funding from November 2020 until September 2021 to ensure that GPs and their teams are able to continue to support all patients, and those who require face-to-face appointments should and must be given them.

**Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): I join the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), in wishing the Leader of the House a very happy birthday when it comes—he does not have too long to wait—and in her comments on Dementia Action Week. It is very important, particularly this year, that we mark and remember it. I certainly welcome next week's debate, in which a great many Members will take the opportunity to have their say and make a contribution.

Last year, a young constituent of mine had to defer a place that they had been awarded at the United States basketball academy because of late cancellations of a visa appointment at the US embassy. The family are frustrated because they are facing the same situation again this year. The embassy appointment is scheduled for just days before he is due to travel, and, despite a number of efforts on our part to see what we can do, we

are struggling to make any progress. Will the Leader of the House do anything in his power to see what the Foreign Office could do to assist with any interventions to make sure that young talent such as my constituent are able to undertake the options they have before them to pursue exciting careers?

I was disappointed that there was nothing in the Queen's Speech to protect workers' rights or to stop the tactics of fire and rehire. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) had a private Member's Bill in the previous Session, but that has obviously now fallen. I would be grateful if the Leader of the House would undertake to bring back, perhaps in Government time, something in the terms of the Bill that my hon. Friend had introduced, so that we can consider and resolve these issues.

Last week, when I raised the issue of arms licences, the Leader of the House indicated that they were "extremely carefully controlled" and that we

"sell arms only to those countries with which we have the closest relationship".—[*Official Report*, 13 May 2021; Vol. 695, c. 264.]

Will he therefore advise us of whether credible evidence of weapons being used in breach of international law, even by allies, is a criterion that results in the suspension of these licences? Can he provide time to review the rules on arms sales to ensure that the UK never turns a blind eye to war crimes?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** On the hon. Gentleman's final point, the licences are indeed carefully controlled and kept under continuous review. So, yes, of course it is expected that the arms we sell are used, even by friendly nations, in a proper way, and I am absolutely confident that our close allies are using any arms we sell to them in a proper way.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the issue of his constituent who hopes to go to the US basketball academy. I cannot promise immediate access to the US embassy but I will certainly take this up immediately after this session with the Foreign Office to see whether anything can be done to help his constituent. I cannot promise more than that.

As for workers' rights and fire and rehire, the ACAS report has been produced and sent to the Department for Business, Energy and Industry Strategy, which is considering it and will update the House in a reasonably rapid fashion. That is not a commitment as to timing, but this is certainly at the forefront of the minds of those there, as is an employment Bill, which will be brought forward, as the Prime Minister said, when the time is right, to protect and enhance workers' rights. I have said before that fire and rehire is one of the things that gives capitalism a bad name. It is usually in the interests of businesses to co-operate and work with their employees, who provide them, ultimately, with the profitability that ensures that the nation's economy grows and strengthens.

**Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): Covid infection rates in my council area of Kirklees remain some of the highest in the country, although, thankfully, hospitalisations are low. Last night, the Health Secretary announced surge testing and extra vaccination capacity to help reduce those infection rates and protect local people across Kirklees. May we please have an update statement from the Health Secretary early next week? Will the

Leader of the House join me in encouraging all those eligible for their job to come forward and get it when it is offered?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend raises an important point, and he is of course absolutely right; we want as many people as possible to be inoculated—to come forward for their job—as this provides the best possible protection against the virus. My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary has been absolutely assiduous in attending this House and keeping it updated, and I am sure he will continue to do that. With 36 million people having had their first dose and 20 million people having had both, the percentage take-up rate is really encouraging. Some 90% of people say that they want to have the job—obviously, that includes those who have already had it. There is enthusiasm for it, it is working extraordinarily well and it is helping us to get back to normal. So people must roll up their sleeves and expose their upper arm, as His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge did yesterday, and get jabbed.

**Mr Speaker:** Let us go to Ian Mearns. Congratulations on returning unopposed as the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: Thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker.

I wish the Leader of the House a very happy birthday for Monday, and thank him for his follow-up letter after last week's exchange. I welcome the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), to her place and I thank her predecessor, the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), who was a pleasure to work with in the role. I am hoping that the Backbench Business Committee will be open for business as soon as possible—I truly hope by next week.

We are now in the third decade of the 21st century. Based on statistics that the Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs published in March this year, and research by Loughborough University, the number of children living in poverty in my constituency of Gateshead has risen by almost 12% since 2015, meaning that 38% of children in my constituency now live in poverty. These are the Government's own figures, and they require an urgent cross-Government response. Can we have a debate in Government time about what the Government's immediate plans are to end the scourge and waste of child poverty in the United Kingdom in 2021?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** May I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his unopposed return? We can continue our Bill and Ben act of his asking for more time for the Backbench Business Committee and my telling people who ask for debates that they should ask him, rather than asking me. I am looking forward to continuing that, and I congratulate him most warmly. It is a sign of the House's confidence in him that he was returned without opposition.

The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. Progress has been made, and I am sorry to hear that his constituency has not been reflective of the nation as a whole, where, since 2010, the number of children in absolute poverty has fallen by 100,000. This is because of a number of policies that have been and continue to be introduced: the national living wage, which is worth

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around an extra £4,000 a year; the doubling of the personal tax threshold, which is worth an extra £1,200 a year; and an extra £1.7 billion going into universal credit work allowances by 2023-24. A number of steps are being taken and continue to be taken. They have been successful in the past, and I am sure they will continue to be successful in the future.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): On 10 March 1987, Daniel Morgan, a private investigator, was brutally axed to death. So far, the family have never had justice because a series of police investigations have gone awry. There are many allegations about corrupt involvement of police officers and the *News of the World* under Rupert Murdoch.

The family were delighted when the former Home Secretary and then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), set up an independent panel to investigate all this in 2013. That has now completed its work, and the understanding, because it says so in the terms of reference laid out by the Home Office, was that the Home Secretary would only arrange publication to Parliament—not review it, not redact it, not interfere in any way at all, but publish it to Parliament. She is refusing to do so.

Will the Leader of the House please make sure that this is no longer delayed? Otherwise, it is an outrage to the family—a “kick in the teeth”, as they have said themselves. Can we have the report published on Monday? Can we have an oral statement from the Home Secretary herself, so that we can get to the bottom of this and, most importantly, give justice to the family of Daniel Morgan?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The issue that the hon. Gentleman raises is one of great importance and great concern, which is why the former Home Secretary set up this inquiry. The hon. Gentleman is unfortunately wrong, because the Home Secretary has not received the report from the commission. The Home Secretary will follow her statutory responsibilities—

**Chris Bryant:** No, that is wrong.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** This was checked with the Home Office this morning. I was told that the Home Secretary had not received the report, so I asked the obvious follow-up question: is it in the post room of the Home Office? It has not been received by the Home Office as of yet.

**Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Con): With Greater Manchester police in special measures for poor leadership, I wish to reaffirm and put on record my support for our bobbies on the beat. With the Government’s commitment to the delivery of more policemen, including 348 already in place in Greater Manchester, may I ask my right hon. Friend for a debate in Government time on the importance of neighbourhood policing and the benefits to the community?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I so agree with my hon. Friend that neighbourhood policing is extremely important, effective, reassuring and helps to reduce crime. The Government are doing everything they can to help policing and we should show our admiration for the constables who

keep us safe, not least the constables around the parliamentary estate. Their numbers are being added to—not particularly on this estate, but around the country at large. Twenty thousand additional officers are being recruited; 6,600 have already been recruited. The police are, of course, operationally independent and that is an essential part of our Peelite tradition, but “The police are us and we are the police” is the fundamental basis of how we are policed by and with our consent. Local police forces—neighbourhood policing—is fundamental to that.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: A subject access request to Pioneer Academy has revealed that it sent covert participants to planning meetings of the “Save Moulsecoomb Primary School” campaign, taking notes to use against the school community and parents. Compared with Moulsecoomb, Pioneer Academy has more schools with worse results than it has better. After last month’s alleged incident of the Pioneer Academy boss manhandling a child outside the school, 96% of parents now balloted are against the academisation. The local authority, all the unions and the parents are against it, and now even Ofsted is saying that the school has made progress in the two years since it was last inspected. Can the Leader of the House suggest a way that I and my community can stop this level of intimidation, take back control of their local school and keep it for the local community?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I say two things in response to that. One is that the academisation programme nationally has been an enormous success, has helped to raise standards in education and is giving people better life opportunities. It was part of the levelling-up agenda before we even embarked on the levelling-up agenda and it is fundamental. However, I add that any organisation must follow best practice and the law of the land in whatever it does. If the hon. Gentleman has specific examples of where the law has been breached or guidance has not been followed, he would be right to take that up with the Secretary of State for Education. If I can facilitate any correspondence between him and the Secretary of State, I will, of course, be happy to do so.

**Sara Britcliffe** (Hyndburn) (Con): On Friday, I had the pleasure of visiting the brilliant staff and pupils at St Mary’s Roman Catholic Primary School, alongside Tony from our local business, What More. Not only did we see their eco-classroom, answer their questions and read about their eco journey so far, but Tony was able to talk to them about how his business reuses and upcycles plastic, proving that not all plastic is drastic. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking both the staff and pupils for the work that they are doing to protect our environment and will he allow a debate in Government time on how we encourage others to follow their lead on our journey to net zero?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I obviously join my hon. Friend in thanking the pupils and staff at St Mary’s for doing their bit. Of course, May is the month of Mary, so it is a very good time to be visiting Catholic schools named in honour of Our Lady. It is a reminder that we all have a role to play in protecting our planet. The United Kingdom will continue to lead the way in acting on climate change, hosting COP26 in November and moving the

United Kingdom to a net zero economy by 2050. Rather remarkably, as the Prime Minister has pointed out, since 1990, we have cut our emissions by 40% and have grown our economy by more than 70%, so we can have economic prosperity, economic growth and levelling up, as well as make our way towards net zero.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** May I also congratulate the Leader of the House on his upcoming birthday? I wonder who is going to sing “Happy Birthday” to him. Perhaps it will be a rendition by one of the wonderful choirs and choral societies that exist across Bath and North East Somerset. They include the Golden-Oldies, a charity that uses singing to tackle loneliness. However, unlike professional organisations, amateur choirs are not allowed to rehearse with more than six people, although the covid risk is exactly the same. Does that reflect somewhat the mistrust of the Government in voluntary organisations—a feeling that they are less responsible and less organised? Do the Government not value the contribution that voluntary organisations and amateur choirs make to society at large? Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to explain this unfair treatment of amateur choirs compared with professional ones?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her kind wishes. I think the House will be sitting until 10 o'clock on Monday, so I probably will not get the rendition—from my children, on their trumpets—of “Happy Birthday” that I would get if the House were not sitting so late. None the less, I am actually the patron of the Mendip male voice choir, which is a marvellous choir in North East Somerset. They invited me to be their patron many years ago and I have thoroughly enjoyed their concerts, which are to the highest standard. Indeed, they have performed in Bath Abbey in the hon. Lady's constituency to great acclaim and success. I completely understand the point she is making and am very sympathetic to amateur choirs, but it is a road map and things are gradually unlifting across the country, with 21 June still pencilled in as the date when we will be getting back to normal, at which point I am looking forward to, as part of my patronage of the Mendip male voice choir, going to one of its concerts.

**Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con):** It is clear that we need more housing, and in particular more affordable housing. However, we need the right houses in the right places and houses that are in keeping with their local areas. Would my right hon. Friend contemplate a debate so that we can talk about how can we achieve those ends?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. The planning system has failed people. It has not always given them the houses that they want. Surveys have always indicated that people want houses, ideally with gardens—although that may be difficult in my hon. Friend's constituency—and then clever people have thought that they should be given tower blocks, which they have never wanted; this is shown in surveys going back to the 1940s. I have always thought that we should look at where and in what sort of houses the architects and the politicians live. By and large, that is what we should then provide for our constituents and we should have a planning system that does that.

I am glad to say that the Government are bringing forward ambitious planning reforms that will deliver for the British people, and reinvigorate the home owning democracy of which we used to be so proud and in which home ownership has declined in recent years. This is a fundamentally Conservative thing to be doing: allowing people to achieve their lifetime's ambition of owning their own home and doing so earlier in their life, rather than later in life. What we were able to do before we were 35, people are now no longer able to do so easily. We must ensure that that is able to happen again, and that will be done through the planning reform Bill.

**Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP):** The Leader of the House may be aware of a report published today by the Social Mobility Commission into the composition of the civil service. The report found that, among top Whitehall civil servants, some 59% attended private schools, compared with 7% in the general population, and that there is a culture in the civil service that seems to favour polish over performance, creating a class ceiling that prevents people from poorer backgrounds from achieving the top jobs. Would the Leader of the House be good enough to arrange for a debate in Government time to allow Members to discuss the findings of this report, and how we might begin to ensure that ability and potential future contribution—rather than the privileges of background—become the key determinants of success and allow the civil service to become a beacon of inclusivity that sets an example to other employers elsewhere in the country?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I actually think that the civil service is a model of good employment practice. Since the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms in the middle of the 19th century, it has been merit based, and that is absolutely how it should be. People get on in the civil service if they are good at their job and perform it well. Our civil service does a remarkable job, and in some cases—looking towards the Box, if I may—an outstanding job, of serving the people of this country. In my own office as Leader of the House—a small office—we have an apprentice, and we had an apprentice before who has been promoted and is succeeding considerably within the civil service. That is a good way of improving accessibility to jobs within the civil service to a broader range. I have not read the report, although I have heard of it and heard some of the headlines about it. It seemed to be concerned that people in the civil service remained calm in a crisis. It seems to me that it is essential to remain calm in a crisis; that is exactly the sort of thing we need from our civil servants.

**Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con):** My right hon. Friend knows that I have been an advocate for the Places for Growth programme, and he will bear witness to my fight to move Government Departments out of London to Rother Valley as part of the Government's levelling-up agenda. In the light of this groundbreaking decentralisation, why cannot we have the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport based in Dinnington, the Attorney General's Office in Aston, the Department of Health in Hellaby, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in Thurcroft and the MOD in Maltby? But levelling up is not just about moving Government Departments north. Will my right hon. Friend agree—and speak to the Government about

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this—that the Places for Growth programme should be expanded so that other bodies, such as the National Lottery, can move to Rother Valley, which will spread prosperity across the north, as was envisioned when the lottery was founded?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for his constituency, Rother Valley. I think the last movement of the capital of this nation was from Winchester to London, and he now suggests that it move from London to Rother Valley. I slightly warn him to be careful what he wishes for, because that would be quite a change in the nature and composition of the Rother Valley, but his broad point is really good: it is not just those organisations directly under the control of Her Majesty's Government that should think of moving; quangos should also think about whether they best serve the nation by being in London or could move elsewhere. He has raised the idea and I hope they will take notice. I remind him that the Government plan to move 22,000 civil service roles to the regions and nations of the UK by 2030. To return to the previous question, from the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), I think that will help by including more people who are more likely to apply for civil service jobs near where live, rather than our having the London-centric focus that we have. I am not, though, in favour of moving our capital city to the Rother Valley quite yet.

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab) [V]: I add my birthday wishes to the Leader of the House for Monday. However, I fear that, for an increasing number of children in this country, their birthdays are not so happy. Between 2015 and 2020—the five years before the pandemic hit—child poverty increased by more in north-east local authorities than it did in any other region. My constituency, Newcastle upon Tyne North, has seen child poverty increase to 33% over that period—that is one in every three children, even before taking into account the impact of covid-19. It is shocking and appalling. How can the Government talk about levelling up when ever-increasing numbers of children and young people in the north-east are growing up in poverty on their watch, even while their parents are mostly already in work? May we have an urgent debate on the need for a comprehensive strategy to tackle child poverty—something that was conspicuously absent from the Government's agenda for this Parliament?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am grateful for these birthday wishes, although they are beginning to get a little embarrassing; I normally keep my advancing age quiet, rather than showing off about it quite so much as I have been doing this morning.

The hon. Lady's point is fundamental to the Government's agenda. This is what was set out in the Queen's Speech: it was about levelling up and continuing the work that has been done. As I said to the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), there are 100,000 fewer children in absolute poverty than there were in 2010. That is an important achievement. The national living wage; the personal tax threshold; the national insurance threshold; the extra money into the universal credit work allowances; the tax-free childcare; expanded free school meals; and the temporary extension of universal

credit—all those things have helped people to get out of absolute poverty, which is a very important part of what the Government are doing. The levelling-up strategy, to ensure that all parts of the country can be more prosperous as the years go by, will help to reduce poverty further.

**Darren Henry** (Broxtowe) (Con) [V]: In the town of Kimberley in Broxtowe, residents are currently participating in a levelling-up consultation so that we may submit the strongest possible bid for the second round of the fund. Will my right hon. Friend confirm the deadline for the second round of levelling-up funding, so that towns such as Kimberley can have the best chance of receiving long-overdue investment? Also, may we have a debate on levelling-up long-forgotten communities throughout the east midlands?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** This is a golden opportunity for a Backbench Business debate to discuss the levelling-up agenda broadly, although of course people debated it during the debates on the Queen's Speech. There will be £4.8 billion in the levelling-up fund, to spend taxpayers' money in a way that improves infrastructure and helps everyday life across the United Kingdom, including by regenerating town centres and high streets. The application deadline is one of those great days of the year—one of those anniversary days that nobody can ever forget: Waterloo Day.

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab) [V]: During the pandemic people have not been able to take their practical driving test due to covid restrictions. Many of those who have taken their theory test may have to take another one because of the time lapse between their practical and theory tests, which is obviously no fault of their own. May we have a debate or statement from the Government about what they intend to do to correct the situation and whether the Department for Transport can extend the expiry date of the theory test certificate for those who have been unable to take their practical driving test due to the covid-19 pandemic?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My own constituents correspond with me about this issue. It always seems to me that the Government must treat people fairly and when they ban things, for whatever good reason that ban may be, constituents should not lose out because of that ban. I am therefore very sympathetic to what the hon. Gentleman is saying. The decision is, of course, one for the Department for Transport. The Secretary of State for Transport is on his feet to talk about trains later, so I do not suppose that this will be within that remit, but I shall ensure that it is taken up because the hon. Gentleman is rightly seeking redress of grievance for his constituents.

**Caroline Nokes** (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Hampshire has a significant Nepalese community, many of whom are deeply worried about family and loved ones in Nepal, where covid has taken a terrible grip and there is inadequate access to oxygen and ventilators. Will my right hon. Friend ask the Foreign Secretary to make a statement to the House about what assistance the UK can give to help Nepal come through this crisis?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for her question, because I can provide her with the answer as to what has been done by Her Majesty's

Government. The United Kingdom has provided £548 million to COVAX, which has already delivered over 59 million doses across three continents, including 348,000 to Nepal. In total, COVAX has allocated almost 2 million doses to Nepal, which will be delivered free of charge. In response to the first covid wave, we repurposed a large portion of our programme to ensure that we were able to focus on Nepal's recovery. In response to the immediate covid crisis, among other things, we have just provided a new £180,000 duplex oxygen generation plant to Nepal Police Hospital in Kathmandu to help address oxygen shortages and treat covid patients. I hope that that information will help reassure some of my right hon. Friend's constituents.

**Charlotte Nichols** (Warrington North) (Lab) [V]: I am sure that you and the Leader of the House will join me, Mr Speaker, in sending best wishes to Warrington Rylands football club, who are playing at Wembley in the FA vase final on Saturday. Non-league and grassroots football have taken a massive kicking during the pandemic, without the resources of clubs higher up the football pyramid. While Warrington is most famous for our rugby league sporting successes, we have a vibrant football scene as well, whether it is the newly promoted Warrington Rylands, Cheshire league teams such as Greenalls Padgate St. Oswalds FC, or Warrington Sunday league clubs, including Wolfpack FC, Cheshire Cheese FC and Winwick Athletic FC. Can the Leader of the House please arrange for a debate in Government time on support for grassroots and non-league football, including improving facilities across towns such as mine so that this sport can grow and thrive in the interests of players and fans?

**Mr Speaker:** I pass on my congratulations, and to Bolton Wanderers on getting promoted.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I pass on my congratulations, too, to Warrington Rylands football club. I must say, I think the Cheshire Cheese football club is the best name for a football club that I have heard recently—it is an absolutely splendid name—although if the Cheshire Cheeses were to play the Cheddar Cheeses, I would be on the side of the Cheddar Cheeses for obvious Somerset-related reasons. The point that the hon. Lady makes is right: it has been a tough time for grassroots football. Obviously, the higher levels of the game have carried on getting money in and various schemes have been proposed to help ensure that the grassroots game prospers. In the initial instance, this is absolutely a Backbench Business debate, but one that I think would be very well supported.

**Mr Speaker:** And it used to be Lancashire cheese before they renamed it with the boundary change.

**Sarah Atherton** (Wrexham) (Con): The 2019 MP intake had little time to get their feet under the green Benches and learn about parliamentary protocol before covid struck, and procedures in this House rightly changed so that Parliament could function. Structure replaced spontaneity and call lists replaced bobbing. As we emerge from the shackles of covid, does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to resume normal procedure as soon as possible so that we can scrutinise Government and represent our constituents?

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): Hear, hear!

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I hear a very loud “Hear, hear!” from my hon. Friend, who I am so pleased to see in his place, as I teased him last week for not being—I am delighted that he is here. I am in entire agreement with my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton): we need to get back to do it properly. The key is that scrutiny is good for the Government, as it is for our constituents and for seeking redress of grievance. The tougher the scrutiny, the better policy is thought through, the better policy is presented and the more it becomes possible to avoid making mistakes that may prove an irritant to our constituents. Getting back to the Chamber and doing things properly is absolutely essential. We have 21 June—Midsummer's Day itself—pencilled in, so people can leave Stonehenge and come to the Chamber of the House of Commons on that day.

**Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab) [V]: The issues around severe court delays are well documented in this place, but I would like to draw the Leader of the House's attention to the real impact that these waiting times are having on my constituents. One is a 100-year-old woman, whose fraud case against a former carer has been charged by the Crown Prosecution Service and amounts to more than £250,000. This case was discovered and initiated more than four years ago, yet court delays mean that she is unlikely to see justice served in her lifetime. Will the Leader of the House please urge his colleagues in the Ministry of Justice to step in to seek a resolution, and at the very least will he grant a debate on this issue in Government time?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** It is always difficult to suggest any degree of intervention with individual cases, because those are obviously matters for the court, although I will of course pass on what the hon. Lady has said to the Lord Chancellor. Let me just set out what the Government have done to try to ease this problem, because it is one that has been recognised and, along with other effects of covid, is one of the greatest seriousness. The Government have committed a quarter of a billion pounds of taxpayers' money to a covid recovery. Additional space has been created to hear more cases, with 60 Nightingale courtrooms that have been opened, and plexiglass, as we see in our own Chamber, has been installed in 450 rooms. More than 20,000 hearings using remote technology are taking place each week, which is an enormous increase from March last year, so things are being done. Now, 2,000 cases a week are being completed in the Crown court, which is similar to pre-pandemic levels, so it is a question of working through the backlog. However, the issue the hon. Lady raises is one the Government take seriously, and as I have said, I will of course pass on the details to the Lord Chancellor.

**Mr Bone:** One of the great advantages of leaving the European Union was that we escaped from the protectionism of the superstate. Free trade agreements give more choice to the consumer and lower prices. Could the Leader of the House arrange a debate in Government time on a substantive motion, to allow Government Members to indicate how united we are behind free trade agreements and see whether the Opposition will support us?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right: free trade is one of the great advantages of leaving the European Union, which has always been essentially a protectionist racket and has led to higher prices for

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many staples of daily life in this country. The Government are a believer in free trade. We have rolled over any number of trade agreements, with the fantastic work done by my right hon Friend the President of the Board of Trade in ensuring that this has happened and in the negotiations with other countries. Free trade is good for both sides, but it is particularly good for the side that reduces tariffs. Why? Because we lower prices to consumers, which means they have more disposable income to use on other things, be it on investment in their country or buying other goods and services. So we grow the overall economy, reducing the tax burden on individuals because tariffs are taxation, and taxation on staples is not necessarily the best way to lead to economic growth, but it also helps producers because producers have to be more competitive, and that means that, globally, they will do better. For economic growth, free trade has always been the way forward, and God bless the late Sir Robert Peel.

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): I hope the Leader of the House cleared that with the Prime Minister, because on 21 April I asked the Prime Minister to demand that public bodies should “buy British first”, and he responded, “of course”. Clearly, the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), had not got the memo by yesterday, when he did not blame the EU, but started by bleating about World Trade Organisation restrictions. I suppose next it will be little green men from UFOs that Ministers use as their excuse for inaction. Can we have a debate in which Members from all sides can demand that Ministers, civil servants and public bodies buy British goods, food and services first?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Since we have left the European Union, we have much greater freedom to buy British first. We do have some international agreements on procurement to ensure that we do things fairly and properly, and that other countries do the same, but it seems to me perfectly reasonable, as there is good and affordable British produce available, that we should decide—where we can, and where it is prudent and affordable—to have a preference for British meat over non-British meat. I do not think that is unreasonable, and I hope the House of Commons will do the same.

**Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con) [V]: My constituent Rosie Aldridge’s son, Alfie, was diagnosed at eight with adrenoleukodystrophy. He can no longer walk, chew or swallow. Rosie describes this as every parent’s nightmare, and my heart goes out to her. In the United States, a post-natal heel prick is routine, and the question is whether this simple procedure could have meant a very different outcome for Alfie and others like him. Will the Leader of the House advise the House whether a debate could be held to consider the case for adopting a similar practice in the UK?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue with the House. It is of great concern, and I offer my sympathies to Alfie Aldridge and his family. As constituency MPs, we all know that these are the most heart-rending cases, and the families go through so much in looking after a child who is unwell.

The Government recognise that ALD is a devastating disease and acknowledge that the physical, mental and financial effects harm not only the individual but their

families. The UK National Screening Committee advises Ministers and the NHS in all parts of the United Kingdom on aspects of population screening and supports implementation. The UKNSC continually reviews the evidence for newborn screening tests and is currently reviewing the evidence on screening for ALD, following a public consultation, which closed on 30 January.

Comparison of population screening programmes such as the newborn blood spot with other health systems can be misleading. In the UK, newborn screening is quality-assured and includes all parts of the pathway for babies, through tests, retests, referral, diagnosis and treatment. In other countries, such as the USA, that is not necessarily the case. I would therefore recommend, in the first instance, that my hon. Friend apply for an Adjournment debate, but I will of course pass on the issue she has raised to my right hon Friend the Secretary of State for Health.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: Around this time last week, the residents of Kenmore Street in Pollokshields safely and peacefully assembled to prevent a Home Office immigration removal van from leaving. The cry, “These are our neighbours—let them go!” rang out in the streets for many hours. I am still awaiting a response from Home Office Ministers as to why they sought to remove two of my constituents in a pandemic and on Eid al-Fitr. Can we have a debate on the practice of so-called dawn raids and why they have no place in civilised society?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The law must be enforced.

**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con) [V]: Last weekend I was pleased to volunteer to direct constituents having their covid vaccinations at my GP surgery in Hendon—a programme that involves a partnership between several local practices. However, my office has since received a number of calls from people who have passed the 12-week interval after their first vaccine and who cannot get an appointment for their second. This is usually where the first vaccination has been via another GP; on one occasion, the reason given was that the practice did not have any vaccine. Will the Vaccines Minister make a statement about the autonomy of practices in inviting their on-list patients to attend surgeries to ensure that eligible patients receive their second vaccine within the 12-week period?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that important point and for volunteering service—he is a model to us all in his public service and the service he provides to his constituents.

It is essential that everyone receives their second vaccine dose at the agreed time, and recent figures indicate that very large numbers of people are receiving their second vaccines at the right time. Established systems and procedures are in place to ensure that second doses can be booked easily. The national immunisation management system is the centralised service for the management of the covid-19 programme established by NHS England.

It is obviously concerning for patients if they fear a delay in their second dose. In some exceptional circumstances, people may not receive an invitation for their second dose from their GP practice. If a full 11 weeks have passed since the first dose, and no offer of a second appointment has come, people should arrange

a job through the national booking system on the NHS internet page or by calling 119. I will obviously pass my hon. Friend's concerns on to the Vaccines Minister and the Health Secretary, but I suggest that he goes back to his constituents and says, "Go online or ring 119" if 11 weeks have elapsed.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I am proud to chair the all-party group on parkrun. I bet every MP in this House has a successful community parkrun. We know that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of our constituents want to put on their running shoes on a Saturday morning at 9 o'clock, and see their friends and run a timed 5 km race come rain or shine. Our all-party group wrote to the Prime Minister yesterday asking him to bring down the barriers which parkrun UK says are holding back this brilliant public health initiative from beginning again in June. It was good that the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport supported parkrun from the Dispatch Box earlier, but may we please have an urgent update and a statement highlighting the practical actions in hand to get us all on the run again?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I get into terrible difficulties with these areas, because it is very much do as I say, not as I do—I am afraid I am not running three miles for all the tea in China. Talking of running shoes, I did actually discover, in an unopened cupboard, my old cricket boots from when I was a schoolboy. I am not even going to put those on. They are splendidly old-fashioned in the way of cricket boots of the late 1980s now are.

The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. It is helpful for health reasons, and for fun, for people to get involved in sport as a collaborative and collective activity. He raises issues relating to the regulations that are making that difficult. I will take that up and get him a proper answer, rather than telling people to do things that I do not want to do.

**Mr Speaker:** Would it be easier for the Leader of the House if we called it the 5K?

**Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger** (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: I think, Mr Speaker, it's a case of howzat.

My right hon. Friend may have received, as I did, a letter from the leader of Somerset County Council, which was sent to every household across Somerset at huge public cost. It is actually full of false flannel and bare-faced lies, unfortunately. It was another attempt to fool the Somerset voters about a referendum that is being organised by the district council to find out what people really think about the different plans for local government. Somerset County Council wants its plan to succeed, so thousands of these spoiler letters suggest it is a waste of time because the Government will not listen, which I believe came from the Government. Unfortunately, the Secretary of State helped to fuel this when he told district councils that the referendum was a mistake. However, the people of Somerset take a dim view of being dictated to. As you well know, Mr Speaker, we do not like being told things by tinpot county councillors or, dare I say, out of touch Ministers. May we have a debate on this, because I'll tell you what we think of it—[*Interruption.*] We don't like it. We never have.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend is beginning to model himself on Corporal Jones. I thought he was about to say, "They don't like it up 'em," but he did not quite go that far. I am absolutely intrigued as to what false flannel is. Is that flannelette? I am not entirely sure. Obviously, documents sent out by county councils should be accurate and factually true. The Government are running a consultation on the new structures for Somerset. My hon. Friend knows my preference. I think Somerset should be restored, reunited, returned to being not quite one holy catholic and apostolic Somerset, but that is the direction in which we both believe in heading. But this should be a fair and properly conducted and civilised debate.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I wish the Leader of the House many happy returns for Monday. We do not count the years anymore, the Leader of the House and I and others, but instead we make the years count. We look forward to that.

The newly released 2021 annual report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom warns that the Chinese Communist party's hostility towards certain groups, for example Tibetan Buddhists, was among the most troubling developments seen in 2020. Under the CCP's systematic campaign of "sinofication", many minorities are seeing their religious identities suppressed and their beliefs persecuted. The religious activities of Tibet's 8 million Buddhists are severely restricted with state surveillance, harassment, arrests, forced labour and the detention of religious leaders. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate or a statement on this matter?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The hon. Gentleman raises a point that is rightly raised in this House. The treatment of Tibetan Buddhists should be of the gravest concern to the House, and to anyone who believes in freedom of religion, but the communist regime in China does not respect any religion. It is an atheistic creed; it does not respect Buddhists, it does not respect the Uyghurs and it does not respect Catholics. It has consistently persecuted and borne down on religion in China, and that is something that ought to be condemned.

**Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): About 14 months ago, a much-loved Ipswich man, Richard Day, walked back after a night out with his brother, minding his own business. He was set upon by three youths who attacked him. One of the youths punched him in the neck, and that was a fatal blow. As Richard lay dying on the floor, they stood over him laughing and rifling through his pockets to steal his belongings. The individual who threw the fatal punch was actually awaiting sentencing for another similar crime. The people of Ipswich are shocked that that individual was given a sentence of only four years in a youth offenders institution. He will be let out automatically halfway through, and he has already served 14 months on remand, so in 10 months he will be back out, presumably on the streets of Ipswich. My constituents are furious that justice has not been done, and there is also a question about the public safety of my constituents if he is back out on the streets of Ipswich. Will the Leader of the House find Government time for us to debate sentences such as these and what we can do to restore the trust of the British people in our criminal justice system?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend raises a deeply troubling case. The sadness for Mr Day's family and the burden that they will carry all their lives is one of unimaginable distress. It is hard in these circumstances to go through the reassurances about the Government taking tackling crime seriously, which of course they do. This is where general national policy meets the individual circumstance, and it is so important that, in the individual circumstance, the right, appropriate and just sentence is passed. Parliament gives the power to the courts to do this, and the maximum penalty for manslaughter is a life sentence. We have independent courts, but it would be wrong to pretend that our courts always get the individual judgments right. It is therefore quite proper for people such as my hon. Friend to seek redress for the grievances of their constituents and to raise these matters in the House so that the judiciary may know what concern there is when light sentences are passed on people who, by a violent murder, have destroyed the happiness of a family.

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

11.37 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Britain's Railways

11.40 am

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the future of rail.

The railway is one of the nation's proudest and most enduring innovations. Almost 200 years ago the first line opened—the Stockton and Darlington in County Durham. Within decades, the railway's iron web stretched across the nation, carrying trains that transformed our economy and society. From steam icons such as the Flying Scotsman and the Mallard, to the high-speed InterCity 125, which became the stalwart of Britain's railway for 45 years, this country was built by the railway.

In the 19th century, rail helped to make us so productive and turned us into the workshop of the world, and rail powered our great Victorian cities and shaped our economic geography. Rail opened up vast, long-distance travel for ordinary people, transforming opportunity for the masses. Just as rail moulded our past, so will it shape our future. No other form of transport can bind the nation so effectively and help us to level up our country, bringing new jobs and investment to regions such as the north and the midlands, as we build back from covid.

However, for rail to play that key future role and reach its true potential, the industry requires radical overhaul. The Government are deeply committed to rail. We are spending tens of billions on modernising rail infrastructure, electrifying existing routes, updating signalling stations, renewing train fleets, building new lines, and making up for decades of underinvestment, but there are problems that investment alone cannot solve, such as too many delays, too much confusion for passengers, and different parts of the industry not working together.

The part-privatisation of the railway in the mid-'90s successfully reversed its long-term decline. Private sector involvement has seen passenger numbers more than double, rising more quickly than in most of Europe. Passenger travel is safer, and our country is better connected, with billions invested in new, modern trains and upgrading our stations—investment that would not have happened under nationalisation. However, the industry is fragmented, it lacks accountability, and it is lacking in leadership. The chaotic timetable change of three years ago this week demonstrated that point, as did the Government being forced to step in to take over failing franchises. Those are just some examples of how the railway was not working, and of how it was neglecting its greatest, most precious asset: the passenger.

Today I am proud to announce the beginning of a new start for the railway in Britain. It is the biggest shake up in three decades, bringing the railway together under a single national leadership, with one overwhelming aim: to deliver for passengers. The new public body, Great British Railways, will own the infrastructure, run and plan the network, organise the timetable, and set most fares. It will be one organisation, accountable to Ministers, to get trains running on time, make the customer experience as hassle-free as possible, and bring the railway into the 21st century, a single, familiar brand, with united accountable leadership.

We are going to sort out and simplify ticketing. Instead of having queues at stations for wads of paper tickets, we will roll out convenient, modern ways to pay and book—smartphones and contactless—and a new Great British Railways website for selling tickets across the network. We will welcome independents continuing to compete in the ticket retail market, particularly where they can grow new markets, recognising the value of private sector innovation. Pay as you go will be more widely accepted, and flexible season tickets will be introduced next month, saving money for an increasing number of people who do not commute five days a week. At the same time, “turn up and go” tickets, conventional season tickets and Britain’s comprehensive service will all be protected.

Although Great British Railways will manage the network, we must not ignore the contribution that the private sector continues to make. This is not renationalisation, which the Government continue to believe failed the railways. Rather, this is simplification. While Great British Railways acts as the guiding mind to co-ordinate the whole network, our plan will see greater involvement of the private sector. Private companies will be contracted to run the trains and services, with fares set by Great British Railways. It will work more like London buses and London Overground, delivered by private companies but branded as a single national service.

The operators will be rewarded for providing clean, comfortable, on-time services, and our reforms will unleash opportunities for them to innovate, helping us to change the way tickets are sold and the way data is used, so that passengers can plan their journeys more easily. These contracts will lower the barriers and bring in new entrants, including community rail partnerships and other innovative bidders operating on branch lines. That will make the competition process easier and will be good for taxpayers and passengers.

In England, we will work to bring the railway closer to those who use the services, and in Scotland and Wales, we will continue to exercise the current powers under devolution. Close collaboration with Great British Railways will help to ensure that delivery improves across the services and provides consistency for passengers across the country.

This is also about changing the culture of our railway. Covid has shown the very best of the railways. Ticketing staff, engineers, drivers, guards, cleaners, signallers, maintenance workers and timetablers have all played their part in keeping supplies, vaccines and essential workers moving, and for that we owe them a debt of gratitude. They have shown us what can be achieved when this industry comes together, and we want to strengthen that.

Simpler structures and clearer leadership will make decision making much more transparent and will remove the blame culture. There is far too much bureaucracy focused on establishing who is to blame rather than finding solutions. For example, all delays greater than three minutes have to be allocated to someone for financial penalties to apply. Until recently, under the delay attribution rules, when a train was delayed by being hit by a bird, who got the blame depended on the size of the bird. A small bird was the fault of a train company and a large bird the fault of Network Rail. Of course, trains are expected to withstand, say, a sparrow, a pigeon or maybe even a smallish duck, but not a swan or a goose.

Once a train has collided with said bird, it creates an industry for debate, argument and litigation. Network Rail and train operators currently employ a stunning 400 full-time members of staff known as train delay attributors, whose sole job is to argue with each other about whose fault the delay is. There is even a national attribution board—a sort of supreme court for the railway—which looks at these disputes and, in one case recently, had to rule on whether a pheasant is a small or large bird. It is completely bonkers. This is the sort of thing that will end. As soon as possible, under our reforms, everyone, including the train operators, will be tasked to work towards common goals and manage costs. We will create a more financially sustainable railway, saving money for the taxpayer. Rail services will be better co-ordinated with each other and better integrated with trains, buses, bikes and trams.

This new plan for the railways, three years in the making, is not about ideology. I am more interested in fixing problems, getting things done and creating the public services that people want. This plan is therefore about delivering for passengers—an ambitious but common-sense blueprint for a more customer-focused, more reliable and growing railway. As we head towards the 200th anniversary of rail’s inception, the network faces perhaps its biggest challenge with the collapse of passenger numbers during covid. This new rail revolution will restore trust and pride in Britain’s railways, secure it for the long term and ensure that it plays just as formative a role in our future as it has done in our past. I commend this statement to the House.

11.49 am

**Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): May I start by thanking the Secretary of State for Transport for an advance copy of the statement, together with the report that was issued earlier this morning? It is two and a half years since the Williams review was first commissioned, and the very fact that Williams was commissioned at all shows that the state, the travelling public and those excluded from the railways because of accessibility have been given a poor deal.

While much has changed through the network due to covid, what the Secretary of State has announced today was pretty much what was recorded in *The Daily Telegraph* last November. If that is the case, will he confirm why did he not make the announcement back in November, when it was reported in the national press?

Taking the announcements in turn today, the Secretary of State said that control of the infrastructure and the contracting of train operations will be given to this new arm’s length Government-owned body, with private firms bidding for concessions with an agreed profit margin built in. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether a publicly owned provider will be able to bid for these concessions on a level playing field? Will he also confirm whether the operator of last resort will continue to exist? If so, will it be brought fully back in-house?

It has been reported that the Treasury is demanding cost cuts of between 10% and 20%. There is concern that rather than seeing increased investment, the real driver behind bringing all this together is more about disguising painful cuts. Any talk of cuts in funding, such as the £1 billion funding cut to Network Rail that we have already seen, will have a direct impact on jobs, our regions and vital maintenance and upgrade works. Does the Secretary of State know how many jobs could

[*Jim McMahon*]

be lost with a reduction of 10% or 20%, and what it might mean to each of our regions? The head of Network Rail, Andrew Haines, and its chairman, Sir Peter Hendy, are to be tasked with drawing up the processes and structures of the new Great British Railways. What date have they been given to report back?

On freight, can the Secretary of State say a little more about how the reforms will impact on the track access regime and about the governance arrangements that will exist for freight when Network Rail takes control of the passenger railways and freight together, albeit under a different name? Decarbonising transport will require a much greater shift if we are to move more from road to rail. How will the reforms help rail freight grow as part of decarbonising freight transport? Importantly, what targets will the Secretary of State set in that regard?

The Government have also made an announcement on flexible ticketing, although to date few details have been provided. The lack of any detail on these tickets and whether they will actually be cheaper for the travelling public frankly renders the announcement almost useless to millions of passengers. There is a danger that flexible ticketing will fail to meet the test of encouraging people back on to rail as we come through this pandemic. What research have the Government done to ensure that the type of product being suggested will address the needs of the travelling public and get more people back on to rail?

This report fundamentally fails to tackle one of the biggest challenges with our transport system, which is that the different modes of transport just do not talk to each other. They do not turn up together when required and they are not joined up. We need a bus and train system that genuinely connects people, rather than leaving them cold, standing, waiting for connecting services. Will the Secretary of State work towards joining up different modes of transport? Critically, if so, what devolved powers does he envisage for our metro Mayors and our transport authorities as part of this plan?

On devolution, will the Government finally follow through on transferring train station responsibilities to our metro Mayors, as was expected in Greater Manchester some years ago? We have not seen any detail on what profit margin operators can expect in practice and whether the cost of that will hit fares or investment. How quickly will the Government publish that?

While I welcome the steps to increase public ownership and control over the railways, as hon. Members might expect, they do not go far enough in this plan. There is ample proof to demonstrate that fuller public ownership, rather than a concession model, would better serve the state, the public and long-term investment. I fear that the Government have really not understood the scale of the challenge in front of them. While we may well see a change of name on the side of the trains, fundamentally passengers will still be left short-changed. Although the Minister says that this is not about nationalisation, the fact is that, as we have seen through covid, we have nationalised risk but continue to allow the privatisation of profit.

**Grant Shapps:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I have to say that I sympathise, because I appreciate that it must have been difficult to take in a report of 114 pages in the time available. Skimming through it and coming

up with questions will have been difficult, and I therefore understand why he asked some questions that are answered fully in the White Paper itself. Less understandable and harder to fathom is how it was possible to put out press comments about the content of the White Paper last night before it was even seen, including a lot of points already covered in the White Paper, and therefore rather misfiring in direction. Let me try to pick through some of the questions asked.

Why two and a half years? As I mentioned, the breakdown in the timetable took place three years ago this week. Keith Williams was appointed to carry out the review, which he has done at no cost to the taxpayer, I should mention, and brilliantly. There was this thing called covid, and we went into the second and third lockdowns in November, so it was perfectly proper to wait until we had a clear indication and for the vaccine to be deployed before coming to the House with the full report. That also enabled us to bring that report up to date with what is actually happening in the running of those rail services.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the operator of last resort and whether it will still exist. The answer is in the report: yes, very much so. As he knows, I already effectively run Northern and the east coast mainline through the operator of last resort. It is not about disguising cuts of any type. He keeps coming back to £1 billion of control period 6 rail funding. Because of covid, operators were unable to spend the money, but they will have that money to spend in the next period. None the less, we have ongoing one of the biggest ever rail transformation programmes, if not the biggest.

The timescales for change are all in the White Paper, and the good news is that we will get going on this immediately. The hon. Gentleman will notice that the bottom left-hand corner on the front of the White Paper says "CP 423", which means that it is command paper 423, which means that we can get on with it, and we are doing that from this moment. A very good example of that is flexi-tickets. He says that there is not enough detail. I am pleased to let the House know that that detail will all be available on 21 June, and that they will go on sale on 28 June. If he takes the time to look in the notes to editors at the back, he will see a large number of examples of what fares will be. These will save people money in each circumstance if they are travelling two or three days a week.

The hon. Gentleman asked about freight. I refer him to page 78 of the White Paper, which talks about freight and our desire to make sure that those freight paths are available within our railway. The advantage of Great British Railways looking after all this is that we will be able to accommodate freight paths. He asked about the decarbonisation that freight will help to bring, and he is absolutely right to focus on that. I am pleased to tell him that a transport decarbonisation plan will be published before the summer that will focus very much on how we already use the best form of transport when it comes to decarbonisation in order to shift more freight around.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the joined-up nature of transport, with people, as he says, waiting in the cold sometimes for transport that may or may not turn up. I know he has not had long to look at the White Paper, but he only has to get as far as the foreword to find my talking about that exact issue. He asks about the way this will work with devolution. He will be pleased to

hear that I spoke to his friend the Mayor of Manchester only yesterday, and I was pleased that he warmly welcomed the White Paper today. Page 41 has all that detail.

I know that Oppositions, almost for Opposition's sake, have to nit-pick and find problems, but the reality is that the nationalisation that they would impose on this country would lead to fewer passengers, as it did last time; fewer stations, with stations closed in our constituencies, as it did last time under British Rail; track being cut, as it was before; and appalling sandwiches. We are not going back to the days of nationalisation. We can do better than that.

**Mr Speaker:** Let us go to the Chair of the Transport Committee.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con) [V]: I welcome the statement, the White Paper and indeed the birth of Great British Railways. We look forward to the Secretary of State giving more detail to the Select Committee on Transport this Wednesday with Keith Williams. In the meantime, let me ask about page 56 of the White Paper, which deals with passenger service contracts, promising:

“Revenue incentives and risk sharing”.

How will that work to ensure that the private sector continues to invest in a way that it has done over the past 20 or so years, when it doubled passenger numbers? Page 71 talks of “New flexible season tickets” allowing eight days' travel in a 28-day period. Does that equate to 28% of the cost that passengers would expect to pay and therefore make it an incentive to travel in our new world?

**Grant Shapps:** I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee and I look forward to coming before the Committee on Wednesday. I hope I will get a bit more chance to expand on some of these subjects. When Keith Williams and I were looking at the role of the private sector, we very much looked at what was happening in London with Transport for London: the way the buses, London Overground and the Docklands Light Railway are all run by private enterprises and how they bring something more than would have been available if the state was simply running all those services. The incentives for such enterprises will be to run good, efficient, trains, on time—clean trains, with wi-fi; these are things that passengers want—to carry on innovating and to bring their private ideas and capital, while allowing Great British Railways to set the overall picture. I do not want to disappoint him on the flexi tickets; the 28 days does not refer to 28%, but I can tell him that, fortunately, every ticket will be cheaper than buying a season ticket when people are travelling now, in a more flexible world, perhaps two or three days a week. These tickets will be warmly welcomed by the travelling public, as people start to go back to work.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) [V]: I, too, thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement. I have to report that, yet again, although there was consultation during the initial review, there has been no discussion of the actual plan with the Scottish Government. As for the so-called “Williams-Shapps” plan, it will be interesting to see how quickly it is renamed the “Williams plan” if it does not work. Although there are elements to be welcomed, I am afraid that it amounts to a real missed opportunity,

with the Tories' continued belief that the private sector knows best and yet more money flowing out of the system and into shareholders' pockets.

By contrast, the Scottish Government have committed to taking ScotRail into public ownership. Will the Secretary of State confirm that nothing in this plan prevents the Scottish Government from doing so? I am disappointed but wholly unsurprised to see that the advice given by the former Rail Minister Tom Harris to devolve Network Rail to Scotland has been ignored. Moreover, the plan states:

“Dedicated station management teams will be created locally within regional divisions of Great British Railways to manage stations, land and assets.”

Will the Secretary of State confirm whether that results in GBR taking on the management of some Scottish stations and taking it out of ScotRail's hands? How will the plan to roll station improvement funds into a central accessibility fund affect current relationships between Transport Scotland and the Department for Transport and annual bids for Access for All money? The plan also contains zero mention of international connections and Eurostar, which is a big omission, given the potential collapse of Eurostar. The plan document for GBR contains lots of nice pictures but not a single one has been taken outside England, which is indicative of a plan that fails to recognise the need to devolve more power to the devolved Administrations. Despite all the noise and rhetoric around the Government's 10-point plan, the document contains just one page out of 116 on rail electrification. It says that the Government will announce further English electrification programmes, but we have been here before and their track record is utterly woeful. So when will this plan be announced? Will passenger service contracts be compulsory?

Lastly, the plan contains little specifically about Scotland. Given that the functions of Network Rail are not being devolved, can the Secretary of State tell us how the operational relationship between the ScotRail Alliance and Transport Scotland and GBR will work? The extension of ministerial control over GBR/Network Rail means that that is likely to become far more complicated.

**Grant Shapps:** I wish to correct a couple of things that the hon. Gentleman said. There has been extensive discussion with the Scottish Government at official level about all of this, so they have been very much briefed. I am sorry that they have not briefed him along the way, as that would have been helpful. I know that he approaches this subject with tremendous dogma as if our railway lines do not interconnect, but they do, or as if the only way through this in the case of ScotRail is to nationalise it. We just take a much more open view about the best way to run a railway. First, the lines happen to connect England and Scotland together. Secondly, we have said in this White Paper that we are happy not only to have this national body, Great British Railways, involved, but to have competition from the private sector or, indeed, an operator of last resort, the public sector. We just have a much less ideological view of all of this. I think it is about trying to juxtapose his very ideological views with this much more straightforward plan to do what is right for the passenger that is causing him quite a lot of his confusion.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned numerous different issues. For example, he said that, on the international side of things, Eurostar was in trouble. He may not have

[Grant Shapps]

spotted it, but Eurostar was refinanced just last week. He asked about the transport decarbonisation element of it. He may have missed the answer that I gave to the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) a moment ago, but the transport decarbonisation plan is referenced in the White Paper, because it is due out very shortly and will tackle those issues in a great deal of additional detail.

I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that Great British Railways will carry on running the infrastructure side of things, but there is nothing in the White Paper that reverses or changes the devolution picture: the Scottish Government will carry on running ScotRail as they see fit. None the less, we do have to recognise that we all need to work together. I normally hear him say exactly that, because our constituents need to travel around and they do not really care about all of the insider detail. They just want a railway that works, which is why he should be welcoming Great British Railways and this White Paper today, because we will get a railway that works.

**Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con) [V]: May I start by welcoming my right hon. Friend's statement today? The people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke elected me on a pledge to better connect places such as Milton via the Stoke to Leek line, which I hope will reopen under my Restoring Your Railway Fund bid. I also want to ensure that railways and stations are responsive to the needs of local communities, such as providing Access For All upgrades and car parking, which is happening at Kidsgrove, thanks to Joan Walley from 2015, and I hope to see it replicated at Longport railway station. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, as part of these reforms announced today, our railways will be more responsive to local community needs and work for every part of our United Kingdom?

**Grant Shapps**: I can most certainly provide an absolute assurance to my hon. Friend, who, I have to say, has been an incredibly doughty fighter on behalf of his Stoke constituency. He mentioned the Stoke to Leek line. I know that he has spoken to the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) and I know that he has an application into the third round of the Restoring Your Railway Fund application, which is enormously popular across the House. That is getting rid of the damage that Beeching did to our railways in this country under British Rail and it is good to see this Conservative Government opening it up again.

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): Passengers in Luton North will be concerned by reports that the Chancellor is planning to cut our railways. After 15 years of Access For All funding, it is truly shocking how many stations, including Leagrave in Luton North, remain inaccessible to wheelchair users, those with mobility issues, and parents like myself with pushchairs. Under this review, will the Secretary of State accelerate Access For All funding so that passengers with access needs in Luton North can have proper and equal use of our railways?

**Grant Shapps**: I do agree, but we have a fundamental issue here: our railways were built by the Victorians, who did not have any kind of disability discrimination

legislation at the time. Many of the stations are far less accessible than we would want to see, which is why we have the Access For All fund, with which the hon. Lady is familiar. I always encourage people to bid for it. There is no prouder moment than when I go round the country with my fellow Ministers to open up stations that are now accessible to people in every kind of way, and I encourage her to apply for that. I have to say that the Chancellor would be pretty surprised to hear the hon. Lady talk about his "cuts" to our railways. He has just put £12 billion into keeping them running over the past year due to covid.

**Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con) [V]: I welcome any reform that puts passenger interests at the heart of the railway, but may I say to the Secretary of State that what passengers in Alfreton and Langley Mill want is for their direct link to London each day to be retained and not scrapped by East Midlands Railway? Can he confirm that, under his new structure, those sort of decisions about where trains stop and how often will be for the new Great British Railways Company and not for the individual franchisee or operator to make?

**Grant Shapps**: My hon. Friend illustrates the problem with the setup that we have at the moment, where each individual railway company bids for its own bit of the track—its own path. We are not using the railway as efficiently as we should, so we cannot run as many services as we should. I can absolutely confirm to my hon. Friend that all decisions on direct links to London will be made by Great British Railways in the future. I should have pointed out to the House that this is a multi-year upgrade to our railways. It will take time to provide fully, as the White Paper explains, and it will require primary legislation. However, we will get on with the main parts of it today, so from today, things will start to improve.

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): I welcome the review and the statement from the Secretary of State. My constituents will particularly welcome the news about flexible season tickets, which will be of huge benefit to commuters right across London and the south-east, particularly those who might be thinking of working from home more once all the covid restrictions are lifted. I am a bit concerned about what protection there will be for commuters from the undue hiking of rail fares. How will Great British Railways be prevented from imposing disproportionate fare increases on commuters?

**Grant Shapps**: I most certainly welcome the hon. Lady's welcome for the White Paper. It is great to hear that she thinks that flexi-tickets will help her constituents; I think that they will, as work patterns evolve post covid. I can provide her with the reassurances that she is after, because today's announcement of Great British Railways does not change how fares have been capped up to now, and all those regimes will remain in place. I think there are great benefits coming down the road—down the line, actually—for her constituents.

**Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): I welcome the commitment to making our railways more passenger-focused and, indeed, resisting Opposition Members' calls to go back to the bad old days of nationalisation. My right hon. Friend will know, however, that my

constituents suffer at the hands of the railway that we do not want, HS2, while the railway that we do want, East West Rail, lacks a firm commitment to the important connectivity of the Aylesbury spur. As a key strand of this review is passenger-focused connectivity, will he fully commit to the Aylesbury spur?

**Grant Shapps:** I do not think we could ever accuse my hon. Friend of not putting on the record his concerns about a new railway line, HS2, being built through his constituency. He has been a clear champion for his constituents in that regard. The other new railway—East West Rail and the Aylesbury spur—is a matter that is under consideration. I note that there is an Adjournment debate on the subject this coming Monday, which one of my hon. Friends will be answering. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) will get the opportunity to put many a point across as we consider the exact path for East West Rail and its spurs.

**Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab):** Full public ownership of the railways is very popular with the public, so it is disappointing to see the half measures announced today that seem to nationalise risk but privatise profits. Will Ministers allow a publicly owned company to bid for these concessionary contracts?

**Grant Shapps:** As I have tried many times to stress to Opposition Members, we are not ideological about this; we just want to do what works for passengers, because they are the people who matter in all this. I have pointed out—I hope the House will think that I have been fair—the relative disadvantages of our previous public and private versions of the railways, and I think this will capture the best of both worlds.

To answer the hon. Lady's question, I want community groups to be able to be involved, as I have mentioned. I said to the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) that the operator of last resort will still be a factor as well. We will make sure that this is run in the best possible way. I cannot really fathom why anyone would want to carve out the private sector's incredible contribution to the railway, which has doubled in size over the last 25 years and is growing.

**Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con) [V]:** The Fat Controller could not manage it, and choo-choo Portillo cannot document it. Can the Secretary of State harness Great British Railways to make it the legend that brings a direct line train from London to Bolton?

**Grant Shapps:** Well, there is a challenge. As I said, the strange thing about the May 2018 timetable change is that it attempted to make more paths available in order to use the track that we have better, but the problem was that no one was in charge, and we know what happened. The great thing about Great British Railways looking after all these different elements is that it will be able to use the track more intelligently. I do not know, but I very much hope that one day that might lead to a train direct to Bolton.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call Angela Crawley. Not here, so I call Martin Vickers.

**Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con) [V]:** Unlike Labour Members, I welcome the Secretary of State's focus on what works rather than just on ownership, but we

should not lose sight of the fact that competition is a spur to improved services. Open access operators have provided services to towns that were not included in franchises. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that these services will continue? Paragraph 25 of the White Paper states:

“New open access services will also be explored where spare capacity exists.”

Can we be assured that the default position will be to do everything possible to ensure that we do not reduce existing services and that we extend and improve services? As chairman of the all-party rail group, I can tell my right hon. Friend that an invitation to address the group is already winging its way to him, and I hope he will be able to do so in the next few weeks.

**Grant Shapps:** Yes, absolutely—open access is something we really think is an important part of the structure. It provides the competition. It keeps everybody on their toes. These are often extremely popular services. As my hon. Friend rightly points out, we absolutely back them in paragraph 25 of the White Paper. Having visited the National Rail Museum in York on Tuesday this week, I cannot wait to bring my stories of looking round that museum to his group.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Angela Crawley appears still not to be here, so we will go to Yvette Cooper.

**Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]:** The current system has been failing my constituency for far too long, so I urge the Secretary of State to make sure that this plan improves things and is a step forward. The five towns are less than 20 miles from the centre of Leeds. If we were that close to the centre of London, we would have many trains an hour into the city, yet Normanton has only one train an hour into Leeds; Pontefract, Castleford and Knottingley are all underserved; and we need more trains to Sheffield, York and Hull. I have met Transport Ministers repeatedly on this, so will the Transport Secretary now guarantee that this new plan will mean more local trains for the five towns?

**Grant Shapps:** I certainly welcome the right hon. Lady's partial welcome, at least, for the White Paper. I completely agree with her about the necessity to join up northern towns. As the northern powerhouse Minister in Cabinet, I spend a huge amount of my time looking at the way that the railway service that I now get to run, Northern, operates through the operator of last resort. The service at the moment is just not good enough. She is right to say that if it was in the south the connectivity would be vastly better. That is why this Government are obsessed—obsessed, I say—with levelling up, and why I hope that her discussions with the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), are very fruitful. Great British Railways will, I think, be of great assistance to her constituents.

**Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con) [V]:** I welcome my right hon. Friend's focus on delivering for passengers. Many commuters face really significant changes in their working week, and flexible season tickets will help, but will he go on looking at affordability for long-distance commuters on the Wessex route through Basingstoke? London depends on highly skilled workers from places like Basingstoke, but the cost of distance commuting needs to be kept under really close review.

**Grant Shapps:** Yes, we are charging Great British Railways with looking at the way that all ticketing operates. One of the things that is so crazy at the moment is the extent to which we are still walking around with paper tickets, which are about half of all tickets sold, and the additional cost that a not-very-streamlined system to use our trains brings to bear. One example that I hope to be able to deliver for my right hon. Friend's constituents—it has actually recently been delivered to mine, although before I was Transport Secretary—is the ability to touch in and touch out. That then works with the Oyster system—although it is not Oyster outside of London—and caps the fares, so that if her constituents make more than X number of journeys a week, it automatically prevents them from being charged more. Those are the sorts of much more advanced ticketing plans that will be much easier to do with Great British Railways because it will all be under one roof.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: I welcome much in this statement, but it is meaningless if we cannot get more than one train a week through Reddish South and Denton stations. At the convention of the north in 2019, the Prime Minister promised northern mayors that they would be able to run their own trains. Greater Manchester has ambitious plans for both GM Rail and tram-train integration with the bus and Metrolink networks, with full London-style integration. I accept that today's announcement is a big step in the right direction, but it falls a little bit short of that 2019 promise. How do we make Greater Manchester's vision a reality?

**Grant Shapps:** I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's tacit support for this; he is right about what we want to do and where we want to go with it. As I mentioned earlier, I spoke to the Manchester Mayor yesterday about the way that GM Rail can help to integrate all these services. Needless to say, since that 2019 speech we have all been tackling covid, and I think it is fair to say that GM Rail would not necessarily be immediately in a position where it would want to take over these routes, all of which are under enormous financial stress and are being rescued by the Chancellor's £12 billion. It is our intention to press on with the agenda of making sure that people can take one form of transport to another—in the case of Manchester, on trams, buses and trains.

**Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): Integrated public transport will be crucial to the north's post-covid recovery and the levelling-up agenda. It should be as easy for my constituents to travel around Greater Manchester as it is to travel around Greater London. As we have heard, transport powers are devolved to the Mayor of Greater Manchester, and a number of other organisations are involved in the region's transport infrastructure, from the operators to Network Rail to Transport for the North. How will my right hon. Friend ensure that existing transport proposals for Greater Manchester and the north are consolidated into this ambitious plan for our railways?

**Grant Shapps:** That is an excellent question. My hon. Friend is absolutely right; when she reads out the list of different organisations involved, each of which has its own plans and ambitions, hon. Members can quickly understand why we need this national body bringing everybody together. It will be an effective way of picking

up on the ambitions of those organisations and, more importantly, her constituents—the passengers who use those services. She has brilliantly echoed the point of several other Members in saying, "Actually, if it was London, it would already be integrated." That is where the Government want to get to, and today's announcement is one small step on that path.

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab) [V]: Whatever the future model of the rail industry, the east coast main line will be key to enabling major projects such as HS2, Northern Powerhouse Rail, Midlands Engine and East West Rail. That points to the urgent need to improve the line itself, as it last saw major investment about 30 years ago and just cannot cope with the demands placed on it. Will the Secretary of State confirm when the long-awaited integrated rail plan for the north and midlands will be published? Will he give a commitment to properly fund this key piece of national infrastructure? Will he also meet me and cross-party colleagues on the all-party parliamentary group on the east coast main line to discuss how the Government can deliver on the capacity and reliability improvements that this strategic line so badly needs?

**Grant Shapps:** The hon. Lady does not know it, but she and I share something very much in common: a love for the east coast main line. I live not a quarter of a mile from it and it is the line that I essentially end up using more than any other; I was on it a couple of days ago. We have actually been putting in massive investment, which she may not have seen. For example, I have signed off at least £300 million—I forget the exact figure off the top of my head—to upgrade digital signalling, which will make a big difference to both the reliability and the number of trains that can travel up the line.

I feel that the thrust of the hon. Lady's question was really about the integrated rail plan and how we are going to use the east coast main line within that part of the programme. The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson)—who is the Minister for both HS2 and the integrated rail plan—will be saying more about this with me shortly. We share the hon. Lady's ambition to ensure that the east coast main line is capable of taking the traffic required to service our constituents today.

**Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con) [V]: Faster trains to London from Weymouth in my constituency will be a key infrastructure improvement if we are to create more jobs and prosperity. The line via Poole and Bournemouth operates to capacity, so restoring a short stretch of track to the south-east of Yeovil Junction to link up with the Salisbury line would do the trick. Will my right hon. Friend reassure my constituents that this easy improvement is a large blip on his radar?

**Grant Shapps:** I was just conferring with the Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry, and this is absolutely on his radar. There have actually been few things we have done that have been more popular in transport and rail than restoring a railway. I know my hon. Friend will know all about that and be bidding into the process, as others have around the House. This just demonstrates, as his eloquent words show, the extent to which these railway reconnections can make big differences to our constituents, and this Government are fully in favour of doing that.

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab) [V]: Following the timetable chaos, the fragmentation and three franchise failures on the east coast main line, my constituents already knew that privatisation did not work, so I welcome the Secretary of State's acknowledgement of that today. However, we know that Transport for the North's core funding has been cut and that transport spending per head in London is three times larger than it is in Yorkshire and the Humber, so my constituents would like to know what benefit today's announcement will bring for HS2 phase 2b to Leeds, future investment in Leeds station and getting on with Northern Powerhouse Rail.

**Grant Shapps:** The right hon. Gentleman will not have to wait very long for the answer, which I mentioned before, about the integrated rail plan, which includes things like what will happen on 2b east to Leeds and much more on the east coast main line, as we were just discussing.

I want to pick the right hon. Gentleman up on one point. I was in the middle of nodding and agreeing with him, certainly about the timetable debacle and what that demonstrated, but it is not the case that TfN's core funding, as he describes it, has been cut. It has the money in the bank; it has not spent it. The actual spending is in the billions of pounds, while we seem to have got stuck talking about a £3.5 million administrative fund that is already in the bank.

My point is this: we are committed to levelling up the north—all constituencies, including the right hon. Gentleman's own—and it will not be very long before we are saying more about that through the integrated rail plan. I entirely agree with him that it is many years overdue, but it is great to have a Government who are getting on with it now.

**Paul Maynard** (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con) [V]: I very much welcome this greatly long-awaited plan. We have all waited for it with such great anticipation, and finally it is here. Can the Secretary of State set out how the plan will embed the role of the existing rail ombudsman as the champion of the passenger interest in the new system? Will he ensure that all ombudsman decisions are binding on rail companies that obtain concessions, and that their participation in the ombudsman system is a condition of obtaining such a concession?

**Grant Shapps:** I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend because, as a former Rail Minister, there are few people in this House who will know more about this subject than him. During this White Paper's time, he has made a significant input to what we have today, so it is in no small part his triumph as well. We have Great British Railways thanks to him.

To pick up my hon. Friend's point about the rail ombudsman, there is clearly talk in the White Paper, which I think he will appreciate—and even recall—about strengthening the role of the passenger champion. I know he pushed for that in his time in the job, and I think he will be pleased with what he reads today.

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): Welsh rail services too often do not work at all or work very poorly indeed. That is unsurprising given that, as Professor Mark Barry of Cardiff University says in a Welsh Government

report, in Wales we have 11% of the rail network, but it gets 1% of rail investment. This White Paper, as far as I can see, unfortunately offers not a lot that is new or useful to address this. Is the Secretary of State aware that the respected Wales Governance Centre, also at Cardiff University, reports a very straightforward conclusion? It says that rail enhancement spending to improve the often dire service that local people endure in Wales would be

“higher under a fully devolved system.”

So will he just ensure that the Welsh Government get full control of rail in Wales?

**Grant Shapps:** I should point out that the railways have not been some sort of money spinner for the Treasury in the last year. We have spent £12 billion, including on the Welsh services, so I am not sure that anyone would have welcomed the cost of the lines. Of course, I have devolved the core valley lines to Wales. In general, though, the infrastructure is run at the moment by Network Rail and it will be run by Great British Railways. I do want to challenge the hon. Gentleman on the figure he used, because I do not want it to go uncommented on. I am sure he is aware that the 11% and 1% figure is hotly disputed, due to the fact that it does not look at passenger numbers and that geography is different in different parts of Great Britain. None the less, on the main thrust of wanting to see those services developed, I am entirely in support of that and I will do whatever I can, while, as the name suggests, Great British Railways will cover the whole of Great Britain.

**Greg Clark** (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's decisive action on flexible ticketing. It is ludicrous that, since the 1950s, the railways have operated on the assumption that commuters go to their place of work five days a week. That has not been true for years and it is high time that it was brought up to date, and my constituents will strongly welcome it. Will he continue to press the case for reform by making sure that contactless travel is available? It has been available for 20 years in London. It is ridiculous that it is not available beyond London so that people can avoid having to queue up to print paper tickets before they can travel.

**Grant Shapps:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about contactless travel. I mentioned that the experiment that happens to run out to Welwyn Garden City has been enormously popular. The problem with actually running the system out is that, as soon as someone crosses more than one different train operating company, or even if they do not and there is only one, there is a huge resistance in the system, because it is so incredibly complicated, with its fragmented nature at the moment, to bring that in. Great British Railways will allow us to bring in more contactless travel, which he will clearly warmly welcome, and I should mention his phenomenal campaigning on the subject of transport for his commuter constituency, particularly in Tunbridge Wells and Paddock Wood. I notice all the time how hard he is working for them and I think these reforms will be warmly welcomed by his constituents.

**Kim Johnson** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: The Labour party has long argued that public ownership of the rail network will provide better value for the taxpayer and for passengers, who deserve more than rhetoric

[Kim Johnson]

from this Government, and yet again, the Government have not gone far enough. Secretary of State, Great British Railways is not the biggest shake-up of the railways in the last quarter of a century; it is just another example of papering over the cracks. Can he give assurances here today that this will not lead to thousands of job losses and attacks on workers' terms and conditions?

**Grant Shapps:** I am sorry that the hon. Lady does not agree with quite a number of her colleagues across this House. Rather than dogma and worrying about whether it is public or private, as if there is some sort of clause IV incentive to set this up in a particular way, why do we not just do what works for commuters and for passengers? There was nothing about British Rail that worked last time in favour of passengers—except for, as I say, closing stations, closing track, serving terrible sandwiches. I do not know why we would want to go back to those days and this Government will not do that. Instead, we will do what works, and what has been working is doubling the number of miles that passengers have been taking on trains to the highest on record by 2019, before covid. The reforms today with Great British Railways are designed to take that further forward.

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for today's statement. Over the last 25 years, we have seen passenger numbers grow to 1.8 billion a year, up to the pandemic, of course, and we have seen service levels grow to 140,000 services per week. They are both at the highest level ever in British history, so he has a successful platform, shall we say, on which to build. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Thank you. This was due to innovation, competition and, above all, a focus on customers. Can he expand a little more on how that focus on the customer will be maintained in the new structure?

**Grant Shapps:** We are honoured to be surrounded by successful former train Ministers in the House today, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend not only for having been a great train Minister but for knowing exactly how many passengers—1.8 billion—travelled in the last, most successful ever year for our railways, which was 2019, before covid. He will be pleased to hear that the entirety of the White Paper is written on the premise of putting the passenger first and working out what they need, which is not very complicated: trains that run on time, are comfortable—warm in winter, cooled in the summer—and have wi-fi available. And no more of those uncomfortable cardboard ironing board seats either! People want to find it easy and comfortable to get on, with tickets that are easily available and contactless, as other hon. Friends have mentioned. That is the way that we will take the numbers back to 1.8 billion and beyond.

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: Some 50% of rail stations in Greater Manchester are inaccessible to people with a disability, and I hope that the Transport Secretary agrees that that is unacceptable. On the face of it, these plans are going to do little to improve accessibility, so can he confirm that he will be giving our regional mayor, Andy Burnham, the funding and powers he needs to control and improve stations, as they do in London?

**Grant Shapps:** As I have tried to stress all the way through, we are trying to do what helps the passengers. I work in a completely cross-party fashion on these things, including, as I mentioned, speaking to the Mayor yesterday and supporting anything that will help passengers, because that is a win for everyone. I agree with the hon. Lady entirely about the inappropriateness in the 21st century of a high proportion of stations being inaccessible. She mentioned a figure of 50% in her case. That is not acceptable in the 21st century, but nor can we magic a solution overnight. I am afraid that today's White Paper does not do that on its own, but I think she will be impressed with other work that the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), is doing in the Department on accessibility, meaning that we are making stations more accessible every single month now. I look forward to that process continuing with Great British Railways.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con) [V]: I welcome the use of private sector capital, ideas and management skill in the new railway, and I welcome the forthcoming attack on late trains, hard seats and dirty carriages. Will Great British Railways ensure that it is genuinely open to bids and offers for new routes, improved timetables, property developments on railway land and improved service quality? Local partnerships and private sector competitors can bring these about as long as they are not thwarted from the centre, as they often were by Network Rail.

**Grant Shapps:** Yes.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP) [V]: Given that 60% of people in Scotland want total control of the railways to be devolved to the Scottish Parliament and only 30% do not want it to be devolved, can the Secretary of State explain why he did not give consideration to this in the White Paper?

**Grant Shapps:** Network Rail currently runs the services, and for a good reason, which is that the whole country is connected by rail. The railways do not stop at the Scottish border and then turn into a different format or track size. For the same reason, we want Great British Railways to take overall control and, if we are to run an efficient service, it would be crazy to do that and at the same time split bits off. That would be completely against the whole purpose of carrying out this reform. However, we have the Union connectivity review, which is, for example, involved in looking at how we can make London to Edinburgh a three-hour journey on the train. I would really welcome the hon. Lady and her colleagues being as involved in that as possible, because I am heartened by their desire to see the whole of Great Britain connected up.

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. Greater Anglia's current franchise agreement provides for the reintroduction of a through service from Lowestoft to Liverpool Street, but this has been delayed, partly by the pandemic. The service is much needed and it is to be regretted that this contractual undertaking has not yet been fulfilled. I would be grateful if my right hon. Friend could provide an assurance that the service will be brought in as quickly as possible, preferably under the current franchise agreement, but if not, under the proposed concession agreement.

**Grant Shapps:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to ensure that his constituents get the best possible service. I was just conferring with the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry; of course, the current franchise agreement does not stand because the franchise agreements are being ended. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) will rightly continue to battle for that service and that my hon. Friend the rail Minister will be happy to discuss it with him further.

**Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab) [V]:** There is much in the statement that I can welcome, and I am grateful to the rail Minister for meeting me earlier this week. Widnes and Runcorn are great northern towns, and there are three stations in my constituency, so the electrification of the Liverpool-to-Manchester railway line that runs through the Widnes and Hough Green stations is very important. On the Runcorn side of the river, the superb redevelopment of the Runcorn main line station quarter by Halton Borough Council needs to be complemented with a new station at Runcorn. I hope the Government will come forward with plans to support that.

**Grant Shapps:** I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's welcome of the policy paper and I know he is meeting the rail Minister on this as well. We will publish the pipeline for future railways works shortly and the hon. Gentleman's effective representations will have been heard.

**Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con):** I support the comments made earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) in respect of the Yeovil south-east chord. This announcement is absolutely brilliant news: it is the first clear statement we have had in this House on radical reform to our passengers' benefit. It will also correct Labour's disastrous Railways Act 2005, which further separated the railway, rather than reintegrated it. When a Member of Parliament has to point out to

his local train operator that 15 lights at a train station are not working and the operator still cannot fix them, something is terribly wrong with the system today. That is one example. Will my right hon. Friend assure me personally that he will not only prevent franchise boundaries from being a blocker to further through services for regional connectivity, but work with me to sort out the dreadful frequency and continual issues we have on the Heart of Wessex line, which has the worst frequency in the entirety of England?

**Grant Shapps:** It is a pleasure to respond, on this last question, to somebody who has actually worked on the railways and understands these things. I feel for his franchise, because it has to deal with him and he will not take no for an answer—and quite right, too. He points out several things about this reform that are really important. The franchise boundaries, as he rightly describes them, cause too much disruption and fragmentation—that is the key thing that will end with Great British Railways bringing it all together and finally listening to the representatives of the people. I believe and have, I hope, strongly indicated through things such as the Beeching reversal fund that Members of Parliament in this place have an absolute right and duty to be involved in the way that services develop in their areas. I know that my hon. Friend and other Members throughout the House will appreciate that Great British Railways will be more responsive to them, as the rightful representatives of their constituents.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the Secretary of State for making the statement and suspend the House for three minutes to make arrangements for the next business.

12.43 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster

*[Relevant document: Parliamentary Works Estimates Commission, Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body, Main Supply Estimate 2012-22: Comments from the Parliamentary Works Estimates Commission and the Treasury, HC 1382.]*

12.46 pm

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster.

Building works have long been on the minds of those in Westminster—ever since the 8th century, in fact, when St Peter and an accompanying heavenly choir descended from above to suggest to a passing fisherman that a church dedicated to him might be constructed on a site very close to where we stand today. Over the years, the view from that spot of raised ground on a marshy island between the Thames and two branches of the Tyburn has featured more than its fair share of scaffolding—the embankment of the Thames; the small palace of Edward the Confessor transformed into a sprawling complex of buildings; the construction of Westminster Hall; and the building of, first, a monastery and then Westminster Abbey itself, not to mention the creation of the neo-Gothic masterpiece whose preservation we are debating today.

Throughout the centuries, those bustling about Westminster have assented to these works because they recognise the importance of this place at the centre of our national story, and so it continues to this day, as we saw in the recent state opening when Her Majesty set out the Government's plans to level up from within a building now receiving significant attention once again.

Such has been the zeal with which politicians of recent decades have concentrated on delivering for their constituents, however, that the present Palace of Westminster has been somewhat neglected. The Joint Committee on which I sat concluded in 2016 that the short-term fixes and sticking-plaster solutions that had prevailed in the post-war environment could no longer keep pace with the building's deterioration. Although it recognised the limitations of the assessments before it at that stage, its recommendations for action were accepted by the House in early 2018.

Some cynics say that nothing has happened since then, but in fact, we have been a veritable hive of activity—not with bees on the roof, but with work to fix the cast-iron tiles that has made considerable progress. The encaustic tile restoration programme has been completed, in the final instance by Mr Speaker himself, who deserves congratulations for the splendour of our encaustic tiles, made in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan). Some of these significant projects upon which the building's future depend have been able to commence and even reach a degree of completion. The risk of a serious fire has been significantly reduced, with real progress towards proper compartmentation and the installation of over 8 miles of piping for the basement's sprinkler system.

The Elizabeth Tower's restoration is now nearing completion, and we all look forward to hearing Big Ben's bongos resound once again. Indeed, they were bonging earlier today, though in a slightly random fashion; we look forward to them bonging the right time, as if we

had dialled the speaking clock. The escalating cost of that project underlined the importance of our establishing the right governance structure for a programme of this magnitude. That has been achieved for restoration and renewal through primary legislation diligently piloted through the House by my illustrious predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom).

The Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority set up as a result have been able to start conducting preliminary work, including the first of 100 detailed surveys of the Palace, to help them more fully understand the scale of the challenge before them. As a result, the programme remains on track to begin its main phase as planned—again, so wisely by my predecessor—in the mid-2020s. However, its ultimate approval is a matter for Parliament, and will proceed only if we can achieve the broadest possible consensus across the House.

That is why today's debate matters, because it fires the starting gun on what amounts to a critical phase for the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster. The coming months are an important period, during which we, the parliamentarians—the custodians of Westminster's history, but also those responsible for protecting taxpayers' interests—make our expectations clear, so that when the fully costed proposals are put before us in early 2023, we are able to approve them full-throatedly, safe in the knowledge that we are doing the right thing for our constituents and for our country in preserving both the cockpit of our democracy and the means of its proper functioning.

**Dehenna Davison** (Bishop Auckland) (Con): Clearly, value for taxpayers' money is a massive concern for residents right across Bishop Auckland, so will there be a limit on the spending for this restoration project?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend puts her finger on the nub of the issue. The business case will be brought forward in early 2023, and this House will have to approve it. At that stage, we will decide whether the amount being asked for is an amount we feel our constituents can afford.

Earlier this year, the Sponsor Body published its own initial thoughts on how to proceed in its strategic review. That reflected work completed in 2020, before the full extent of the pandemic's implications for R and R could be appreciated. It recommended that a period of vacation of the Palace remained necessary and that the main temporary facilities for the Commons should continue to be provided on Parliament's secure northern estate. However, the past 15 months have shown that we are able to function for a time without every facility and, indeed, without a full Chamber. Doing so will always reduce our effectiveness—I am no great fan of remote proceedings, and I am delighted that this Chamber will be back to its bustling norm once restrictions are lifted—but I recognise that during the pandemic we have seen that some of the ancillary services the Joint Committee considered essential to be physically present next to the Chamber have turned out not to be so. It also seems reasonable to consider how technology might be used on a stand-by basis—in case of an emergency recall, for example.

Those are the sorts of things that we must collectively think about so that we can be clear what we are asking for. So many of the assumptions made just a few years

ago now seem out of date. To decant or not to decant, that was the question. I have no opposition to a full decantation if it were nobler in the mind to suffer it, other than that it, as with the entire programme, needs to represent the best value for money, not a vehicle for a consummation devoutly to be wished. Given the efforts now under way to explore a maintained presence, it may be that we can take arms against a sea of troubles. Yes, we are likely to bear fardels because of the scale of these works, but the idea of Members being marched out of the Palace of Westminster for an entire Parliament or longer now appears more fanciful than it once did.

I am encouraged by the current explorations into whether a maintained presence is possible in the Palace of Westminster during the works and look forward to the conclusion of the Sponsor Body's explorations in this regard. That is precisely the sort of issue on which it is quite right that guidance is provided by parliamentarians, who need to ensure that during this period our ability to conduct effective scrutiny is not unduly hindered.

The strategic review contains eight so-called stretch objectives, which set out how the works might go beyond the "do minimum" basics. Do we want to install systems that provide the best levels of comfort? Given the pressing priorities elsewhere on public spending, the answer seems obvious to me, but the Sponsor Body cannot proceed unless we spell it out to it. Do we want to meet the legislative, statutory and planning obligations when it comes to questions of sustainability, or do we want to exceed them? Members will be aware that discussions around environmental priorities have already changed since 2018, given the Government's commitments towards becoming carbon neutral and the impact this change would have on energy inputs.

On the question of disabled access, I hope that we can all agree on a cost-effective approach which provides disabled Members with accessible workplaces and visitors with access to the key democratic parts of this building. On the question of accessibility, the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) has already made clear her commitment to championing accessibility for people with autism. Her contribution on this point is one I welcome and take seriously. It is a good example of the kind of cross-party working which can help us to shape the plans.

There will, of course, be more detailed conversations on that as we consider whether we need disabled access "to all users to all areas of the building". These can build on the opinions already heard and the information already received from many Members as part of the Sponsor Body's strategic review. I know the Sponsor Body also wants to consult around issues like a secondary debating chamber within the Palace, for example, or how best Members would like to use the available space. The next phase of this process, involving more formal consultation, will take place over the summer when Members will be invited and encouraged to share their views directly. If I could put in a plea from the Sponsor Body: please do take the opportunity to express your views to it.

As its work progresses, each period of engagement offers the chance to give ever more detailed views as the specific proposals for restoration and renewal are further developed. For this to be useful, Members must be invited to prioritise what matters most, where money

must be spent and where it can be saved. Members will need to know the cost and benefits of each aspect of the schemes, so the choices and pay-offs between paying least and getting best value are understood and grasped by all of us. Ideally, each idea would have a clear price tag attached.

The Sponsor Body will be inviting the wider parliamentary community, including Members' staff and administration staff, to take part in this consultation period, too. But Madam Deputy Speaker, it is the views of Members as the representatives of taxpayers whose voice I want to amplify today. It is, after all, our constituents and our constituents alone who give us a seat in this place and whose views we represent. When we knock on doors at election time, we need to be able to look them in the eye and explain why the public funds devoted to this project are not being spent on local schools or hospitals or other public services. We want to level up the country, not the Palace of Westminster, so we must be clear that we are concentrating on vital works. We do not want

"To gild refined gold, to paint the lily,  
To throw a perfume on the violet,  
To smooth the ice, or add another hue  
Unto the rainbow, or with taper light  
To seek the beauteous eye of heaven to garnish  
Is wasteful and ridiculous excess."

Our more modest requirement is merely that our democracy should be able to function properly during the period of the works and thereafter. The building's primary purpose should not be as a museum or a tourism hotspot or as another Disneyland. It should not be, to misquote a famous advertisement campaign of the Victoria & Albert Museum, "An ace caff with quite a nice parliament attached".

The United Kingdom's Parliament is a place of work and has been for centuries; a collective endeavour where our primary shared goal is legislating. That is how we make a difference to the lives of our constituents. We should have the confidence and the pride in our role as lawmakers to explain this and to shape the programme accordingly. So I look forward to hearing the views expressed in this debate today and I hope Members will come forward as more details emerge throughout the year: Members of all parties, of all regions and nations, Back Benchers and Front Benchers alike; newer Members who may still be around throughout the period of the works; and time-honoured Members who understand the value of a give-and-take proper in-person debate in the Chamber, just as much as they do the usefulness of a quiet word with the Minister in the corridors of this building.

During the rest of this year and beyond we will be doing what those before us have done for centuries in Westminster: using the power of this sovereign institution to improve people's lives. Yet as we do so, we should probably also spare a moment or two to attend to playing our part in shaping Westminster's long history as the centre of our national life, of our island story. So when, eventually, St Peter returns with his heavenly choir, he will look from his abbey across to a building that he will be able to report back to a carpenter's son is one that he can be proud of. In that spirit, I look forward to the remainder of this debate with bated breath, and I commend the motion to the House.

1 pm

**Thangam Debonnaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): Many of us, and I hope all of us, love this place. I share that love, obviously, with the Leader of the House—this place, its history, its architecture and what it means to be working in the home of our democracy, one of our greatest traditions and most successful exports. Today, we get our first chance to debate the restoration and renewal of the Palace since a major review recommended that the full decant—moving everybody off the estate for a short period—is required. We will debate whether that is short or long enough, but it is indeed required—for cost as well as for safety and effectiveness.

As the right hon. Gentleman said, this is a place of work, but it is a place of work in which we are the custodians of a world heritage site, a world heritage site that has seeping sewage, asbestos, and pipes and wires going who knows where, doing who knows what, and where there is flood and fire risk. That needs fixing urgently, and we can no longer rely on luck. The public care deeply about this place. The right hon. Gentleman is right to mention our accountability to the taxpayers; they want us to spend the money wisely, and they deserve to have this monument to democracy preserved as a place of business in a way that they may continue to be part of, scrutinising our proceedings in this place safely and accessibly.

The House of Commons Commission, before I became a member of it, asked the sponsor body to investigate works for “a continued presence” on the estate. However, the review has already recommended that the best and most cost-effective thing is to continue with a full decant. We cannot carry on like this, endlessly going backwards and forwards, with debates and reviews, endlessly revisiting decisions that have been taken. I declare right now, if it is not already obvious, that I am firmly in the camp that many MPs, staff, trade unions and specialists are in, which is the “let’s get on with it” camp.

I know what it is like—I understand right hon. and hon. Members who worry about missing this place. I know what it is like to miss it and, like all of us, at some point to wonder whether we will even return to it after an election. We all come to this place knowing that we could leave at short notice, and we all want to make the most of it while we are here. Only those with a heart of stone could fail to be moved by the magnificence of Westminster Hall—a millennium of history, a cathedral to democratic representation and civic engagement, from the throwing of ordure in the civil war to, yes, the gift shop and caff. There is, too, the wonderful art of the “New Dawn” stained glass, celebrating women’s suffrage. I get that people are in love with this building—I am, too.

I will never forget my first experience of this Palace, as a young campaigner wanting to change the law on domestic violence, sitting right up there in the visitors’ Gallery till the early hours of the morning, watching the debate on a law that I had helped to shape and hearing a Labour Front Bencher—from this Dispatch Box—propose amendments that I had campaigned and provided the evidence for. I felt in awe of what happens when democratically elected representatives—not just the campaigners—are convinced of an argument sufficiently to change the law of the land in ways that benefit millions of people.

After being taken for tea in what I now realise must have been the cafeteria, the late noble Lord Russell, with whom we had been working, took my colleague and me back through the Palace to his car to give us a lift to the station. As we turned a corner, I heard what I still swear was Shirley Bassey singing. I cannot prove that but, if any hon. Members were here in 1996, on Third Reading of the Family Law Act 1996, I will be grateful if they could not disabuse me of that special memory and tell me that, actually, it was they who were singing “Goldfinger” at 3 o’clock in the morning. My heart stopped as I saw for the first time the Gothic temple that is Central Lobby and heard that voice.

I never tire of skipping up the majestic staircase from Members’ Cloakroom to Members’ Lobby, thinking of Members in times past who had to do their casework on their briefcases at one of the side seats. The Library is where I have done some of my best work for my constituents, researching their problems, finding solutions and, of course, gazing at the river outside. Make the most of it. Enjoy the Library, make friends with the Members’ staircase and marvel at Westminster Hall, but please do not let us be selfish and mess this up by blocking what is needed to preserve this place as a place of democracy, either by insisting on keeping a presence—thereby introducing delays, further expense and possible risks to safety—or by endlessly delaying it. The work need doing, and doing urgently, if we are to hand over this place and its history to the next generation.

When surveyed, the British people say that they want us to look after Westminster. They support restoration and renewal. Yes, it is a tourist site. The Leader of the House is correct to say that that is not its only significance, but it matters to people so much that they care about it, even if they do not visit. We are its custodians, but the taxpayer, the British people, and their children and grandchildren to come, own it. It is theirs. The right hon. Gentleman talks about Members needing to know the price tag, and I completely agree. On behalf our constituents, we have to know that price tag, but we must also know the price of not doing certain works, and of not doing them in a timely manner. In my experience, the price of such things does not tend to go down by delay, and we must understand those counterfactuals.

I understand from the Sponsor Body that we will have clearer information by September and October, but we can already assess some of that from the assessments made so far, and from the evidence of our own eyes, ears and noses. There is leaking sewage. Who here in the summer of 2019 could forget that delicate scent, as they walked down the corridor to the Library? There are wires and plumbing that nobody knows the function of. There is asbestos, flooding, fires—please let us not say, “Well, we’ve managed to avoid disaster so far.” We have been a whisker away too many times, and eventually our luck will run out.

As hon. Members may—or may not—know, in 2016 the Joint Committee recommended a full decant as the safest, quickest, and most cost-effective way of fixing all that. Yes, we have learned a lot in the past year, including that we can be swift enough at moving to different arrangements, and then moving back. In 2018, that decant was endorsed in the Joint Committee’s full report, which also made the case for the Sponsor Body to act as client on our behalf—quite right too; politicians interfering as clients can be incredibly unhelpful—and the Delivery Authority to carry out the work.

Also in 2018, this House rejected the options of a rolling programme or partial decant. We voted for that. We made our views known, and in 2019 we voted for the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019. That Act established the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority, which came into existence last year. The Sponsor Body was asked to review the full decant, and consider the potential for continued presence in this House throughout the works. It published its recommendations recently, and it strongly recommended that we continue with a full decant on the grounds of value for money, safety, and speed.

If we attempt to maintain a continued presence in this building while building works go on around us, I invite all hon. Members to consider what that would be like. Will the right hon. Gentleman really tell the builders to keep the noise down? If he were to get builders into his own home, and commission them to work on every single part of it, sorting out sewers, wiring, lighting, and removing dangerous materials, would he tell them that he also wants to continue living in the middle of it? What contractor would take on that job?

**Mark Tami** (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that experience suggests that what people say they are prepared to put up with and what they will actually put up with are two very different things?

**Thangam Debbonaire**: Yes, I could not put it better myself. It would be interesting to know whether the Leader of the House intends to come in here in a high-vis jacket and a hard hat. Will he expect his staff to do the same? He said that we need to maintain our work without being unduly hindered, but we would be hindered on a building site.

Today is Global Accessibility Awareness Day—surely a day to take stock and to reflect on what that means for restoration and renewal. If any hon. Members have accompanied a constituent in a wheelchair around this place, they will have experienced, as I have, the acute, painful embarrassment of realising that the democracy we prize is on show for them only via a very awkward, pre-booked route, if that.

If Members have been here with partially sighted constituents, they may have noticed poor lighting and hidden hazards around the building. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for recognising my commitment to autism awareness, which is at least in part inspired by our much missed colleague, Cheryl Gillan—surely no Member here has not been on her training course—and any Member aware of that issue will know what a challenge this place is for many autistic people, and that making it good for autistic people, and for those with disabilities, makes it better for us all.

Disabled people make up 10% of the population—our voters. They have a right to be here. They have a right to scrutinise us. They have a right to be unimpeded witnesses to democracy. Are we really saying that they should not have that?

Our staff and the thousands of other staff who work on the parliamentary estate are dedicated public servants. They are patriots; they love this country and the democratic institution of Parliament. They come to this place each day to serve it and the people of this country. They deserve our gratitude, and like so many public servants, they deserve a pay rise, especially those who kept coming

into the building throughout the pandemic, although that is not the subject of the debate. They surely deserve safe working conditions.

A full decant will ensure that staff have the safest possible conditions in which to work while the works are done and when they are over. Remaining on the estate will mean that those who are required to be here—although that may be a smaller group than once thought, some will be—will not have safe working conditions while that work is going on. It will put them in an intolerable position. It will mean delays. It will mean risks. It will mean that those staff required to be on the estate will have to tolerate all of that.

Many of those staff will outlast many of us, but they will not have had a say or a vote. They may have been consulted, but that is not the same as what we have. We have decision-making powers that we need to take seriously on behalf of our staff, parliamentary staff and our constituents. We have had our say, we have taken a vote and we need to honour that commitment. I invite the right hon. Gentleman to imagine himself saying to the Doorkeepers, cleaners and Clerks that some of them will be required to work on a building site, which will remain a fire risk and where asbestos is being removed. I wonder if he will ask his own staff to do that.

Please let us get on with this. The right hon. Gentleman mentions the value of quiet words with Ministers in corridors. He must know that other corridors exist. Ears of Ministers can be bent in corridors far and wide. Some of us may not be MPs by the time the work is done—if we get a move on, some of us might be—but it is not about us. It is about the British people, their love of democracy and the rule of law and their right of safe access to bear witness to the lawmaking done in their name. It is about making sure that our staff and the entire parliamentary staff have a safe place to work as soon as possible, without working in risky situations in between. It is about the public of the future. If we mess this up and it ends up costing us more through delay and removing essential parts of the works, they will rightly blame us for putting off what should not have been put off, for fudging what should have been done with clarity and for failing to avert a disaster that could and should have been avoided.

For goodness' sake, let us heed the assessments of the experts, let us allow the Sponsor Body to get on with creating the detailed plans for the outline business case and costing, and let us commission the Delivery Authority as soon as we have those agreed plans. Politicians do not make good project managers for things like this. That is why we voted for the Sponsor Body. We interfere beyond our skills, we change our minds, we have to think about elections. We are not the experts; we are the custodians, and now that we have been given the information, we need to get a move on. Those who come after us will not thank us if we duck it, but they may just recognise that we were the parliamentary generation that put first the British public and our love of history and democracy and got this done.

1.13 pm

**Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con): These Houses of Parliament are falling apart faster than they can be fixed. All the old fire, heating, drainage, mechanical and electrical systems need replacing, ditto the sewage system,

[*Damian Hinds*]

which dates back to 1888, and there is asbestos throughout. The cost of maintenance projects and ongoing work has doubled in three years to £127 million a year.

The fire at Notre-Dame in 2019 reminds us of the importance of protecting the world's most treasured and symbolic historic buildings. Our 150-year-old building has a floor plan the size of 16 football pitches, with 1,100 rooms, 100 staircases, three miles of passageways, four floors and 65 different levels. It houses 11,000 historic artefacts. Restoring this place is an enormous undertaking. It is also a duty—a legal duty for us, but a moral duty too, to protect this heritage asset and our liberal democratic institutions.

What it is not is something that will benefit Members here today. We do not yet know quite how long the project will take—that will come in the full plan that will come before the House in early 2023—but we do know that it will be a substantial period of time, completing sometime in the 2030s. MPs average 13 or 14 years' service, and the average current MP has already done six of those, so the sobering truth is that, though many colleagues here will be around during the most disruptive times of the restoration, most of us will not be here when it is finished. None the less, as the shadow Leader of the House said, it falls to this generation of parliamentarians to ensure that the necessary work gets done and that we secure the future of our Parliament, and the building that houses it, one of the free world's most iconic.

As MPs, we are answerable to our constituents. This is their Parliament; we are just passing through. Especially at this time of enormous economic and fiscal strain, we are acutely conscious of the need for best value. Given all that had changed since the publication of the independent options appraisal in 2014 and the Joint Committee report in 2016, to which the Leader of the House referred, it was right to look again at the plans. The recent strategic review concluded that vacating the building while works take place remains the best approach in terms of both time and cost, but that we can reduce the length of time away, with more done before MPs and peers leave through a more phased approach and possibly through the use of a cofferdam for access to the works from the river.

On the question of where to relocate during the works, that review looked at—or, in many cases, relooked at—41 different options in 20 different locations. When we talk about relocating, we tend to think first about this debating Chamber, but the footprint just of the Committee rooms, for example, is about four times the size of this debating Chamber and these two Lobbies, let alone the displaced office space. All told, on my rough calculation—colleagues are welcome to check this—the total space used by the Commons in the Palace of Westminster is 47 times the space of this Chamber. It is the combination of the need for a lot of space with the huge premium there is on being within the existing secure perimeter, for all sorts of clear reasons, that points to Richmond House, possibly in combination with other parts of what is known as the Northern Estate, which is better known to colleagues as Norman Shaw North and South and the other buildings in that part of the estate.

There are trade-offs and compromises that could be made to make the decant phase cost less and, in the time to come, we have to focus sharply on those. I stress

that we are talking here about a temporary period during the works. Probably the three biggest compromises that could be made to reduce costs are, first, accepting having a slightly smaller Chamber and/or reconfiguring the voting Lobby, because although the Chamber may be a small fraction of the overall space requirement, its dimensions as a single room are a big constraining factor in the relocation; secondly, a willingness, to a degree, to rearrange our Committee business and other business to reduce the amount of space requirement; and thirdly, having fewer MPs' staff having to be accommodated on the estate itself. Each of those three things—by the way, there will be others—would give more flexibility to the decant and so could make the temporary siting less costly. It will be vital over the coming months to hear further from colleagues on such compromises that could be made to reduce cost.

Notwithstanding the need to vacate, in the next phase, towards the full plan and business case, the programme will also examine the possibility of some continued presence—I think my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House referred to it as a maintained presence. Essentially, it is the question: could we keep this Chamber operating here during the works, even with other Commons functions being relocated elsewhere within the secure perimeter? If that were possible, my personal view is that it would be very valuable, because it would minimise the disruption to our liberal democratic institutions. But it is clearly not without risk or challenge, given some of the safety considerations, with the flow of large numbers of people, particularly when there is a Division, and as MPs, we must never forget that we are a relatively small minority of the people who work in these buildings. There are also all the other functions that today go with the operation of the Chamber, such as the Table Office, the Vote Office and so on. It is not guaranteed to be possible, but it is important to investigate thoroughly any possibility. We will have to look at the relative cost of it and the timings, as against a full decant and all the practicalities.

The cost of the decant is one thing. A much bigger consideration is the cost of the project itself—the thing we are decanting for. Here, again, there are choices, trade-offs and compromises. As my right hon. Friend said, it is a question of priorities. This project is called restoration and renewal, and clearly there is a balance between those two things. We must restore, but how much renewal is right for taxpayer value in aspects such as visitor access or the education function? In the approach towards the full business case, the programme will be working up a bare minimum option—what is essential to arrest the decay of the buildings—but also conducting value analysis in 14 categories, from logistics operations to environmental and net zero aims to visitor facilities, to see where it may make sense from a value perspective to go beyond that minimum.

Again, it is vital to hear from colleagues on these matters and for us all to consider that they do involve trade-offs. There are many things that we may want to see for the future of the seat of our democracy, but we have to consider their cost, what is essential and what can be done without. It is too easy to say, “We want X, Y and Z, and we want the thing to come in at the lowest possible cost.” Ultimately, this comes down to specifics, not generalities, and making physical trade-offs.

Debates such as this are one way—and an important way—for Members to make their points, and there will be a range of other channels over the next few months

for engagement with colleagues on these important questions. Four of us in the House sit on the Sponsor Body board. We will hear shortly from the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami). My hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Ian Levy) also sits on the board; he apologises for being unable to be here, as he is sitting on a Bill Committee. We are keen to hear from all colleagues on their views.

In the main, it will not be us who will see the end results of restoration and renewal, but many colleagues here today will operate in a time of significant change and disruption, and we need to ensure that MPs are still able properly and fully to serve their constituents and scrutinise Government throughout that time. We need to ensure that this centre of our nation's democracy and symbol of democracy for the world is restored for future generations. A decision has been dodged repeatedly over the years, and that has made this more expensive today than it would have been. If we dodge it again, it will become more costly again. The most cost-effective thing to do is to act, and now is the time we must ensure that it is done at the best possible value.

1.23 pm

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP) [V]: As has been noted, I am one of the people on the Sponsor Body board, so I want to make it clear that I have that interest in what is being discussed.

This afternoon is a space for a general debate. We could have been debating the private Member's Bill on fire and rehire promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). We could have been debating the issue of dawn raids raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). We could have been debating the fact that the EU settlement scheme is only open until 30 June, and our constituents only have that long to apply for settled status. Instead, we are taking part in this ridiculously self-indulgent debate about improving the workplace for MPs. The building is dark, smelly, inaccessible and unsafe; however, I do not believe this is the time to discuss restoration and renewal, particularly when we are coming out of a time when people have been excluded from payments. People have not had money because the Government's furlough scheme has fallen far short, yet we are talking about spending billions of pounds. This is a huge amount of money and it just seems unbelievably self-indulgent.

Let me look at some of the issues that have been and are likely to be brought up in this debate. I have said already that we are talking about a massive amount of money, but that is true in respect not just of what will be spent when work on the restoration and rebuild actually begins but of what is being spent now. The House of Commons has made decisions and decided the direction in which we should go, yet the Sponsor Body is being pointed in all different directions because of the House of Commons administration cannot make up their minds and are asking us to look at things that were not originally in the brief. I genuinely believe that millions of pounds of public money are being wasted on doing things like looking at a significant foothold in the Chamber. I make no apologies for prejudging that: I do not think it would be sensible to keep the Chamber if the rest of the House of Commons was decanted.

I cannot imagine why anybody could possibly think that was a good idea, unless they were looking at this from the point of view of themselves wanting to appear in the Chamber.

I understand the shadow Leader of the House's point about people really loving the building, but for most people the Chamber is a stuffy place that they see on the TV and certainly have not visited in real life, unless they live somewhere in the south of England—most of my constituents have not been anywhere near the House of Commons. Not everybody has a deep feeling of love for the Chamber and I think the general public could do without it for quite a period of time during a decant. The significant foothold is just a daft route to go down. We have talked about democracy functioning properly; democracy can function properly in a room where people can vote with buttons. That is still a democracy. We do not have to troop through the Lobbies in order for this place to be considered a democracy.

I was struck by the shadow Leader of the House's comments about accessibility. I agree that there is a massive issue with accessibility in the building. If I were in charge and able to wave a magic wand and change things in the building, one thing that I would change is the accessibility, but I want to be clear that it is not just about people who visit the building or members of staff; we are failing in the number of disabled MPs we have and we are never going to be able to encourage more disabled people to stand for Parliament unless we can say, "Yes, you can actually get to the Chamber—or wherever it is you need to be—in time for a vote." We need to very be clear that that is important. If we are looking at having any kind of significant foothold, or whatever it is called, during a period of decant, we need to make sure that disabled MPs can still access wherever the significant foothold is supposed to be. I do not imagine we could do that for people with significant physical disabilities that mean that they cannot get to places. People will not want to walk through a building site filled with asbestos to get to the Chamber.

Other than the money and accessibility, the other hugely important thing that needs to be taken into account is the need to be environmentally friendly. We cannot just say, "Well, we don't have very much money for this so we are going to put carbon neutrality down the agenda for refurbishing the House of Commons." This place talks so often about wanting to be a leader and to model good behaviour; if we cannot ensure that the building is as carbon-neutral as possible, we will fail to meet our climate change obligations and to ensure that future generations are not further harmed by climate change.

There are a few ways of doing things that could require a much smaller area for a decant. For example, post the Scottish independence referendum we will have 59 fewer MPs, so you will not have to worry about us, but we could also take the opportunity to get rid of 850 people in the House of Lords—well, not get rid of them but get rid of the House of Lords and the positions that they hold. That is an outdated institution that is taking up space, and it will cost a significant amount of money coming out of the public purse to pay for the refurbishment of the building that the House of Lords exists in, which is an institution that a significant majority of Scots do not support.

[Kirsty Blackman]

I was concerned when I saw the call list for today's debate. I have talked already about the fact that this debate is self-indulgent. We have 16 Conservative Members wanting to stand up and talk in this debate, and only six Opposition Members. If we had a debate on one of the things that desperately matter to our constituents, we would have had far more people wanting to contribute.

At the time when I was put on the Sponsor Body, people wanted to contribute because that was when they thought it was a good idea to lay out their very important views on this matter, but we can always just respond to the consultations, rather than taking the opportunity to eat into time in the Chamber.

I think this is an unbelievable amount of public money. I am hugely concerned by the amount being spent, even now, looking at different things, such as the decant options. We should be putting the public purse and the spend up there, along with accessibility and environmental friendliness. That is what we should be considering. We should not be considering whether we get to sit in a certain big green chair during this interim period. That should not be the most important thing, because it is absolutely unnecessary for democracy to function.

1.31 pm

**Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): September 2016, January 2018, July 2020, and here we are again today. Members of the public might think that everything that can possibly be said about restoration and renewal has already been said. They might also think that we should just get on with it. I am frankly amazed that we are rehashing this debate yet again and that some are trying to draw a different conclusion.

We debated restoration and renewal at great length in 2018, and we even achieved Royal Assent for the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019. This House and the other place decided to accept the findings from the Joint Committee, set up in 2014, that the best value for taxpayers' money is achieved by a full decant from this Palace.

To try to carry out the project while colleagues continue to work here would, according to every assessment, cost the taxpayer significantly more—potentially up to seven times as much over several decades. A recent NAO report has stated that the ongoing maintenance work to patch and mend has doubled in just three years to more than £125 million a year. We are spending £2 million a week just to keep this building going.

It appears that there are those who would prefer to stay in these beautiful palace surroundings rather than save money for the taxpayer, but my direct question to them—they know who they are—is: why pretend that staying in the Palace is the cheaper option when all the evidence points to the contrary?

Established back in 2014, which is now seven years ago, the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster concluded in 2016—now five years ago—that the Palace faced

“an impending crisis which we cannot responsibly ignore.”

The report referred to the pre-feasibility study concluding that there was

“a clear and pressing need to tackle the backlog of work”

and observed that the

“longer the essential work is left, the greater the risk becomes that the building might suffer a sudden, catastrophic failure”.

The independent expert advice that it received pointed to one clear conclusion:

“a full decant of the Palace of Westminster is the best delivery option”.

“Impending crisis”, “clear and pressing need”—we cannot responsibly ignore it, but we are ignoring it, are we not, Madam Deputy Speaker? My question for the Leader of the House is: why is the one clear conclusion from the independent expert evidence that he himself heard when he was a member of the Joint Committee now being disregarded? Why is the clear decision of this House and the other place in 2018 now being watered down? To suggest that previous debates proposed profligate expenditure is utter nonsense, so going round this circular procrastination serves only the purpose of the procrastinators.

My right hon. Friend has described at length the excellent work that has been undertaken to install fire breaks and sprinkler systems, but, as he knows only too well, there are other potential catastrophes that would require an immediate and potentially multi-year evacuation of the entire Palace. Those could happen today, tomorrow, over the weekend. Such catastrophes could include an asbestos leak from anywhere in the basement or the many chimneys that rise up through the Palace. It could include a major collapse of stonework. My right hon. Friend will be aware of recent cases of falling masonry. I am pleased to say that so far there has been no damage to human life, but he will know that our right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General did fall victim to a stone gargoyle crashing through his car windscreen while in the car park. Masonry has also fallen on to a path that is regularly used by members of the public and colleagues.

Other disasters that could befall this world famous building—today, tomorrow, over the weekend—include major failures in the electricals, sewerage, gas and water installations that make up the bulk of the spaghetti of wiring and pipework in the basement. Much of it is now well beyond the patch and mend approach being taken to the work at a cost of two million quid a week. In today's debate, we should surely be considering the design of the basement itself. I know that those Members who want to stay in the Palace make the case that the mechanical and engineering works that make up the vast bulk of the restoration can be done in bits and pieces, so that they can therefore move between this Chamber and the other place without any incremental cost or difficulty. But you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Leader of the House and many colleagues right across the House know full well that the basement runs the entire length of the Palace. To shut off one part of it while MPs can occupy another would be vastly expensive, time consuming and incredibly complicated.

As MPs, we all know how tough it has been for so many throughout the pandemic. It is totally understandable that many colleagues feel nervous about actively voting to spend any money on restoring the Palace. For many, it is easier to kick the can down the road, ignoring the rising costs and risks to the Palace in order to avoid facing up to having to pass an outline business case that would approve the cost of restoration and renewal. However, all colleagues should be aware that there is a significant upside to the restoration of this UNESCO world

heritage site: the fantastic opportunity for UK businesses, for UK crafts—old and new—and for apprenticeships right across our country.

The work carried out here will become a showcase for the best of British for future generations. Not only that, but engagement by the R and R Sponsor Body has identified that 75% of the public want to see this place restored. They might not know what goes on here or they might loathe what goes on here, but they do not want us to let it sink into disrepair, or to see that the most famous and iconic building in the world is lost due to our mismanagement and failure to act.

There is one more factor to consider. Quite apart from the fundamental issue of saving the taxpayer money by volunteering to move out while the restoration takes place, there is also the need to provide proper contingency arrangements for our democracy that any 21st century Parliament needs to have in place. Democracy has not been functioning well during the pandemic. The Leader of the House has himself admitted that Ministers have had an easier ride, while the majority of MPs are absent from the House. We are all agreed that healthy scrutiny of the Government is dependent on MPs and peers being present to provide tricky interventions and, yes, the opposition that makes for a functioning democracy. A hybrid Parliament such as we have seen during the pandemic is no solution to the multi-year restoration that is needed.

Even once the restoration is completed, there will always be the risk that an unforeseen future event requires temporary evacuation from the Palace, so the Palace of Westminster needs a permanent contingency arrangement. Of course a temporary arrangement does exist, and I know we do not talk about it, but this would not be adequate for more than a couple of weeks, which is simply not good enough. It therefore seems extraordinary to me that MPs refusing to decant will not only cost far more but will also mean that we never have a proper contingency plan for the future of our democratic institutions. If, as is likely, the Sponsor Body does end up promoting a full decant to a converted rather than a rebuilt Richmond House, this would offer the right compromise. It would enable our democracy to function properly while the critical work goes ahead in the Palace. In addition, the legacy value of having a permanent contingency arrangement in Richmond House would ensure the safety and security of all who work and visit here for generations to come.

I will leave hon. Members with a quote from a 30-year-old resident of Northern Ireland taken from the R and R public engagement strategy:

“It would be embarrassing if people around the world could see the state the building has gotten into. It is supposed to be a symbol for democracy around the world.”

1.40 pm

**Mark Tami** (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Let me start by saying that I agree totally with the words of the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who is very knowledgeable on this subject. I recommend that Members watch her presentation to the Institute for Government, which was also very good.

I remind the House that it is nearly three and a half years since we voted in favour of a full decant and the establishment of the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority—which, as my hon. Friend the Member for

Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) said, was enacted in 2019—and nearly five years since the Joint Committee produced its report. I have the pleasure, or some may say the misfortune, of serving on all these bodies, including the current Sponsor Body board. There is great enthusiasm on the board for this project, and work is under way to produce a business case for the required work with the intention of putting it to the House in 2023. Personally, I would like that to happen sooner, but I accept that we have to produce a robust business case and then we need to make our minds up in this House.

Doing nothing, patching up and making do, and pretending it is all fine are not viable options. Carrying on as we are, as if this is somehow a no-cost option, is just ridiculous. We are spending millions of pounds every year on work much of which will probably have to be ripped out and done again as part of the overall project. The Leader of the House is a decent chap but he does not like or accept the decision of this House to decant completely. He believes that we should stay put, even though every estimate that I have seen says that that is the most expensive and time-consuming option that we could choose. I accept that it is an honest view and he believes that that is the best thing for us, but where I would part company with him is in the practice of persistently kicking the can down the road.

The Leader of the House wanted a review of the decision, and that has happened. I hope that he and others will accept that the review broadly went along with the established position and recommended a full decant. It did accept that there are ways in which we could minimise the amount of time that Members are absent from the estate. Of course it is technically possible that we could stay on site, but, as other Members have made very clear, that would probably cost billions more and take 30 years to complete. Not content with these delays, the can has received another good kick and we are to have further work undertaken to find whether we can have some form of presence on the estate. We can go on and on like this, but all it does is to incur more delay and more cost.

Why do we want to stay here? Do we honestly believe that if we move out the world is going to fall apart? Do we believe that this is part of some terrible plot and that if we leave we will not be allowed back in? I have heard all those stories, but they are just not true. As other hon. Members have said, this is not just about us. It is not just about the 650 MPs or the 800-odd Lords; it is about the thousands of staff—the Clerks, Doorkeepers, caterers, cleaners and on and on—who make this place actually function, because, without them, this place would not function. We are the minority, and this should not be just about what is convenient for us; it should be about meeting the requirements, and most importantly ensuring the safety, of everybody.

R and R is not a vanity project, as some would have us believe. It is not a blank cheque to spend public money on luxury surroundings. It is about saving and restoring this great building and, importantly, creating a safe and secure environment for everyone to work in. Of course we have to deliver value for money for the taxpayer, but, equally, we have to deliver a building that can offer much greater access for all and that is actually fit for purpose.

I firmly believe that Richmond House should be the preferred option for a decant for the Commons. However, while knocking most of it down and rebuilding it may

[Mark Tami]

offer the best outcome in terms of a useful building, I acknowledge that that is probably not going to happen, and we will have to work within what we have now. That is not the end of the world—far from it. As the Leader of the House said, we have seen during the pandemic that we can do things differently. I am not the biggest fan of electronic voting, but we have managed to make it work. Virtual participation means that the amount of space we will need can be reduced. At the time of the Joint Committee, the Leader of the House was very concerned that we would not get two Division Lobbies, but we could probably live without that.

As the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire said, R and R will be a great opportunity for the country as a whole. The Prime Minister is always going on about shovel-ready projects, and this surely meets that criteria. However, the Leader of the House wants to rip the shovel from the hands of the Prime Minister and throw it in the Thames.

Although R and R is a project in London, it should not be a London-centric project. The Sponsor Body has made very clear its determination that businesses from around the UK should have the opportunity to bid for work. We cannot and must not allow some big company just to dish out the work to its usual mates, as we have seen with many big contracts in the past. We then find that all the steel has come not from the UK but from China. We cannot make those mistakes again. To achieve that, we have to ensure that the tender process, while fit for purpose, does not deter smaller companies because of its cost and its length.

Central to the project must be the establishment of a substantial apprenticeship scheme, hopefully taking on at least 160 or more people from around the UK, creating the next generation of heritage experts. I hope Members will embrace that and encourage businesses and individuals from their areas to play their part in what will be an exciting project.

In the coming months, R and R will be reaching out to Members and Members' staff and administration staff to help explain and build that business case. I hope colleagues will take part in that and help the process. There are those who will always say that this is not the right time to restore this place—“Let's just keep putting it off and make it the next generation's problem.” That has been the approach for 80 years; for 80 years we have been putting it off, patching and making do—“Don't worry about it. This'll get us through the next 10 years.” We knew the problems then and we know the problems now, and they have just got worse. If we persist in kicking that dreadful can down the road, we will face not only mounting costs, but the real prospect of a catastrophic fire or other significant failure. That would put not only this building at risk, but the lives of the people who work in it. I believe that it must be in everybody's interests that we just get on with the job and stop putting obstacles in the way. Let us restore this place and create a Parliament fit for the 21st century.

1.50 pm

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): There is a lot of what the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) said that I agree with. Let us get on with it. Let us come together in this. I commend both the Leader of the House for his approach and his speech

and the spokesperson for the Sponsor Body, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds). They both spoke in a very outgoing, moderate and sensible way.

This is not a debate between decant and not decant. It is not a debate with, on one side, pragmatic modernisers who want to do what is right and, on the other side, stuffy traditionalists who just care about staying in a Palace that they love. It is far more complex than that. So it is not a debate about decant or not decant—it is about how we get on with the job of restoring this Palace and not having a gold-plate operation. That is what I want to address my arguments towards.

I have to deal, in that regard, with the present proposal—the Northern Estate programme as it is. This is the entire demolition of Richmond House, and this is where I follow what the right hon. Gentleman just said; I would argue that it is financially wasteful, environmentally unsound and not necessary.

Let me look at this in a bit more detail and go back to the original Joint Committee report, which my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House signed. It said that “a temporary Chamber could be established in its”—that is, Richmond House's—

“inner courtyard and the rest of the House of Commons' core operations could be consolidated in and around Portcullis House and the Northern Estate”.

The Northern Estate programme later found that measurements of the Commons Chamber, including the exact footprint of Division Lobbies with the oriel bay windows, would not fit in the courtyard, so the Northern Estate programme claims that this requires the entire grade II\* listed building to be demolished, except for its façade, and for total replacement with a new permanent building.

On 31 January 2018, the Leader of the House said that

“the conclusion that we came to, preliminarily favouring a complete decant, was based on the assumption that a temporary Chamber could be put up in Richmond House.”—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 885.]

Demolition of Richmond House is a completely different cost basis and I, for one, would not have come to that conclusion, had we known the true picture. The possibility of demolishing Richmond House is not mentioned at all in the Joint Committee report.

**Damian Hinds:** My right hon. Friend is right, of course, about the historical sequence, but I hope that it is of some reassurance if I tell him that, since I have been involved in the Sponsor Body, I can honestly say that I have not met a single person, either in this House or on the restoration and renewal programme, who now believes that it is desirable to make the full demolition of Richmond House that he alludes to. We have to cut our cloth and, as I said in my remarks—and indeed, as the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) just said—we have to work within what we have, and we need to work out what compromises we need in order to do that.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** That is extremely helpful because, as I said, I have to work with what we have at the moment, and from what the spokesperson for the Sponsor Body now says, we seem to have moved on from the demolition of Richmond House. This will be of enormous

comfort to the heritage organisations such as SAVE, with which I have been working very closely. If we are looking at a grade II\* listed building, even the lowest level of listing is defined as

“warranting every effort to preserve”

these buildings—that is according to Historic England—and Richmond House is above that. It was, of course, one of the most important public buildings created in the 1980s.

I can cut short my speech, because I appear to be on a bit of a winning streak. I do not really need to quote all the various points that have been made by numerous distinguished architects and historic buildings organisations in favour of Richmond House, which was put up only 30 years ago. Of course, demolishing it would be environmentally unsound.

**Mark Tami:** I do not want to upset the right hon. Member, but my preferred option would be to knock the building down, apart from the façade, and to create something that would have a useful legacy. The reality is that I do not think that will happen, so we have to work within the given footprint. That would probably mean that we had only one Division Lobby rather than two, which would not be the end of the world.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** It is so wonderful to all come together and find a way forward. I can provide a way forward, because I have been working with SAVE on the matter. This is called the Mark Hines proposal, and it is from a professional architect. SAVE commissioned Mark Hines Architects to look into preserving Richmond House. He found that a replica Commons Chamber would fit into the Richmond House courtyard. His proposal includes a full Chamber of the same size and layout as at present, Division Lobbies, public and press seating at gallery level—somewhat reduced, understandably—and handicapped access. It would fulfil the full security needs, having a separate public entrance with security clearing area and a blast-proof structure. A private security firm has assessed the plan and said that it meets security requirements.

Architectural plans prove that this is possible. The building could be prefabricated off site and installed using cranes within a matter of months, and independent security consultants confirm that it is as safe as existing proposals. It is professionally costed at £46 million, in contrast to reports in the architectural press that the current plan would cost £1.6 billion. To reassure my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), the former Leader of the House, if the House of Commons insists that we decant and create an alternative Chamber, I proffer that solution. It would save a listed building and provide a perfectly adequate alternative.

I must say that there is an even cheaper proposal, and I hope the House will forgive me if I share it. That is the Anthony Delarue proposal—again, he is a professional architect—which I commissioned. He accepts that a top-to-bottom renovation makes sense, because, as we have heard, the systems need a total revamp. He proposes that we move temporarily to the House of Lords Chamber, as we did in the second world war, and that the House of Lords move to the Royal Gallery. He suggests—this is a professional architect, not me—that these areas could be sectioned off with complete external servicing, with linear access to Portcullis House via New Palace Yard,

and with temporary canteens, lavatories and so on accommodated in Old Palace Yard, Victoria Tower Gardens or Abingdon Street Gardens.

That proposal has all the advantages of a full decant. Every electrical socket, bit of wiring, air duct and climate control system can be pulled out and comprehensively done in one go. It solves the most expensive problem—the provision of temporary accommodation—by housing two plenary Chambers within the existing Palace. Richmond House will not be just preserved but integrated into the estate, to house workers displaced from the Palace. The proposal eliminates the lengthy timeframe of potential public inquiries into the demolishing of a listed building. Of course, it retains the QEII conference centre, with all the financial advantages to the Treasury of retaining its income from the centre. That is the proposal. I put it forward as probably the very cheapest option, rather akin to what we did in the second world war. If the House insists on a full decant into Richmond House, however, I proffer the courtyard idea.

None of these plans is set in stone. We can be clever, and we can pick and choose. Surely, time has moved on. As has been said again and again in this debate, we have proved that we can work virtually. I am with the Leader of the House; I do not like virtual working, but it can greatly shorten the time for which we have to be away from this Chamber. There are other proposals I have put which are even cheaper. We know—I know we cannot say much about it—that there is already an emergency alternative pop-up Chamber stored somewhere. If we had to move away for a few months or a year, we could use the atrium of Portcullis House. I met the architect of Portcullis House. He actually designed it so a Chamber could go in the atrium. A Chamber with Division Lobbies could fit exactly in that space. Not ideal, but surely we have proved during this pandemic that we do not have to move out of this place for ever. I was very interested in what the Leader of the House said, and I think what the Chairman of the Committee said, if I remember rightly, that while we would want to move out all the Committees from here, we could actually seal off the Chamber and have access through the corridor past the Prime Minister’s office.

I want to emphasise that this is not a debate between decant and not decant. I am perfectly happy, and all those colleagues on the Back Benches I have been working with are perfectly happy, if we have to decant for a few months, eight months, nine months, a year. What we do not want—I will finish on this point, Madam Deputy Speaker—is a gold-plating operation. We do not want Richmond House demolished. We do not want a permanent replica Chamber created at vast cost. We do not want to surrender our fate to an army of consultants and architects to leave this place and be out of it for five or 10 years. Look at the Canadian example: we could be out of this place for up to 10 years. I do not believe that that is what the public really want. This is a citadel of our democracy. For many people in the world, this democracy is about this building. By all means, let us come together and get on with it, but let us have a short decant, not a long, highly wasteful decant of up to 10 years.

2.1 pm

**Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), but there is a danger that he is doing what I am very concerned

[Meg Hillier]

about, which is keeping going the debates about many options. He is, of course, entitled to his opinion, but we are getting to the crunch point now. It does feel a bit like groundhog day. We are, once again, debating these options and, in essence, what has changed?

What has changed, as others, including the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), have said, is that we are spending more money: £127 million a year, according to the National Audit Office. What has not changed is that we still need to do a major refurbishment. What has changed is the personnel involved. I caution new Members in particular that it can be tempting to say—I think the Leader of the House is dangling this in front of us regularly—that Parliament has changed, people have changed and there are new views. But that is the thing about this place: it is a constantly renewing democracy and place. Unfortunately, with the byzantine structure of Committees and Members changing all the time, if we take the view that we always have to revisit everything because it is a new group of people working here, we will never settle on tough decisions. The Government are the same. How long does a Government Minister last or indeed a permanent secretary in Whitehall? I have been the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee for six years. Only one permanent secretary is still in post, in a different Department, from six years ago. We therefore have to recognise, as the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) said, that we are the custodians now and we need to make the decision.

It is worth noting—this is a bit of a back-of-the-envelope calculation, so there is probably somebody I have missed out—that there have been three Clerks of the House, two Mr Speakers, at least three Leaders of the House, three Prime Ministers and three Parliaments since the Joint Committee reported in 2016. As others have pointed out, it was on 31 January 2018 that this House made a decision to get on with it. It has been a very slow process since. There is a danger that this will be endlessly revisited, with new Parliaments, changes to the public finances and everyone coming up with a great new idea about what the different needs are.

Let me re-emphasise, as the former Leader of the House the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire did, that there is a risk of catastrophic fire here. There have been 29 incidents between 2015 and 2020. There are 24 fire wardens on three shifts, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Not long before lockdown, one of the fires was found on a weekday. If it had been a weekend, the wardens' patrolling pattern meant that they might not have picked it up. Mechanical and engineering is a mess. Anyone who has been down to the basement can see the problems there, with hot water next to electricity. This has all been highlighted many times, as have issues with the sewers; you do not need to ask someone where the lavatories are in this place because you can sniff them out most of the time, and staff have to work in that stinking smell. The great stink got the sewers of London built, but the great stink might finally get us out of this place. There are holes in carpets, with more seeming to emerge even in lockdown, and dangerous voids, top and bottom of the building.

The main change is that a lot of money has been spent to keep people safe in the event of a catastrophic fire. So we have all got fire alarms in our rooms and in

Committee Rooms, but that does not save the building; if the worst happened, that is what would happen. That is a real issue because this is a grade I listed building, a heritage building and a UNESCO site, so there is no option here. Ultimately, the Government—it is the Treasury's responsibility—under UNESCO rules, have to make sure that this building survives. Much of the work that has been done, with this £127 million a year, will have to be redone once major works start.

The Leader of the House has used his position to delay, not progress. Of course we have to keep an eye on things, but we have set up a structure that allows us to do that. I agree with the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) that there is a danger that it is seen as self-indulgent to discuss this today. We should not be discussing the principle of what we do and when we do it; if more Members were here talking about the businesses that could benefit from this, that would be a good thing. There are many other issues we could be discussing. Rather than this, we could be talking about jobs and opportunities for people who have had a really tough time over the past year. The Leader of the House is proposing options that would put staff at risk. I do not want to be responsible for any staff in this building once we start ripping out asbestos. He is also proposing options that would lead to a lack of clarity over who is responsible. If we had a hybrid set of working, are the contractors, the Sponsor Body or the Delivery Authority responsible, or is the Clerk of the House? If something went wrong, who is in charge in that complex set-up? We need to be clear that those are dangerous and risky options.

The Leader of the House speaks of Parliament agreeing it, but I remind him, as others have, that Parliament has agreed with this. We must be careful about endlessly opening up options, and having a start-and-stop approach. There is a sense that this is a bit like musical chairs, with everybody believing or hoping that they will not be standing when the music stops, a bit like as it is with covid-19. I recall that just over a decade ago, probably about 12 years ago, I was serving on a pandemic planning sub-committee of a Cabinet Sub-Committee, where I was a bit-part player in discussing then how to deal with a pandemic. It is apparent that over time that drops down the agenda because nobody thinks that they are going to be the Minister in charge when the pandemic hits. It dropped down the priority list, but this issue cannot, as we know what we want to do and there is a real risk here.

Of course, value for money is very important—I am clear about that. I chair the Public Accounts Committee for a reason: I believe that every pound of public money saved is a pound for the Government of the day to spend on something else that they consider to be important, on the basis of the manifesto on which our voters elected them. That means that the business case is important, but it will cost billions and billions of pounds to do this work. Let us be honest about that. Let us forget this £4 billion figure that is being bandied around. We know it will cost a lot of money, but it cannot be done on the cheap—there is not a cheap option for a building such as this. We have to acknowledge that and accept that we are the custodians and we have to make the tough choices. This must be value for money and in response to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison) let me say that, yes, there needs to

be an envelope of costs, contingency needs to be built in and we need to be rigorous about testing and pursuing people on that. That is why we have made sure that the National Audit Office looks regularly at this and that the Sponsor Body works closely with the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, so that each step of the way the project planning is in place to make sure we are doing this.

Of course we should not gold-plate things. We certainly do not need to gold-plate temporary provision, because it will be temporary. It needs to be functional and workable. We have shown over the past year that we can be very adaptable and their lordships seem to be even more adaptable, able to work in different ways. We work in our constituencies and in all sorts of different environments. We do not have to have the perfect solution, but we need a solution for the time we are out of the building.

We must also plan to ensure that businesses up and down the country are enabled and prepared to bid for the contracts that will come up. Some years ago, I visited New South Wales ahead of the London Olympics to see how businesses in New South Wales had been worked with to get them ready to understand what they needed to do to bid for contracts for the Olympics. We can do a similar engagement project, but while we are debating whether or not we do it, we are going to be a long way off getting to that point of supporting such businesses to get jobs.

All the evidence shows that any major project will get more expensive and more complex the longer it goes on, so we need to decide and we need to get on with it quickly. We should not be prolonging it, and we need to have a focus on what needs to be done, including setting the parameters and making sure that good governance is in place to get on with it. This will also help us control costs, which of course we are all concerned about, but we must not be concerned about the big figure at the beginning, because there will be a big price tag. There is no getting around that.

Let us just run through the governance. We have the Sponsor Body, which is a group of professionals who understand how to manage projects, and it will oversee the Delivery Authority. Of course, Members—we have heard from some of them—are represented on those bodies. In the House in the past, and let us look at the Elizabeth Tower as an example, reporting to the Clerk of the House through the system in the House has not worked. The Elizabeth Tower refurbishment started off with a price tag of £29 million, and it ended up at £80 million. So the idea that somehow we are passing responsibility over and losing control of costs is hardly borne out. We need to keep a close eye on the costs, but the idea that it can be done in the old-fashioned way through the House systems has not proved to work. I will not highlight it, but I recommend to Members the National Audit Office report of last year that looked at the Elizabeth Tower, when the House's own auditors recognised some of the challenges and problems, such as mission creep and the inability to bottom-out costs at the beginning.

We need to get on with it, and we need to open up the opportunities. As the right hon. Member for East Hampshire says, doing nothing is not an option. We must not reopen every option every time we debate this. We all aspire to run the country—sadly, my party is not

running the country at the moment—but if we want to be in that position, we need to show that we can boldly take difficult decisions. Government is not about being popular and always choosing an easy option; it is usually the opposite. Proper governance is actually about making difficult decisions.

I want to put on record my thanks to the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire. She did not mince her words today, and I thank her for that. It is not a political game. It is not about pitting London against the country. It has just got to be done, and if we do it well and we do it right, we will be thanked, ultimately, because we will have saved this building and created jobs around our country.

2.12 pm

**Dr Liam Fox** (North Somerset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who talked about the length of time it can take to make decisions and to plan properly for the inevitable in this place. I have been a Member of Parliament for almost 30 years, and as she alluded to, it is certainly a regular pattern in this place that, when a difficult decision comes along, there are in effect three parliamentary ways to deal with it: first, legislate for it, whether it is good legislation or bad legislation; secondly, throw money at it, whether or not it is good value; and, thirdly, put it off. It seems that there are still some of those who want to do the last.

I plucked this notice from the staircase close to my office a little while ago. I would be showing it to the House, but I know that would be against the rules about using props, so for those who were not able to take advantage of seeing it, it says:

“Do not enter  
Masonry falling on staircase  
Use lift only”.

It was not that inconvenient until a couple of days ago, when the lift did not work either, and I was not able to access my office in St Stephen's Tower, and neither were any of my staff. To those who say this is something we can put off again, I say that it is not. If we actually care about things like the health and safety of our own staff, it needs to be dealt with. One thing I think the House needs to agree on is that we have to get on with it. Further delay should not be one of the options that we consider.

Those who say that we should not be talking about this now because there are much more important subjects for Parliament to talk about, or that we should try to do it on the cheap, are failing in their duty as Members of Parliament. In terms of those who say that there are much more difficult issues to talk about in the covid environment, I am getting fed up with that sort of virtue signalling from people in this Chamber as an excuse to put these things off because they believe it will buy them favour with bits of the media or the electorate. It is irresponsible to put it off, for the very reason that has been given by so many Members today.

The idea that we should do it on the cheap is actually to betray those for whom we hold this place in trust. It is an amazing, wonderful building, but we are not just temporary residents; we have a role in holding it in trust for our country. It is shocking that we have allowed ourselves to get to this position of patch and mend at a huge cost, let alone even considering carrying that on.

[Dr Liam Fox]

We would regard any Government proposal that took a similar approach as a shocking waste of public money that would ultimately require a bigger bill to put it right. That is the case in this House, and we have to face up to that today.

The hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch made the very interesting point—with her PAC hat on, I imagine—that, were we to go ahead with what will come at a very large cost, it will provide employment for people with great skills and crafts, many of them diminishing in number, who are able to repair a grade I listed building. We have just gone through a period in the pandemic when we have paid out huge amounts of public money for people to not actually be doing anything in many cases. We have an opportunity to provide employment, skills and training for those in our country, and it is a unique opportunity in many ways that we should not overlook.

In this short contribution, I want to say something about the historic political and constitutional importance of this House—the House of Commons, not the House of Lords. The Houses of Parliament are, of course, iconic nationally and internationally, but the position of the House of Commons is a unique one. I have not taken part in these debates before, but I have listened with great interest to Members talk about the difficulties with the solution of decanting the House of Commons to the House of Lords or vice versa until we get the building work done in one place. I entirely understand that, but I believe it is something that we should consider for the following reason.

The House of Commons and the House of Lords are not of equal constitutional importance, and keeping a democratic link between the House of Commons and the Palace of Westminster is, in itself, of great national importance. I listened to the argument made by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) about the basement and the problems in this place. We hear all these arguments about cost and difficulty, but—again, to refer back to the contribution of the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch—we were told prior to covid about the cost and difficulty of mRNA vaccines, and when we had to put our minds to it, we were able to provide solutions in a relatively short time.

I accept the difficulties, and I am by no means an expert in any of that, but if it is possible to maintain the link between the elected House of Commons and the Palace of Westminster, we should take it. When German bombs fell on this Chamber during world war two, the House of Commons remained inside the Palace and moved to the House of Lords. Many of Churchill's greatest speeches during world war two were, in fact, given in the House of Lords, because that historic and iconic link was maintained between the democratic Chamber and the Palace of Westminster.

However long or short our tenure in this democratic House of Commons, we are not just temporary residents here; we have duties to those who have sent us. The historic continuity of the world's oldest democracy inside this building is extremely important, and such rare links should only be broken when there is no alternative but to do so. The link between British democracy and the House of Commons is of tremendous value—a

value that can be measured in terms of more than just the cost we face for refurbishment. As Members of Parliament, we should strongly consider our role in our heritage and the future of this Parliament before we take such decisions.

2.19 pm

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: It is a pleasure to participate in this important debate. Looking at the Benches, this seems to be a bit of a minority sport, but it is an important matter that all of us parliamentarians must take seriously. I am the longest-serving Member on the Labour Benches, which means I am coming to my 41st year in Parliament later in the year.

I love Parliament and I love the building, and over this last year we have all been conscious that the beating heart of our democracy is not just about the Chamber, Committee rooms, and the formal side of Parliament, but it is the Tea Room, the Lobby, the chat on the Terrace—the political life that goes on and is nurtured in a building such as ours. Covid has badly affected that vibrant life, and we know what it is like to have real challenges to our normal political and parliamentary life.

Nevertheless, I am on the “let's get on with it” side. We have had two big votes, and as the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) said with such clarity in a very good speech, it is much more expensive to do the job now that we could have started some time ago. Interestingly, I am just clocking the number of speeches from former or current Chairs and members of the Public Accounts Committee, and I was a member of that Committee as a very young MP.

I wish to make two rather different points. Yes, I want to get on with this. I understand that we will have to decant. I look back at the amazing achievement of the London Olympics and at how people in my constituency—Huddersfield is a very typical constituency—were full of pride at the way those Olympics were managed and at how, it seemed to them, no expense was spared to make them the finest Olympics they could be. Reading the report we are discussing, all the time it comes back to value for money. Of course we want value for money, but this is a vital and important building and we cannot do it on the cheap. It must be done to the finest specification, because we owe it that. When it comes to their Parliament and their great institutions, the people of this country do not penny-pinch. They want to be proud that a leading nation such as the United Kingdom can do something, do it well and, as with the Olympics, do it on time. That is an important point: let's get on with it!

Could we also be a little more conscious of the tremendous effect that this massive renewal programme will have on the whole of our capital city? I am a member of the River Thames all-party parliamentary group, and we have a little commission on the renaissance of the Thames. Major construction companies came to us and said, “You realise that the renewal of Parliament is such a major job that it will clog the roads of half of London for years.” The number of trucks carrying materials and taking away waste will involve tens of thousands of truck movements in our city. I believe that the impact of that on the rest of our capital city has been rather neglected.

I have been in touch with the commission, who are a very good group of people, and they are aware of the interests of a number of Members in this subject, and of the additional challenge of making the renewal programme more sustainable. Some of those major players came to talk to Members of Parliament and said, “Do you realise the impact on the whole transport infrastructure of London, and how that is going to hurt?” In a very good speech, the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee mentioned the importance, in major projects such as this, of talking to local people—of consulting in a meaningful way about what is going to happen. We should renew those efforts to consult, as London will be massively affected by this, the biggest construction programme since the second world war.

The alternative that people have been talking about for some time now is bringing the River Thames back to life as a major transportation highway. So many materials that are required by this massive construction site could come on the river, and most of the waste and the detritus could be taken away on the river. There is a real opportunity here not only to do something wonderful in terms of bringing the River Thames back as a major conduit for our capital city, but to reduce the enormous pressure of this important and challenging piece of work. Therefore, that broader context is important. I implore every Member of Parliament to take that alternative seriously. It is not an easy choice to make, because most of the jetty points on the Thames that are good for getting goods on and off boats are increasingly being bought up, sold and given planning permission for rather expensive apartments. There are enough still left, and they should be rapidly secured so that we can have that supply chain. Down the line, all the experts and people who know about our docks, our transportation links and much else say that that renewal of the Thames, even when we have finished the building work, will mean that food to the House of Commons and supplies to the whole of central London can come in on newly developed, electric and low-impact craft. I wanted to make that point very strongly.

Madam Deputy Speaker, like many others, you might think, “What has got into the hon. Member for Huddersfield?” Well, it is no secret that I was born on the River Thames, I went to school at Hampton, which is on the Thames, and I have spent 40 years in Parliament, working by the side of the Thames. I care about it and can see the potential for it in the future.

May I make one further point? There will be massive contracts. I do hope that we deliver on the large number of jobs that will be required for craftsmen and other people employed all over the United Kingdom. As much material as possible that is used in that big construction project should be derived from the UK. We talk about apprentices, and I hope that they will be given a thorough education and training in the highest level of skills—skills of which we can be proud. The potential that exists in this project in terms of the sheer number of jobs that can be generated is greater than the report has indicated.

I wish to mention one other important point. It is strange that I should be in agreement on this not only with the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), but with my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), who made a very good speech. As he said, in order to do this, all the options must be kept open. There are some very innovative

ideas for what will happen to Richmond House, but that must not be an excuse for delay. We must get on with what we are doing.

Lastly, I am a little disturbed that some of the early contracts, when we had sight of them, did not have enough of what they call environmental sustainability elements—an audit of its sustainability. During the procurement process, please do not let us make considerations based only on cost. Please let it be done on quality and, vitally, on sustainability and the environmental impact. Environmental audits will be crucial to this whole process. We could send a message, at a time when we face climate change and global warming, that we can do major construction sensitively, sustainably and in a way that employs great craftspeople and trains great skills.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I apologise on behalf of the House authorities to Members in the Chamber that a report that ought to have been on the Table, having been tagged in today’s Order Paper in connection with this debate, has not been made available. It is of course in the Vote Office. The reason I mention it is because several Members have raised matters that are dealt with in the report.

In particular, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) mentioned that the programme of works that will take place here in some form or other ought to be constructed in such a way as to provide employment and other opportunities for every part of the United Kingdom, not only for London. That matter is mentioned in the report. Another matter mentioned in the report, which the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) just alluded to, is the number of apprenticeships to be created and the number of apprentices to be given opportunities. I mention it to the House because it would be wrong if the impression were given that nothing is being done and that no one is overseeing the current work that is being done in preparation for the necessary works that everyone acknowledges must be done to this building.

It will not surprise Members in the Chamber to hear me say that the reason why I am aware of this report is that I wrote it in my capacity as Chairman of the Parliamentary Works Estimates Commission. It was not on the Table. It should have been. I can see that you have all missed it. Now that I have told you about it, I hope that it will be taken into consideration, as indeed it has been by the Treasury and the Sponsor Body.

2.32 pm

**Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con) [V]: As the newly elected Member of Parliament for Clwyd South 18 months ago, I was awestruck to be working in such a beautiful and historic building, but also acutely aware, from all the internal hoardings and cordoned-off spaces, of the seriousness of the problems of repairing and renewing the deteriorating fabric of the Palace of Westminster. As a member of the Speaker’s Advisory Committee on Works of Art, I am also aware of day-to-day problems such as leaking roofs and the need to protect the many and varied works of art within the Palace of Westminster.

Before I became an MP, I was much involved in heritage projects, mainly in Wales, and therefore have nothing but respect for the experts who are advising us on the scope and scale of the restoration and renewal programme. But equally, representing my constituency,

[Simon Baynes]

which has many fine buildings in need of restoration and renewal, not least those relating to its proud mining and industrial heritage, I am aware of the need to be realistic about the amount of public money that can be spent on the Palace of Westminster. I therefore welcome this general debate because it is vital that MPs scrutinise restoration and renewal. Although the 2019 Act established an independent Sponsor Body to carry out the project, it is essential that there is a mechanism to ensure that the House's views are heard, particularly as circumstances change as the project proceeds, as was eloquently discussed earlier. We are, of course, the guardians of taxpayers' money, and restoration and renewal will involve a vast sum of public cash. It is right that the project should be completed, but it is essential that Members are in a position to scrutinise the way the money is spent in line with the Act, which stipulates the importance of seeking value for money.

As the Chancellor has made clear, the public finances are in a difficult state and it is therefore only right that we find ways of economising with restoration and renewal. It is clear from the terms of this debate, and has been pointed out several times this afternoon, that the terms around the project have moved on significantly since the Act was passed, and that the make-up of the House has changed since then as well. Some of the lessons that we have learned from the hybrid Parliament can be applied to restoration and renewal, and it is right for Members to raise this with the Sponsor Body. We know that hybrid proceedings have been a poor second best, but surely they are a viable temporary option to be used if it means saving hundreds of millions or even billions of pounds in construction costs and minimising the need for a full and lengthy decant. In particular, like my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), I would like to express my support for the ideas put forward by Save Britain's Heritage for an alternative scheme for retaining Richmond House, which was cited in the recent strategic review as "the cheapest of the shortlisted options by some way".

In conclusion, this debate comes at a critical time in the restoration and renewal process. The programme is on track to commence the main phase of works in the mid-2020s, which is why it is so important that the broadest possible consensus is achieved across the House and that this consensus also commands the support of the people who elected us to Parliament in the first place.

2.36 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak on this issue, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I thank you for calling me to contribute to the debate. The history of this place simply resonates with every step up those ancient stairs in Westminster Hall, with every breath that is taken in this history-saturated Chamber, and with every glance heavenward in Central Lobby where the four nations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland come together as one in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We are part of the living history in this place, and the preservation and restoration of it are essential. We are literally preserving the history of our nation.

I came into this House in 2010 when I was elected as the Member for Strangford. Before that, I served as a councillor for 26 years and in the Assembly for 12 years.

I love the tradition of this place, and I love the building. I stay in the hotel across the bridge, and every morning when I walk across and look at the Houses of Parliament, I never fail to gasp and say, "Wow, look at that building!" Coming to this place inspires me every day of my life. It also makes me very proud to be British and to have the traditions, the history and the culture that we have in this House. Wow, I am really proud and pleased to have that! It makes me so proud to be British.

I love the pomp and the pageantry. When I have had the chance to be a bit player when Parliament is prorogued, I love to watch how it is done, and to watch the state opening of Parliament and the Queen's Speech. Wow! Those things are incredible. Nobody anywhere in the whole world can do it like we British can in this House. That is something that I want to put on record. I truly love the democratic process. This mother of Parliaments has sent the democratic process across the whole world to many nations who have all had a chance to embrace the democratic process that we have in this place. I am humbled to be the MP for Strangford and represent the good people of Strangford. When we come here, ever mindful of the history, we are walking in the footsteps of some of the greatest political giants that ever walked, in all the history of this world and our great nation, and now we have the chance to be here and be a small player. A wee boy from Ballywalter—that is what I am—has had the opportunity to be the MP for Strangford. That is a reflection on the place that I come from.

This place is steeped in history. I love the building, not just for the building alone, but for the democratic process that it represents and for the opportunity that it gives everyone to represent their people in this House. On my trips to the United States, pre-covid obviously, I am always thoroughly impressed by their attitude to their nation's history and the care that they take of it. Their monuments and memorials gleam, they have tours and information at every place of historical significance, and they are proud, as they should be. However, when I look at the attitude to our history in this place, a lot is left to be desired.

Most recently, there has been a desire to remove historical figures and to attempt to paint our historical literature and films with warnings. The past is the past and we are shaped by the lessons learnt from it. If we alter the past to suit a modern narrative, we do our history a disservice. The House is part of the fabric not simply of British history, but of the foundation of democracy. It deserves a top-class restoration to secure and preserve it for generations to come. To walk through and see beams from 1400 is humbling. The duty on us is clear: we must do what is right, we must get this right and we must pay what is right.

On 16 July, the Leader of the House said—I read his comments before the debate—that

"the proposal must be robust and evidence-based...must give value for money and...cut out unnecessary spending; and...the plans need to be up to date."—[*Official Report*, 16 July 2020; Vol. 678, c. 1737.]

That is important. Whether the crux of the issue is value for money, what compromises need to be made to save money, what opportunity exists for simpler, quicker and cheaper temporary accommodation, or how new ways of working developed in response to covid-19 affect Parliament's requirements, they are all things that we must look at.

The review also found that by approaching restoration in a new way, with a phased approach to the delivery of the works in the Palace of Westminster, the time that Members and staff will spend in temporary accommodation could be kept to a minimum. I very much look forward to the Leader of the House's response and a look at that timescale. A detailed and costed restoration and renewal plan will set out specific timescales, but the period in which works take place in the Palace of Westminster should be thought of in terms of years and not months.

I was slightly dismayed by some of the briefing that I looked at. It was indicated that while theoretically this is a House matter, concerning the running of the Commons and the Lords, given that several billions of pounds are involved, the Government have a stake. There are suggestions that Downing Street is jittery about the cost. A possible final bill of £4 billion is often quoted, but that is a ballpark estimate made several years ago. No one can be sure—it could cost a lot more. The Government must know that the restoration must be done and done soon. They must back it.

I am a proud Ulster Scot, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I know that you are a proud Scot. That history is something that we both share. I loved history, and it was the one subject at school that I did rather well in and enjoyed. As an Ulster Scot—I do not want to put words in your mouth, Madam Deputy Speaker, but you might say the same—I say, every pound is a prisoner. If it is, the thought of spending huge amounts of money is not the kind of decision that I take lightly. However, this is not an option but a necessity.

The money must be spent, and we must do it to as tight a budget as possible, but it must be done. There is much uncertainty about how to go forward. I am reminded of an Ulster Scotsism that is used, which I always remember, along these lines: they used to be indecisive, but now they are not sure. Sometimes, we might show some reluctance to make decisions in this House, but I hope that we do so.

It is also my opinion that the options presented allow us to do the work and yet still participate in this Chamber. I would like that to happen, but I am not sure whether it is possible, and others have reflected on that as well. Having spent a large part of the past year fiddling with Zoom passwords, battling wi-fi connections and frozen screens, and not really understanding exactly what was happening—I am not technologically minded—one thing has been made abundantly clear to me: this place is special and to do it wholly remotely simply does not cut it.

The thrust of the debate and the outworking of the role of an MP is simply not up to the same standard when carried out remotely. We must be able to retain a base in this place. I know the history of former decants and it is clear that they were not the best route.

I also saw in the background notes a quote stating:

“The work to save our Parliament buildings for the nation is essential and urgent, and the Palace of Westminster continues to be at a high risk of catastrophic damage, be that a major fire, flood or falling masonry”.

I am reminded of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Parliament buildings. On 2 January 1995—just before I entered the Forum for Political Dialogue and ultimately into the Assembly—there was a fire in the Parliament buildings. It was over the Christmas and new year holiday period, so no one was aware of it and the fire had been burning for a period of time in the main Chamber.

The Parliament buildings of the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont replicate this House; they are not as large, but, as people can see on television, they are based on this place. The fire at Stormont was started by two wires rubbing together. After a number of years, that friction caused a fire. Someone living down in Dundonald, at the edge of Stormont, saw the smoke coming up the chimney. There was lots of talk that it was a terrorist attack, but it was not—it was just the age of the electrics. That is a reminder to me that perhaps we need a high level of maintenance in this House.

I have read reports that

“the Restoration and Renewal Programme team found that moving MPs into a temporary chamber in Richmond House on Whitehall and peers to the nearby QEII conference centre remains ‘the most secure, cost-effective and practical solution’ to keep parliament in operation while works take place.”

The cost of this is extremely prohibitive and leads me to the idea of hybrid systems. At least with a hybrid system, there could be some people in this place and others able to work effectively in other places; the background notes also referred to the Northern Estate programme. As the Leader of the House said, we have to focus on value for money. I am very much on that page. I am not the greatest advocate of hybrid proceedings—my ability would indicate that—but I would rather have hybrid proceedings for a little bit while we could not use this Chamber than spend £1.5 billion.

The background notes state that an hon. Member

“asked the House of Commons Commission if it had considered ways in which hybrid or virtual proceedings could reduce the cost of the restoration and renewal programme and minimise the need for decant during the programme. Sir Charles Walker, who answers questions on behalf of the Commission said that no formal assessment had been made and that it would be for the House to determine whether to adopt different ways of working.”

I believe that we can have the best of both worlds. The creation of a replica Chamber is not a good use of funding if there is a way to keep this place open while continuing the works.

The comments of the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debonnaire), regarding wheelchair and visually disabled access are welcomed by everyone here. She also referred to those with autism and challenging educational issues. I entirely support her proposals in that regard. I have often had the opportunity—as have other right hon. and hon. Members—to engage with schools from our constituencies in the education centre, which the former Speaker was instrumental in bringing about, and which was really good news.

I understand that the safety and security of staff is paramount, and changes will have to be made to the placement of staff in our offices, yet it seems to me that there is a way forward: we must look to a hybrid model as the best of both worlds.

At the end of the day, this is undoubtedly and unfortunately a costly project—costly but worthwhile. We have an opportunity to take lessons learned from Parliament by Zoom, along with sensible financial decisions, to ensure that this Parliament can continue to operate effectively while we restore and protect this living and breathing seat of democracy for hundreds of years to come. We do this not just for us at this time, but for everyone who comes after—everyone who will walk where political giants have walked before.

[Jim Shannon]

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the detail that you gave: it was good that you were able to inform us that all parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will have a part in the work. I welcome that and am encouraged by that. Perhaps the Leader of the House could provide some assurance that apprentices from Northern Ireland will have an opportunity to be part of that work.

I realise that I have gone on a wee bit long, so I shall finish with this. There are reports that say that a delay in starting work would add to the cost, because this 150-year-old building is falling apart faster than it can be fixed, with the cost of maintenance having doubled in just three years to £127 million a year in 2018-19, so it is clear that the decision must be made shortly. I urge the House to consider a hybrid model as the right decision, if it is in order and Members agree. We need to put up with the inconvenience, knowing that we are preserving this wonderful place—this incredible seat of democracy, the envy of all the world—and doing so as cost-effectively as we can while ensuring that we can all work well and still do the job we are elected to do.

2.50 pm

**Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con) [V]: It is always a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon); I share his delight in that incredible view on Westminster bridge. This place is an iconic symbol of our country and a symbol for democracy around the world. It is an immense honour to be an elected representative, but we also have a duty as custodians to take care of not only the fabric of the building but the culture and ethos. The hon. Member for Strangford is the embodiment of a very good ethos and culture that our Parliament represents.

We have heard about the decisions that have already been made and the extensive work that has already been done—including by you, Madam Deputy Speaker—and I pay tribute to everybody who has worked so hard to get us to this place. I wish to expand the debate to look forward, because the Leader of the House is right when he says that we are now moving to the next stage. To date, the biggest concern has been clarity on keeping the lid on costs, as was said earlier, and for this place not to be closed for business for any longer than absolutely necessary. That message has been sent loud and clear. Those issues remain of paramount importance, but we also need to make sure that there is just as much clarity on what a modern democracy needs from its buildings.

The No. 1 recommendation of the report we are considering is that we need to move the discussion on and, in particular, to look at a balance between restoration and renewal. What is it essential to preserve and what should we change? No one wants to gild the lily—all right hon. and hon. Members who have made that point today are absolutely right that we do not want to over-engineer R and R—but there are issues that we need to deal with. There are issues of restoration and issues of renewal and we need to consider them. It would be wrong to allow other people to decide the priorities for us, so we need to grasp the matter.

A vision has already been clearly set out to “transform the Houses of Parliament to be fit for the future as the working home for our Parliamentary democracy, welcoming to all, and a celebration of our rich heritage.”

But what do we mean by that? That is a lot of words that are open to a lot of different interpretations. One theme in the plans for restoration and renewal is accessibility and inclusiveness, but what do we mean by that?

The Joint Committee that looked at these issues back in 2016 was absolutely right that this is a one-off opportunity to get things right—to renew and transform Parliament to be fit for the 21st century. That is fundamental to the planned building works and refurbishment. Most importantly of all, we have to avoid mission creep when the work actually starts. Current Members and, indeed, those who will be elected in elections to come—I am sure they will come on a frequent basis—should not feel that we have missed the opportunity to see this project as one of renewal, too. The Leader of the House is absolutely right when he says that we need to move on to that part of the debate and not just repeat debates of the past, and I am sure many Members would agree.

I have always believed that the right approach is to do the minimum, but what that means will be very different for everybody. Our Parliament is a building that has literally shaped our democracy as it has emerged and grown. It reflects the history of our democracy, and that is absolutely right, through its architecture, its artwork and its sculptures, but the democracy when this building was built back in 1837 was very different from the one we have today.

Parliamentary buildings are really important. They reflect democracy. They reflect our history, and that rich history is crucial to preserve, but they also condition us for the future. We have a duty to ensure that they reflect the entirety of our democratic history and perhaps our ambitions for the future, too. A celebration of our rich heritage and the need to be welcoming to all, which are clearly in the vision for this project, must be taken seriously as we move into the next stage.

Our plans for renewal need to seriously take into account and articulate to the Sponsor Body the importance of preserving our history, which needs to be firmly protected and not subject to any rewriting exercise. We also need to ensure that the currently untold stories of our Parliament are there, too, to make sure we are celebrating the full richness of the history of Parliament. Also, as set out in the restoration and renewal vision, we must consider the importance of making sympathetic changes to ensure that we are welcoming to everybody, whether that is disabled people visiting Parliament, members of staff or, indeed, Members ourselves.

Most important of all, we need to make sure that when we come back after all these works are finished, it is a place that is fit for the future. In particular—many Members have referred to this in the debate already—we have to ensure that we have the digital technology we need to run a modern democracy, whether that is in the Chamber, our Committee Rooms or our meeting areas. We need a clear plan for setting priorities for delivering a Parliament that is, as the vision says, “welcoming to all”.

I commend the Women and Equalities Committee for considering some of that as part of its broader inquiry on a gender-sensitive Parliament. A number of other Members in this debate and elsewhere have raised the issue of disability access, but we need to have a much more cohesive consideration of these issues that looks at more than just the bricks and mortar; we need to look at what is going to happen. We have to determine

how we can ensure that this restoration and renewal project of the fabric of our democratic institution will be viewed by all the people we represent. We need to make it a place that is welcoming for all, whether that is people considering standing for election or people visiting to see their democracy in action.

I would like to make one final point, which is that there is a significant section in the strategic review on the growing use of the Palace. The report noted:

“To avoid disturbing Members and staff, major works programmes try to operate outside of ‘normal working hours’”, and of course that is important.

The strategic review goes on to say that

“the growth in the 24/7 culture means many onsite business activities now operate beyond normal working hours. Saturdays are busy with commercial tours, weddings and other events. Hansard production plus coverage of political TV programmes (followed by production of digital newsprint) also occurs during weekend hours. Requests to film on site are also regular. Catering are now just as busy during some recess periods as”

when Parliament is sitting, and

“August is the busiest month for Tours which operate every weekday during the month.”

The report goes on to say that all of that is squeezing out some of

“the time for major building works.”

We should be concerned about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker), the Chair of the Administration Committee, has taken this issue head on. He is to be applauded for his tireless work to make sure that Parliament and the House of Commons focus on their core business, and are not distracted by becoming a corporate entertainment venue or a tourist attraction. That is a cause for concern. We must not allow activities that are not core business to prevent major building works from being done now. We need to get a much better grip on this place being used for our core business as a democratic institution first and foremost, and not allow these secondary usages to crowd out the essential work that we do, but also the essential maintenance that the building needs.

I wholeheartedly disagree with the comments made earlier that this debate is self-indulgent—far from it. The way we renew our Parliament and transform it to be fit for the future as the working home of our parliamentary democracy could not be more important. Making it welcoming for all and a celebration of our rich heritage really matters. It should matter to everyone who values the future of our democracy, so it should matter to every Member of this House.

3 pm

**Sir Paul Beresford** (Mole Valley) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) is absolutely right about the importance of this iconic building. Coming from the other end of the earth, I watch many of the Commonwealth Parliaments mimicking, or trying to mimic, this one, but they cannot mimic the building.

I was a little concerned when this debate came up because I was worried that the Leader of the House was going to tell us that the can was going to be kicked further down the road. So I enjoyed his speech, but I am afraid that I join his opposite number, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debnair), in the “get on with it” gang.

When I was on the Commission with my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), we discussed this issue backwards and forwards, and we came forward with the decision that a full decant and “get on with it” action should happen. She gave an excellent speech on that—I am sorry she is not here to hear me put this point—which has saved me from having to do an awful lot of talking.

When we discussed this issue, I became aware that some of my friends in the press—I have some friends in the press, including the national press—were pretty cynical and pretty worried about the cost. I took two of them—one each from two of the national papers—around individually to show them the masonry, which was falling apart and decaying. Some of it was very ancient and in desperate need of restoration and renewal.

I also took them down to the basement—the long passageway that runs the length of the building—and showed them some of the 86 vertical chimneys running from it. They were originally designed for ventilation, which of course meant that a fire could travel laterally and vertically extremely quickly. At present, these chimneys carry a mass of electrical services of varying ages, many of them clearly defective, as well as gas pipes and so on. We have gas pipes down in the basement, as well as air conditioning conduits, steam pipes, telephone systems and communication fibres—there is, of course, also a hugely overlaid and overworked sewerage system. That infrastructure serves the whole building from end to end, moving up through the chimneys.

There is also a small duplication, which many Members will be unaware of, in the form of a corridor, much like that in the basement, running along the top of the building. In the days before the dangers of asbestos were known, that dangerous material was literally and liberally splashed everywhere from buckets. All that needs to be dealt with and preferably removed.

The sewerage system is extraordinary. It consists of two very large steel tanks, which are listed, at the Commons end, and that collect from a very large pipe that runs the whole length of the building. If we are going to do a part-and-part arrangement, that would be exceptionally difficult to deal with. As somebody mentioned, the system was put in place in 1888. It not infrequently bursts and not infrequently leaks. If it bursts over equipment or some of the infrastructure, disaster may well be staring us in the face.

Infrastructure has been laid on infrastructure. All must be removed to allow for a modern, safe replacement. This has long been realised by most who have looked into the basement over many decades. In fact, I understand that the problem was discussed in the House in 1904, as well as interminably since, but the radical renewal required has been consistently put off—the can being kicked down the road.

Any suggestion that the work could be completed from one end of the building, proceeding to the other defies logic. To even try that would greatly extend the period of the renovations and vastly increase the cost. We have to understand that the longer we wait, the more the risk of catastrophic collapse of service looms over us. In 2020, if my memory is correct, the risk was rated at a 50:50 chance of a catastrophic collapse of our services—not just fire but a collapse of our electricity, gas, telephone systems and fibres, where we have that. Fires regularly break out. We are at a real risk that

[*Sir Paul Beresford*]

means we could well have a total collapse of our internal communication system and of Parliament at both ends. As I said, I join the Opposition gang: the longer we delay, the greater the risk.

3.5 pm

**Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con) [V]: I was shocked and saddened to learn of the death of our former colleague Mike Weatherley. I offer my deepest sympathy to his family and friends. He was an outstanding colleague and Member for Hove.

Having been a Member of Parliament for a long time, I fully understand, better than most, the need for restoration work to be conducted. I could actually do with some myself. Although I was greatly heartened by the opening statements of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, I take nothing for granted. There are so many potential fire hazards around, not to mention the unsanitary state of the place generally.

When I was a member of the Administration Committee, we were taken up the Elizabeth Tower to see for ourselves how urgently the repair work was needed. Water was pouring in through the windows and the masonry was in a very poor state. As the scaffolding is gradually being removed, we can all see the transformation that has taken place, with the minimum of disruption to the work of the Palace of Westminster. This project should be taken as an example of what can be achieved without interruption to the life of the parliamentary estate. Will my right hon. Friend tell me when the project will be completed and the whole tower will be revealed?

The Palace of Westminster, as many colleagues have said, is a symbol of democracy the world over, and the envy of most other countries, but behind the façade there is severe decay. Over the past few years, there have been several instances of pieces of stonework falling from the building, endangering staff and visitors. The sewers are no longer functional. The smell along the Terrace Corridor is absolutely appalling. One need only visit the cellars, as I have, to realise the very real fire risk from the miles of electrical cabling. Electrical wiring has been added in layers over many years until it hangs like jungle creepers everywhere. A modern Parliament needs modern services, and a full upgrade is long overdue.

As a member of the all-party fire safety and rescue group, I regularly receive reports on the number of minor fires that are dealt with every month as a matter of routine. Over the past few years, much has already been done to improve fire safety. Thousands of new sprinklers have been installed, along with miles of pipework to service them. Thousands of automatic fire detection devices have also been fitted, along with voice alarms. All this has been done without disturbance and almost without the knowledge of Members and their staff. I do not think any Member would wish to see this magnificent building share the same fate as Notre Dame. The roof is leaking and stonemasonry needs restoring, not to mention the problem of the asbestos that needs to be safely removed.

I therefore accept without reservation the need for action. What I remain unconvinced by is the proposition—because it is still there—that the elected House should move out of the building. I fear that Parliament may never return, in spite of all the guarantees given.

The plan voted on by the House of Commons recommended a full decant and the provision of a temporary Commons Chamber in the courtyard of Richmond House. May I point out that the vote was extremely close—but I fully understand that every vote counts—with a majority of only 16? That is not exactly an overwhelming endorsement. Apparently, these plans, as we have heard, have now been shelved and there is a new plan to completely demolish Richmond House and rebuild it. This is not only a horrendous waste of money and time, but totally unnecessary. Demolishing a perfectly serviceable, thermally efficient, relatively modern listed building to accommodate a temporary Chamber is absolutely crazy. The so-called gold-plated solution, which seeks to create an exact replica of the Commons Chamber, is a ridiculous idea. It is also costly in terms of emissions, given the Government's pledge to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Demolishing the building and rebuilding it is not only a complete waste of money, but would result in unnecessary additional carbon emissions.

Richmond House, a grade II listed building, where I worked in my days as a Parliamentary Private Secretary, is barely 35 years old—I was there on the day it opened—and to consider demolishing it is an absolute act of vandalism. It also delays the start of the restoration and renewal work for several years, possibly until 2027. Work should start as soon as possible to renew the hazardous wiring and other services in the Palace and to create a modern, sustainable working environment within the historic fabric of the building.

Since the vote in 2016, there has been a considerable change in the make-up of the House and the arguments for and against a full decant need to be looked at again. The Sponsor Body needs to be held to account by the elected members and its proposals properly scrutinised. I think the unelected Chamber should be the ones to decant, if that has to happen, as they have done admirably well during the covid-19 pandemic—it would probably be my only opportunity to sit on those red Benches. Hybrid or fully virtual proceedings have worked well for them over the last year, so I have favoured us using the Lords Chamber while the Commons and surrounding areas are restored. The work on the services for the whole Palace, including the cabling in the basement, could then go ahead with a minimum of disruption to Members and their staff. The Lords Chamber and the Royal Gallery can be serviced externally in terms of electricity, lighting and so on, which would provide enough working space and eliminate the need to convert the QEII Centre for the use of the House of Lords at an estimated cost of £350 million or more. The estimates of cost for the conversion of the QEII Centre did not take into account the loss of earnings for this publicly owned building and the subsequent loss to the Exchequer. Plans for the QEII Centre also include major building works to create a working space to replicate the height of the Lords Chamber—it is absolutely ridiculous.

Since 2016, with the uncertainty of Brexit compounded by the covid-19 pandemic, money is now very tight, so the economic considerations are absolutely crucial. Affordability and value for money are so important. The Chancellor has said that huge efforts need to be made to balance the books after the enormous cost to the public purse of supporting businesses throughout the pandemic. The current plans will cost billions, and I think we need to take into account the sacrifices made

by our constituents over the past year and think of how it will look to them if we allow taxpayers' money to be wasted on a white elephant. By comparison, the cost of a new school is between £20 million to £30 million, so we need to be both careful with costs and transparent in how the money is spent.

Both Houses have proved their ability to work flexibly and embrace new technology over the past year, which is what I am doing right now. It is only right that all options be looked at in order to save millions of pounds of public money and start the process of renewal as soon as possible. Virtual proceedings are not ideal, but all options need to be considered.

I do not want the Sponsor Body to be given a blank cheque. Elected Members should have oversight of the budget for this project. The recent strategic review has costs redacted, even in the copies provided to Members of Parliament. Every solution presented so far by the body inflates the costs and increases the delay in commencing the urgent work that is required to make the Palace safe for everyone who works in and visits the building.

If a temporary Chamber is required, there are cheaper and less disruptive options available, and Members of Parliament should be given the chance to debate them. The House should take this opportunity to rethink plans for a full decant and instead consider a rolling programme of work on the Palace structure and services, working continuously in three shifts. It could be completed in five years, and the continuity of Parliament in this place maintained. The current plans in no way represent value for money, the importance of which was stressed in the Act of Parliament that set up the Sponsor Body.

Some Members of Parliament serve only for one term. My length of service, together with that of a number of colleagues who have spoken in this debate, is quite unusual these days. I will never forget walking into this building on my first day as a new Member of Parliament—even if some people mistook me for a Labour Member. The magnificence of the architecture and the weight of history that these walls carry was quite overwhelming. To deny the next generation of Members of Parliament that experience, and instead to swap it for a soulless copy of the Commons Chamber in another building, would be absolutely unforgivable.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Thank you, Sir David. You mentioned the architecture of this building, which is vital, but it is the people who make this building. Mike Weatherley was one of those people, and I counted him as a personal friend. He told me that he was standing down because he did not want to leave it too late to start another career. He did start another career, and he did it admirably well, travelling between California and the United Kingdom. I was devastated to learn of his illness, and more so this morning when I learned of his passing. My deepest condolences to his family.

3.17 pm

**Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con) [V]: It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess); contrary to what he said, he looks to me to be in fine working order.

In preparing for this speech, I tried to think about what the public would make of what we are debating this afternoon. For someone who does not live or work around Parliament, it is probably rather hard to envisage

the scale or the incredible intricate detail of the Palace of Westminster. As a new MP, I am still struggling with it. I imagine that when we talk about Parliament requiring, in some cases, quite literally hundreds of millions of pounds to be spent on it, it is probably very difficult for someone in the outside world to comprehend just where and how much of that money needs to be spent. That is the crux of this issue; in the eyes of the taxpayer, we have to justify that money.

Before I became an MP, I had some experience of renovating buildings and upgrading property. I was a director of a very large, historic family department store, which was extremely old, and we had a huge listed building that we were constantly improving, upgrading and modernising. I appreciate that that is not quite on the scale of what we are discussing. However, it beggars belief that we are in perhaps one of the greatest buildings in the world, steeped in such history, and our Parliament is in such a dire condition around us that we are discussing the need to decant. Talk about kicking the can down the road.

That raises the even bigger question of how, once we get this magnificent building restored and repaired, we keep on top of it year after year—for heaven's sake, let us make sure that we do—and not let it get into rack and ruin before fixing it again. I have no doubt that had we maintained it properly, we probably would not be dealing with the eye-watering cost and disruption that we now face. This is an historic icon and one of the most famous buildings in our country. We absolutely should restore it to its former glory, but then we need to keep on top of it and maintain it for the next 1,000 years.

In my experience of refitting old buildings, extending supermarkets with thousands of people a day walking through them, and even putting in new floors—yes, I have also removed asbestos from buildings—we never ever shut the business for one trading day. The people we inconvenienced were far more important than us MPs. They were called “customers” and, like taxpayers, they paid for the work. I am fully aware that Parliament is a much bigger and more complex job, but the principle is the same. This is a long-term, decade-long project, and I for one am more than happy to be inconvenienced. I cannot see the public having too much sympathy for us in that respect.

The public will want to know that we are doing our job properly, making good decisions, and that they are getting value for money—more than ever at this moment in time, given the state of the public purse. Yes, it is common sense to evaluate what is best for the taxpayer, but I question whether it will be cheaper to move out entirely, allow a blank canvas, and be away from the home of democracy for years on end. I fear the repercussions of a project of this scale rolling on indeterminately, and when we would get back. Indeed, as some Members have said, some of us might never return. Alternatively, we could put up with inconvenience, but we should get on with it as these works are much needed now. Obviously, we must ensure that it is safe, but let us not keep putting off the issues, and instead start to deal with them now.

We are in recess for around four months of the year. That gives a huge degree of flexibility, and the ability to tackle the project in stages. Surely it must be feasible to work around a functioning Parliament, if that is possible, viable and cost effective. Being here is a powerful incentive to get on with the job. Out of sight, as they say, is out of

[Duncan Baker]

mind. We have had months using a hybrid Parliament system, which could be used again if absolutely necessary, when some parts of the building were being worked on. It is fair to say that nothing is impossible, as we have seen over the past year, but we owe it to the taxpayer to spend their money wisely and properly. We as MPs are capable of being flexible and adapting, just as we and the rest of the nation have done. There are no such words as “can’t be done”, and great chunks of the work could be carried out around us, or indeed have already started. Above all, this is our home. It is where we represent our constituencies. This is the mother of democracy, and I would think carefully about the repercussions of not being inside these four walls, should we move out for a long period.

3.23 pm

**Dehenna Davison** (Bishop Auckland) (Con): As ever, I thank my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House for his characteristically fabulous history lesson which, as so often, filled me with a warm glow at having the honour of representing my constituents in this place. He was right to highlight the importance of this place at the centre of our national story. The walls that surround us, the very fabric of the Palace of Westminster, are a central tenet of our democracy. The palace may feature on postcards, tea-towels, ceremonial mugs and—I am guessing—the screensavers of many parliamentary staffers across this place, but first and foremost it is a working office.

This is a meeting place for representatives from around our Union, and an open and accessible centre for constituents to lobby us as their Members of Parliament. It is, of course, a thriving melting pot of political plotting, which happens in every corner of the building, not just here in the Chamber. It is vital not to lose sight of the fact that even though the palace is a symbol of London and of our nation, it is home to thousands of members of staff who support our work. Those members of staff deserve to work in a building whose fabric is not crumbling around them, where they can walk around without fear of falling masonry, and where they do not have to greet the office rat alongside their colleagues in the morning.

Naturally, the restoration of a grade I listed building and a UNESCO world heritage site housing a working legislature comes with unique challenges that are not faced by other large-scale restoration projects. We must complete the works quickly in a cost-effective manner and, vitally, with as little disruption to parliamentary business as possible, because what is this place for if not for legislating effectively, and never legislating for the sake of it, but instead doing all within our power to make people’s lives better?

The restoration and renewal process has felt like a black cloud looming over Westminster for too long. Since the appointment of a Joint Committee six years ago, it seems we have had endless back and forth and um-ing and ah-ing about the best route to follow, with no clear decision making and a troubling lack of clarity and transparency. The Sponsor Body’s strategic review—itsself due in October, but published in March—was full of redacted costings, including the capital costs of a number of potential decant locations for both this place and the other place. If the Sponsor Body is trusted to

make operational decisions for a significant chunk of the restoration and renewal works, it must be open and honest about how much these things are likely to cost.

I cannot stress how important it is that the cost of the work is reduced as much as feasibly possible, with no gold-plating in sight, while ensuring that democracy can still be done and we can continue to change lives for the better. I know that the past year has been an economic whirlwind for my constituents right across Bishop Auckland, and I have heard far too many stories of lost incomes, despite the Government’s unprecedented support schemes. On that note, I have severe reservations about voting in support of giving a blank cheque of up to £6 billion or more against the backdrop of such intense economic hardship, with millions upon millions spent on a management report alone, before a single brick or cable has even been restored. It is completely unacceptable.

In Bishop Auckland, we are waiting patiently for the result of our bid for just £46 million from the towns fund, so just imagine what we could do with £500 million. I do have a shopping list, Mr Deputy Speaker, including restoring the A&E, a Toft Hill bypass and a new school in Shildon, but I will save that for another day for fear of getting into trouble.

After this Chamber was bombed during the blitz and the question turned to how it should be rebuilt, Winston Churchill said:

“We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us.”—[*Official Report*, 28 October 1943; Vol. 393, c. 403.]

I would like to see it restored in all essentials to its old form. Churchill understood that the form and fabric of the Chamber is an essential ingredient of the fiery debates we hold in this place.

For that reason I would like to make clear how important it is that, whatever decant arrangements we agree on, we do not see a permanent return of hybrid proceedings. While virtual proceedings have allowed some hon. Members to spend more time at home with their families and in their constituencies in a difficult year, I am sure hon. Members on both sides of the House would agree that not being physically in the Chamber is detrimental to the parliamentary experience. I heard the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) make this point even more eloquently than me earlier. Small things, such as the inability to intervene in virtual speeches, have led to a significantly reduced quality of debates.

I know that the proposals included in the Sponsor Body’s strategic review involve the demolition and complete redevelopment of Richmond House as the location for the decant, and these plans involve the construction of a number of, in my view, unnecessary and expensive add-ons. I may have spent only about 18 months here as a Member, but I would be more than happy to forgo access to new cafés, Committee Rooms, replica voting Lobbies and gyms if it meant that I was saving my hard-working constituents their taxes and stopping them being wasted. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) so eloquently outlined, we have heard alternative proposals, such as those from Mark Hines Architects, which has drawn up plans for a temporary Chamber of the same size and layout as the current one, saving over £500 million compared with the current proposals—and I am back to my shopping list.

However, I will admit that I do have some concerns about a full decant. That is not, as the shadow Leader of the House lightly alluded to earlier, because I would miss the place, though I would, but for two reasons: first, as I have already highlighted, because I believe we need the minimal possible disruption to our ability to do our jobs and to serve our constituents, but also because of the optics. In a time when the nation's finances are stretched by the pandemic, how does it look to our constituents to demolish a 30-year-old building, only to construct a swanky new shiny one at vast expense just to be used temporarily?

My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) cannot be here today, but she asked me to represent her view in this debate, which is that we should seek both to reduce disruption to our democratic institutions and try to save our constituents money. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough highlighted a number of cost-effective possibilities, but my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton spoke to me about the possibility of shifting this Chamber into the House of Lords and moving the peers out to an alternative place, while ensuring that the democratically elected element of this place would continue to function as normal. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) has spoken eloquently about that, too.

As I highlighted earlier, given its UNESCO heritage site recognition, this place is of global significance. I share the view of my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher), who also cannot be here today. She believes that the decant works must be carried out as swiftly as possible. In her words, although I would never try to deliver them in her usual vivacious style and nor in her accent from what I consider to be the wrong side of the Pennines: “In the era of global trade deals an extended decant risks our global perception. I am of the view no longer than six months is tenable or we risk the following with our global trading partners, ‘Well, why would I use your company for my projects when you can’t renovate an old building to time?’”

On the point about the companies working on these projects, I agree with the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) and the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) that this should be a huge opportunity for businesses right across our country to contribute.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) highlighted earlier, the devastating fire at Notre Dame cathedral in 2019 acted as a tragic reminder that we must get the restoration and renewal works done as quickly as possible. If we waste time dithering and delaying, quibbling over how best to decant the Palace, not only does that risk spiralling costs to the taxpayer, but it increases the risk of a catastrophic incident such as what happened in Notre Dame. That is why, contrary to the view of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), now is the time for this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) stated eloquently that since the restoration project was first actioned, circumstances have changed and the political make-up of this place has changed, and that is why it is right we have this debate today.

In conclusion, I implore the Sponsor Body and corporate officers of both Houses to come together swiftly to find a definitive path for the works. Members’ staff and

most importantly the public need certainty over the timescale, costings and style of the works to rest in the knowledge that their democratically elected representatives will be able to do their duty to legislate, to scrutinise the work of Government and to keep the beating heart of democracy that our ancestors planted in this place alive and kicking for many generations to come.

3.31 pm

**Shaun Bailey** (West Bromwich West) (Con): After that fantastic contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison), I feel this is going to be a bit of a disappointment, but let us see how it goes.

This has truly been slightly seat-of-the-pants stuff today, believe it or not. I did not really know what to expect when I came into this debate. As we saw the opening salvos from the Leader of the House of Commons and the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), I thought we were going to see the old arguments of leave or remain, but just that we had stepped through the looking glass a little bit. As the debate has progressed, however, I think some really important points have been made. I am conscious that I will probably not be able to address all of them to the extent that I would wish to, but I would like to touch first on the idea of the opportunities that come out of this.

The right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and other hon. Members are absolutely right: there is an opportunity with these works, either way, to ensure we see the best this country has to offer—whether that means ensuring we have builders from Wednesbury, bricklayers from Spennymoor, electricians from Haslington, surveyors from Clitheroe or artists from Clifton—and to ensure that as we do this work we can showcase the best this country has to offer. We all know that it truly does have the best to offer. We need to ensure, as we come out of the pandemic and out of the economic hard times, that we use the restoration of this Palace as a symbol to everyone else that we are back and that we do support those industries, we do support our economy and we do support our local artisans. It is important that we do that at the heart of our democracy.

Picking up on a point made by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), this is an important debate. Do not get me wrong. There are other things I wish to talk about as well, of course. I want to have debates about how we protect survivors of domestic violence. I want to have debates about ensuring that the children in areas such as Princes End in my constituency, which has some of the highest rates of child poverty, get the resources and the opportunities they deserve. But at the moment, the way we do that is by ensuring that the basis of our democracy—the area we have those debates in—functions; that it can operate, that we can have those debates and done in the right way. Because if this place slows down and is not operational, we cannot do that and we cannot change people’s lives. That is why every single one of us is here: to change people’s lives for the better. That is why we are here, irrespective of party and irrespective of whether we are a socialist, Conservative, Unionist or nationalist, and to be able to do that, we need a place to do it from.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland that we must ensure we are back here after any sort of decamp, because that is what the public

[Shaun Bailey]

expect. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North made an interesting point when she said that her constituents saw this as a stuffy place. For the schoolchildren from areas such as Tipton in my constituency who came down pre-pandemic, this place was awe-inspiring. I remember welcoming a school down from Tipton just before the pandemic and their awe at this place. Many of them felt that this place was inaccessible to them, and I was so proud, as their Member of Parliament, to show them round and say to them, “No, you can come here, and do you know what? One day you could be sat on these Benches, and you should be able to aspire to be here.”

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Gentleman is making a fantastic point. I have had the opportunity, through the Parliamentary Education Centre, to have schoolchildren from the different strands of education—state schools, Catholic-controlled maintained schools and integrated schools—come to this place, and they all look forward to it, because it is an opportunity for them to see the mother of Parliaments at work and to ask their Member of Parliament questions. He is right: it is also an opportunity for us to give encouragement to those young people, who one day could be Members of Parliament.

**Shaun Bailey:** I thank the hon. Gentleman—my hon. Friend, if I may say so—for that intervention. He is absolutely right. It has been disappointing that, because of the pandemic, I have not had the opportunity to show more schools round, but I hope to be able to do so in the future with our fantastic Education Centre, which I pay tribute to for the work it does, as I am sure all Members do.

I touched previously on the best of British, and we have to ensure that the procurement is open and transparent. That is key, and it is what the public expect, particularly given the fact that we have gone through some interesting times over the last few months. We need to ensure that there is transparency. I will not regurgitate all the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland made about transparency on the costings, because she articulated them much better than I would, but we need to be up front with people about the cost of this. When we talk about billions of pounds, what does that actually mean? We bandy these words around in the Chamber quite a lot, but sometimes that can feel quite disconnected, as I know from the conversations I often have with my constituents, particularly a few weeks ago on the doorsteps.

For example, the £29 million spent on the Elizabeth Tower project could pay for us to run nearly 1,000 police stations in my constituency. I am actually losing all my constituency’s police stations, but that is a different matter altogether that we are not going to talk about right now. The point is that we have to make this relative to the people we represent, because I think we all agree that ultimately this is their Parliament. We are the custodians of it, but this is their Parliament, and we have to ensure that we do the work on their building—on the people’s building—in the way that they would expect us to do it, which is transparent and cost-effective and respects the situation that we now find ourselves in.

As many Members have said, when people are losing their jobs and their livelihoods, it is difficult to explain why we are spending millions of pounds on a building.

I would find it difficult to go into some of my most deprived communities that have lost so much and say to them, “We’ve just spent millions of pounds on knocking down a 35-year-old building.” I would struggle to look them in the eye and justify that.

I am conscious of the need to allow colleagues to make their contributions, so I will conclude. We have to get this right. As many Members have said, it is about the people who are here; they are at the heart of this. I echo the comments made about accessibility, which is really important. The hon. Member for Bristol West articulated that very well, and I absolutely agree with her. We have to ensure that, as part of the works, this place is accessible to everyone and allows everyone, irrespective of additional need, to access it.

Equally, we must ensure that the people we engage to do the work pay the living wage and use apprentices and that this work is done to advocate social mobility, so that people from all backgrounds and all strands of life can be part of the work and benefit from it.

This is vital work. It will set the stage for how this place is viewed in the decades to come. It is vital that we get this right and get this done, but it must be done in the right way that respects our communities.

3.39 pm

**Sara Britcliffe** (Hyndburn) (Con): It is always an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey). I must mention my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham) really wanted to contribute to the debate. I know he shares many of my views. I am grateful to be able to speak in this critical debate on how this fantastic building can be protected, preserved and restored for generations to come.

I start by agreeing with the general principle that Parliament must be restored, not only because I seem to spend more of my time with Stuart Little in this building than with my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), but because, as much as it is a working building, it is also a symbol identifiable around the world. It is our physical manifestation of democracy and British values, and it is a majesty to work in. I still remember the feeling I had after the 2019 general election when I came into this place for the first time as the representative of Hyndburn and Haslingden. I remember it because I still feel it to this day. This building gives us pride. It encourages us to be thoughtful, considered and collegiate, and it is steeped in history, from Westminster Hall to St Stephen’s Chapel. Let us not forget, and as we remembered only last week, that night during the second world war when this place was bombed by the Luftwaffe.

As a new MP, I cannot imagine being elected and not having the experience of walking into this place, but sadly that is what is proposed. Rather than work occurring around Members of Parliament, recognising the importance of this place’s continuing to function, as it managed even after being bombed during world war two, the proposal is for us all to leave. We all recognise that remaining in situ, with construction occurring around us, would be disruptive, but disruption is, I believe, a price worth paying. It can only be because of an aversion to disruption that works have not taken place already. Generations have ducked this question. It is right and proper that we

do not, and that we finally take the decisions on how much disruption can be tolerated and how much we are willing to pay, both immediately and over time.

Unfortunately, nothing that I have seen in these costings indicates a genuine attempt to get a handle on the costs of this colossal project. The most striking number I have heard so far is a potential cost of the survey running into the hundreds of millions of pounds. That money spent elsewhere would fund new schools, hospitals, road upgrades, rail line openings, freeports and research and development—all things that can make an enormous difference to the lives of my constituents. They create jobs, they level up, they spread equality of opportunity. For that money being spent on this project, what do we get? How much change do we see? Not very much. It will fund investigations and deliberations.

I accept that work will cost money, and my constituents accept that too, but we have to be proportionate. We have to consider the wider economic circumstances and those of our constituents. We have urgent infrastructure needs in Hyndburn and Haslingden. We do not need surveys. For this project to succeed, and most importantly to bring the public with it, we need to be realistic on the cost. What is realistic in the short term that needs doing as one block, and what can we span over multiple years, allowing our economic recovery to take hold, allowing us to deliver on some of our levelling-up promises so that opportunity is spread?

3.43 pm

**Paul Howell** (Sedgefield) (Con) [V]: It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe). The Palace of Westminster is a building, but it is more of an institution. It is of incredible historical importance, and for new Members like me, who have been deprived of valuable time in it, it is an iconic place to be revered for future generations. I, for one, fully support the move to not only restore it but to bring it up to date, ready for others to use it, appreciate its history and create more history within its walls. Its importance is enjoyed not only by those of us who sit here; more than 1 million people visit Parliament every year, including schoolchildren, constituents, businesses, charities and tourists.

However, a large part of this debate is about the value for money of this project. It is imperative that the many Members who, like me, are recent additions to this place are given the opportunity to scrutinise this project for our constituents. After the last year or so that they have endured, they need to see us enact our role as custodians of the public purse, which as we all know has taken a real hammering because of covid. However, we also need to make progress and not procrastinate any further. This place deserves our attention and investment, which has been delayed for too long. We need to reappraise what we are spending and how. Clearly, there are some non-negotiables, such as improving fire safety—we certainly do not want to see a Notre-Dame. However, covid, although wreaking havoc on so many aspects of life, has also shown us that changes in working practice can be delivered at extraordinary speed when there is a will. We need to take that mindset and see how we can substantially reconsider the ways in which operations can continue, albeit with some transitional inconvenience, while the restoration and renewal is delivered.

An ex-boss of mine, now sadly departed, had a phrase in managing our business: “follow the cash”. We need to do precisely that. It is said that if we look after the pennies, the pounds will look after themselves, but we also hear about people being penny wise and pound foolish. It is imperative we look for value at every stage and keep our focus on the pounds. We need proper procurement and management. This is not a private project with a private purse, so we must not be wasteful and we must have a stringent procurement process that is robustly and explicitly in control. We must see that things are done not only well and right, but appropriately, and without extravagance and wasteful spending where it is not really necessary.

There is also a way in which we can make this project contribute to the country’s purse. The Houses of Parliament restoration and renewal programme states that the restoration will be a

“national infrastructure project that will benefit small and medium-sized enterprises and create training opportunities all over the country.”

Small and medium-sized enterprises will be engaged in supply chains and will benefit significantly from the contract spend. It certainly makes sense that the contracts born of the restoration of such a quintessential British heritage site be given to British businesses. Only by ensuring that this project provides jobs to British companies and British people, and provides stimulus to British supply chains, can we truly claim that we are providing value for money and offsetting costs by allowing the job and business benefits to be here, where the source of the money is.

The project writes:

“The Delivery Authority will create a host of new employment and training opportunities, supporting thousands of jobs in construction, engineering, design, and IT”.

This will be

“as well as attracting those with specialist skills in carpentry, stonemasonry, metalwork, and heritage conservation”

and more.

The latter of those trades, which will have struggled during our national lockdown and need contracts, are also often to be found and practised in the areas we might call “left behind”. We need to ensure that unless there is absolutely no alternative all contracts remain on British soil. Not only would we support those who have faced some of the worst effects of the pandemic, but this might go a way towards our levelling-up agenda and give stimulus to some sectors and areas that have fallen behind in recent decades. Here is a good opportunity to take a good deal of money, which it will be, by necessity, and inject it into areas that really need it.

I must be clear that, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, this place is special. It is fundamental that it remains special and it continues to be a special home of democracy. Technology must be used to help the transition and we must minimise the frustrations to true debate, which this place affords normally but has failed to deliver over the past year, just as now, when I am giving a speech but this is not a debate that I am part of, even though we have this video link. Of course we need to deliver technology in this place that is as future-proof as possible, but we also need to have such broad thought on that, because in the time it will take to do that we cannot possibly imagine the further technological innovation

[Paul Howell]

that will take place. It is a difficult thing to do, but we must attempt to make sure we future-proof, where possible. We of course need to recognise that the positive changes in the perspective of inclusivity that we have seen in society must be fully incorporated into the fabric of this programme.

In conclusion, done well, this project is an excellent opportunity to invest, rather than just spend, the taxpayer's money, but it must be delivered in a way where our constituents can be confident that their money has been appropriately spent and that this place retains its place as the iconic seat of democracy.

3.49 pm

**Thangam Debonnaire:** We have had a good debate today. I am pleased to be part of closing this debate and to have seen almost every speech and heard the range of views. The well-informed right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who worked hard on so many things in her time as Leader of the House, reminded us, with a note of frustration, of how we got here. I understand that frustration, because she reiterated—as it needs to be reiterated—the increased costs of either delaying things or maintaining a continued presence in this place.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) has enormous expertise and is a font of knowledge not only on why we need to just get on with the job, but on how to do that well. As he said, he has been on every Committee that has discussed this matter over many years. He has put a great deal of thought not only into making sure that we are doing a good job as custodians for future generations, but into how we can make the decamp work.

It is also fair to say that other hon. and right hon. Members of the sponsor body board, including the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) and the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), who have obviously put in an enormous amount of work and said so today, made it clear that doing nothing, patching up and making do are no longer options. I do not know whether there is anybody left in this House who thinks that it is an option to do nothing, patch up and make do, but just in case, let us make it clear that that is not an option. Pretending that we do not need to do this is also just wrong, but so, too, is pretending that it is not going to cost more if we do this in a way that keeps us in here at increased cost, expense, time, risk and various other things that I might not have thought of.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, with her eye for detail and ability to cut to the heart of the argument, pointed out that the costs of endlessly and repeatedly debating the matter means that we keep on spending money. We carry on spending the taxpayers' money that many hon. Members here today have said that they want to take care of. We all want to take care of taxpayers' money. I cannot think that there is a single Member in this place who is not acutely aware of taxpayers' money. That is why so many of us want to ensure that we are preventing the further unnecessary spending of taxpayers' money that is occurring because of delay in the stop and start approach.

My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) made his case for getting on with the job with his customary style. He raised concerns about the disruption to the centre of London and put forward the interesting case for using the Thames as a conduit. While I am extremely fond of the Thames, I have also seen the sort of construction works that are needed to take place to make a landing-stage in tidal water such as the Thames, and I do have to say to him that I would like him to come to us with more information, but I am very concerned that his suggestion would mean more disruption, more noise and possibly more delay. However, it is obviously something that needs sorting out and with speed.

It was disappointing to hear so many hon. Members talking about taxpayers' money as if we are not at risk of having to spend more taxpayers' money if we do not act or if we do not decant to allow the work to get on efficiently. It is disappointing to hear it framed as if this were not a place of work for thousands of people, not just MPs, and as if it were not also the property of the taxpayers whom we are representing.

I have not yet mentioned voids. Anybody at all who has visited a tower block with dangerous cladding or other fire safety defects in the past few years, as I have, cannot fail to be horrified at the news of the voids that exist across this estate that present a great fire risk if they are not remedied. If we remain here while they are being remedied, that, in my view, represents an unnecessary risk at which to put MPs and, more importantly, staff.

I am glad to say that I found myself in agreement across party lines many times this afternoon—as I have already said with the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire and other members of the board. The right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) put forward many well-made points. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke with his customary charm and showed his willingness to try the difficult road. He has embraced technology even when he, I and many others have been, frankly, quite bothered by it at many times in the past year, and he is willing to put himself through more of the same so that we can do our work efficiently on behalf of the people we represent. Would that everybody would follow that example and be willing to take that difficult road. I say that even though I have frequently had cause to want to do something really rather fierce with my iPad when I have heard yet another person say, "You're on mute." I am going to get that put on a T-shirt to save everybody time.

What is in it for taxpayers? Apprenticeships, jobs, skills and crafts—businesses up and down the country are going to benefit from the money that we are not spending but investing. We are investing it not just in the building but in the constituencies of those Members who have expressed understandable concern about the cost. Of course, there must not be an unlimited flow of money—we all agree that that is essential. I cannot stress too highly that I do not think a single Member does not believe in value for money for the taxpayer—but in my view, from what I have read and been briefed on by the various experts, the idea of a partial decant to the House of Lords fails to take into account the fact that this is an entire estate, complete in itself. Although flawed, it is connected, with those flaws, which would in itself put us at possible further risk.

**Mark Tami:** I thank my hon. Friend for the very kind words she said about me earlier. On the point she is making, I am sure the Leader of the House agrees, because he was also on the Joint Committee, and we spent months—probably more than a year—looking at every one of the options, including using the House of Lords. On the surface it seems quite a sensible case of just moving down there, but as my hon. Friend rightly says this is one building and one set of services. It would be incredibly expensive and difficult to try to create new services, and we would still be working in a building site, so it just would not work.

**Thangam Debbonaire:** I thank my right hon. Friend for that detailed and informed view.

It is also worth reminding Members—and I say this respectfully to newer Members—of the awful day when we were locked in here because of the terrible murder of PC Keith Palmer. That cannot have failed to have alerted everybody in this place to security risks that we all would really rather we did not have. We have to remain within a secure perimeter, and I want to take seriously the advice that we have had from security specialists who say that staying within the northern estate is vital if we are to maintain security. Again, I have to say that it is not about us; it is about our staff and the public.

I have heard mention of Portcullis House; I walked across Portcullis House atrium yesterday and counted not one, not two, but three buckets collecting water from a leaky roof, so we are going to have to do some work if we think we are going to decant into Portcullis House. That is also a cautionary tale of what happens when we do not keep up with the maintenance.

I say to all right hon. and hon. Members, whether new or long-standing, that if they have not—as I have not yet, but I am booked to—taken the tour of horror, which I am told is really quite the horrifying tour, please will they do so? I think it will help those who have said that they do not how to explain it to their constituents. I completely get that, because to begin with I was not sure how, but once I had seen some of the pictures and heard some of the tales—I am about to go and see for myself—I finally understood how to talk to my constituents, because my constituents own this place, as do the constituents of other Members. That is why we need to stop the delays, recognise that the costs of delay are high and realise that a partial decant is in and of itself both a delay and a cost.

We need to recognise that the specialness of this place is worth preserving. This place is worth modernising and enhancing. Debate itself can take place anywhere that there are two politicians of different parties in a room—and even more so if they are of the same party. That debate can take place anywhere, and we now know that we can also vote in really quite constrained circumstances. It is not ideal, but it will do us until we can get back in here, fully modernised and fully safe.

3.58 pm

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** May I begin with the point mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and by you, Mr Deputy Speaker: our mutual friend, Mike Weatherley, whose death was sadly reported today? He and I coincided—we were elected to Parliament at the same time—and he was a friend to

every Member of this House. He was a kindly, good, decent, hard-working person. We send our deepest sympathies to his family and pray for the repose of his soul.

This has indeed been an excellent debate. I am grateful to everyone who participated, particularly the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), who has taken a very constructive and thoughtful approach to this matter. I think that we can work together, because it is one of those occasions where there is much more agreement than perhaps there appears to be on the surface. I will try to go through that and, at the same time, try to respond to all the contributions that have been made.

First, let me record my gratitude to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) for representing us on the Sponsor Body, for the work that he is doing, and for the extremely measured and thoughtful approach that he characteristically takes, pointing out to us that ultimately we will have to make choices. We will have to decide on what we want, to consider phasing, and to work out how much is renewal and how much is straight restoration. This will be fundamental to how the scheme is costed in the end.

I also thank my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who unfortunately is not in her place for the wind-ups. Given that she was the Leader of the House, she knows where this programme began and piloted it through its beginning stages very successfully. She made some important points about recognising that the work has to be done. That is fundamental. There is nobody who disagrees with that at all. The work needs to be done, and it needs to be done as soon as is practicable. There has been absolutely no delay in my period as Leader of the House. Indeed, I would argue the reverse.

Interestingly, my right hon. Friend gave an example of the stone falling on to the car of our right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General. That was not at the Palace; it was at Norman Shaw. That is why the works that we are doing have to be phased, and the work on Norman Shaw is taking place. I can tell the House that the plans for Norman Shaw are under way and the proposals are being made, and, as we are not now intending effectively to bulldoze Richmond House, they are going ahead faster. The planning permission went in, I think, in March and the work on Norman Shaw North should have its own decant in December 2021, with external works commencing in January 2022 and completion of the project in October 2025.

I have to tell the House that if we were continuing with the Richmond House programme, were waiting for that to happen and had not used Richmond House as the decant option for Norman Shaw, we would not even have started on Norman Shaw until 2025, let alone completed it. I must therefore reject the idea that things have not been happening.

Derby Gate, which of course creates some of the space for people moving out of Norman Shaw, will see people moving into it on 31 July this year. The preliminary works are taking place, and they are taking place faster because we have been trying to get the scheme under control. That is the second part of the work. The first part was to recognise that it needed to be done, but the second part was to look at the cost.

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

When I became Leader of the House, in one of my early meetings on restoration and renewal, it was suggested to me—this is not a formal forecast—that the cost range was likely to be £10 billion to £20 billion. That is ridiculous. It is not an amount that even those of us who are most committed to the project think is reasonable. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said in his excellent speech that the figures for Richmond House had risen to £1.6 billion. I knew that the combined cost of moving the two Chambers was £1.5 billion, but my right hon. Friend was suggesting £1.6 billion just for Richmond House.

The right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), as always, made a thoughtful contribution in which he spoke about decant. My opposition to decant has never been decant per se; it has always been a means to an end on cost. We were getting schemes that were so ridiculously expensive that one had to push back and say, “Surely there is a better and cheaper way of doing it.” Whether we can get it down to the £46 million suggested by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough, I am not certain, but £1.6 billion is not proper stewardship of public funds.

**Meg Hillier:** The right hon. Gentleman talks about cost, but we of course do not know what the cost is until the business case comes through, and I think that needs to be clear. Is he really suggesting that if we do the work around us, that will be cheaper than if we move out and do it in one hit and then come back?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I have not begun to suggest that, and I am very glad that the hon. Lady has intervened on me, because the figures given by the Public Accounts Committee on the £127 million of running costs that we are expending are not very well explained in the Committee’s report. If she wants to explain them, I would be delighted to give way.

**Meg Hillier:** The figures quoted are from the National Audit Office, and the full details are in the National Audit Office’s work. They are then simply quoted in the Public Accounts Committee report. It is National Audit Office work that is done to get those figures in the report.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Those figures seem to relate to the £44 million spent on the Northern Estate project, the £24.6 million for Canon Row, the £15.9 million for fire safety, the £12.6 million for the Elizabeth Tower and the £4.8 million for IT, almost all of which will continue regardless of how R and R is done. Therefore I am concerned about the impression being given by this figure that there is a massive increase in cost because we have not yet moved out. I do not think that is accurate, but if the hon. Lady would like to give more elaboration on the figures, I would find it very helpful.

I have tried to look for further details to understand what is being quoted in that £127 million figure that was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire and alluded to by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier). I think it is important to get an understanding that a lot of the costs we are being told are extra are actually preliminary, because we are getting on with the work to get things ready.

There is the crucial work—a number of people have mentioned Notre Dame—on fire safety. We should bear in mind that the fire safety work has been tested and completed, with the exception of the Victoria Tower, in the past few months, and includes: 7,112 automatic fire detection devices; 1,364 locations for fire stopping compartmentation, dividing the Palace into 16 compartments; 4,126 sprinkler heads in the basement of the Palace, so the risk that we have heard about of a conflagration from the basement is very, very significantly reduced; and the 8 miles of pipe that I have referred to before.

It is really important to understand that a lot of work is already going on and ties in with the outline business case, which is being carried out to schedule by the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority. That is the right way to proceed, because a number of people have mentioned the Elizabeth Tower, including the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch, and what went wrong there with the cost going up from £29 million to £80 million. The key thing we learn from that is that we need to do the outline business case in detail.

I actually think that had we said to the British people, “To redo Big Ben, a national symbol, would cost us £80 million”, the British people would have said that that was a perfectly reasonable thing to do. I think the criticism came because the expense rose as the process unfolded. We want to ensure that that does not happen with restoration and renewal and that we get a figure that is realistic.

**Shaun Bailey:** Just to touch on that very briefly, if I understand my right hon. Friend correctly, it is not so much that we have an aversion to public expenditure; what I think he is trying to say is that we should be up front with the public about exactly what that looks like. Am I correct in understanding what he is trying to say there?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Absolutely, but within limits. The £10 billion to £20 billion would, I think, test the patience of most of our voters. That is why I do not think that this House should go blindly into approving or delegating this scheme without knowing precisely what the cost is. This debate is therefore important, because the outline business case is being worked on as we speak. Those involved have begun the survey work, and they are getting on with it, which is really important. But if they come back to us in early 2023 and say, “The cost is going to be £10 billion to £20 billion.” there will be a vote in this House to approve it or not. I have a nasty feeling that if it is at that level, we will not approve it, and yet the work must be done. So now is the time to give the message that we are willing to accept a little inconvenience and to have more restoration than renewal, and that while we have to ensure that disability access is done properly, we recognise that the last percentage of disability access is the most expensive. There are therefore compromises that we will be called upon to make.

**Meg Hillier:** On the Elizabeth Tower—I alluded to this, but perhaps I should quote directly from the NAO report—Parliament’s internal auditors identified, among other things,

“inadequate project governance; high turnover of project staff; and poor cost estimation.”

That really encapsulates the things that we do not want to get wrong with this project. It will cost a lot of money, but we need to be sure that we have had proper

governance and proper cost destination and that we are presenting to the public a figure that is real, even though it will not be cheap.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am absolutely at one with the hon. Lady, and I am grateful for that helpful intervention. That is why the outline business case is being worked on now. We hope to have some preliminary idea about it early next year, with the vote on it in 2023.

Let me return to some of the individual contributions. My neighbour and right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) emphasised the symbolism, the need to get on with things and the stonework. It is important that, under the Act, the Commission—I can assure the House that the Commission is very aware of this—is allowed to carry out repairs before the R and R body takes over. We have scaffolding up, so it seems sensible to try to do repairs where we can. There is no point in having scaffolding, as it currently is, just acting like the slips, waiting to see what catches come its way, although of stonework rather than cricket balls. So I agree with what my right hon. Friend said.

The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) seemed to want to become Old Father Thames, which was a rather charming way of suggesting how we should rebuild the Palace. My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) emphasised the limits on public money, as did the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He also encouraged, as did many others, UK-wide working and opportunities, and pressed for answers on timescales, which we will get in the outline business case.

I find myself in a very high level of agreement with my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who pointed out that this is a place of work. Although it is nice that tourists come to see it, that must not interfere with its work as a legislature, and if we need to do building work in August, it cannot be open to the public in that time. Getting that priority right is very important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) said, “Get on with it!” I hope that I have persuaded him that we are getting on with it, and that is what everybody wants to do. As I have set out, the preliminary works are very much already happening.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West wanted a date for the Elizabeth Tower, and I will give him a date. I am told that the bells will ring in early 2022. Now, “early”, when used by the civil service, is one of those things that I have learned about in my brief time in Government, and early 2022 could mean some time in December, but it would be early December. However, there is a better promise, which is that the scaffolding will be down by summer 2022—“summer”, of course, is an equally elastic term. What particular point in summer, I do not know, but we are almost there. The bells were being tested this morning, and it was really rather wonderful to hear them—it was uplifting. My hon. Friend made the crucial point, which was so helpful to the argument, that the Richmond House planning would have delayed us until 2027, which would have been an added complication and problem with the whole programme.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) brought his own experience to bear in a very interesting way, and talked about how we look

after customers. He said that we do not inconvenience them, but that we sometimes have to recognise the need to keep going regardless.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison) made an inspiring and sparkling speech. She was against gold-plating, as am I, and did not want a blank cheque in these economic circumstances. She reminded us of Churchill’s view of how buildings shaped our democracy. She also talked about what it would look like to our constituents if we decided to do things in a sort of Liberace way—I am not very keen on doing things in a Liberace way. *[Interruption.]* I am being mobbed out from the Front Bench by the Deputy Chief Whip. As he has 330 votes in his pocket, I must not ever dare to disagree with him; otherwise, Government business might become problematic.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey) mentioned opportunities and the need for there to be a plan for jobs. I think his basic plea was for every member of his constituency to be employed on the parliamentary estate. He referred to apprenticeships. Apprenticeships will be important and will have a long-running benefit for the heritage of this country because the stonemasons who are trained here will then be stonemasons who work on our great cathedrals and other heritage buildings.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) mentioned the symbolism of this place and told us very clearly—I think this is the right way to put it—that we cannot duck the question. If we duck the question, we will end up grousing, to carry the bird thought through. But that is what we are doing now: we are not ducking the question.

I was delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgfield (Paul Howell) spoke. I fear that even now, nearly 18 months after the general election, one’s heart still leaps at the thought that Sedgfield is a Conservative seat. Leaving that little point aside, he mentioned what an iconic institution this is with its 1 million visitors. Follow the cash, as his old boss used to say to him, is what we must definitely be doing. The important point is that it is very hard to future-proof in terms of technology, because we think we are future-proofing but the technology goes off in some other direction that we did not think about. So we have to be open to a variety of opportunities.

This is a long-term project and it will come at very considerable cost to the taxpayer. The solutions we arrive at must therefore be the best option for the preservation of the Palace of Westminster and in the public interest, prioritising value for money. This is fundamentally a parliamentary project. I cannot remember who said that actually it is a fundamentally House of Commons project, because the symbolism of this House as the democratic House is what people think about when they look at the Palace of Westminster. I have the greatest admiration and respect for their lordships, but when people look at this palace, they think of the home of the world’s oldest democracy. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset made that fundamentally important point. It is a parliamentary project. It is a House of Commons project. We are the ones who are accountable to taxpayers.

I have set out my Government’s views and other hon. and right hon. Members have set out theirs. I am confident that the restoration and renewal programme team will listen to those carefully, and in the coming

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months the Sponsor Body will engage with MPs and peers to seek their views on how the proposals should develop. It is vital that parliamentarians give their time, energy and expertise to this process so that collectively we shape a programme that safeguards both the Palace of Westminster and taxpayers' money, and will make St Peter proud.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** If there is a Liberace candelabra going spare, I can think of no more fitting place than the Leader of the House's modest office.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster.

## Business without Debate

### REGULATORY REFORM COMMITTEE: TRANSFER OF FUNCTIONS

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 9(6)),*

That—

(1) The Regulatory Reform Committee be abolished and its functions transferred to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

(2) The following amendments be made to Standing Orders:

(a) In Standing Order No. 18 (Consideration of draft legislative reform orders etc.),

(i) in paragraph (1), line 1, leave out “Regulatory Reform Committee” and insert “Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee”, and

(ii) leave out “Standing Order No. 141 (Regulatory Reform Committee)” in each case where it occurs and insert “Standing Order No. 141 (Scrutiny of regulatory and legislative reform orders etc)”.

(b) In Standing Order No. 83P (Certification of instruments), in paragraph (9) leave out “Regulatory Reform Committee” and insert “Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee”.

(c) In Standing Order No. 83Q (Deciding the question on motions relating to certified instruments), in paragraph (1) leave out “Regulatory Reform Committee” and insert “Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee”.

(d) In Standing Order No. 141 (Regulatory Reform Committee),

(i) leave out the title and insert “Scrutiny of regulatory and legislative reform orders etc”,

(ii) leave out “There shall be a select committee, called the Regulatory Reform Committee,” and insert “The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee shall be the select committee”,

(iii) leave out from the end of sub-paragraph 3(l) to the end of paragraph (3),

(iv) leave out paragraphs (10) and (11),

(v) leave out paragraph (12) and insert “In undertaking functions under this order, the committee and any sub-committee of it shall have the assistance of Counsel to the Speaker.”,

(vi) leave out paragraph (13) and insert “In undertaking functions under this order, the committee and any sub-committee of it shall have power to invite Members of the House who are not members of the committee to attend meetings at which witnesses are being examined in relation to matters within paragraphs (1)(i) to (iii) and such Members may, at the discretion of the chair, ask questions of those witnesses; but no Member not being a member of the committee shall otherwise take part in the proceedings of the committee or sub-committee, or be counted in the quorum.”.

(e) In Standing Order No. 142 (Localism Act 2011, etc: scrutiny of certain orders and draft orders),

(i) in paragraph (1) leave out “Regulatory Reform Committee” and insert “Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee”,

(ii) after paragraph (13) add

“(14) In undertaking functions under this order, the committee and any sub-committee of it shall

(i) have the assistance of Counsel to the Speaker, and

(ii) have power to invite Members of the House who are not members of the committee to attend meetings at which witnesses are being examined in relation to matters within paragraph (1) and such Members may, at the discretion of the chair, ask questions of those witnesses; but no Member not being a member of the committee shall otherwise take part in the proceedings of the committee or sub-committee, or be counted in the quorum.”.

(3) In the Resolution of 19 March 2013 (Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of Section 4A(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009), as amended on 26 March 2015, 11 October 2016, 4 July and 12 September 2017 and 30 January 2018 and 16 January 3 February and 2 March 2020, leave out “Regulatory Reform Committee”.

(4) In the Order of 20 May 2020 (Liaison (Membership)), leave out “Regulatory Reform”.—(*Maggie Throup.*)

*Question agreed to.*

### STANDARDS

*Ordered,*

That Anne McLaughlin be discharged from the Committee on Standards and Allan Dorans be added.—(*Maggie Throup.*)

### PRIVILEGES

*Ordered,*

That Anne McLaughlin be discharged from the Committee of Privileges and Allan Dorans be added.—(*Maggie Throup.*)

## North of England: Transport Infrastructure

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(*Maggie Throup.*)

4.19 pm

**Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am pleased that other hon. Members intend to make a contribution.

The Government talk a lot about levelling up and there can be few more important elements of that agenda than transport. It is critical if we want to grow our national economy or cut our national carbon emissions. It is critical if we want to heal the growing inequality, division and disillusionment that are tearing at the fabric of our country. However, this is not just an agenda for the north; it is an agenda for the whole of the UK—one we should be able to collaborate on constructively, no matter what our party. But it is also an agenda that demands action, not words. The change we need will not come with half measures.

Of course, right now, all our transport is reeling from the impact of covid, so the first ask of Government is to ensure that support is sustained until passenger numbers and confidence recover. Cutting back too soon would force urgent cuts to services, needlessly deepening the hole that we need to climb out of. I know that the Minister takes these matters very seriously, and I am sure—and certainly hope—that he agrees that any such cuts would be very short-sighted.

However, our goal has to be so much more than survival, and nowhere is there more potential or more need for ambition than with our buses. They have suffered from decades of ideological neglect—a perfect example of free market fundamentalism—but they are the backbone of our public transport and the most realistic place to look for the quick results we need on decarbonisation, congestion and inclusion. The only appropriate ambition for our buses is a truly world-class service, and that is what I am working to achieve in South Yorkshire. That ambition means a rapid shift to a zero carbon fleet. It means affordable, flexible fares. It means routes and frequencies that genuinely serve all our communities, and it means buses integrated into a coherent regional system, with seamless connections across every mode. If the Netherlands can do it, why cannot we? If we build a system that works, people will use it, but that, of course, needs funding.

I am genuinely pleased that we now have a national bus strategy. It is a welcome recognition of the utter failure of deregulation but, so far, it is long on aspiration and short on detail, with no clarity yet over how 85% of the promised £3 billion will be spent, or how much of it will reach places such as South Yorkshire. The Government's ZEBRA—zero emission bus regional area—funding for electric buses similarly sounds great, but it is a competitive pot that will cover only a handful of areas across the whole country. Central revenue funding for bus services was slashed by almost 20% between 2009 and 2018 and is an unbelievable 15 times lower per head in Sheffield than it is in London. Three billion pounds sounds quite a lot, but it is a fraction of what is needed to repair the damage. If the Government are serious about change, we need to have adequate, long-term and reliable funding.

The issue with buses is not just funding, but structure and ownership. Deregulation has been disastrous, so the Government must give Mayors and local government leaders not just the freedom, but the support to make bolder changes, such as moving to franchising, if that is needed, in order to have the control, integration and value for money that a world-class service demands.

We need a similar ambition for our trams. Supertram is a great, zero-emission success in Sheffield but, after 30 years, it needs funding for renewal and improvements such as extending our groundbreaking tram-train services. Meanwhile, there is enormous untapped potential for similar systems in other northern regions such as West Yorkshire.

Active travel must be another central priority for northern transport. It helps people to live healthier lives, supports more pleasant and connected communities and gets cars off the road. It reduces carbon emissions and other air pollution, and is accessible to people on lower incomes. That is why, in South Yorkshire, we are investing more than £100 million in it over the next two years and are working with the Government to do still more. But we need that sort of investment right across the north. We also need to electrify all road transport, not just our buses. The Government have a critical role in encouraging a wide network of charging points, but the rate of installation is currently just a fifth of what it needs to be to meet the UK's climate goals. The modest means available betray the grand aspiration.

The role of central Government is especially critical in rail. High Speed 2 has dominated much of that debate but, for me, faster rail journeys to London are a distinctly secondary contribution to levelling up. My first priority is transport within my region—the sort that gets people to work and the shops every day—and then the transport between the cities and towns of the north, especially Northern Powerhouse Rail. HS2 makes sense because it promises to enable those things but, if it undermines them instead, it deeply compromises its claim to be part of levelling up.

Like other northern leaders, I am hugely concerned that the Government are considering delaying or cutting corners with NPR, or combining it with the trans-Pennine upgrade to help pay for HS2. The Minister has been supportive in the past and I hope that he will reassure me today that that is not the case.

Equally concerning is the possibility that HS2 East through Sheffield and Leeds could be postponed. Not only would that make HS2 meaningless in terms of levelling up for a huge swathe of the north, including some of its most deprived areas, but it would jeopardise NPR and local transport investment around Sheffield. It would be the worst of all worlds.

Therefore, if the Government are serious about HS2 being a project for the north, they should build phase 2 in its entirety, on time, while doing the same for NPR, Midlands Engine Rail and other supporting works. That might sound like quite a lot to ask, but having embarked on HS2 with a promise that it would not come at the cost of northern regional rail renewal, the Government cannot now propose half measures.

The full impact of HS2 and NPR is more than a decade away, so the Government can and must move decisively to level up northern rail now. Across the region, there are smaller-scale investments that can have

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an outsized impact. We have set out the case for early investment in midland main line electrification up to Sheffield and the work between Sheffield and Clayton Junction to deliver an HS2 and NPR-ready section within 10 years. I hope that the Minister will agree that that should be prioritised, irrespective of when HS2 East goes ahead.

The works to improve the Manchester central corridor will have benefits across the north of England. A rail link from Doncaster Sheffield Airport would unlock the huge potential of GatewayEast. Simply getting on with the endlessly delayed electrification of our existing lines would give a major boost not just to decarbonisation, but to simplified rail operations and high-skilled jobs. Instead, we are left fighting service reductions, like the potential suspension of direct trains from Sheffield to Manchester Airport. The lack of a direct link to a major airport 45 miles away is just not compatible with any serious ambition for our railways.

Amid all the talk of renewal, the Government are cutting Network Rail's enhancement budget by £1 billion and have slashed the operating budget for Transport for the North. The just published Williams review is a welcome, if so far incomplete, admission of the failures of privatisation and the need for a single strategic body for rail. However, it still runs the risk of putting profits ahead of passengers and leaves major questions unanswered, notably on the structure of our railways and decarbonisation.

Over the decade to 2019, the north received barely 40% of the per capita public spending on transport that went to London. That is a huge gap to make up, but it is not just about the money; it is also about how things are done. To succeed, transformation needs to happen in partnership with—and where possible, led by—local government. We need stronger local and regional devolution, including a northern transport budget and an end to piecemeal competitive funding pots, so that we can plan for the long term and reshape our transport systems as a coherent whole.

We need a transport strategy defined not just by greater investment but by a compelling vision for the sort of society we want to build in the north and beyond, with liveable communities, affordable transport and a rapid and just transition from fossil fuels. With the greatest respect to the Minister, whose sincerity and hard work I have seen on countless occasions, I do not believe that the Government yet have that vision. I want to acknowledge, though, the positive moves they have made, not least the providing of emergency covid support, and I am grateful for the investment that we have been able to secure in South Yorkshire recently. But if you have committed yourself to transformation, there are no prizes for good work at the margins. The Government's talk about levelling up conceals a much meaner reality. From HS2 to TfN to buses, the investment does not yet match the fundamental change that I think we all want to see.

To conclude, the transformation of northern transport is the right goal. Our economy demands it, our environment demands it, our people demand it and basic fairness demands it. I want to work together with the Minister and the Government to ensure that we achieve it, but that means that words alone will not do. Promises alone

will not do. A low-balled, scattergun investment will not do. If the Government talk about transformation, they need to act like they mean it.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Dan Jarvis, the mover of the motion and Andrew Stephenson, the Minister responding, have given permission for three short contributions, and I have been informed, as per the rules.

4.32 pm

**Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con):** I thank the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) and the Minister for allowing short contributions to this Adjournment debate from me and my colleagues. I agree entirely with the points the hon. Gentleman has been making about the crucial role that transport plays in levelling up and in delivering our environment targets, and about how we can improve our communities right across the country and especially in the north. I have absolutely no doubt that connectivity drives economic activity and that economic activity is a key driver of growth, but it is harder than it should be to move people and goods around our country, and around the north in particular.

It was great to hear the hon. Gentleman talk so much about buses. As the Minister responsible for the Bus Services Act 2017, I have to say that there were not that many voices in support of buses then. It was like, "You what?" from colleagues at the time, but buses seem to be much more in favour at the moment, and that is a good thing. I slightly disagree with one of the points the hon. Gentleman has just made, however. The deregulation of buses was not a cause of bus use decline. In the 30 years leading up to deregulation in 1985, passenger numbers on buses went down from 15.5 billion to 5.5 billion passenger journeys per year. That is an average decline of 2% a year. Since deregulation, yes indeed, passenger numbers have continued to go down, but they have gone down at the significantly reduced rate of 0.2% per year. So I think that those who were responsible for bus deregulation in the 1980s could easily make the case that they went into new territory and saved the bus industry from its precipitate decline. But let's not worry about that. The key thing is that we have a new enthusiasm for buses.

Buses are the hard yards of our public transport system. It is impossible to imagine a good, effective transport system without buses at its heart. The drive towards more environmentally friendly buses, particularly electric powered buses such as those we have in Harrogate, will be popular right across the country. Today, we have seen the publication of the response to the Williams review. I have not yet read it all, and it will be interesting weekend reading. Again, we have questions about how to take things forward from a position of more strength. We have 140,000 services per week in our country, which is the highest level in our history. Passenger numbers have grown to 1.8 billion—a billion more passenger journeys a year since rail privatisation. People have been choosing rail, which has been a key ingredient of economic progress in this country ever since railways were invented.

Railways helped to drive the industrial revolution and made the UK the economic powerhouse that it has been. It will be interesting to see how we build on that to make it even better. There is no doubt in my mind that

the system was over-complex and needed reform, and I look forward to the work that has taken place in the Department, and the Williams review.

I will conclude—short contributions only—by highlighting a couple of areas. The Minister is a great champion for investment. He has been consistent and hardworking on this issue, and I ask him to consider two areas. The first is connectivity to ports—sea ports and airports; goods and people. Liverpool2 is an example of an interesting port development. Improving access to maximise that investment is not easy, given its location, but it is important to grasp that nettle. Leeds Bradford airport involves a different mode of transport. Some years ago, more people were leaving Yorkshire to travel from Manchester airport than travelled from Yorkshire itself. If we could improve airport capacity and connectivity within Yorkshire, a significant amount of journeys would become unnecessary.

Finally, I am a big supporter of HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail, which includes delivering the eastern leg of HS2. It is important to separate the trans-Pennine rail upgrade from Northern Powerhouse Rail. Northern Powerhouse Rail is about fast connectivity between the cities of the north; the trans-Pennine rail upgrade is about connectivity into the slightly smaller towns and cities—the Huddersfields, or wherever. There is a difference between into and intra. That is not widely understood, but it is significant. The projects do different jobs, and both need to proceed. I am conscious of time, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I will conclude my remarks. I know that the Minister is a great champion both from and for the north, and I want to support his work to ensure that the north gets the services it needs.

4.38 pm

**Sara Britcliffe** (Hyndburn) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for allowing us to highlight some of the infrastructure needed in our constituencies, which go under the title of “the north.” The Minister will know all about what I am about say. I have been working with Ministers for more investment in a strategically important freight terminal in Huncoat, and the redevelopment of the Skipton to Colne railway line. Both would deliver significant economic growth in my constituency and across the north. One priority of this Government has been to set out the importance of improving west to east connectivity in the north, primarily joining Liverpool to Hull, and I reiterate the important role that Hyndburn and Haslingden can play in that.

The location of the Huncoat freight terminal is perfect and, if realised, it would be a major step forward in making connectivity more viable. Many important stakeholders in the north have already recognised the potential of a Huncoat freight terminal, as they recognise the significant role it would play in increasing distribution capacity for the movement of goods across the north-west. That is even more important when congestion at the Manchester freight terminal is taken into account, as that is a major block to continued economic growth in the north.

Manufacturing businesses across Lancashire see the terminal as a huge opportunity for them to increase their output and expand their logistics network, which will be key to increasing exports as part of our post-Brexit, post-pandemic economy. Huncoat is especially suited to work for Lancashire businesses as it sits at the centre

of the motorway network. It is on the motorway junction and will need only a feeder road, meaning that goods vehicles will not cause congestion in residential areas.

As is well known, the last mile in logistics infrastructure is often the most difficult, and that is the case for Manchester. The opportunity at Huncoat would not be hindered by such challenges, however. It is a unique investment opportunity in building freight capacity not only because of its proximity to the motorway network, but because all the ground conditions are already in place for freight, as it was once part of the now-closed Huncoat quarry. In Hyndburn Borough Council’s local plan, it has been preserved for the use of a freight terminal for decades, with the support of Northern Rail, which also believes the site could be strategically important.

This project would play a wider role in supporting the reopening of the Skipton to Colne railway line, which needs a major freight transport element to make it viable. That has been highlighted by the local authority and the campaign group Skipton East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership, who have indicated that passenger journeys alone will not make the business case strong enough for this investment. I thank SELRAP for its hard work in the development of this line, and I know my hon. Friend the Minister will join me in doing so.

I will continue to work with the Department for Transport on the matter. We need that railway line, because it will provide numerous benefits to commuters and our local economy. The line will link east Lancashire with new economic opportunities in cities across the north, and better east-west connectivity will improve access to diverse employment opportunities for everyone. Importantly, the new route will connect affordable housing in east Lancashire with employment opportunities across the north, and it will be a catalyst for regeneration in communities such as mine in Hyndburn and Haslingden. The reopening of the Skipton to Colne railway line and the development of the Huncoat freight terminal will assure residents—first-time Conservative voters, I might add—across east Lancashire that the Government are delivering on their promise to level up.

4.41 pm

**Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): It is always an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe). I thank the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing this debate and allowing us all to speak on incredibly important issues. To me, transport in Rother Valley, which is in the north and part of the Sheffield city region, is one such issue. I want to focus particularly on connectivity between the two biggest towns in my constituency, Maltby and Dinnington, which have no direct bus link. That is a crucial issue for residents of those towns. It is great that the hon. Gentleman has secured this debate, because I know that he, as the Mayor of the Sheffield city region, will be listening to my pleas for that bus service.

My constituents are concerned that Maltby and the rest of Rother Valley have been neglected when it comes to recent investment in transport and infrastructure projects. Of the £47 million allocated to Rotherham to improve transport last year as part of the transforming cities fund bid submitted by the Sheffield city region, only £2.25 million has been allocated to projects that directly benefit Rother Valley. Although the transforming

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cities fund scheme will provide a bus corridor along the section of route between Rotherham and Maltby, the basic, core issue—the need for reliable and frequent buses connecting Maltby to jobs and educational opportunities—is not being addressed.

Maltby is the 76th most left-behind area in England, and 32% of households do not own a car. Constituents contact me constantly with deeply concerning tales of missing work, education and important appointments because buses drive past them or do not turn up. Maltby schoolchildren who are placed at Dinnington High School face a colossal one-hour journey with a bus change to travel just 5.2 miles. Workers who are offered jobs in Dinnington and Doncaster are unable to accept those opportunities because of the lack of public transport options, and I have heard cases of people missing interviews for jobs because of the poor connectivity.

I welcome the Government's announcement of the national bus strategy, but the Sheffield city region must play its role in ensuring that Maltby and other towns and villages across Rother Valley—Dinnington, Kiveton Park, Swallownest, Treeton, North Anston and all the others—are not forgotten about. Unless the Sheffield city region steps up and presents viable projects to attract the investment that is needed, it will simply not happen. Obviously there are many other projects—this is not just about buses. For instance, I hope that Sheffield city region will join me in trying to get the South Yorkshire joint railway reopened and support my campaign to get a new station at Waverley.

Sheffield city region and this Government must prioritise Rother Valley's transport, rather than focus on white elephants such as HS2. Rother Valley does not want HS2. South Yorkshire and my part of it do not want HS2—it is not a priority. What is a priority is the buses and the connectivity, especially to and from Maltby, to ensure that no community is left behind. I invite all parties—whether it is the Government, Sheffield city region or Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council—to work together to get the buses that my towns and villages need to be connected and to truly level up Rother Valley and all of South Yorkshire.

4.45 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this important and timely debate, and I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) and for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) for their short contributions.

I think we can all agree that we share the same vision: a north that is better connected, more resilient and fully able to realise its full economic potential—in short, levelling up the northern powerhouse and building on the £29 billion invested in transport across the region since 2010. The Government are steadfastly focused on delivering that vision. The Department for Transport in particular, led by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who is also the Cabinet Minister responsible for the northern powerhouse, is delivering real change on the ground and accelerating priority projects to make that ambition a reality. We know that there are significant challenges. The pandemic has dealt a huge blow to

transport users and operators across the north. In South Yorkshire, the Department ensured continuity of services with £500,000 in the bus service support grant and almost £10 million in light rail support to the Sheffield Supertram.

As the vaccination roll-out continues at pace across the country and we look forward to the lifting of restrictions, the challenge now faced by the north is how we get on with building back better after covid-19. There are already promising signs. For example, the pandemic has renewed our focus on moving to a zero-carbon future. Sheffield city region received almost £7 million from the emergency active travel fund during the pandemic. In addition, the Prime Minister has announced £2 billion in funding for active travel nationally, with the aim of half of all journeys in towns and cities being on foot or by bike by 2030. That funding, underpinned by strong partnership working with local and combined authorities, is key to improving active travel, reducing our carbon footprint and creating thriving town and city centres across the north.

This is levelling up in action. Indeed, let no one be in any doubt about the Government's commitment to levelling up the north as we recover from this dreadful pandemic. It is at the centre of the Government's agenda, with a White Paper in development led by the Prime Minister himself. Significant progress has been made, with over 60% of the north now covered by metro Mayors, offering a strong voice for the people of those areas, as well as access to new funding opportunities, particularly for transport. The intra-city transport settlements announced in the 2020 Budget deliver £4.2 billion to mayoral city regions over the next five years from 2022-23. In the Budget earlier this year, we announced more than £30 million of capacity funding for northern city regions to help prepare for those settlements. That funding is crucial to places such as the Sheffield city region, where engagement is ongoing between the Department and the combined authority on the proposed Sheffield Supertram renewal. On top of that, we have the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund, cementing our commitment to the vision of a prosperous and thriving nation where no area is left behind.

Transforming railways in the north will have a dramatic impact on our national infrastructure by releasing capacity, reducing our carbon footprint and improving journey times and reliability, and this was touched on by all hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn continues to make a compelling case for the Colne to Skipton line and especially for a freight terminal at Huncoat in her constituency. I pay tribute to her continued campaigning on that issue; given my constituency interest, I will leave that one there. Other Members continue to make a compelling case, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, who continues to make important points about freight. I am pleased to tell him that I met the metro Mayor for the Liverpool city region on Monday to talk about freight, among other issues. Those conversations across the midlands and the north continue to be ongoing as we look to support freeports and other investment which will have an impact on the need for increasing the amount of rail freight we can transport.

We have made significant progress on the railways in recent years. We brought the failing Northern franchise under direct departmental control in March 2020. We

removed the last Pacer train from operational services in December. However, we know that there is much more to do. On the trans-Pennine route upgrade, £589 million, with more to follow, has already been allocated on the main route between Manchester and Leeds. I know the hon. Member for Barnsley Central shared my joy at the announcement of £137 million to upgrade the Hope Valley line. These improvements will deliver much needed capacity and reliability between Sheffield, Manchester and Leeds to better connect our northern powerhouse, but our vision goes beyond upgrading existing infrastructure and we want the north better connected by both conventional and high-speed rail services.

Last year, following the Oakervee review, the Prime Minister confirmed that HS2 would go ahead. He also committed to delivering an integrated rail plan to determine how best to deliver phase 2b of HS2 alongside other major rail investments in the midlands and the north. I want to reiterate the Government's commitment to HS2, much to the disappointment, I know, of my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley. We are committed to delivering HS2 and to enabling the east midlands, Yorkshire and the north-east to reap the benefits of high-speed rail services.

**Alexander Stafford:** On HS2, may I have a commitment from the Government that if it does go ahead—I hope it does not—every step will be taken to mitigate the dangerous and damaging effects that could destroy villages in Rother Valley?

**Andrew Stephenson:** My hon. Friend makes a powerful case on behalf of his constituents, something he has done repeatedly in meetings with me since he was elected. When I was put in charge of the HS2 project in February last year, I committed to ensuring that communities are put at the heart of the project. We have had a land and property review. We have taken various other steps to ensure that impacts on communities are mitigated, so I hear loud and clear the concerns of his constituents, while still believing that this project is of vital importance to this country.

Since the announcement of the integrated rail plan, I have met local leaders, Members of Parliament and business groups to hear about their priorities for major rail investment, including meeting the hon. Member for Barnsley Central on a number of occasions. As things stand, communities on the eastern leg would be waiting until 2040 to realise the benefits of HS2. That is clearly too long to wait, which is why the work of the integrated rail plan is looking at ways to scope, phase and deliver phase 2b alongside other transformational projects, such as the midlands rail hub and Northern Powerhouse Rail, to bring down the cost and also deliver the benefits as quickly as possible.

I can assure all hon. Members that the Government remain committed to Northern Powerhouse Rail, with over £100 million spent to date and a further £75 million commitment for this financial year. We share the hon. Gentleman's desire to see spades in the ground on that as soon as possible. The Government continue to consider all options for Northern Powerhouse Rail as part of the integrated rail plan, including those in Transport for the North's statutory advice. Once the integrated rail plan is published, TfN will submit a business case for NPR that is consistent with the integrated rail plan's policy

and funding framework. This will mean a more rapid alignment around single route options with NPR and an accelerated delivery timetable, which will allow us to realise the benefits for communities in the north as soon as possible.

Growing local economies and levelling up the north and the midlands is at the heart of what we are trying to achieve. That is why Ministers from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and from the Treasury have been closely involved in drawing up the integrated rail plan. I know that this is not just about building railways. We need to take a holistic view of how to capitalise on our investments and to support regional economies. I would add that our vision of levelling up goes beyond new lines, trains and stations. It is about creating a forward-looking simplified travelling experience which puts passengers first. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced today the biggest shake-up of the railways in 25 years. We want to see simpler fares, flexible season tickets and clearer routes for compensation. We will also integrate infrastructure, revenue collection, fares and timetables under a new body, Great British Railways, providing a single recognisable brand with accountable leadership for all passengers.

The reforms announced today will empower local areas to have a say over the design of the railways post pandemic, including stations, through new partnerships with Great British Railways regional divisions. These partnerships will be flexible regarding the needs of different places, and I am sure the hon. Member for Barnsley Central will welcome the ability for local leaders to control stations, buy additional services and infrastructure, and integrate provision with other types of transport.

Our focus, of course, is not just on rail. We want to level up all modes of transport, and we all know that buses are absolutely vital to the north's economy and to our communities. This point was made strongly by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, and very eloquently about some of the bus service challenges by my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley, who talked about some of the poor connections in his constituency.

There can be no greater champion of buses than the Prime Minister himself, who has committed us as a country to bus back better from covid, but I know that this ambition is shared because the hon. Member for Barnsley Central has commissioned the South Yorkshire bus review. He commissioned it as the Mayor of Sheffield city region, and he found significant challenges in declining ridership and passenger dissatisfaction.

Bus patronage has also suffered greatly because of covid, and we know that it will take a concerted effort from Government, local transport authorities and operators to build back better. That is why we announced the national bus strategy in March this year, backed by £3 billion in transformational funding, to help us move forward with joined-up plans in the years to come. Local authorities, working in collaboration with their local bus operators, have been asked to publish a bus service improvement plan, setting out how they will use their enhanced partnership or franchising scheme to deliver an ambitious vision for travel by bus. Some

[Andrew Stephenson]

£25 million is being made available to support authorities with this, including the creation of a bus centre of excellence.

I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman, in his capacity as the Mayor of Sheffield city region, to make the ambition behind the national bus strategy a reality. I am sure that he will want to work with local Members of Parliament across the region to ensure that the right service is delivered for everybody living across the region.

In addition to the advice we receive from Transport for the North, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has established the Northern Transport Acceleration Council, providing a direct line between local leaders in the north and Ministers in the Department for Transport. NTAC ensures that Ministers are kept updated about priority projects, are active in unblocking barriers to their progress and are accountable for their delivery. We have so far met as a council to dissect crucial Government announcements on levelling up the regions, such as the national bus strategy and the Green Book review.

My hon. Friend the rail Minister—the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris)—chaired a productive NTAC meeting on Tuesday to discuss timetabling in central Manchester, which the hon. Member for Barnsley Central attended as the Mayor of the Sheffield city region, alongside fellow northern leaders and industry experts. The hon. Gentleman made his views very clear about his desire to maintain a direct

service between Sheffield and Manchester airport, and to ensure that the timetabling will not be impacted by the ongoing upgrade to the Hope Valley line, to which I referred earlier. As he will be aware, a short intensive review of the Manchester recovery taskforce recommendation will now take place, starting with an extended session tomorrow, at which all parties will review the proposed solutions once again and grapple with some of the difficult choices involved in implementing a reliable timetable. We look forward to arriving at a workable solution, and I am sure we share the ambition of the hon. Gentleman to come up with the best solution for all involved.

I could go on, but I think that by now I have, I hope, done enough to convince everyone sufficiently that levelling up the north and investing in northern transport remains our top priority. The Department is at the centre of this, but the Government at large are committed to levelling up and we are committed to ensuring that we build back better after probably the most difficult 12 months any of us can recall, so let us now get on with it and make it happen.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I would like to thank the technicians and the broadcasting unit again for performing miracles in allowing such an Adjournment debate virtually and physically—hybrid—to be conducted. I thank them very much indeed.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Written Statements

Thursday 20 May 2021

## CABINET OFFICE

### Government Consulting Hub

#### **The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez):**

My noble Friend, the Minister of State for Efficiency and Transformation, Lord Agnew of Oulton, has today made the following written statement.

I am pleased today to formally launch the new Government Consulting Hub, a centre of expertise for Her Majesty's Government on management consultancy. As the Minister for Efficiency and Transformation in the Cabinet Office and Her Majesty's Treasury, I am aware of the enormous potential that the civil service has, and I am committed to ensuring that the work of the civil service offers public value and upholds the highest standards of performance. As our centre of excellence for consultancy, the Government Consulting Hub will establish new approaches to knowledge generation and sharing and to training in partnership with the Government Skills and Curriculum Unit. It will drive up capacity and the capacity to work jointly across Departments to reuse thinking and work, and to be our own experts where it is reasonable to do so. These core elements will provide the civil service with a powerful resource, helping to reduce the amount spent on consultancy, maximise value where consultants are needed, and support the growth and use of the civil service's internal capability to deliver consultancy type work and to deploy consultancy type skills. This is not just a savings exercise. This is a real opportunity to invest in the future of the civil service, to build capability, skills and experience, and to have a much greater impact in the work that is delivered. An overview of the work of the Government Consulting Hub has been published today on gov.uk.

[HCWS43]

### European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks Report

#### **The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith):**

I am today laying before Parliament a report, "The European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks: 26 December 2020 to 25 March 2021".

I am laying this report because it is a legal requirement under the EU (Withdrawal) Act 2018 for quarterly reports to be made to Parliament on the progress of the work to develop common frameworks.

The report is available on gov.uk and details the progress made between the UK Government and devolved Administrations regarding the development of common frameworks.

This report details progress made during the 11th three-month reporting period and sets out that no "freezing" regulations have been brought forward under section 12 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act.

A copy of "The European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks: 26 December 2020 to 25 March 2021" report has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The publication of the report reflects the Government's continued commitment to transparency.

[HCWS44]

## TRANSPORT

### Britain's Railways

#### **The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):**

Today, we are announcing our plan for the transformation of Britain's railways. The Williams-Shapps plan for rail fully reflects the independent recommendations of Keith Williams, to whom the Government are grateful for his thorough work since 2018. Williams identified serious issues facing the railways before covid struck; the pandemic has exacerbated some of these and added more. The Government have provided unprecedented support to keep the railways running during the pandemic. Now, we look to the future—today we are setting out an ambitious plan to ensure that the system is ready to meet these challenges.

Today's railway is fragmented—numerous bodies with different incentives lead to a lack of joined-up thinking. No single organisation is accountable for integration, planning and leadership across infrastructure, passenger services and freight operations.

Even before covid, the franchising model for passenger services had become unsustainable, with multiple failing franchises, delayed competitions and dwindling market confidence. East Coast and Northern had already failed and the Government had to step in.

To meet these challenges this Government are introducing the biggest reform to the railway in three decades. We are committed to delivering a rail system that is the backbone of a cleaner, greener public transport system, offering passengers a better deal and greater value for money for taxpayers. That means getting the trains to run on time, providing a better quality of service and having firm control of the sector's costs.

To bring about change on the scale that is needed:

We will end three decades of fragmentation by bringing the railways back together under a new public body with a single, national leadership and a new brand and identity, built on the famous double arrow. Great British Railways (GBR) will run and plan the network, own the infrastructure, and collect most fare revenue. It will procure passenger services and set most fares and timetables.

We will make the railways easier to use by simplifying fares and ticketing, providing more convenient ways to pay with contactless, smartphone and online, and protecting affordable walk-on fares and season tickets. Rail services will be better co-ordinated with each other, and better integrated with other transport services such as trams, buses and bikes.

We will keep the best elements of the private sector that have helped to drive growth. GBR will contract private partners to operate the trains to the timetable it sets. These contracts will include strong incentives for operators to run high-quality services and increase passenger demand. The contracts are not one size fits all, so as demand recovers long-distance routes will have more commercial freedom to attract new passengers. Freight is already a nimble, largely private sector market and will remain so, while benefiting from the national co-ordination, new safeguards, and rules-based access system that will help it thrive.

We will grow, not shrink, the network, continuing to invest tens of billions of pounds in new lines, trains, services and electrification.

We will make the railways more efficient. Simpler structures and clear leadership will make decision making easier and more transparent, reduce costs and make it cheaper to invest in modern ways to pay, upgrade the network and deliver new

lines. The adversarial blame culture will end, and everyone across the sector, including train operators, will be incentivised to work towards common goals, not least managing costs.

These changes will transform the railways for the better. They will also make the sector more accountable to taxpayers and the Government. Government Ministers will have strong levers to set direction, pursue Government policies and oversee delivery to ensure the railways are managed effectively and spend public money efficiently. Great British Railways will be empowered—a single, familiar brand with united, accountable leadership.

These reforms represent a bold new vision for passengers—of punctual and reliable services, simpler tickets and a modern, green and innovative railway that meets the needs of the nation. In summary our ambitious rail transformation programme will deliver 10 key outcomes:

- A modern passenger experience
- A retail revolution
- New ways of working with the private sector
- Economic recovery and financially sustainable railways
- Greater control for local people and places
- Cleaner, greener railways
- Bold, new opportunities for rail freight

- Increased speed of delivery and efficient enhancements
- Skilled, innovative workforce, and
- A simpler industry structure

This is not renationalisation, which failed the railways, rather it is simplification. While Great British Railways acts as the guiding mind to co-ordinate the whole network, our plan will see greater involvement of the private sector—private companies will be contracted to run the trains, with stronger competition to run services. Our reforms will also unleash huge new opportunities for the private sector to innovate in areas such as ticket retailing and data that can be used by passengers to better plan their journeys.

We look forward to building this new vision for Britain's railways in collaboration with the sector. We are proud to set out plans to support our railways and serve our country with a system that is efficient, sustainable and run in the public interest.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2021-05-20/HCWS42>

[HCWS42]

# Petition

Thursday 20 May 2021

## OBSERVATIONS

### TREASURY

#### Return to work after the pandemic

*The petition of residents of the constituency of Glasgow East,*

Declares that the covid-19 pandemic has caused huge changes to the working patterns of many people across the UK, with the furlough scheme helping to support many businesses; further that restrictions across the UK are beginning to ease, with more businesses opening their doors, meaning that many people are returning to work; further that, despite the necessary safety precautions, some people with disabilities do not feel comfortable returning to work as of yet, and would rather wait until infection rates and covid-19 cases have fallen further; further that the UK Government should ensure that nobody, particularly a person with a disability or health concern, is forced to return to work; further that the Government should commit to ensuring that the onus is on the employee to make the decision over their return to work, not the employer; further that if an employee wishes to stay on the furlough scheme they should be able to make this decision without repercussion and fear of losing their employment.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider ensuring that people with disabilities are able to make the decision on whether to return to work or whether to remain on furlough and that this should be the employee's decision, not the employer's.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by David Linden, *Official Report*, 14 April 2021; Vol. 692, c. 433.]

[P002657]

*Observations from The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):*

The Government thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for submitting the petition on behalf of his constituents about the application of the scheme to employees who have been shielding.

The CJRS is available to all employers and employees providing they meet the eligibility criteria, and this includes Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) individuals. Since the beginning of April, shielding guidance is no longer in place, but CEV individuals can continue to be claimed for like everyone else, subject to the CJRS eligibility criteria.

It is not for the Government to decide whether an individual firm should put its staff on furlough, or take its staff off furlough—that is a decision for the employer, in consultation with the employee. Functions given to HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) under the Coronavirus Act 2020 require HMRC to reimburse employers for particular costs relating to the retention of staff who have agreed to be furloughed. The functions delegated to HMRC under this Act do not enable the Government to require employers to furlough their staff or alternatively require employees to agree to be furloughed.

CEV individuals should talk to their employer to discuss and agree options around work, for example, the ability to work from home, or returning to the workplace in a different role if their previous position cannot be fulfilled in a covid-secure manner. Employers are required to take steps to reduce the risk of exposure to covid-19 in the workplace. If CEV individuals have concerns about their health and safety at work they can raise them with their workplace union, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) or their local council, and can be reassured that the existing employment rights framework provides protections against discrimination, unfair dismissal and detriment.

# ORAL ANSWERS

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