

**Monday**  
**14 June 2021**

**Volume 697**  
**No. 16**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS**  
**OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY**  
**DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Monday 14 June 2021**

---



# HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

## MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

(FORMED BY THE RT HON. BORIS JOHNSON, MP, DECEMBER 2019)

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY, MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE AND MINISTER FOR THE UNION—  
The Rt Hon. Boris Johnson, MP

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Rishi Sunak, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT AFFAIRS AND FIRST SECRETARY OF STATE—  
The Rt Hon. Dominic Raab, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE HOME DEPARTMENT—The Rt Hon. Priti Patel, MP

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. Michael Gove, MP

LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR JUSTICE—The Rt Hon. Robert Buckland, QC, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE—The Rt Hon. Ben Wallace, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE—The Rt Hon. Matt Hancock, MP

COP26 PRESIDENT—The Rt Hon. Alok Sharma, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY—The Rt Hon. Kwasi Kwarteng, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE, AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN  
AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Elizabeth Truss, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WORK AND PENSIONS—The Rt Hon. Dr Thérèse Coffey, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION—The Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson CBE, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS—The Rt Hon. George Eustice, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—The Rt Hon. Robert Jenrick, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT—The Rt Hon. Grant Shapps, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND—The Rt Hon. Brandon Lewis CBE, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Alister Jack, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WALES—The Rt Hon. Simon Hart, MP

LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS AND LORD PRIVY SEAL—The Rt Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—The Rt Hon. Oliver Dowden CBE, MP

MINISTER OF STATE, CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. Lord Frost CMG

MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO—The Rt Hon. Amanda Milling, MP

## DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

### **Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—**

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Kwasi Kwarteng, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Anne-Marie Trevelyan, MP (Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth)  
Lord Grimstone of Boscobel, Kt (Minister for Investment) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Nadhim Zahawi, MP §  
Amanda Solloway, MP  
Paul Scully, MP  
Lord Callanan

### **Cabinet Office—**

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY, MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE AND MINISTER FOR THE UNION—  
The Rt Hon. Boris Johnson, MP

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. Michael Gove, MP

COP26 PRESIDENT—The Rt Hon. Alok Sharma, MP

MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO—The Rt Hon. Amanda Milling, MP

PAYMASTER GENERAL—The Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Lord Frost CMG  
Chloe Smith, MP (Minister for the Constitution and Devolution)  
Lord Agnew of Oulton (Minister for Efficiency and Transformation) §  
Lord True CBE

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—

Julia Lopez, MP  
Leo Docherty, MP (Minister for Defence People and Veterans) §

### **Defence—**

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Ben Wallace, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Jeremy Quin, MP (Minister for Defence Procurement)  
Baroness Goldie DL

## PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

James Heappey, MP (Minister for the Armed Forces)  
 Leo Docherty, MP (Minister for Defence People and Veterans) §

**Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—**

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Oliver Dowden CBE, MP

## MINISTERS OF STATE—

Caroline Dinenage, MP (Minister for Digital and Culture)  
 The Rt Hon. John Whittingdale, MP (Minister for Media and Data)

## PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Matt Warman, MP  
 Nigel Huddleston, MP §  
 Baroness Barran MBE

**Education—**

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson CBE, MP

## MINISTERS OF STATE—

Michelle Donelan, MP (Minister for Universities)  
 The Rt Hon. Nick Gibb, MP (Minister for School Standards)

## PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Vicky Ford, MP  
 Gillian Keegan, MP  
 Baroness Berridge of the Vale of Catmose §

**Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—**

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. George Eustice, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park §

## PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Lord Benyon  
 Rebecca Pow, MP  
 Victoria Prentis, MP

**Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office—**

SECRETARY OF STATE AND FIRST SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Dominic Raab, MP

## MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. James Cleverly, MP (Minister for the Middle East and North Africa)  
 The Rt Hon. Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park (Minister for the Pacific and the Environment) §  
 Nigel Adams, MP (Minister for Asia)  
 Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Minister for South Asia and the Commonwealth)

## PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

James Duddridge, MP  
 Wendy Morton, MP

**Health and Social Care—**

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Matt Hancock, MP

## MINISTERS OF STATE—

Edward Argar, MP (Minister for Health)  
 Helen Whately, MP (Minister for Care)  
 Nadine Dorries, MP (Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health)

## PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Jo Churchill, MP  
 Lord Bethell of Romford  
 Nadhim Zahawi, MP (Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment) §

**Home Office—**

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Priti Patel, MP

## MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. James Brokenshire, MP (Minister for Security)  
 Kit Malthouse, MP (Minister for Crime and Policing) §  
 Baroness Williams of Trafford  
 Lord Greenhalgh (Minister for Building Safety and Communities) §

## PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Victoria Atkins, MP  
 Kevin Foster, MP  
 Chris Philp, MP §

**Housing, Communities and Local Government—**

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Robert Jenrick, MP

## MINISTERS OF STATE—

Luke Hall, MP (Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government)  
 The Rt Hon. Christopher Pincher, MP (Minister for Housing)  
 Lord Greenhalgh (Minister for Building Safety and Communities) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Eddie Hughes, MP

**International Trade—**

SECRETARY OF STATE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE, AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—  
The Rt Hon. Elizabeth Truss, MP

## MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Greg Hands, MP (Minister for Trade Policy)  
Lord Grimstone of Boscobel, Kt (Minister for Investment) §

## PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Graham Stuart, MP  
Ranil Jayawardena, MP  
Kemi Badenoch, MP (Minister for Equalities) §  
Baroness Berridge of the Vale of Catmose (Minister for Women) §

**Justice—**

LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Robert Buckland, QC, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Kit Malthouse, MP (Minister for Crime and Policing) §

## PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Alex Chalk, MP §  
Chris Philp, MP §  
Lord Wolfson of Tredegar, QC

**Law Officers—**

ATTORNEY GENERAL—The Rt Hon. Michael Ellis, QC, MP

SOLICITOR GENERAL—The Rt Hon. Lucy Frazer, QC, MP

ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—Lord Stewart of Dirleton, QC

ATTORNEY GENERAL (MINISTER ON LEAVE)—The Rt Hon. Suella Braverman, QC, MP

**Leader of the House of Commons—**

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS—The Rt Hon. Jacob Rees-Mogg, MP

**Leader of the House of Lords—**

LORD PRIVY SEAL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt. Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park

DEPUTY LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Earl Howe CBE

**Northern Ireland Office—**

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Brandon Lewis CBE, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Robin Walker, MP

**Scotland Office—**

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Alister Jack, MP

## PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Iain Stewart, MP  
David Duguid, MP §

**Transport—**

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Grant Shapps, MP

## MINISTERS OF STATE—

Chris Heaton-Harris, MP  
Andrew Stephenson, MP

## PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Robert Courts, MP  
Rachel Maclean, MP  
Baroness Vere of Norbiton

**Treasury—**

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY, MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE AND MINISTER FOR THE UNION—  
The Rt Hon. Boris Johnson, MP

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Rishi Sunak, MP

CHIEF SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Stephen Barclay, MP

FINANCIAL SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Jesse Norman, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Lord Agnew of Oulton (Minister for Efficiency and Transformation) §

ECONOMIC SECRETARY—John Glen, MP

EXCHEQUER SECRETARY—Kemi Badenoch, MP §

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Mark Spencer, MP

## LORDS COMMISSIONERS—

James Morris, MP  
Rebecca Harris, MP  
David Rutley, MP  
Maggie Throup, MP  
Michael Tomlinson, MP  
Alan Mak, MP

**ASSISTANT WHIPS—**

Scott Mann, MP  
 David T. C. Davies, MP §  
 Alex Chalk, MP §  
 Tom Pursglove, MP  
 Maria Caulfield, MP  
 Nigel Huddleston, MP §  
 David Duguid, MP §

**UK Export Finance—**

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Elizabeth Truss, MP  
 PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Graham Stuart, MP

**Wales Office —**

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Simon Hart, MP  
 PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—David T. C. Davies, MP §

**Work and Pensions—**

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Dr Thérèse Coffey, MP  
 MINISTER OF STATE—Justin Tomlinson, MP (Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work)  
 PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—  
 Mims Davies, MP  
 Guy Opperman, MP  
 Will Quince, MP  
 Baroness Stedman-Scott OBE, DL

**Her Majesty's Household—**

LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt Hon. Lord Parker of Minsmere, KCB  
 LORD STEWARD—The Earl of Dalhousie  
 MASTER OF THE HORSE—Lord de Mauley  
 TREASURER—The Rt Hon. Stuart Andrew, MP  
 COMPTROLLER—Mike Freer, MP  
 VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—Marcus Jones, MP  
 CAPTAIN OF THE HONOURABLE CORPS OF GENTLEMEN-AT-ARMS—The Rt Hon. Lord Ashton of Hyde  
 CAPTAIN OF THE QUEEN'S BODYGUARD OF THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD—Earl of Courtown  
 BARONESSES IN WAITING—  
 Baroness Penn  
 Baroness Scott of Bybrook OBE  
 Baroness Bloomfield of Hinton Waldrist  
 LORDS IN WAITING—  
 Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay  
 Viscount Younger of Leckie

§ *Members of the Government listed under more than one Department*

---

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING THE CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—Andrew Selous, MP  
 REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION—Christian Matheson, MP  
 REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY—  
 Sir Charles Walker, MP  
 REPRESENTING THE HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—Sir Charles Walker, MP  
 REPRESENTING THE PARLIAMENTARY WORKS SPONSOR BODY—The Rt Hon. Damian Hinds, MP  
 CHAIRMAN OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION—The Rt Hon. Sir Edward Leigh, MP

---



# HOUSE OF COMMONS

THE SPEAKER—The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP

CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Dame Eleanor Laing, MP

FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Dame Rosie Winterton, MP

SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Mr Nigel Evans, MP

PANEL OF CHAIRS—

Rushanara Ali, Sir David Amess, Hannah Bardell, Mr Clive Betts, Mr Peter Bone, Sir Graham Brady, Ms Karen Buck, Sir Christopher Chope, Judith Cummins, Geraint Davies, Philip Davies, Peter Dowd, Dame Angela Eagle, Clive Efford, Julie Elliott, Yvonne Fovargue, The Rt Hon. Sir Roger Gale, Ms Nusrat Ghani, James Gray, Sir Mark Hendrick, Mr Philip Hollobone, The Rt Hon. Stewart Hosie, The Rt Hon. Sir George Howarth, Dr Rupa Huq, The Rt Hon. Sir Edward Leigh, Steve McCabe, Siobhain McDonagh, The Rt Hon. Esther McVey, The Rt Hon. Maria Miller, The Rt Hon. David Mundell, Mrs Sheryll Murray, The Rt Hon. Caroline Nokes, Ian Paisley, The Rt Hon. Mark Pritchard, Christina Rees, Mr Laurence Robertson, Andrew Rosindell, Mr Virendra Sharma, Sir Gary Streeter, Graham Stringer, Derek Twigg, Sir Charles Walker

SECRETARY—Chris Stanton

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—

The Rt Hon. The Speaker (Chairman), Dr John Benger (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Service), The Rt Hon. Nicholas Brown, MP, Thangam Debbonaire, MP, Dr Rima Makarem (External Member), The Rt Hon. Jacob Rees-Mogg, MP (Leader of the House), Sir Charles Walker, MP, Louise Wilson (External Member), Pete Wishart, MP

SECRETARY TO THE COMMISSION—Marianne Cwynarski CBE

ASSISTANT SECRETARY—Robert Cope

ADMINISTRATION ESTIMATE AUDIT AND RISK ASSURANCE COMMITTEE AND MEMBERS ESTIMATE AUDIT COMMITTEE—

Dr Rima Makarem (Chair), Harriett Baldwin, MP, Mr Clive Betts, MP, Frances Done, Sir Charles Walker, MP, Louise Wilson

SECRETARY TO THE COMMITTEE—Hannah Bryce

COMMONS EXECUTIVE BOARD—

Dr John Benger (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Service) (Chair), Mostaque Ahmed (Finance Director and Managing Director, Finance, Portfolio and Performance), Ian Ailles (Director General of the House of Commons), Isabel Coman (Managing Director, In-House Services & Estates), Marianne Cwynarski CBE (Secretary to the Commission and Managing Director of the Governance Office), Sarah Davies (Clerk Assistant and Managing Director, Chamber and Participation), Mandy Eddolls (Managing Director, People and Culture), Alison Giles (Director of Security for Parliament), Tracey Jessup (UK Parliament Chief Digital and Information Officer), Colin Lee (Managing Director, Select Committee Team), Saira Salimi (Speaker's Counsel), Penny Young (Librarian and Managing Director, Research and Information)

SECRETARY TO THE BOARD—Katharine Williams

SPEAKER'S SECRETARY—Helen Wood

SPEAKER'S CHAPLAIN—The Rev. Canon Patricia Hillas

SPEAKER'S COUNSEL—Saira Salimi

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS—Kathryn Stone OBE



# THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

## OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE  
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND  
[WHICH OPENED 17 DECEMBER 2019]

SEVENTIETH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF  
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 697

THIRD VOLUME OF SESSION 2021-2022

### House of Commons

*Monday 14 June 2021*

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

#### PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

### Oral Answers to Questions

#### HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

##### Waste Collection Authorities

**Greg Clark** (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the performance of waste collection authorities. [901075]

**The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall):** We have set a national ambition to recycle 65% of municipal waste by 2035. Councils will have a crucial role in meeting that target, and my Department will continue to work with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and local authorities across the country to improve recycling rates, reduce emissions and reduce the amount of waste ultimately sent to landfill.

**Greg Clark:** Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to our bin men and women, who worked magnificently throughout the covid crisis, even at the risk of contracting covid during the worst times of the pandemic, to keep us safe, actually collecting a bigger volume than usual? Is he aware that in Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge and Malling, there are growing concerns about the management of the waste contract by the company Urbaser, with collections missed and roadside litter uncollected? What can he do to put pressure on that company to meet the performance standards that it has agreed with the local authorities?

**Luke Hall:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and for the opportunity to pay tribute to our waste collectors and the work that they have done right across the country throughout the pandemic, keeping our communities clean and helping to keep them safe, too. Of course, it is for councils themselves to decide how best to meet their commitments and how to manage the performance of their contractors, but my right hon. Friend's voice carries significant weight. I am sure that his point has been heard loud and clear. I hope that it is resolved as quickly as possible. I know that these are extremely important issues for his constituents and for residents across the country, and of course I am happy to meet him to discuss the matter in more detail.

##### Covid-19 Memorial Wall

**Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): If he will take steps with Cabinet colleagues to ensure the permanency of the covid-19 memorial wall. [901076]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Eddie Hughes):** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Like many MPs, I pass the memorial wall daily when I am in Parliament, and I am moved when I see family and friends either laying floral tributes or making an inscription on the wall to commemorate loved ones they have lost. The Department keenly understands that communities across the country will want to find ways to commemorate our

collective experience. Therefore, it is critical that all those we have lost are commemorated and that families receive, as the Prime Minister himself has stated, a fitting and permanent memorial. As the Prime Minister announced on 12 May, the Government will establish a UK commission on covid commemoration. We will set out the commission's membership and terms of reference in due course.

**Dawn Butler [V]:** I thank the Minister for that thoughtful response. The covid memorial wall is an iconic, organic work of art created by bereaved families, and it should not be removed or painted over. I hope that the Minister agrees that it should be a permanent memorial and that MPs should visit. I met Fran, whose husband died three weeks after they were married. She lovingly drew 2,000 hearts, and I dedicated one of those hearts to my uncle Buck, who died. I am, however, disappointed that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has yet to visit. I hope that the Minister will encourage all MPs to visit like he has done, and ensure that the memorial wall is permanent and that MPs speak to bereaved families.

**Eddie Hughes:** I believe that the memorial wall is owned by St Thomas' Hospital. I am not sure what decision it has come to with regard to its permanency. However, as I said, having seen friends and family visiting, I would keenly encourage MPs from across the House to do that. We need to consider the most impactful and enduring way to remember those we have lost and to commemorate the service of everyone involved in this unprecedented response to the pandemic. As I say, the commission has been set up and we will report on its terms of reference and membership in due course.

### Evictions and Homelessness

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of ending the moratorium on evictions on levels of (a) evictions and (b) homelessness. [901077]

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of ending the moratorium on evictions on levels of (a) evictions and (b) homelessness. [901084]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Eddie Hughes):** Although the ban on bailiff enforcement has ended, the measures that the Government have introduced mean that fewer cases are progressing to eviction. Landlord possession claims were down by 74% in quarter 1 of this year compared with the same period in 2020, and the number of families in temporary accommodation is at its lowest since 2016. For those who need more support, we are providing councils with £310 million through the homelessness prevention grant—that is an uplift of £47 million on last year—which can be used for financial support for people to find a new home, to work with landlords to prevent evictions, or to provide temporary accommodation and ensure that families have a roof over their head.

**Ms Buck:** Even before the effect of the end of the evictions ban, a quarter of all homeless households in London were being accommodated away from their

home areas—away from their schools, their caring responsibilities, their jobs and their support networks. Previous Ministers have condemned that but done nothing to stop it. Will the Minister condemn it and state that homeless households should be accommodated near their support networks? What will he do to ensure that that happens?

**Eddie Hughes:** It is important that these matters are handled by the councils themselves, because they are much closer to the problem than the Government; that is not something that we should or could legislate for centrally. With regard to the hon. Lady's own council, we have allocated £5.2 million from the rough sleeping initiative and £6.8 million of homelessness prevention grant funding. The contribution that the Government are making to support local councils is very significant.

**Florence Eshalomi [V]:** I thank the Minister for his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), but one of the key ways to prevent homelessness is to ensure that people are not being evicted. As a result of the end of the evictions ban, many Vauxhall residents now face eviction, with no need for justification and no requirement for adjudication. The Government said in 2019 that they wanted to bring an end to section 21 no-fault evictions, yet two years down the line, tenants in my constituency still face the constant threat of eviction. Will the Minister please tell the House when we can expect to see the long-awaited renters reform Bill?

**Eddie Hughes:** We remain committed to delivering a better deal for renters, including repealing section 21 of the Housing Act 1988. We will legislate, but it is only right that that legislation considers the impact of the pandemic and is a balanced set of reforms that improves the private rented market. A White Paper detailing our package of reforms to the private rented sector will be brought forward in the autumn.

**Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Today marks four years since the tragedy of Grenfell, where 72 people lost their lives. Recent research published by Shelter shows that 3.2 million private renters are fearful of complaining about unsafe and unhealthy properties for fear of being evicted, and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reports that nearly a million tenants now fear eviction due to the ending of the evictions ban. The Secretary of State promised that no one would lose their home as a result of the covid crisis. How will he honour that promise, and when will no-fault section 21 evictions come to an end?

**Eddie Hughes:** It is important to acknowledge the amount of funds that this Government have committed to ensuring that renters are supported—over £200 billion through the furlough scheme, for example. If hon. Members want evidence of whether that has been successful, let me point out that over nine out of 10 people are not in rent arrears at all, so that has been of significant help to people. With regard to the Bill that I referred to in my previous answer, I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman, with whom I get on very well, in the coming months to ensure that we deliver renters reform that is appropriate and helpful to all parts of the sector.

### Green Spaces

**Claire Coutinho** (East Surrey) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to protect green spaces. [901078]

**Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to protect green spaces. [901092]

**Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to protect green spaces. [901097]

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick)**: The pandemic has shown how vital our green spaces are for the wellbeing of the nation, from sharing our national parks together to inviting loved ones over to our gardens. That is why it was a priority for me and my Department to reopen our parks at the start of the pandemic—something that has offered a lifeline to many people and families over the past year. As we build back better and greener in our recovery, we will enhance our environment and provide more green spaces through our forthcoming planning reforms. They will build on and embed our already extensive protections for the green belt, areas of outstanding natural beauty and our ancient woodlands.

**Claire Coutinho**: I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to protecting our green spaces and the broader Government investment in our nature recovery programme. Will he consider looking at a new "wild belt" designation as part of the planning proposals to ensure that we protect those hard-won gains for generations to come?

**Robert Jenrick**: I would like our planning reforms to create a legacy of enhancing our environment and leaving the natural world in a better state for future generations. We are continuing to consider how best to achieve that through the ongoing detailed design of these reforms, but I am interested in wild belts, as I know my hon. Friend is. We are already bringing forward a raft of changes to support nature's recovery, including introducing mandatory net gain for biodiversity through the Environment Bill and requiring tree-lined streets in all new developments—something that we are increasingly seeing in new housing across the country.

**Nicola Richards**: In Greets Green and Lyng, communities have long been promised a facelift, with quality new housing developments by Sandwell Council, but very little has yet been delivered. Residents in Newhall Street are regularly blighted by crime and antisocial behaviour and have been calling out for help and investment for years. Does my right hon. Friend agree that while these areas go undeveloped, it makes no sense for green spaces in other parts of West Bromwich East, such as Peak House farm, to be at risk of development?

**Robert Jenrick**: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that we need local areas to make the most of existing developable land—repurpose it, revitalise unused sites and build the most beautiful homes our communities need. The west midlands, which she represents a part of, is one of the best examples of a place in the country that is meeting housing need and building homes, but is doing so with a very strong emphasis on brownfield

sites. The Government are backing that with, for example, a £100 million land fund and £108 million that we provided through our brownfield fund.

**Karl McCartney** [V]: There is clearly demand for more housing in the central Lincolnshire local plan area and across communities in my constituency of Lincoln, the east midlands and the country at large, but we are continually seeing local green belt being built on by large developers, and land banking is still rife on the edge of urban areas. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must balance housing developments by big developers with the need to ensure that communities of all shapes and sizes still have the opportunity for smaller and individual housing within the curtilage of those settlements of the type and style that buyers wish to purchase and, crucially, live in?

**Robert Jenrick**: My hon. Friend makes a number of important points. First, we have been clear that the manifesto commitment that the Government were elected upon was to protect and enhance the green belt, and that is exactly what we intend to do. Secondly, we want a planning system that is based on local plans, where local people and their communities democratically choose sites, and they will be, and should be, a mix of not only larger ones but smaller sites, particularly brownfield sites, which can be developed at pace by small and medium-sized developers. One of the litmus tests for the planning reforms that we intend to bring forward later in the year will be whether they shift the balance from the large developers who can navigate the current convoluted and complex system in favour of small and medium-sized builders, such as the local entrepreneurs that my hon. Friend represents in Lincoln, and ensure that they, too, can prosper and build more homes.

### Cladding and Fire Safety Defects

**James Murray** (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): What recent estimate he has made of the number of buildings that will have (a) dangerous cladding and (b) other fire safety defects beyond June 2022. [901079]

**The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher)**: We meet on a sombre day—the fourth anniversary of the Grenfell tragedy, when 72 people lost their lives—and across the entire House, I am sure that, whatever one's political view or stripe, our hearts go out to all those people, their families and their friends who lost so much on that night four years ago.

We continue to see progress with the remediation of unsafe cladding systems. We project that 84% of high-rise residential buildings with unsafe ACM—aluminium composite material—cladding will be completed by the end of 2021. We continue to drive toward 100% and we expect those who have made a full application to the building safety fund to be on-site by the end of September 2021. The building safety Bill will bring about a fundamental change in both the regulatory framework for building safety and the construction industry culture, ensuring that those responsible for buildings make sure that fire and structural safety risks are properly managed.

**James Murray**: Four years after the Grenfell Tower fire, survivors and the local community are still waiting for justice, and across the country people are still waiting

for an end to unsafe buildings. We know from the Government's published data that of the 469 buildings over 18 metres identified with aluminium composite material cladding, 107 still have it. However, there is no data on remediation of non-ACM cladding or on buildings below 18 metres. Will the Minister commit to publishing data next month on how many of the 1,890 buildings over 18 metres that are progressing bids with the building safety fund for non-ACM cladding have been remediated, and on how many of the 77,500 blocks between 11 and 18 metres may be unsafe?

**Christopher Pincher:** I am obliged to the hon. Gentleman for his question. As I said, and as he knows, we have made significant progress in the remediation of ACM-clad buildings: 95% have either been made safe or had remediation begun on them. With respect to buildings that have had non-ACM but dangerous cladding put on, I can tell him that some 685 buildings have now been registered for the building safety fund, with £359 million of public funds allotted for their remediation. We are determined to go further and faster to make sure that people's homes are safe and that this issue is finally and completely put to bed.

### New Housing Developments

**Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): If his Department will take steps to ensure that new housing developments are conditional on the consent of local people. [901080]

**The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher):** Local plans create the local community's vision for where essential development such as housing should go. Our planning reforms will give communities the chance to be involved meaningfully at the start when local plans are prepared and will make it easier for local people to understand proposals and express their views. This will bring certainty that housing will come forward in areas best identified for growth by the community, while ensuring that valued countryside remains protected.

**Chris Green:** Does my hon. Friend share my concerns about the Greater Manchester spatial framework, which has twice been vetoed and has not gone ahead? The absence of that plan causes a great deal of problems with uncontrolled building in the whole of Greater Manchester, but particularly for my constituents in Bolton West. Will he do all he can to support Bolton Council in adopting and implementing its plan if the GMSF's faults cannot be rectified soon?

**Christopher Pincher:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend; he is a doughty champion of his constituents in Bolton West. He will know that rather than allowing suffering from speculative development, local plans give certainty both to developers and to communities in providing the homes that the country needs, and where agreed. It is essential that we get local plans in place to help to put our economy back on track; I am pleased that he recognises that. As he says, Bolton Council, along with eight other Greater Manchester councils, is committed to taking forward the Places for Everyone joint local plan. I will continue to monitor and support the progress of plan making across Greater Manchester to ensure that plan coverage is achieved by the end of 2023 and that my hon. Friend's constituents in Bolton are best protected.

**Mr Speaker:** I call shadow Secretary of State Steve Reed.

**Steve Reed** (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): One year ago, the Secretary of State took an unlawful decision in the Westferry case to help a billionaire Conservative party donor to dodge a £40 million tax bill. Now it seems that they are at it again: *The Sunday Times* reports that John Bloor, a billionaire property tycoon, gave £150,000 to the Conservative party barely 48 hours after the Housing Minister had overruled the local council to approve a controversial planning application on rural land, raising fresh questions about unlawful lobbying. Will the Minister commit right now to releasing all unpublished documentation relating to the case, so the public can see whether this is indeed yet another case of cash for favours?

**Christopher Pincher:** I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman likes to cast himself at the court of Keir as something of a witchfinder general—a sort of weird amalgam of Lavrentiy Beria and Mary Whitehouse—but I can tell him that there are no witches to be found here today. With respect to the Sandleford Park application, that was recovered by officials, as many applications are, without recourse to Ministers; we have yet to see any advice from officials on that application.

With respect to the Ledbury application, that was a recommendation to proceed made by the independent planning inspector, not least because at the hearing the local authority reversed its position and took the view that the application should go ahead. I took the advice of the planning inspector; I accepted the planning inspector's recommendation. Process and procedure were followed punctiliously. The hon. Gentleman has to find other witches to burn.

**Mr Speaker:** Let us go to the Chair of the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government.

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab) [V]: I am sure the Minister has had a busy weekend reading the Select Committee report on the planning system. In it, he will have seen that the Committee was supportive of the Government's proposals to improve and enhance the local plan system, particularly through getting more public involvement by making the plans digital. That is to be welcomed. However, many people in our evidence-taking were concerned that once a local plan has been agreed, local people will lose their right to have any meaningful say in individual planning applications. That was a real concern that was expressed to us, so when the Government respond to the report and to its wider consultation, will they look again at how they can ensure that local people have a meaningful voice on individual applications, particularly those in the renewal areas, which are often very contentious?

**Christopher Pincher:** I am grateful to the Chairman of the Select Committee for his report. We will consider it carefully, as we always do, and I am pleased that he has, with some caveats, been so very supportive of our proposals. He asks about the way in which we can better democratise our planning system. The fact is that 3% of all planning applications are engaged with by the local community, yet 90% of planning applications go through, so only a small number of people are engaging with the planning process and the overwhelming number of plans

go through anyway. I do not think that that is particularly engaged or democratic, and we are seeking to bring forward the democratic element of plan making so that local people can have a real and meaningful place and decision-making role in what happens in their communities.

#### **Environmental Protections: Development**

**Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): If he will publish the Government's plans for environmental protections in the development process. [901081]

**The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher)**: The planning for the future consultation closed in October 2020, and it generated an enormous amount of interest, with 44,000 responses. We are analysing those responses and will respond to the consultation in due course. We are committed to planning reforms that are intended to provide better protection for environmental assets. I have worked closely with my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary as well as with my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) on the measures in the Environment Bill, and the planning reforms complement and reflect these.

**Gareth Bacon**: The Government will shortly be bringing forward their planning Bill, which I recognise is needed to bring forward much needed new housing and infrastructure. My Orpington constituency is two-thirds rural, so what guarantees can my right hon. Friend give me and my constituents that green-belt and greenfield land will be protected from inappropriate development?

**Christopher Pincher**: We are committed not only to protecting the green belt but to enhancing it, and those protections will remain in force when we bring in planning reforms. I can assure you, Mr Speaker, that we will not be taking the advice of the Select Committee, which suggested that we should undertake a wholesale reform of the green belt. We have committed to protect it, and so we shall, because only in exceptional circumstances may a local authority alter a green-belt boundary, using its local plan and consulting local people on where essential new housing should go, and it needs to show real evidence that it has examined all other reasonable options before proposing to release the green belt. We are committed to the green belt, and we will fight for it.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The planning system is integral to addressing the climate crisis and to protecting and enhancing our environment. However, many people rightly questioned the Government's green credentials when the Secretary of State refused to block the proposed coalmine in Cumbria. Will the Minister therefore take the opportunity to show that the Government take our environment and the climate crisis seriously, and commit to the full suite of clear and measurable environmental targets in the forthcoming planning Bill?

**Christopher Pincher**: First, may I welcome the hon. Lady to her place as the shadow planning Minister? I think we all share a commitment to protect the environment, which is why this Government were the first Government to commit to net zero. It is why, as housing and planning Minister, I am committed to the future homes standard, to ensure that we decarbonise future homes by at least 75%, and it is why the Environment Bill will ensure a biodiversity net gain of 10%. We will bake those

environmental proposals into our planning reforms to make sure that we have a planning Bill to be proud of and that we protect our environment.

#### **Community Renewal and Levelling-up Funds**

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What steps he is taking to measure the effectiveness of the (a) community renewal fund and (b) levelling-up fund. [901082]

**The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall)**: Through the levelling-up fund and community renewal fund, we are investing more than £5 billion in people, infrastructure, the regeneration of town centres and high streets, upgrading local transport, and investing in cultural and heritage assets. These funds will include high-quality evaluation, which is crucial to understanding the types of intervention that best support places to level up, right across the country.

**Chris Elmore**: I have tabled written parliamentary questions on this, which the Minister is yet to answer, but he also knows that I support the levelling-up fund, in that it is the only available funding on the table. Therefore, I want to work with the two local authorities in my constituency to ensure that we put forward the best bids for Ogmore constituents. Will he set out when the second and third funding round deadlines will be announced by him, or by the Secretary of State, so that local authorities can plan and ensure that they put the best possible bids forward for communities, because for many local authorities the 18 June deadline is simply too tight? I want to work with the Minister, and I would really welcome some constructive engagement to ensure that we get the very best for my constituents.

**Luke Hall**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the way in which he has asked his question. There will be further opportunities for local authorities to submit bids into the fund through subsequent rounds, and we are publishing more details about how the levelling-up fund will operate from next year later in this year. I was pleased to understand that his local authority, which I believe is in category 1, will be submitting a bid by 18 June. I hope it will be making good use of the £125,000 capacity funding that we are providing it with, which I know will help it to work closely with us and build that strong relationship with the UK Government. I look forward to receiving its bid, and I am always happy to meet him to discuss it in more detail.

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is now nearly two years since the Prime Minister announced the towns fund, yet 30 towns have only just received confirmation of what funding they will receive, 26 towns still have not received any response to their bid, and precious few projects that have been bid for have been completed. So will the Minister commit to publishing a report on which areas are receiving funding from the towns fund, the levelling-up fund and the community renewal fund, which have missed out, and the impact of any projects that have actually been delivered?

**Luke Hall**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and welcome him to his place; representing local government on these Benches is the greatest privilege that any of us could ask for, and I look forward to

working with him constructively. On the towns fund, the details are already in the public domain on all the towns we have supported and announced town deals for. He rightly says that a number are still awaiting the outcome of their deal, and their details are also in the public domain. We are still in the application process for the levelling-up fund and for the community renewal fund, so we have not got a definitive list of bids that are in, but I very much look forward to working with him. The levelling-up fund and the community renewal fund are important opportunities for our constituencies, right across the country, to invest in upgrading the critical infrastructure that is so important to our constituents.

### Home ownership

**Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to promote home ownership. [901083]

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick):** This Government are making the dream of home ownership a reality for people across England, taking generation rent and turning it into generation buy. I am delighted that earlier this month we launched our First Homes scheme, with the first properties ready for sale in Bolsover, providing homes discounted by at least 30% for first-time buyers, priority local people and key workers. Our new 95% mortgage guarantee has already given lenders the confidence to help families and young people get on to the property ladder, without the burden of a large deposit.

**Mr Holden [V]:** I am in my first home—I moved in only in May—and I want to see more of my constituents in exactly the same position. Will the Secretary of State outline what support North West Durham constituents in particular can access through the new schemes—particularly the First Homes scheme, in which so many of my constituents are interested in getting involved—and when they will be fully available and rolled out throughout the country?

**Robert Jenrick:** I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that the Government are committed to making sure that young people have the opportunities that they need to live and work in their local community, both in North West Durham and right throughout the country. I encourage my hon. Friend's constituents to go to the Government's ownyourhome.gov.uk website to check out the brilliant schemes that are available. I am also glad to let him know that later this month we will launch the first set of first homes in County Durham.

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Today, on the fourth anniversary of the terrible fire at Grenfell, we first and foremost remember the 72 people who lost their lives. Our thoughts are with the bereaved, as well as the survivors of that terrible night.

The Grenfell community has steadfastly campaigned for justice and for change, but it has come too slowly. Hundreds of thousands of people are living in buildings that we now know to be unsafe, with some even still wrapped in the same flammable cladding as Grenfell. Many of those people are first-time buyers who have watched their dream of home ownership become a living nightmare, in unsellable, worthless homes.

I welcome the building safety fund, but funds alone are not enough, not least because of the extremely slow progress in allocating them. We need active intervention and leadership, so will the Secretary of State commit that all buildings will be made safe—and not just in respect of aluminium composite material cladding—or at least be in the process of being made so, by this time next year? Will he free homeowners from the burden of the costs and anxieties of being trapped in unmortgageable, unsafe homes?

**Robert Jenrick:** I join the hon. Lady in giving my sympathies, thoughts and prayers to the survivors, the bereaved and the community of north Kensington. We all want to support them to ensure that their quest for justice continues and reaches its conclusion, as a result of the public inquiry and the police investigations. Of course, we will do everything in our power to ensure that it never happens again.

Earlier this year, I set out the next steps in our plan to ensure that homes in this country are safe. We are providing £5.1 billion to ensure that unsafe materials, such as cladding, are removed from people's homes as quickly as possible. Some 95% of those high-rise flats that have the same ACM cladding as was on Grenfell Tower have either now been remediated or have workers on site as we speak, and the work on 65% of them has been completed. I want to see that work finished by the end of this year and we will do everything we can to ensure that that happens.

We are also working with lenders, insurers and surveyors to ensure that they also play their part and we have a proportionate, sensible approach to risk, so that those who do not need to be trapped because of this issue are not unduly trapped and those who created this situation in the first place—the builders and the developers—pay their fair share. We are currently consulting on an industry levy and we will encourage, as we have done throughout this process, those developers that have not already stepped up to do so, because it is unconscionable that leaseholders are having to pay for the faults of an industry that has profited at their expense.

### Levelling-up and Shared Prosperity Funds

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the (a) levelling-up fund and (b) UK shared prosperity fund. [901085]

**The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall):** The levelling-up fund and the UK shared prosperity fund are core parts of our levelling-up agenda. I regularly speak to my ministerial colleagues about both funds, and those discussions will inform our levelling-up White Paper and the UK shared prosperity fund investment framework, which we plan to publish later this year.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes [V]:** I thank the Minister for that answer. Like many other Members, I have been involved in discussions with my local authority regarding the levelling-up fund; however, it occurred to me last week that there was something of a democratic deficit in the process. Given that the fund can be used in a number of policy areas that are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, why is there no mechanism for councils to

formally consult their Scottish Parliament representatives on the issues? Will the Minister advise what his Government are doing to ensure that projects associated with the fund are realised with as much collaboration as possible with the democratically elected Government of the people of Scotland?

**Luke Hall:** The hon. Gentleman is clearly working hard on his bid for the levelling-up fund. There is absolutely nothing at all to stop his council consulting with or speaking to the Scottish Government before it submits its bid; it is absolutely welcome to do that. At the heart of these funds is localism. It is about local authorities and communities working directly with the UK Government and building that strong relationship with communities in Scotland, which we think is a key part of this process. We are investing billions of pounds and want to work closely with his community. I absolutely encourage his council to engage with the relevant Government.

**Mr Speaker:** We go to Patricia Gibson, the SNP's spokesperson.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): While the Minister claps himself on the back at the munificence of these various funds that he is talking about, he may wish to reflect on the fact that there is not one new penny of money available, so let us not pretend.

The EU structural funding allocations in the devolved nations and the spending in the areas covered by the levelling-up funding and the strategic priorities fund previously had the direct involvement of Ministers from the devolved nations. How can the Minister now justify cynically insisting on a centralised Whitehall-led approach, cutting out the directly elected Governments of the devolved nations from spending decisions in their own countries in devolved areas of responsibility?

**Luke Hall:** I must point out this continued factual inaccuracy. There is new money going in this year through the UK community renewal fund. Some £220 million is being invested to trial new priorities and projects ahead of the introduction of the UKSPF. As I just said to the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), the local authorities in Scotland are absolutely able to consult with the devolved Administrations. We will be speaking to the devolved Administrations at the shortlisting stage of the bids to seek their advice and to see whether the bids conflict with anything that they are delivering, or with any of their policies. We are investing billions of pounds in these projects: in infrastructure; in community renewal; in transport; in regeneration; and in high-street refurbishments. This is something that the nationalists should be welcoming, rather than trying to find unfair grievances.

**Patricia Gibson:** The Public Accounts Committee delivered a damning verdict on the towns fund, saying that the Minister's Department had

"not been open about the process it followed and would not disclose the reasoning for selecting or excluding towns"—

for funding. In view of that, what specific measures will the Minister announce today to ensure that the distribution of the levelling-up fund and shared prosperity fund will be both transparent and free from political bias, unlike the towns fund?

**Luke Hall:** The answer to that is that it is all published on gov.uk and it has been for months now. Clearly, the nationalists cannot reconcile themselves to the fact that this Conservative Government are supporting communities in Scotland that they have let down for so many years. We are investing billions of pounds in people, infrastructure, regeneration, transport, and high street refurbishments. We are delivering on the ground, building new relationships and binding together our precious Union.

### Covid-19: High Street Recovery

**Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): What recent guidance the Government has provided to local authorities on opening up the high street in the context of the covid-19 outbreak. [901094]

**Sara Britcliffe** (Hyndburn) (Con): What steps he is taking to help high streets recover from the covid-19 outbreak. [901100]

**David Warburton** (Somerton and Frome) (Con): What steps he is taking to help high streets recover from the covid-19 outbreak. [901102]

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick):** As we embark on what we all hope will be a great British summer, this Government have announced a vital package of support for our high streets, from planning easements to funding support. Taken together, we are seeing more than £385 billion of support for our businesses and high streets. With our planning reforms, we will allow our high streets to adapt and thrive, see outdoor markets spring up, and al fresco dining flourish. I am confident that, despite all the challenges, people across this country will rediscover the delights of their local high street this summer.

**Esther McVey:** Cheshire East Council continues to keep unnecessary barriers in place on the high street in Knutsford, blocking off the car parking spaces and damaging local businesses. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Cheshire East Council should be helping local businesses and not literally putting barriers in their way?

**Robert Jenrick:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that bringing back people to their towns and high streets is vital, including to the one that I know well in Knutsford. Local authorities should be doing everything they can to make those high streets as welcoming as possible. Covid-19 guidance and our al fresco dining revolution should not come at the cost of despoiling otherwise beautiful high streets such as that in Knutsford. With just a little imagination and creativity, it is perfectly possible for barriers to be made beautiful, even if they do need to be there. We want to see council officers apply thought and judgment, rather than being over-zealous. Put simply, if they will not take them down, they should build barriers better.

**Sara Britcliffe:** First, I thank the Secretary of State for recently visiting Accrington to discuss what a difference the levelling-up fund could make to my constituency. We know that it is important to build more houses, but on that visit we also spoke about our dilapidated housing

stock both in the town centre and across Hyndburn and Haslingden. Will he agree to meet me to discuss the VAT placed on renovation and repairs for old housing stock and look at the potential for removing this as a trial in certain areas to encourage builders to rejuvenate old housing stock?

**Robert Jenrick:** My hon. Friend will know that such decisions are for the Chancellor to make. We have in place a reduced rate of VAT at 5% for certain residential renovations to encourage development and incentivise regeneration. However, she makes an important point that of course I would be happy to discuss with her. I thank her for hosting me in April, when it was great to see the town back open for business and still producing some of the best pies in Lancashire. She will know that I got into some trouble for saying that a particular shop in her constituency produced the best pies in the county, so all I will say on this occasion is that they are all pie-owners and there is a slice for everyone if they visit Accrington.

**Mr Speaker:** Just to say, Handleys in Chorley needs to be tasted.

**David Warburton:** Our splendid market towns in fabulous Somerton and Frome are driven by their high streets. They are the engine room of the local economy and the hub of the community, as I am sure everybody saw at the fabulous eat:Castle Cary festival last month. However, the past year has obviously been extraordinarily difficult, so does my right hon. Friend agree that support for high street businesses is essential both to keep our communities strong and to achieve a swift economic recovery?

**Robert Jenrick:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I urge all his constituents to get back to their local high streets to support the shops and hospitality businesses that he mentions and make the most of the sunshine in Somerset. We have seen some positive signs, with Springboard data reporting an increase of over 17% in people shopping on their high streets in the recent half-term break. He mentions the eat:Castle Cary festival. That is exactly the kind of thing we want to see across the country this summer. Outdoors is safer than indoor venues. My Department, for its part, is ensuring that through planning easement it is much easier and simpler for local communities to hold outdoor events such as markets without needing to obtain planning permission.

### Topical Questions

[901135] **Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick):** One of the greatest divides in our country, and one that has been thrown into sharp relief by the pandemic, is between those who own a home of their own and those who do not. That is why I was delighted to be in Bolsover earlier this month to see the very first site of our new First Homes scheme, which will provide new homes, for the first time, at a 30% discount. I was also delighted to announce sites in a further 30 towns last week, worth over £700 million in total. On Friday, I saw the real difference that this is making to local people in Doncaster, Redcar, Bishop Auckland and Hartlepool, to name a few.

Today marks the fourth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire. I visited the site yesterday. I am sure the whole House will once again join me in paying our respects to the 72 victims, their families, their friends and the wider community in north Kensington who suffered as a result of the tragedy. It exposed serious and systemic failings that we are determined to address through our new building safety Bill, which we will bring forward shortly.

**Nickie Aiken:** May I also offer my condolences to those involved in Grenfell four years ago—an event that we will never forget?

I welcome the incredible work that this Government have done throughout the pandemic to support more rough sleepers, with a staggering £700 million in extra funding for local authorities. I pay tribute to the local authorities and charities involved in helping rough sleepers off the streets, day in, day out. Now we must learn from the Government's brilliant Everyone In strategy, which saw an incredible 90% of rough sleepers taken off the streets and offered accommodation. As my right hon. Friend knows, I am campaigning to have the Vagrancy Act 1824 repealed. Does he agree that it is now time to learn from what we did with the Everyone In strategy, especially in terms of the reasons people find themselves on the streets in the first place, which are particularly around mental health and addiction issues? Does he agree that we need to learn those lessons and replace the Vagrancy Act?

**Robert Jenrick:** I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to councils and communities across the country, including her own council in Westminster, led very ably by Rachael Robathan. Rachael and I have walked the streets of the west end on many occasions over the past year and seen a tremendous reduction in the number of people sleeping rough. We must build on that and ensure that the progress we have made in the past year is not allowed to slip through our fingers. We will be working across Government to do that because, as my hon. Friend says, homelessness is a housing issue and a health issue. It is about mental health and it is about drug and alcohol addiction, and we need a cross-Government approach to the challenge.

**Naz Shah** (Bradford West) (Lab) [V]: Last week, we witnessed a tragic Islamophobic attack in Ontario, Canada, which sadly killed three generations of a single family. The attack reminded us all of the dangers of allowing Islamophobia to seep into society and the impact it can have on people's lives and communities. The Conservative Government announced in July 2019 that they would appoint two independent advisers on Islamophobia. Almost two years on, can the Secretary of State even tell us who both those independent advisers are and publish their terms of reference as well as the work they have carried out, or is this Conservative Government remorselessly neglecting to tackle Islamophobia across the UK?

**Robert Jenrick:** This Government have a zero-tolerance approach to racism and discrimination of any kind. We commissioned Professor Swaran Singh to undertake an independent review of the Conservative party. On the day of its publication, the Prime Minister unilaterally and in full accepted all the recommendations, and we will publish a plan as to how to implement them very soon.

I do think it is wrong of the Labour party to raise this issue quite in the way that the hon. Lady does. It was, after all, the Labour party that was investigated by the Equality and Human Rights Commission. It was the Labour party that was found to have breached the Equality Act 2010, and it is those on the Labour party's Front Bench who almost to a man and a woman who were named in that report and criticised for their conduct. It is also wrong of the Labour party to publish leaflets during the Batley and Spen by-election campaign that suggest that the Conservative party does not take anti-Muslim hatred seriously.

[901136] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): Cornwall is beautiful, but that has meant a massive increase in the demand for second homes, pushing the price beyond what most local hard-working people can afford. What more can be done to help young people get on the housing ladder in Cornwall without concreting over my scenic home area?

**Robert Jenrick:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on the tremendous vision of Cornwall that has been seen by billions of people around the world in the past few days. The beauty of Cornwall was clear for everyone to see, but I appreciate that it is the very beauty of the place that creates problems for her local people and constituents. That is one of the reasons we have created the First Homes scheme, which offers 30% discounts for local residents, and I encourage her constituents to look on [ownyourhome.gov.uk](http://ownyourhome.gov.uk) to see the schemes we have available.

[901137] **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: Will the Secretary of State meet the co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group for “left behind” neighbourhoods to discuss how we can take forward proposals from the Community Wealth Fund Alliance, which has more than 400 organisations as members, and the work of the hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger), and establish a community wealth fund to convert dormant assets into long-term community-led investment for the most disadvantaged communities, such as Orchard Park and Bransholme in my constituency of Hull North?

**Robert Jenrick:** I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady, as would my hon. Friends on the Front Bench. We have brought forward the community ownership fund, and we will publish details on that very soon. It will allow community groups to bid in for match funding to buy a village shop, a pub or a sports field—much-valued community assets. We have also announced the right to regenerate, which will enable people to bid in for public sector assets that are currently being neglected and bring them into better use.

[901138] **Ruth Edwards** (Rushcliffe) (Con): Rushcliffe has been let down by the current planning system. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that his reforms will put protecting our countryside at the heart of our planning system and abolish measures such as the duty to co-operate, which has previously enabled councils such as Labour-run Nottingham City Council to push thousands of houses from brownfield sites in the city where they are sorely needed on to Rushcliffe's greenfield sites in the countryside?

**Robert Jenrick:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. We want to see cities such as Nottingham have the investment they deserve to build more homes and to tackle the issues they face. We see having good-quality housing stock in cities such as Nottingham as a crucial part of levelling up and spreading prosperity. That is one of the reasons why we changed the local housing need formula to place a much greater emphasis on smaller cities such as Nottingham.

[901139] **Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): As a result of delays in processing applications to the building safety fund, increasing numbers of eligible developments in my constituency are finding themselves subject to soaring building insurance renewal costs. Will the Government finally accept that they need to step in and resolve this problem with the industry as a matter of urgency?

**Robert Jenrick:** As a matter of fact, for ACM buildings within Greenwich and Woolwich, of the 23 that have registered, 21 have completed remediation, one building has been removed and one building has started work. For buildings with applications to the building safety fund, of the 94 registrations made, 31 have been confirmed as eligible, 27 have been assessed and 12 have been withdrawn. So great progress is being made. I am working with the insurance industry, and we should ensure that it brings forward market proposals, not simply have the Exchequer step in and subsidise it.

[901140] **Anthony Browne** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Some local authorities are treading a fine line between being a planning authority and being a property developer. My local authority, South Cambridgeshire District Council, is buying land with a view to developing it. Whatever the other arguments about that, it raises a fundamental potential conflict of interest in that the local authority has to apply to itself for planning permission—something that is causing great concern among residents. Will my right hon. Friend consider whether there is a need to tighten the examination of this conflict of interest when a local authority applies to itself for planning permission on its own land?

**Robert Jenrick:** I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that there are occasions when a local authority may need to apply for permission to build on council-owned land—for example, a new school—but he is right that there needs to be a robust set of safeguards in place, because these applications do generate a great deal of interest and an appearance, on occasion, of unfairness. The applications must be transparently publicised, consulted on and determined in a way that is fair and open.

[901144] **Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): I have listened to the words this afternoon, but my constituents living in leasehold properties in Bedminster and elsewhere are rightly furious now with the Government for betraying the promises that they would not be responsible for the financial cost of rectifying building safety defects, and the delays in announcing the Government loan scheme have just added insult to injury. So can we have a bit more detail? When does the Secretary of State think he will be providing full details regarding eligibility and timescales for implementation to help these people?

**Robert Jenrick:** We have made good progress on the plan that we announced earlier this year. The extra funding is now available through the building safety fund, and we are working through the applications. For lower-rise buildings, we have said that we will bring forward a financing scheme in which no leaseholder will ever need to pay more than £50 a month. There will be long-term low-interest loans for cladding removal and remediation and associated works, and we have said that we will bring forward the details of that shortly.

[901141] **Robert Lorgan** (High Peak) (Con): Lots of High Peak parents have been contacting me concerned about the poor state of repair of many of our local children's play areas, including at least one that has had to go without a swing for well over a year. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that instead of spending taxpayers' money and resources on their own pet projects, councils should focus on their core responsibilities such as properly maintaining children's play areas?

**Robert Jenrick:** As a parent of three young children, I spend a long time in playgrounds and appreciate their importance to everybody in society. I think it is really important that councils take parks and playgrounds seriously. They may be a non-statutory duty, but they are a very important one to members of the public. We have now had two years of increases in council funding, which were voted on and supported by both sides of this House, so local councils have the resources, and they should prioritise open spaces as we come out of the pandemic.

[901147] **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: My constituents in Lancefield Quay are among many who now cannot afford full insurance due to issues of cladding on their buildings. The Secretary of State mentioned

earlier that he was working with the insurance industry. There is not a market solution to this; there is an impending market failure on his watch. What is he going to do about it?

**Robert Jenrick:** I disagree with the hon. Lady, because a number of businesses have already brought forward market solutions—Aviva, for example, and I believe that E.ON is also doing so. It is extremely important that we in this House are united in putting pressure on the insurance companies, not simply asking the Exchequer to step in and bail out some of the most affluent and successful companies in the country. That is what we are trying to do, and we are seeing signs of progress.

[901142] **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): Major housing developers are very quick to build new homes and take the money, but in Ashfield they are not so quick to finish sites and make them ready for adoption—some of the sites have taken 10 years plus. This is simply not good enough for my residents, who have parted with their hard-earned cash for their dream home, so will my right hon. Friend please give new home buyers in Ashfield some words of reassurance that the Government are taking this seriously?

**Robert Jenrick:** I agree with my hon. Friend. It is extremely important that developers, large and small, make good on their promises to local councils and local communities. There are already relevant powers in the planning system, but we are considering how to beef them up as part of our planning reforms, so that where homes have been permissioned, the builder gets on and finishes the job. We will also be legislating for our new homes ombudsman, so that where the standard of those homes falls below what people expect, a route to recourse is available to everyone.

## Personal Statement

3.31 pm

**Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a personal statement to the House. The matter I am referring to occurred on 27 April 2020. I had been trying to get online to an important Committee meeting. After many attempts throughout the day, I was still not connected and had to leave the meeting. I did not swear or raise my voice, but my behaviour led to two complaints. I have reflected on my behaviour. I accept that it constituted bullying and, as such, was entirely inexcusable. The circumstances were stressful for the staff assisting the Committee and for me. I apologised to them before, and I apologise to them again, and to the House, unreservedly. I will never repeat such behaviour.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. Let us move on.

## Points of Order

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you received notice from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care that he intends to make a statement on the covid-19 regulations earlier than advertised? I ask this because it is a long-standing principle of this House that major changes in Government policy are to be announced to Parliament first, and I can think of no more important policy announcement than changes to regulations that restrict the freedom of the British people. It appears that the Government are planning to hold a major news conference on the covid regulations at 6 pm, but the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is not making his statement to the House until 8.30 pm. That is not only a clear breach of parliamentary convention; it is also a breach of the ministerial code. The code states:

“When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of Government policy should be made in the first instance, in Parliament.”

What makes the matter even more concerning is that about 30 minutes ago the media were given an embargoed copy of the statement. So the media have the statement in advance, there will be a public press conference at 6 pm, and then the last people to know about the changes to the regulations will be Members of Parliament. That is clearly very disrespectful to Parliament, and probably a contempt of Parliament.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you heard from the Prime Minister this afternoon, because I am astonished that he is not coming to the House to make this statement? I entirely join my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) in what he has said. It would have been perfectly possible for the Prime Minister to come to this Chamber at 3.30 and inform Parliament of what is going on. I quite understand that it is much easier for the Prime Minister to have a few patsy questions from Laura Kuenssberg and her colleagues than to sit here for a whole hour and be grilled by MPs, but are we a presidential system or are we the House of Commons? Who runs this country? Is it the media or is it the House of Commons? I repeat what my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) said: in future, we must make it clear that if there are any Government announcements, they are made here first, to the elected representatives of the people.

**Mr Speaker:** First, may I say that I am grateful to both gentlemen for giving notice of the point of order? I have repeatedly made it clear how important it is that announcements should be made in this Chamber first. As you are both aware, the Secretary of State will be making a statement at 8.30 pm on covid. That will give Members of the House an opportunity to question him on the Government's policy. However, it is not what I would have expected, which is a statement to the House before an announcement to the press. It is not acceptable. The Government determine when Ministers make statements, but in doing so they must show respect to this House.

May I just say that we were not going to get a statement until I got involved with Downing Street? The fact is that this has been forced— to actually get a statement today; it was going to be left till tomorrow, which would have been totally unacceptable. The fact is

[Mr Speaker]

that I understand that the Prime Minister, at the moment, is at NATO—there is a big conference going on—and he is not here. That is why I insisted that somebody come to make this statement. The timing of it is 8.30 pm. I thought that was better than waiting for the Prime Minister to make a statement tomorrow.

This House needs to know; it needs to know first. I find it totally unacceptable that, once again, we see Downing Street running roughshod over Members of Parliament. We are not accepting it, and I am at the stage where I am beginning to look for other avenues if they are not going to treat this House seriously. What I would say is that I think it is time for me to have a meeting with the Prime Minister to put on the record—here and now, but with him—that this House matters.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Just in case there was any lack of clarity from your statement, may I ask whether it is at all feasible that, should the Government now have recognised the power and force of your statement and of the objections of the House, they could come to you and say that they are prepared to bring their statement forward to 6 o'clock? Would the House be able to find time for that?

**Mr Speaker:** If somebody is willing to do that from Downing Street, I will always ensure that this House will hear it. I was told that no decisions had been taken. That is why I am more shocked to know that there is an embargoed copy of what is going to happen to this country, without this House knowing. I was told no decisions had been taken—that no decisions will be taken until the Cabinet meets. The fact is I am being misled—this House is being misled. It is not acceptable, and I would welcome them coming here before they make the press statement, as the press have already got an embargoed copy. I am sure that the Whip is now texting the Chief Whip to let him know exactly what is being said, because this is disappointing to all of us.

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

3.37 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Uyghur Tribunal: London

3.43 pm

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the treatment by the Chinese Government of witnesses giving evidence to the Uyghur Tribunal in London.

**The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams):** We are disturbed by reports of attempts to intimidate those appearing at the recent hearing of the Uyghur Tribunal. We have previously made it clear that any attempt by China to silence its critics is unwarranted and unacceptable. The United Kingdom supports freedom of expression both as a human right in and of itself and as an essential element for the enjoyment of a full range of other rights. The freedom to speak out in opposition to human rights violations is fundamental.

The Government have repeatedly expressed our serious concerns about the human rights situation in Xinjiang, and the United Kingdom has led international efforts to hold China to account for its human rights violations in the region. Yesterday's G7 leaders' communiqué called on China to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, especially in relation to Xinjiang. In March, the Foreign Secretary announced sanctions against four Chinese officials and one entity responsible for those violations, alongside the European Union, the United States and Canada. In January, we launched a package of measures to help ensure UK businesses and the public sector are not complicit in human rights violations or abuses in Xinjiang. The Foreign Secretary has consistently raised the UK's serious concerns directly with the Chinese Foreign Minister, State Councillor Wang Yi, most recently in a phone call on 27 May.

Rather than continuing to issue denials in the face of overwhelming evidence and seeking to silence their critics, we call on the Chinese Government to address the breadth of concerns being raised internationally about Xinjiang. As a matter of urgency, China must grant the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights or another independent fact-finding expert unfettered access to Xinjiang to verify the facts on the ground.

I reiterate that the Government welcome any rigorous and balanced initiative that raises awareness of the situation faced by Uyghurs and other minorities in China. I met Sir Geoffrey Nice in April to discuss the Uyghur tribunal, and we are following its work. My officials will study any resulting report very carefully indeed.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** The Uyghur tribunal is an independent investigation of alleged genocide and crimes against humanity in the Uyghur region, led by Sir Geoffrey Nice. It started its hearings between 4 and 7 June in London and will reconvene later in the year. It was set up because the Chinese Government have reservations on the genocide convention and a veto at the UN Security Council, which prevents investigation by the International Court of Justice, and China is not party to the International Criminal Court.

It is a disgrace that, on Wednesday 9 June, the Government of the Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region held a press conference featuring relatives of Uyghur exiles abroad, who were coerced to give statements that claimed to falsify the testimony of those who had given

evidence to the Uyghur tribunal. We know already that the Chinese Government monitor, intimidate and harass Uyghurs living abroad, including UK citizens. We have also seen attempts to intimidate Members of this House. An Amnesty International report collated evidence from more than 400 Uyghurs in 22 countries, including the UK, who live in daily fear of the Chinese authorities. The harassment included aggressive messages and threats.

The first question is whether the Government will give evidence to the tribunal. If not, perhaps the Minister could explain why.

Rodney Dixon, QC, has alleged that Uyghurs are deported from third countries to China, where they go on to face genocidal atrocities. What assessment have the Government made of the credibility of the harrowing evidence provided by the Uyghur tribunal, and how will they act on its findings?

Do the Government support the involvement in the UK economy of firms that are complicit in the surveillance and monitoring of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, including surveillance firms such as Hikvision and telecommunications firms such as Huawei? Why have the Government rejected the recommendation of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee to require companies operating in Beijing to provide convincing evidence that their supply chains are not tainted by forced labour? Where are the provisions in the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to give force to those concerns?

As I said, China exerts pressure on foreign states to deport Uyghurs who have fled the country back to China—states including Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Thailand, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Will the Government immediately commit to complaining formally and publicly to those countries, and tell them to stop that process at all costs?

**Nigel Adams:** I thank my right hon. Friend yet again for his work in this area and for bringing this important issue to the House's attention. As I said in my opening remarks, we welcome any rigorous and balanced initiative that raises awareness of the situation faced by Uyghurs and other minorities in China. We will follow the tribunal closely and study any resulting report carefully.

Of course, my right hon. Friend knows that it is the policy of successive UK Governments that any determination of genocide or crimes against humanity is a matter for a competent court. We are therefore not in a position to provide evidence, testimony or other official support to the tribunal.

My right hon. Friend is right to mention the press conference held by Chinese authorities. We are disturbed by reports of attempts to intimidate those appearing at the hearing. We have previously made it clear that any attempt by China to silence its critics is unwarranted and completely unacceptable. As I have said, we have engaged with Sir Geoffrey Nice. We have pointed him to some open-source information to be of assistance, which is some of the most compelling evidence on what is going on in Xinjiang.

With regard to the Select Committee report that my right hon. Friend referenced, we announced on 12 January that we will work with the Cabinet Office to provide guidance and support to UK public bodies to exclude suppliers where there is evidence of human rights abuses in any of their supply chains. That work is continuing. As he will appreciate, that is a BEIS-led approach.

All our policy towards China is agreed by the National Security Council, and detailed implementation is co-ordinated by the National Strategy Implementation Group for China. These are senior officials across Whitehall. These governance structures are kept under review to ensure that effective co-ordination at all levels is always upheld.

**Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab):** I have lost count of the number of times that I have stood at this Dispatch Box and urged the Government to take stronger and more robust action against the atrocities of the Chinese state as it relentlessly persecutes the Uyghur people. I have also lost count of the number of times that the Government's response has been woefully inadequate. From the blocking of the genocide amendment, to the failure to sanction Chen Quanguo, to last week's rejection of many of the recommendations in the BEIS Select Committee's report on forced labour, the reality is that the Government's response to the genocide that is taking place in Xinjiang has fallen miserably short of befitting any credible definition of global Britain, so far amounting only to sanctions on a few lower-level Chinese officials.

Five days ago in Xinjiang, we had the chilling spectacle of relatives and friends of witnesses who have so bravely testified to the Uyghur tribunal being paraded in front of Chinese TV cameras, clearly under duress, and made to discredit the evidence that their family members had presented. Having attended the tribunal myself, I can tell the House that the evidence is truly harrowing. I therefore ask the Minister: what assessment have the Government made of the credibility of the evidence presented to the tribunal? Will the Government be testifying at the tribunal and will the Minister himself be attending the tribunal? When will we see the changes to the Modern Slavery Act promised by the Foreign Secretary in his statement to the House on 12 January? How is, in the Foreign Secretary's word, the "urgent" export control review progressing, which also began on 12 January? Do the Government support the opening of an ICC investigation into the international crimes of the Chinese officials who are orchestrating these abuses? Why are the Government not doing more in the UN to get independent human rights observers into Xinjiang? What steps are the Government taking to protect Uyghurs living in the UK from harassment and intimidation by the Chinese authorities?

The witnesses who have testified at the tribunal have shown huge courage and leadership. Let us hope that the Government will at some point start to follow in their footsteps.

**Nigel Adams:** I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I disagree on a large part of his thesis that this Government have taken no action. This Government led the first two statements on Xinjiang at the UN. We have used our diplomatic network to raise the issue up the international agenda. We will continue to work with our partners across the world to build an international caucus of those willing to speak out against these human rights violations, and we have seen that caucus raised from 23 countries to 39. We will increase the pressure on China to change its behaviour.

We have backed up our international action with robust domestic measures: on 22 March, under the UK's global human rights sanctions regime, we imposed

[Nigel Adams]

asset freezes and travel bans on four senior Chinese Government officials and an asset freeze on one entity. On 12 January, the Foreign Secretary announced measures to help to ensure that businesses are not complicit in violations or abuses in Xinjiang. Of course, we are continuously keeping our sanctions regime under review.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the intimidation of the Uyghur diaspora. We are absolutely aware of this. We are very concerned about members of the Uyghur diaspora, including in the UK, being harassed by the Chinese authorities. This is an effort to intimidate them into silence, force them to return to China or co-opt them into providing information on other Uyghurs. This activity is unacceptable. We have raised our concerns directly with the Chinese embassy in London.

In my answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), I mentioned that we are not in a position to provide evidence, testimony or official support to the tribunal, but we have engaged: I have engaged personally with Sir Geoffrey Nice on this measure, and I understand that my noble Friend the Minister for human rights in the other place has spoken with him on no fewer than four occasions. We are following the tribunal's work closely, and clearly we will be studying any resulting report.

**Mr Speaker:** Let us go to the Chair of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) [V]: I very much welcome the urgent question; my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) is absolutely right to ask it and to focus on the Uyghur community who have been so brutally injured, tortured and, indeed, sterilised by the Chinese state.

What has my hon. Friend the Minister done to work with partners around the world, from China to Canada, the United States and indeed New Zealand, to stand together against the united front that is not just torturing and seeking to exploit the weakness of the Uyghur peoples as they seek refuge and peace, but actually seeking to undermine the freedom of the British people and other people around the world by trying to shape our universities, silence our free speech and intimidate our citizens? Is he standing up for Britain?

**Nigel Adams:** I thank my hon. Friend the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. The short answer is yes, we are standing up for Britain. He is right to raise the question whether we are working with international partners on the issue. It is absolutely correct to do so; it sends the clearest possible signal of the international community's serious concern and our collective willingness to act.

Our announcement on 22 March of sanctions against the perpetrators of gross human rights violations against Uyghurs and other minorities was made alongside the United States, Canada and the European Union. I can give the Chairman of the Select Committee some other examples in which we have worked together with partners and it has delivered: the Hong Kong visa offer, work with Canada, Australia and the EU on scholarships, export controls and extradition suspension in Hong Kong, parallel sanctions announcements on Xinjiang,

and forced labour measures with Canada. We will continue to work with our international partners. He will have noticed the communiqué yesterday from the G7; we are very pleased to be able to lead that charge.

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to the SNP spokesperson.

**Alyn Smith** (Stirling) (SNP): I, too, commend the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this important question. The Uyghur tribunal is an important event and a moment of clarity for a lot of us. I express our solidarity with the brave organisers of the event and with the witnesses and their relatives.

I have a couple of concrete questions for the Minister. If we all agree that the tribunal deserves our support, will he detail what practical measures the Government are bringing forward to support the people giving evidence and their relatives? Will he at least commit to a future statement in the House and a debate on the tribunal's recommendations when they come forward, so that we can all consider its very serious testimony properly?

**Nigel Adams:** We absolutely welcome any initiative that is balanced, rigorous and raises awareness of the situation that Uyghurs and other minorities in China face. Sir Geoffrey Nice and those involved in the tribunal are distinguished figures. We will continue to engage with Sir Geoffrey and with those involved in the tribunal. We are more than happy to follow up on his work and we will study incredibly carefully the reports and any conclusions that the tribunal brings forward. As I said in my answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, we pointed Sir Geoffrey, prior to the tribunal starting, to some compelling evidence via open source information as to what is going on in Xinjiang.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): I suspect that the Chinese Government do not care a damn what we say in this Chamber, but they do care about what British business is doing and if it withdraws business as a result of human rights violations. There are plenty of other friendly countries such as India that can do anything China can do, so what has the Minister done to summon in businesses, name and shame them and say that they should move their imports and exports from China? These people are no better than Bristol slave traders of the 18th century, building their businesses on the backs of misery.

**Nigel Adams:** We are providing businesses with the guidance that they need to understand the moral, reputational, legal and economic risks of conducting business in Xinjiang. It is for businesses to reassure themselves and their customers that their activities in no way contribute to human rights violations taking place in Xinjiang. We also know that many businesses take the egregious violations of human rights in Xinjiang as seriously as we do. Many have already acknowledged the risks and have taken action. Our guidance is clear on the risks that they face when operating in Xinjiang, and we expect all businesses to take appropriate action in response.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: Listening to these reports—the latest in a series of accounts of disappearances, deportations and detentions

of Uyghurs outside China—it is clear that the Chinese Communist party has no problem with coercion outside its borders. The eyes of the world will be on the Chinese Government at next year's Beijing Winter Olympics. A diplomatic boycott by the UK would send a clear signal that this sort of transnational repression is totally unacceptable. Does the Minister agree that this boycott is necessary, as without taking meaningful action, we can expect only more of the same from the Chinese state?

**Nigel Adams:** No decisions have been made with regard to diplomatic attendance at the Winter Olympics.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): I attended the tribunal and I saw images of mass crematoriums and a young mum who was incarcerated for a couple of years. Her triplets were returned with marks around their necks, and one was returned as a frozen corpse. For her bravery to give evidence to the inquiry, she had her family paraded on TV by the Chinese authorities. The right thing for the Minister to do would be to support the tribunal publicly. Otherwise, as the United Nations, we end up as a broken flush when it comes to holding China to account.

**Nigel Adams:** I thank my hon. Friend, again, for her dogged determination on this subject and many others surrounding human rights. I have said before during this session and during the four or five previous urgent questions on this issue that we will continue to hold China to account on its human rights abuses. With regard to the tribunal, we welcome any initiative that is thorough and balanced, and that raises awareness and provides us with detailed information of the situation that is faced by Uyghurs and other minorities in China.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP) [V]: China appears to want only to crush dissent and to suppress expression of freedom. How are the Government going to hold China to account? Will the Minister spell out the key measures that he is going to take to do so?

**Nigel Adams:** It is as clear as the nose on your face that China is an authoritarian state. It has different values from our own and we are holding it to account. As I said in a previous answer, we led the first two statements on Xinjiang at the UN. We have led on this. We ensured that, in the communiqué yesterday, there was reference to what is going on specifically in Xinjiang. We will continue to work with our partners across the world. We have built the international caucus of countries prepared to call China out on what is going on in Xinjiang. We will continue to do that work. We will take all evidence that is presented before us, such as what will come out following the conclusions of the tribunal, but my hon. Friend can rest assured that we will continue to lead international efforts to hold China to account for its human rights violations.

**Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the G7 communiqué and our previous sanctions announcement represent a great example of the UK working with international allies to combat the Chinese rights abuses in Xinjiang and Hong Kong? They are an important step forward but do not go far enough, so will the Minister advise us of what further practical actions can be taken to bring the atrocities to an end?

**Nigel Adams:** Not only did the G7 communiqué call on China to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, especially in relation to Xinjiang, but I direct my hon. Friend to the global human rights sanctions that we announced, alongside 29 other countries, in March. That demonstrated our international leadership on this issue. We are committed to working with others to hold China to account for the human rights commitments that it has freely assumed under international law and its own constitution.

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: At the UN, China was urged to allow unfettered access to Xinjiang, where the recent Uyghur tribunal reaffirmed that Chinese authorities are committing grave human rights violations. [*Inaudible*]—testimony of the horrors taking place, which include three crimes against humanity: detention, persecution and torture. As international courts cannot deal with the Chinese Government over allegations of genocide, and China holds a veto on the UN Security Council, will the Government commit to co-operating with and examining and acting on the findings of the Uyghur tribunal?

**Nigel Adams:** I struggled to hear all of that question, but I can pick up on a key point to which the hon. Gentleman referred: the inability of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to access the region. If China really wants to dispute the compelling evidence of systematic violations in Xinjiang, all it has to do is, as the hon. Gentleman said, allow the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights or another independent credible body urgent and unfettered access. That will allow such a body to investigate and verify the truth.

**Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): Human rights violations should always be condemned wherever they take place. The world knows that such violations are happening in Xinjiang—we know they are happening—but they are not prevalent in the public eye and so are not as effective in terms of making action take place. What steps is the Minister taking to rally further international support for action on Xinjiang?

**Nigel Adams:** My hon. Friend makes a good point and is right to highlight that. We will continue to work with our international partners to build that international caucus of those who are prepared to speak out—sadly, there are plenty of countries that are not prepared to speak out on this issue—and increase the pressure on China to change its behaviour. We have gone from a situation in which China was denying what was going on—denying the very existence of these camps—to a situation in which it now at least has to acknowledge the existence of the treatment. We have led joint statements and UN human rights bodies, and most recently we were joined by 38 countries at the UN General Assembly third committee in October. We will continue to work alongside our international partners to keep the pressure on China.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: At the tribunal, we heard the evidence of Tursunay Ziyadin about how beatings and internal torture in the camps had left her sterile—we in the Jewish community are all too familiar with such evidence from events 80 years ago. In China, a woman whom Tursunay did not know was presented as a good friend and claimed that infertility

[Alex Sobel]

was why Tursunay's husband left her, but he actually died in a car crash. How will the Minister ensure protection for those who give evidence, many of whom have sought political asylum in our country? In response to the direct witness evidence we heard, what is he going to do to ensure that fake testimony and false news are not spread in the UK or internationally?

**Nigel Adams:** We are disturbed by the reports of attempts to intimidate those who have been appearing at the recent hearing. Any attempt by China to silence its critics is unwarranted—it is completely unacceptable, as we saw at the press conference held in China most recently. We are aware of reports of members of the Uyghur diaspora being harassed by the Chinese authorities in an effort to intimidate them into silence. Again, we have called out that behaviour and raised our concerns directly with the Chinese embassy in London.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: In order to combat the human rights abuses heaped upon the Uyghur Muslims by China, it is obviously vital that we build the broadest possible coalition of support across the world. In particular, what is my hon. Friend doing about building a coalition of Muslim-majority countries, which seem to be silent on supporting their brothers and sisters in Xinjiang, so that we can ensure that China gets the message that its human rights abuses are unacceptable to the entire world?

**Nigel Adams:** My hon. Friend is spot on, yet again; we wish to see a broad international caucus of countries, including Muslim-majority countries, speaking out about the widespread human rights violations in Xinjiang. He is absolutely right to point out that not enough of those countries are speaking out on this issue. I can reassure him that this has been a particular focus of our diplomatic efforts. Through our diplomatic network, and with my ministerial colleagues, we engage our counterparts regularly to set out our concern about the situation in Xinjiang, and we make sure that they are aware of the measures the UK is taking in response. We will continue our focus on building as much support as possible.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): We have all been appalled at the evidence now being given to the tribunal of the experience of the Uyghur people and, specifically, of the experiences of Uyghur women, including forced sterilisation, forced abortions and repeated sexual violence. So what are the Government doing to tackle this specific issue of gender-based violence against Uyghur women?

**Nigel Adams:** Obviously, gender-based violence, wherever it takes place, is unacceptable. We continue to work very hard on this area internationally and commit a significant amount of our support in this regard in countries where it is an issue. We will, of course, continue to look at all options available to us for further action to address the human rights violations that are going on in Xinjiang.

**Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): It is clear from the testimonies given at the Uyghur tribunal that there are major threats to minority communities within China's borders and, given what we have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for

Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), threats to the Uyghurs in this country, too. For that reason, does my hon. Friend agree that the UK must uphold a clear, principles-led foreign policy, acting in line with the Government's integrated review, which yielded its clear-eyed assessment of China as a "systemic challenge" to the UK?

**Nigel Adams:** Yes, my hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. The integrated review makes it clear that UK policy towards China is defined by our national interests, and the Prime Minister has said that we need to be "clear-eyed" about the challenges posed by China, but we must take an overarching, balanced approach that also seeks to manage disagreements, capitalise on the opportunity and co-operate on shared interests.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In light of the harrowing evidence presented to the UK Uyghur tribunal, what discussions took place at the G7 summit, and what discussions is the Minister having with other global leaders, to establish a special session of the UN Human Rights Council to adopt a resolution to provide for an independent international mechanism to investigate crimes under international law and other human rights violations in Xinjiang currently being blocked by China?

**Nigel Adams:** The hon. Lady will have seen the G7 leaders coming together yesterday. Having the presidency is a great opportunity for us to be able to put this issue forward. As I have said previously, we have led international efforts to hold China to account and yesterday's G7 communiqué specifically called on China to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, especially in relation to Xinjiang.

**David Johnston** (Wantage) (Con): It has been reported in the past 24 hours that the EU was reluctant to specifically cite the camps in Xinjiang as part of the forced labour statement. Whether or not that is true, does my hon. Friend think that our closest allies will be united both in being disturbed by the testimony that we are seeing, and in condemning the coercion of the witnesses' families?

**Nigel Adams:** My hon. Friend is right to bring that up. Of course, we condemn any intimidation of witnesses to this tribunal or to any other forums where people are giving similar such evidence. As he will have seen, yesterday's communiqué called on China to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, specifically in relation to Xinjiang. Additionally, in the recent communiqué of the Foreign and Development Ministers of the G7, the G7 expressed deep concern about human rights violations in Xinjiang and reiterated our call for independent experts to be given unfettered access to Xinjiang. We will continue to work with our partners to build a caucus of those willing to speak out against China's human rights violations.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind) [V]: Arriving at the NATO summit in Brussels today, the Prime Minister said that nobody wants to "descend into a...cold war with China"

and that, when people see challenges, they are things that we have to manage together with China. Can the Minister assure us that the Prime Minister will highlight the grotesque human rights abuses committed against the Uyghurs and that he recognises the importance of this matter in any dialogue with China?

**Nigel Adams:** The hon. Lady makes a good point. Of course, the Prime Minister is raising those issues. Let us be clear: our relationship with China remains clear-eyed. It is rooted in our values and is driven by our national interest. China is the world's second largest economy. It is a member of the G20 and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. We have a policy of engagement with China and our approach towards China will remain consistent.

**Robert Lorgan (High Peak) (Con):** I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing this urgent question and on his continued work in highlighting the appalling treatment of the Uyghur people by the Beijing regime. With that in mind, can the Minister outline to the House what steps the Government are taking to ensure that no UK businesses are complicit in human rights abuses in Xinjiang?

**Nigel Adams:** I thank my hon. Friend for that very good question. We have been engaging with businesses on these issues for some time. On 12 January, we launched a Minister-led campaign to reinforce the need for business to take action in line with our advice and also to encourage them to act to address the risk. We are also providing support and advice to public bodies, and these build on the existing measures that we have taken to respond to Xinjiang, including research funded by the UK to help build the evidence base. There are a number of additional reports that have recently been published that the United Kingdom Government have helped to finance.

**Mr Speaker:** I am now suspending the House for a few minutes in order for the necessary arrangements to be made.

4.18 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Ethiopia

4.22 pm

**Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con) (*Urgent Question*):** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the deteriorating situation in Ethiopia.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Duddridge):** I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this urgent question, and I thank him for his work not only on Ethiopia, but on Zambia and Angola, where he serves as a trade envoy, and for the excellent work he does on the Business Council for Africa.

The Government are deeply concerned about the situation in Ethiopia. Our greatest concern is the rapidly growing human rights and humanitarian crisis in Tigray. We are now more than seven months into the conflict in Tigray, and there is no sight of an end. It has taken a terrible toll on the people of Tigray. More than 350,000 people are assessed to be in famine-like conditions in total—more than anywhere else in the world—and, sadly, this is expected to rise. A region-wide famine in Tigray is now likely if conflict intensifies and impediments to the delivery of humanitarian aid continue. This crisis has been caused by insecurity, an ongoing lack of humanitarian access and the deliberate destruction of agricultural equipment and medical facilities. It is a man-made crisis.

Officials from our embassy in Addis Ababa have visited Tigray five times to assess the situation and guide our humanitarian response. The UK's special envoy for famine prevention and humanitarian affairs, Nick Dyer, visited Tigray last month. Our ambassador is due to visit this week. During these visits, we have heard many harrowing reports of atrocities committed by all parties to the conflict. This includes extrajudicial killings, and widespread sexual and gender-based violence. It is simply unacceptable, it must stop and the perpetrators must be held to account.

The head of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Mark Lowcock, has said the humanitarian disaster is in part due to the presence of the Eritrean troops in Tigray. He says they are using hunger as a weapon of war, and we therefore need to see the immediate withdrawal of Eritrean forces from Tigray and Ethiopian soil now. The Government of Ethiopia have said this will happen, but it has not yet happened. I am particularly shocked about reports that Eritreans are dressing up in Ethiopian uniforms and committing atrocities.

The concern of the G7 nations about the situation was set out in yesterday's communiqué, following the leaders' summit this weekend. The G7 leaders called for an immediate cessation of hostilities and unimpeded humanitarian access to the area. I am pleased that all G7 nations in the EU, along with a growing number of other nations, including Spain, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Belgium and Poland, have joined the UK's call for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire. His Holiness the Pope expressed his concerns and also called for an end to fighting this weekend. It is vital that that happens to allow life-saving aid to reach the hundreds of thousands in need.

[James Duddridge]

The international community response to this crisis needs to be scaled up urgently. That will involve co-ordination to ensure aid gets in.

**Mr Andrew Mitchell** (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Hear, hear!

**James Duddridge:** I am glad my right hon. Friend agrees with me on that issue. I am conscious that there will be a number of questions, so I will cease my comments there.

**Mr Robertson:** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank everyone who supported me in the application.

The Minister knows that the UK's ties with Ethiopia are very close and historical. Ethiopia is the second largest recipient of UK aid—it receives about £300 million a year from the UK. As chairman of the all-party group on Ethiopia and Djibouti, I wish to see that relationship and that level of aid continue.

Since the end of the Derg in 1991, Ethiopia has been a peaceful and safe country, holding together very many groups and religions and enjoying impressive economic growth. That is why it is so sad to see the current conflict in Tigray. Is the Minister satisfied with the current level of engagement of the United Nations and the African Union, in terms of negotiations and peacekeeping?

The World Food Programme has said that 350,000 people are suffering from catastrophic levels of hunger, categorised as integrated food security phase classification 5—the highest level. That is the highest number of people classified in that way in a single country in the past decade, and it is projected to increase. The World Food Programme says that it needs an extra \$203 million to scale up its response in Tigray, and that,

“unless food and livelihood assistance is scaled up”,  
famine is a risk, so what else can we do to help?

More generally, is the Minister satisfied that aid is reaching people in Tigray? Have the non-governmental organisations had their access restricted? What protection is being provided to aid workers following the reported deaths of nine aid workers?

On aid, does the Minister agree that often the people in most need in the world are those living in war-torn countries? Is it therefore right for any country to be suspending any direct aid to Ethiopia at the moment? In such situations, surely the trick is to get under the radar and deliver aid to the people who need it most.

Has the Minister been able to assess whether hospitals and their equipment are being adequately protected? Has he been able to assess the living conditions of the 1.6 million people who have been displaced throughout the conflict?

We have heard about the involvement of the Eritreans in Ethiopia. That was originally denied by the Ethiopian Government. Does the Minister feel that some of the worst atrocities are being committed from that route?

Finally, what assessment has the Minister made of the likelihood of the conflict spreading to other parts of Ethiopia and the wider region? I know the Foreign Secretary has a focus on east Africa, which demonstrates that we are all concerned about that situation.

**James Duddridge:** I thank my hon. Friend. This is indeed one of our largest aid programmes. He asked whether the UN and the AU could do more. Yes, always, but we are working with our UN partners very carefully. I have spoken extensively to the new political affairs, peace and security commissioner, Bankole Adeoye, about this issue. Sadly, I can confirm the World Food Programme's analysis of famine-like conditions—IPC5. Clearly, we need to do more. My hon. Friend asked whether we could do more, and I can announce this afternoon that the UK Government will provide a further £16.7 million of aid from our regular programme elsewhere in Ethiopia and divert it towards the conflict in Tigray. He mentioned NGO access. That has improved since the early days of the conflict, but NGOs still do not have full access, and the land in Tigray is controlled by different combatants, which makes it even more difficult. He talked of hospitals. Hospital supplies were virtually at zero at one point, and from what we have seen from our five visits from the embassy and Her Majesty's Government, only around 74 of the 264 hospitals are operating in any way, shape or form.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the Eritrean troops. They have no place in the Ethiopian conflict, and they have been asked to leave. They should leave, and we will work with all partners to ensure that that happens. Rather chillingly, he also asked whether the conflict could spread. We are concerned, with the election coming up and with the pre-existing instabilities in the Oromo region and the Amhara region on the Sudanese border, not to mention the issue of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance dam, that there are a number of flashpoints, so it is important that we deal with this conflict as it stands at the moment and ensure that it does not spread further into the region and Ethiopia more generally.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I thank the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) for his strong words, and the Minister for his frank response. We have also repeatedly raised this horrendous situation. Indeed, I raised it with the Prime Minister in this House eight months ago, but tragically since then we have seen a worsening and deepening of the crisis. As has been said, Ethiopia has made huge strides forward on poverty, and our aid, trade and friendly partnership has been hugely important. We all want to see a prosperous and democratic Ethiopia, but the war and famine of the 1980s are seared into the memories of the British people and the world, so it is especially heartbreaking to see the current famine and to see civilians being hacked to death, rape, the destruction of food and health capacity, tens of thousands displaced and hundreds of thousands cut off from assistance. We must now speak forcefully and frankly, and most crucially take action in the face of the growing and incontrovertible evidence. We have a clear responsibility to act and to protect and assist Ethiopian civilians.

The UN human rights chief has spoken of potential war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the G7 spoke this weekend of a humanitarian tragedy, with potentially hundreds of thousands living in famine conditions, so has the Prime Minister spoken to Prime Minister Abiy or any of the other key players, not least following the G7 this weekend? If not, when will he do so? What action are we taking at the Security Council and the Human Rights Council with the AU to bring

about an end to the conflict, full humanitarian access and a full independent investigation into the allegations of human rights abuses?

There is clear evidence of a serious food crisis, as the UK envoy and the UN have said, with huge numbers of people at risk of famine and food emergency, so this is the wrong time for us to be slashing humanitarian aid, as the House has made repeatedly clear. The Minister mentioned £16.7 million being diverted. However, the UN humanitarian chief pointed out last week that the UK had provided \$108 million to Ethiopia last year, but that this year we have reported only \$6 million. Can the Minister clarify that, and tell us when we will be urgently increasing our total assistance? I share his concerns about Eritrean troops. Have any actually left, or are they still there? It has been claimed that they have left, but I have yet to see any evidence of that. Will he also consider targeted sanctions and measures against any individual, from whatever side, who is found to have committed human rights abuses, war crimes or other atrocities?

**James Duddridge:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his long-standing interest in this issue, through oral questions in the House and through parliamentary questions as well. We share the desire for a return to a democratic and prosperous Ethiopia. That was at the centre of the east African strategy, and we will work more closely with the United Nations in particular, and with UN organisations and local organisations, to ensure that all perpetrators are brought to account. The primary relationship with Prime Minister Abiy is with the Foreign Secretary, who met him on an east African trip and who I know retains that dialogue. I do not know specifically when the Prime Minister last spoke to Prime Minister Abiy, but I will certainly let the hon. Gentleman know.

On the aid level, I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the small redirection of aid moneys. I do not recognise the numbers that he talked about, but I am more than happy to have a dialogue with him around that. Obviously, multilateral spending in addition to bilateral spending makes the situation slightly more complicated, particularly as we are diverting more money into the region. I think those are the main issues that he raised. If I have missed any, I will pick them up during other answers.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) [V]: I welcome the urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), which could not be more important given the tragic scenes we are seeing in Tigray at the moment. May I ask my hon. Friend the Minister what work he has been doing with our American friends—notably, of course, Senator Coons, who is the representative of President Biden in the region—and what co-ordination he is doing with UN agencies, including the Nobel prize-winning World Food Programme? Is extra support going to those organisations, and are they able to raise money through the open, charitable arms of the United Kingdom? So many people in this country are looking to help, and I am sure they would give very generously.

**James Duddridge:** I thank my hon. Friend for his work on this issue and on the Foreign Affairs Committee. We are very engaged with our American partners. I attended a meeting last week with Samantha Power and international

organisations, discussing this issue. When I was last in Ethiopia, I met the incoming ambassador, and there has been a regional envoy travelling in the area, whom I also met last week. I have had several meetings with David Beasley of the World Food Programme, which we try to work with as closely as possible, although at key points of this conflict, access to the area, rather than actually delivering the aid, was the main problem.

Ultimately, there is no solution without political dialogue. Although the issues that my hon. Friend raises are important, several other actions need to take place as a precursor before we get that food to the people who are starving. It is particularly concerning that people are destroying hoes and farming equipment so that people cannot plant. It is a narrow point; if they do not plant in the next few weeks or months, there will be no crop at the end of the cycle.

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP) [V]: May I first put on the record my heartfelt sympathy and condolences to the families of those murdered by terrorists last week in Afghanistan while in their line of work with the HALO Trust? The attacks were atrocious and cowardly, and the perpetrators must be held to account. These men and women bravely put their lives on the line every day by clearing landmines all over the world.

Most of the 5.5 million people living in Tigray are desperately hungry, and more than 300,000 people are suffering from famine. Starvation causes someone's body literally to consume itself; their organs shrink, their hair falls out, they convulse and they hallucinate before death. Children are even more at risk; it is reported that 300,000 children are expected to die. Even if aid deliveries were stepped up immediately, the situation will only worsen by September, so how are the UK Government using their relationship with Ethiopia to allow aid organisations access and to alleviate this impending catastrophic crisis?

This catastrophe is unfolding as we speak, and we know the devastation it will cause if we do nothing, yet the UK Government are ignoring both UK law and their own manifesto pledge by cutting aid—including that to Africa by 66%. Will the Government reverse those life-threatening cuts and, at the very least, immediately mobilise sufficient emergency funds to get life-saving aid to the Tigray region?

**James Duddridge:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I would like to be associated with his comments on the HALO Trust, which does excellent work in Africa and elsewhere around the world.

Sadly, the numbers are even worse than those the hon. Gentleman cites. Nearly 23 million people across Ethiopia will require assistance in 2021. The vast majority of those, and the vast majority of the increase on the normal assistance, are in Tigray, with 6.2 million of the population requiring assistance.

The hon. Gentleman asks about aid getting through. The process for humanitarian assistance getting through was very convoluted. It has improved, but it is still not sufficient to get the materials through, even if we did have them to distribute. However, that is something we are working on very closely; the famine prevention and humanitarian affairs envoy talked about it, and the ambassador will talk about it when he visits Tigray this week. One of the first people to visit Tigray was our development director, looking at these very issues of gaining access.

[James Duddridge]

Crucial to all this is ensuring that the Eritreans get out of Tigray, to create a situation of stability. I very much hope that the turning point of the elections will be a pivot, where the Ethiopian Government will look again at some of these issues.

**Mr Andrew Mitchell** (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) on securing this urgent question, and I echo the comments of the Foreign Affairs Committee Chair that many responsible people throughout our country are worrying about a return to 1984 famine conditions. I urge my hon. Friend, who is a decent and humane Minister, to take two key things away from the House. The first is that 2 million people have been driven from their homes—many across the border into Sudan—and 350,000 people, according to the UN, are now in IPC phase 5, which means they are quite literally starving to death. Secondly, in 2020, the UK recorded \$108 million in humanitarian money for Ethiopia; so far this year, with the cuts resulting from our broken promise on the 0.7%, the UN tracking system says that Britain has provided only \$6 million—that is the figure scored against ODA so far. Will my hon. Friend bear in mind those two facts in his discussions with his Treasury colleagues?

**James Duddridge:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his long-standing interest. Like him, I do not want to go back to 1984, although there are chilling similarities. He talks of the number of individuals who have gone across the border to Sudan. We have provided £5 million to refugees coming over. We also recognise the number of 350,000.

I think my right hon. Friend explained the source of another hon. Member's figure of \$6 million. I will have to check it, because that is a gross distortion. This is one of our biggest aid programmes. We are the second or third largest aid donor, so that must be a snapshot of a single programme or a very small period of time, because our programmes are many multiples of that.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind) [V]: Tragedy has hit many people in the region, and sadly much of the world's media seems to be ignoring it. Children are ultimately the most horrendous victims of this kind of war, and sexual violence has been perpetrated against many women in Tigray. Two million people, as others have pointed out, are now homeless or have been driven from their homes, and 350,000 people face imminent hunger. There has to be a political solution to this situation, and there has to be a humanitarian response to it.

Is the Minister confident that the Ethiopian Government will allow unfettered access to United Nations human rights inspectors to look at the human rights situation? Is he confident that we will make sure that no further arms are supplied to Ethiopia and, indeed, that there is an arms embargo on the whole region to try to force the pace on bringing about peace for the future? Have he or the Government had any contact with the African Union on this issue, and what role is the African Union playing in trying to bring about a political settlement and a political solution so that another conflict does not break out and the many refugees who have gone to Sudan and other places are able to return home in safety?

**James Duddridge:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. He is absolutely right that this requires a political solution; without a political solution, all the other actions that take place will not work. That is not to say that we should not do other things, but we need to look at the backbone of the long-term political situation. This conflict has been going on too long—over eight months. During that period, we have called for “unfettered”—in the right hon. Gentleman's words—humanitarian access. I would not describe the access we have now as unfettered; I would describe it as better than when we started early on in the conflict. We are working very closely with the UN in this regard.

The right hon. Gentleman mentions the issues around arms embargoes, which I will consider carefully. As he will appreciate, though, arms come in over many borders—porous borders—and the situation is quite complex, with regional influence well beyond just the African continent. The African Union should be, will be and is part of the solution, and we will work with it. I have spoken a number of times to my opposite number, Commissioner Bankole, and I even spoke a few weeks ago with the President of Ethiopia and briefly with the head of the African Union, Moussa Faki, about the African Union. The African Union will be part of the solution. In the 54 states of Africa, there is a diminishing conflict, but there are significant problems, and the African Union is well placed to solve them, rather than their being solved from London or New York.

**Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) on securing this urgent question, and thank Mr Speaker for granting it, shining a spotlight on this absolutely appalling humanitarian situation. It is particularly tragic, given how much progress Ethiopia had been making on development. The Minister said that quite clearly it is a man-made crisis. In that light, would he consider writing to the Nobel peace prize awarding committee to ask it to revoke the peace prize it awarded to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed?

**James Duddridge:** I thank my hon. Friend for her service as my predecessor in this role. She will appreciate that the awarding of a Nobel peace prize is not for the United Kingdom to determine. At the moment, our relationship with Prime Minister Abiy is one of trying to have a strong dialogue. The Foreign Secretary has a very good, honest relationship with Prime Minister Abiy. At the moment, we are better having a continued and quiet dialogue and diplomacy, rather than leaping to some of the solutions that my hon. Friend is pointing to—legitimate solutions elsewhere that might be right at a different time, but I do not think they would be constructive at this juncture.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: “Never again”—that is what the international community said after the famine in Ethiopia in the 1980s. In fact, I lived there between the ages of five and eight, and I will never forget the looks in the eyes of starving children my own age: scared, desperate or, worst of all, hollow. So it is utterly horrifying to hear that history is repeating itself. In the face of this Government's decision to abandon the 0.7% target on aid, it would be an act of extreme callousness to cut what we give to the people of Ethiopia at this time. The Minister said that he does not recognise the £6 million figure, so can he clarify how

much less this country will be spending on aid to Ethiopia as a result of the aid cuts, compared with last year? He also said that the money promised today is a diversion from elsewhere, so what programmes are being cancelled or delayed as a result?

**James Duddridge:** I would not want the House to get the wrong idea. Internationally we said, “Never again,” but actually things are improving across the African continent. There are still problems, but things are moving in the right direction and have been since 1984. In Ethiopia specifically, prior to this conflict, the Ethiopian Government were much more able to find their own solutions, alongside us, but aid remains part of the process. The hon. Lady pushes me to provide statistics that I do not have available, but they will be reported to the House in the normal course of business.

**Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con) [V]:** Does the Minister share my concerns about credible reports of child soldiers being deployed in the conflict? The UK is supporting the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in investigating human rights violations in the conflict. Does that include looking into the involvement of child soldiers, and what more can the UK do to help prevent this abuse of vulnerable young lives in the region?

**James Duddridge:** Sadly, a high level of sexual violence is being directed at children—children are being forced to commit sexual acts—and I think it is likely that people under the age of 18 are being conscripted. I will be interested to hear from non-governmental organisations with more evidence, and that should be brought before the African Union, the UN and local authorities to ensure that perpetrators are held to account, because clearly it is unacceptable.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab):** The humanitarian crisis unfolding in Ethiopia is saddening, and we in the UK must urgently step up to help civilians via aid as well as demanding an immediate end to the violence in Tigray. What assessment have the Government made of reports of aid being cut off, health facilities being vandalised and aid workers being harassed by troops on all sides of the conflict? What about the horrific allegations of sexual torture and rape? What action is being taken against them?

**James Duddridge:** Sadly, all those things are happening, it is true. To put some numbers on the sexual violence, it is over 1,000, and we fear that probably at least 26,000 people are likely to require support in the coming months. That is based on UN estimates. It is very difficult to give more precise figures on the types of atrocities and the perpetrators, given that we do not have full access. As I say, there is very strong evidence that Eritrean soldiers are dressing up in Ethiopian uniforms, and there are counter-accusations of similar behaviour from other combatants.

**Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con):** The vast majority of my constituents support the Government’s decision to reduce international aid, but they rightly expect us to provide funding and support to relieve the situation in Ethiopia. Does the Minister agree that moving away from the 0.7% target in no way stops us providing vital support in circumstances such as these?

**James Duddridge:** I thank my hon. Friend for his support. Of course we are still contributing £10 billion of aid. That is an enormous sum of money in absolute terms. It is also enormous relative to the actual size of our economy—it is much larger than other members of the G7 and our international partners, such as the Americans, for example. Not only that, but it is not a permanent change; we are going to get back to 0.7% when the economic conditions allow. I know that there are other hon. Members in the House who want that to happen very quickly, but we will keep that situation under review and try to get it back. It certainly does not stop us helping more in situations such as that in Ethiopia.

**Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]:** Gang rape and brutal sexual violence against women and little girls are being used as weapons of war in Tigray. This fear of sexual violence means that women and girls are in hiding, too terrified to travel to food distribution centres. Children are literally starving because of fear of rape. What work are the Government doing internationally to remove the stigma of rape in conflict? What steps are being taken to bring perpetrators of sexual violence in conflict to justice?

**James Duddridge:** This is an incredibly important issue, which was given a higher profile when Lord Hague was Foreign Secretary. It was raised up the international agenda. In fact, I was alongside him in a number of UN meetings when I was Minister for Africa under David Cameron, raising these issues. It does appear that sexual violence is being used more, not less. Some of that might be our awareness and our willingness to talk about it, rather than brushing it under the carpet, but it is really important that we flag that it is one of the worst areas of behaviour. We need to get away from it. I note that the House is discussing the issue in more detail—perhaps I will be able to provide more detail—on Thursday this week.

**Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con):** This urgent question underlines exactly why we should not be reducing our aid budget from 0.7% to 0.5%, but this war in Tigray is a test for the west. The conflict has resulted in widespread starvation, as the Minister points out, but a state of famine has not yet been declared. The recent G7 summit called for an immediate ceasefire, but how likely is it that either Ethiopia or Eritrea will heed those words? What is clear is that if the international community stands back and does nothing, the war, the scale of the famine and the number of civilian deaths will continue to increase.

As the UN Security Council penholder for peacekeeping and the protection of civilians in armed conflict, will the UK be calling for an emergency session of the UN Security Council, and will we be offering to send independent observers, so that we can better understand the situation, given the conflicting reports and statements made by the Ethiopian Government on the one hand and NGOs on the other?

**James Duddridge:** My right hon. Friend makes very strong points, and I am reminded that if the famine-like conditions were more concentrated—were in a more defined area—they would indeed be defined as famine; this is so widespread that it is defined as famine-like conditions. We are already working with our colleagues

[James Duddridge]

and international observers to understand. Unfortunately, if we only do what we are doing now the situation will get worse; we must do something different. At the heart of that is finding a political solution and, hopefully, moving away from the election will be a pivot point. I am not demeaning any of the other calls for action, but without a political solution things will get worse.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his clear commitment to the job in hand. Like all the other hon. Members here today, I am deeply concerned about reports of multiple massacres in Ethiopia's Tigray region, including the killing of up to 800 people in and around the sacred refuge of the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Axum.

I am also greatly concerned about the food situation in the region. Even before the conflict over 1 million people in Tigray needed daily food assistance, including 40,000 Eritrean refugees, so will the Minister outline what discussions he has had with African counterparts about this terrible conflict and what he is doing to support those at risk of famine, in particular Christians and ethnic groups who are often at the end of the queue when it comes to getting help?

**James Duddridge:** I am concerned about all the people, whether they are Christians, Ethiopians or Eritreans, as I know the hon. Gentleman is. I continue a dialogue—in fact I think this issue comes up in every single meeting I have across the continent. It is a blight on the continent; it is a problem for the continent and the world, not just for Ethiopia. So we will continue raising those issues; the Minister of State Lord Ahmad has, as Minister on freedom of religion, particularly emphasised them, and we also heard from the Prime Minister's envoy, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), in this Chamber just a few moments ago.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: Eritrea is effectively a dictatorship with one of the worst human rights records in the world. What pressure can my hon. Friend put on the Government of Eritrea to remove their troops from this conflict and to make sure that they abide by the human rights records we want to see right across the world?

**James Duddridge:** At various points in the conflict there has been denial that troops are there, denial that they were there and committing atrocities, and so on and so on; it has been very unclear. I share my hon. Friend's analysis of the situation. Guy Warrington, a senior member of the Foreign Office, will soon be visiting the area and taking up the post of ambassador there to work on this issue and a number of others. As I have said, my hon. Friend's analysis, while uncomfortable, is correct.

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab) [V]: The UN Secretary-General's special representative on the elimination of sexual violence, Pramila Patten, said last week that 22,500 women in Tigray need access to services as a result of conflict-related sexual violence. This coming Saturday is the UN International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict. Will the Minister support Tigrayan women around the world who are calling for justice for their sisters by using the

UK's position on the UN Security Council to press for urgent and immediate action to stop this violence and ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice?

**James Duddridge:** I thank the hon. Lady for the way in which she has addressed this and a number of other issues on Ethiopia behind the scenes as well as in public; that has been very helpful. I am very keen to support raising the issue, whether on the UN day or in debate. Anything we can do to call out sexual violence against women makes it harder for the perpetrator to commit the crime and easier for us to rally support for people to be prosecuted and to put others off in the future.

**Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): Reports of new atrocities in Tigray continue to emerge almost daily. Does the Minister agree that UN investigators need to be given urgent and full access to the region so that they can investigate, and will he consider further joint action with our international partners if that access is not forthcoming?

**James Duddridge:** It is important that we look at the situation as an international community rather than acting on a bilateral basis. I am hopeful that the end of the elections will be a pivot point; it is difficult to see big changes happening before that, but we should call for greater humanitarian access and we must do so as a collective region or an international community. Clearly, given the deteriorating situation, we cannot just call for these things not to happen and then rest on our laurels. We will have to look again at these issues.

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab) [V]: The Minister will have seen reports that Vodafone is paying the Ethiopian Government £850 million for a telecoms licence, as the first stage of a deal that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed described as

"the single largest foreign direct investment into Ethiopia".

There is widespread concern that that funding will be used to support the war in Tigray. Will the Minister therefore explain what advice the Government are giving British business on investment in the country at this time?

**James Duddridge:** This is not a Government investment, but a CDC investment, although we are dancing on the head of a pin in the sense that the CDC itself is a UK Government-supported institution. We supported the bid to be a telecoms supplier; that bid precedes the Tigrayan conflict, and its successes in bringing greater mobile telephony across the area will help to transform Ethiopia. If there were any question of the money being used to support the conflict in Tigray, we would not be involved; if the hon. Gentleman has any evidence of that, he should come forward. We see this as something that will open up Ethiopia, not shut it down.

**Anthony Mangnall** (Totnes) (Con): The Government have rightly identified the scale of this crisis. Will they therefore detail how the reduction from 0.7% will cut the ability for us to fund projects in Ethiopia?

May I also ask the Minister whether the preventing sexual violence in conflict team is ready to deploy into Ethiopia? It was suggested on 24 May by the special representative in the House of Lords that the team would be deploying. I would like the Minister to come to the House and tell us when they will deploy, when

they will be able to provide assistance to victims of sexual violence in conflict, whether documentation of these crimes is taking place and whether we will be able to lead any prosecutions for what are the most atrocious crimes.

**James Duddridge:** I cannot give my hon. Friend the detailed breakdown that he is looking for. I do recall signing off, in the past week or so, an answer to a parliamentary question about specific support in Ethiopia; I will not quote it from memory, because I do not want to introduce errors into *Hansard*, but when I get back to the office I will be more than happy to point him in the direction of that PQ. I point out again that the ambassador is travelling to the region this week. We will work with our UN partners to work out what specialist support, what physical kit and which individuals across the region are needed. The answer is not always sending people from London; it is about sending people regionally to support exactly the same work. I am conscious that we will have more time to discuss the matter on Thursday, and I will make sure that I can give my hon. Friend an even better answer then.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: May I follow up on the question asked by the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall)? Because of the widespread reports of sexual violence in Tigray, can the Minister confirm whether he is expecting that the UK's preventing sexual violence in conflict teams will be travelling to the area and working with and supporting survivors, or not? I was not clear from his last answer whether he is expecting that to happen.

**James Duddridge:** I am afraid that I cannot provide the right hon. Lady with that clarity. I will do so later today in writing and address that issue in the House on Thursday. I do not want to inadvertently mislead the House with the wrong statistics, but we are very aware of the problem and very aware of the need to take action.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the Minister for answering the urgent question. I will suspend the House for three minutes to make arrangements for the next business.

5.4 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## National Insurance Contributions Bill

### *Second Reading*

5.7 pm

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill before the House today is a short one, with just four measures: an employer's national insurance contributions relief for employees in freeports; an employer's NICs relief for employers of veterans; an exemption for Test and Trace support payments from self-employed NICs; and changes to the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes legislation with regard to national insurance contributions. The measures are all important, and I shall explain each of them in more detail.

I shall start with the employer's NICs relief for employees in freeports. At the Budget, the Chancellor announced the locations of the first eight freeports. These sites, which range from Teesside to Tilbury, will become hubs for trade, innovation and commerce. They will attract new businesses and they will regenerate communities by creating jobs, boosting investment and spreading prosperity. Overall, freeports present an extraordinary opportunity to drive regional economic growth, and the Government want as many areas as possible to benefit.

An important part of the appeal of freeports for employers is undoubtedly the wide range and variety of tax reliefs that they provide. These include an enhanced 10% rate of structures and buildings allowance, an increased 100% capital allowance for companies investing in plant and machinery, and full relief from stamp duty on land or property purchases.

The employer's NICs relief for workers in freeports contained in the Bill encourages employment while supporting regional growth. Under this measure, employers with premises in a freeport in Great Britain will be exempt from employer's NICs on up to £25,000 of a new worker's wages. This legislation applies to all new workers who spend 60% of their working time at a freeport tax site in the first three years of employment.

The relief will be available from April next year until at least April 2026. At that point, a sunset clause will require the Government to lay secondary legislation to extend the relief, if they wish, for up to a further five years to April 2031. Any decision to extend will only be taken upon review of the relief's impact. However, even if the Government decided not to extend the relief, employers will be able to claim it for the full three years on new hires taken on before April 2026. While these measures relate to Great Britain, let me assure the House that it is the Government's intention to legislate for this relief in Northern Ireland as soon as is practicable. Indeed, the Bill provides the Government with the power to set out the detail of employer NICs relief in Northern Ireland in secondary legislation once engagement with the Northern Ireland Executive is complete.

The second of our measures concerns NICs relief for employers of veterans. As colleagues will recall, this policy was announced at spring Budget 2020. It also fulfils a manifesto commitment to reduce employer NICs for a full year for every new employee who has left the armed forces. The House will know well that I am very closely connected to the astonishing work of special forces in Hereford, but the veterans of our armed forces

[*Jesse Norman*]

across the United Kingdom give extraordinary service to this nation. We know that some face great challenges in obtaining secure and fulfilling employment, so it is only right that we should do all we can to change this situation. Under the Bill, employers will not pay employer NICs on earnings worth up to £50,270 in a veteran's first full year of civilian employment. This amounts to a saving of up to £5,500 per hired veteran. I am sure that colleagues across the House will agree that this measure should give a real boost to veterans' employment prospects, and should mean that many more businesses benefit from their often extraordinary skills and personal experience.

I now turn to the exemption of Test and Trace support payments from self-employed NICs. Last September, the Government announced the launch of a £500 support payment in England for low-income individuals who had been told to self-isolate but who could not work from home and would lose income as a result. Shortly afterwards, the Scottish and Welsh Governments announced similar schemes. These payments, which were provided by local authorities, would be subject to employee and employer class 1 and 1A and self-employed class 2 and class 4 NICs under long-standing legislation. Last year, however, the Government introduced secondary legislation to exempt payments under the support schemes from employee and employer class 1 and 1A NICs. The measure contained in the Bill will extend this exemption to the self-employed. It will ensure that these workers are treated consistently with their employed counterparts and do not have to pay NICs on support payments. The legislation will therefore retrospectively exempt Test and Trace support payments from class 2 and class 4 NICs for the 2020-21 tax year. It will also ensure that in future Test and Trace support payments will not be included in profit liable to class 2 and class 4 NICs.

The final measure in the Bill relates to changes in the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes—DOTAS—regime in relation to NICs. As colleagues will recall, the DOTAS legislation was introduced in 2004. It seeks to provide Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs with early information about new tax avoidance schemes—information on how they work and about those who use them. The provisions in the Finance Act 2021 enhanced the operation of the DOTAS regime, and the Bill includes changes to an existing regulation-making power in the Social Security Administration Act 1992. This will ensure that HMRC can act decisively over a wider range of promoters and their supply chains if they fail to provide information on suspected avoidance schemes. It will also ensure that HMRC can warn taxpayers about suspected avoidance schemes at an earlier stage than at present. In addition, the Bill places responsibility for the obligations within DOTAS and for any failure to comply with them both on promoters of these schemes and their suppliers. I am sure all colleagues across the House will welcome these measures.

The Bill supports regional growth and, with it, the Government's levelling-up agenda; boosts employment while helping to protect those on low incomes from the financial impacts of covid-19; and strengthens the Government's powers to tackle promoters of avoidance schemes. For all those reasons, I commend it to the House.

5.14 pm

**James Murray** (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak about this Bill on behalf of the Opposition. We will not oppose the Bill on Second Reading. Indeed, we support the intention behind many of its measures. However, I would like to take this opportunity to raise important questions with Ministers about some of the approaches they have decided to take.

As we know, clauses 1 to 5 would introduce a new zero rate of secondary class 1 national insurance contributions for employers taking on employees in a freeport. The zero rate would apply from April 2022, and it would allow employers to claim relief on the earnings of eligible employees up to £25,000 per year for three years. As the House will recall from the Report stage of the recent Finance Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) made it clear that we want every region and nation of the UK to succeed whether or not it has a freeport. We want secure new jobs with better pay to be created right across the country, and we want to support and protect British businesses and industries. Freeports may be part of the solution to increasing trade and investment across the UK, but we note that the International Trade Committee concluded in its recent report on UK freeports, published on 20 April, that

“it remains to be seen how successful freeports will be at achieving this objective.”

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Just to clarify, the hon. Member says that freeports might be part of the solution—to levelling up, I guess—but does he therefore support freeports or does he agree with his colleague in the shadow Treasury team, the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), who has said that they are “economically illiterate”?

**James Murray**: I was awaiting the hon. Gentleman's intervention—I was definitely expecting it given the recent debates we have had in this place—and if he will wait just one moment, I will get on to setting out our position on freeports in more detail.

We were concerned at the recent Report stage of the Finance Bill that the Government themselves seemed to show a lack of certainty by voting against our simple amendment to the Finance Bill that would have seen the success of each individual freeport transparently evaluated. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman will remember, we wanted each freeport to be judged against the key tests of whether, across the country, they lead to any net increase in jobs, deliver improvements in training and skills for local residents, produce tangible transport and infrastructure improvements beyond the port itself and will be adequately protected against the risks of tax evasion, smuggling and criminal activity. It is disappointing that the Government voted against the transparent evaluation of their proposed freeports. Not only would this have enabled us to judge their success, but some of the factors we highlighted in our tests would in fact make investment in freeports more attractive to businesses.

Indeed, in response to the Government's own consultation on freeports last year, many respondents argued that

“although tax incentives can be a significant driver behind businesses investing within an area, they were not usually the sole determinant.”

The Government's summary of responses went on to explain:

"Some respondents also indicated the success of tax incentives was partially dependent on local factors, especially the quality of transport infrastructure and the skills and availability of local labour."

As we consider the tax relief before us today, it is therefore important to remind the Government not to ignore the other aspects of the operation of freeports that may be key to their success.

On this tax relief, I would like to ask Ministers to address three specific points that arise from the Bill. First, while relief to employer's national insurance contributions may be a reasonable part of a tax incentive package along with other tax incentive measures, it is hard to understand why this relief is conditional on employment not commencing until 6 April 2022. As the Chartered Institute of Taxation has pointed out, with freeports expected to start operating in 2021, that would surely hamper freeport employers this year and perhaps create perverse incentives about delaying the start of an employee's work. I would be grateful if the Exchequer Secretary set out in her response the Government's reasoning behind this condition on accessing the relief.

Secondly, clause 8 of the Bill enables the Government to set an upper secondary threshold for employer class 1 national insurance contributions specifically in relation to freeport employees—and, indeed, for armed forces veterans, which I will turn to shortly. In practice, this means that employers do not need to pay NICs until an employee's earnings pass that threshold. We note that the upper secondary threshold for freeport employees will, according to a policy paper published by the Government on 12 May, be set at £25,000 for 2022-23. That is substantially less than the equivalent thresholds for employers' relief for under-21s and apprentices, which is £50,270 in 2021-22. Just to be clear, this means that employers do not need to pay any NICs for under-21s and apprentices earning up to just over £50,000 a year, but they will have to pay contributions for freeport employees next year if they earn more than £25,000. It would be helpful to understand the Government's rationale for picking this figure. According to the Office for National Statistics, the median income in all those local authority areas where the eight freeport sites are located is greater than £25,000, with the figures ranging from £25,200 in Kingston upon Hull, within the Humber freeport, to £33,200 in Thurrock, within the Thames freeport. I therefore ask the Exchequer Secretary to explain why the relief for freeport employers is set below median pay in all freeport areas and why this rate is half of that for those employing under-21s and apprentices.

Thirdly, as the plans for freeports stand, businesses taking advantage of their tax incentives will still pay corporation tax. British businesses that pay their fair share of tax will find it very hard to understand why the Chancellor has been for so long so lukewarm about a new, global minimum corporate tax rate to stop large multinationals undercutting them by exploiting tax havens around the world. The Chancellor welcomed the rate being cut from the original 21% proposed by President Biden down to 15%, even though that would cost Britain £131 million a week and leave British businesses being undercut. When I have asked the Financial Secretary before about the Government's position, he said he did not think "it is appropriate for Ministers to comment on tax policy in flight".—[*Official Report*, 28 April 2021; Vol. 693, c. 418.]

Now, however, the outcomes of the G7 Finance Ministers' meeting and the Carbis Bay summit are public, so perhaps his colleague, the Exchequer Secretary, could explain why the UK Government's position has been to back a rate of 15%.

Let me move on to other measures in the Bill. As we have heard, an important relief, covered by clauses 6 and 7—

**Jesse Norman:** I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman some satisfaction on that question. What is extraordinary is how the Labour party has continuously sought to pretend that things are other than they actually are in relation to this deal. Let us just talk about that for a second. In the first case, the G7 is a package—it is a process. Were we, as Labour would have had us do, to ignore the pillar 1 aspects, there would then have been no argument, no debate and no proper taxation of platforms in the areas where the new taxing rights will reside. That would have been a serious, serious deficit. The whole point of the package is to see it as a package, and it predated the Biden Administration. We have greatly benefited as a world from their additional support, but it is by no means up to them; it is an OECD process, of which they have been an important recent supporter.

**James Murray:** I thank the Minister for engaging on what has happened in the negotiations about the new global deal, but I notice that he did not address the issue about the headline rate. I have asked him on several occasions, perhaps three or four times in recent months in this place, to explain why the Government have been so lukewarm about an ambitious rate of 21%, as proposed by President Biden, and instead favoured its being cut to 15%, which is indeed what has happened. I note that when the right hon. Gentleman got to his feet a few moments ago, he did not address the headline rate. Labour Members continue to worry that we are missing out on a once-in-a-generation opportunity to strike a truly ambitious global deal to stop a few large multinationals avoiding paying their fair share of tax.

**Jesse Norman** *rose*—

**James Murray:** I will make some progress, if that is okay.

**Hon. Members:** You asked him a question.

**James Murray:** I tell you what, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will give way if the right hon. Gentleman addresses the specific point about 15% and 21%.

**Jesse Norman:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, it is completely inappropriate for a Minister to comment on confidential negotiations with allies and other nations around the world. He is ignoring that this is a package and the package involves two pillars, the second of which is a 15% rate, globally agreed, one that reconciles and acknowledges different countries around the world which have different tax regimes and different supports. The Government have been in no way lukewarm on pillar 2. What the Government have insisted on, in contradiction to the Labour party and against the ill-fated and ill-advised suggestions that it has made, is pillar 1, which is the crucial component of this that allows us to tax platforms. It is extraordinary that the hon. Gentleman refuses to acknowledge that under a Labour party Administration, there would have been no taxation of these platforms. What on earth does he say to that?

**James Murray:** As the right hon. Gentleman well knows, I have set out many times that we believe that there should be a deal on both pillar 1 and pillar 2. However, pillar 2 stands to generate a huge amount of revenue for British public services and to stop a few large multinationals avoiding paying their fair share of tax and thereby undercutting British businesses that are paying their fair share of tax.

The Minister keeps referring to the idea that it is inappropriate for him to comment on the British Government's position. The position is there in public, following the G7 Finance Ministers' meeting and the G7 summit over the weekend. People have a right to know what our Government were arguing for and we can arrive at no conclusion other than that the British Government were at least lukewarm and perhaps even against the tax rate being set at 21% because it has fallen to 15%, thereby losing out on £131 million a week, meaning that we are potentially missing a once-in-a-generation opportunity for a truly ambitious global tax deal.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**James Murray:** Certainly. I am conscious, Madam Deputy Speaker, that this is not all entirely within the frame of the Bill, but I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** The hon. Gentleman does keep mentioning it. Just on the point about corporation tax, he seems to imply that somehow we are in favour of lower corporation tax, but he is aware that the Government are increasing corporation tax from 19% to 25%. On pillar 2 and pillar 1, I have heard him at the Dispatch Box on numerous occasions urging the Government to sign up to a deal that was only on pillar 2. It did not involve pillar 1, so how can he say now that he was in favour of a wider negotiated agreement? That is not what he was saying at all.

**James Murray:** I am surprised—because the hon. Gentleman always seems to be here when I am speaking at the Dispatch Box—that he does not seem to remember me advocating for a deal on pillar 1 and pillar 2. I will happily send him the reference in *Hansard* after this meeting so he can refresh his memory. The point here is that we have President Biden suggesting 21% in pillar 2 as an ambitious global deal. We had the British Government being at least lukewarm and potentially anti the proposal of 21%. We have now settled on a position where it has dropped to 15%, and we will not cease pushing the Government to be more ambitious in what they seek to achieve, because this will mean that Britain will lose out on £131 million a week that could be invested in our public services and British businesses will continue to be undercut by a few large multinationals that do not pay their fair share of tax.

I will move on to other measures in the Bill. As I was saying, there is an important relief, covered by clauses 6 and 7, that sets out to help service personnel leaving the armed forces back into work. This is a vital issue. Veterans deserve the full support of the Government as they seek civilian employment after their service to our country. It is crucial to make sure that all veterans get the support they need. I noted that the Government's consultation document for this measure refers to an existing career transition package to service personnel leaving the armed forces and explains how 6% of veterans

accessing the service remain unemployed for up to a year after leaving the armed forces. We believe that this relief on employers' national insurance contributions is a positive step, and we hope it will particularly help the 6% of veterans who the Government acknowledge are not benefiting from the current service on offer.

We recognise that this measure may not, on its own, be enough to get everyone into work, so I would like to ask the Exchequer Secretary to set out what further help the Government are offering the 6% of veterans, in particular, who need greater support. We also want to make sure that the employers' relief is as effective as possible, so I ask why the employers' relief for veterans is 12 months, which is much less than the relief for employers in freeports, which is 36 months. Perhaps the Exchequer Secretary could explain the Government's thinking in setting the relief for just one year rather than three years, in line with the approach taken for employers in freeports.

Moving on to further measures in the Bill, clause 10 provides a national insurance contributions exemption for payments made under a self-isolation support scheme. Ministers will know that we in the Opposition have been calling on the Government to expand eligibility for this scheme for some time. It is crucial that people who need support to self-isolate receive it, so we welcome any steps that make the system of self-isolation payments more effective and subject to less administrative burden.

We note that the Government introduced secondary legislation to exempt self-isolation support scheme payments from class 1 and 1A national insurance contributions in October 2020 for England and January 2021 for Scotland and Wales. We recognise that the measure in front of us, which exempts self-isolation support scheme payments from class 2 and class 4 national insurance contributions, will bring the treatment of the self-employed in line with the employed. We also recognise that it will be retrospective for the year 2020-21, and so can be reflected in the relevant tax returns.

Can the Minister explain, however, why the exemption for class 2 and class 4 contributions was not implemented earlier, in line with the exemption for class 1 contributions? If the class 2 and class 4 exemptions had been announced earlier, that could have given much-needed certainty to self-employed people at an earlier point in the outbreak. I would be grateful if the Exchequer Secretary explained why that did not happen.

Finally, clause 11 widens existing regulation-making powers so that regulations can be made for national insurance to mirror the amendments to the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes procedures in the Finance Act 2021. Under DOTAS, introduced by the Government in 2004, promoters of tax avoidance schemes are required to notify the tax authorities of any new scheme they are planning to offer taxpayers. The measure in clause 11 and its counterpart in the recent Finance Act aim to help HMRC obtain details earlier than it can now where promoters fail to provide information about their avoidance under DOTAS.

We welcome any measures that help HMRC track tax avoidance schemes, and we believe it is crucial that it targets the promoters of such schemes. I therefore want to use this opportunity to ask Ministers how effective they think the measures that flow from clause 11 will be. As they may know, the Chartered Institute of Taxation believes

that there is a hard core of between 20 and 30 promoters, identified by HMRC, who clearly do not play by the rules. Do Ministers recognise that number? If so, I would be grateful if the Exchequer Secretary set out what goals HMRC has to clamp down on those 20 to 30 hard-core promoters. Are there any targets, and are there dates by which Ministers expect the number of hard-core promoters at large to fall substantially?

As I set out at the beginning of my remarks, we will not oppose this Bill today. Indeed, we support the intention behind many of its measures. As I have explained, however, we have a number of questions about the design of the measures in it, and I look forward to the Exchequer Secretary addressing them directly in her reply. We want to see effective measures in place to support British businesses, jobs in every part of this country and veterans seeking work. On this Second Reading and in later stages of the Bill, we will be pushing the Government to make sure that is the case.

5.32 pm

**Fay Jones** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I am not used to being called so early in the batting order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am very grateful.

I made my maiden speech on a small but mighty Bill, and this is another. I very much welcome the contents of the Bill. These small but meaningful changes will make a real difference to many of my constituents.

There are two elements of the Bill on which I would like to focus. The first is what it would do for freeports. I was elected in 2019 on a manifesto that promised to create up to 10 freeports around the UK. They are a cornerstone of the Government's levelling-up agenda, which recognises that talent is spread evenly across the country but opportunity is not. As someone who represents an often-forgotten part of the world, I am determined to see that agenda through.

We know that a freeport is an area within a country's geographic border but outside its customs area, but there is no one model for freeports. That is their strength: they can be implemented in a number of ways.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady share my interest in and my demand for having a freeport in Northern Ireland too? I understand that this legislation does not necessarily help that happen, but does she support us in our calls to have a freeport in Northern Ireland?

**Fay Jones:** As a Member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, I certainly welcome that suggestion. I was greatly reassured by the Minister's reference to that in his opening speech, and I hope that further details will come forward as soon as possible.

Freeports can be implemented in a number of ways. For example, manufacturing businesses operating in a freeport can benefit from tariff inversion, whereby tariffs from a finished products are lower than those on its component parts. Further tax and non-tax incentives, such as lower rates for corporation or even employment tax, which we are discussing this afternoon, as well as simplified customs processes can also be offered.

Although a freeport is a fairly new buzzword in our political discourse, it is important to remember that this is not a new idea. The UK used to operate a number of

freeports. In fact, prior to the creation of the Welsh Assembly, now the Senedd, a freeport even operated in Cardiff.

Back in 2016, the then up-and-coming Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), now my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, argued that freeports could turbocharge the UK's post-Brexit economy. Free of the customs union and state aid rules, he argued that tens of thousands of jobs could be created with a successful freeports programme. He was right then, and he is right now.

In 2018, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) highlighted in a Westminster Hall debate just how positive a freeport in the UK could be. He cited the example of the Jebel Ali Free Zone in the United Arab Emirates and explained how it has transformed Dubai. It now hosts 7,000 global companies, employs 145,000 people and accounts for around 40% of the UAE's total direct foreign investment. That is a dramatic example, but there is no reason to believe that freeports in the UK cannot be just as successful as those around the world, perhaps even more so given our strong links with the United States, Europe and the Commonwealth.

I warmly welcome clause 1 of the Bill, which introduces a new zero-rate national insurance contribution for employers taking on employees in a freeport. The Government have already outlined the 10 areas of the UK where freeports will be created. Eight sites in England have been successful, and the Government have committed to creating one in Wales. I understand that the First Minister of Wales has expressed reservations and an unwillingness to work with the UK Government on a Welsh freeport, so may I urge the Minister, my close neighbour and friend across the border, who knows Wales extremely well, to press full steam ahead and work with his colleague the Secretary of State for Wales in setting up a Welsh freeport.

A rising tide lifts all boats—to continue with the maritime theme—and a freeport in Wales will create jobs and growth in all parts of Wales. That is especially important for me in mid-Wales, because, throughout the recent Senedd election, constituents told me that all they want is for their kids to have a future in Brecon and Radnorshire. They want them not to leave at 18 to go to university, only to come back 30 years later when they can afford to buy a home. They want them to have good jobs when they leave education. This is not part of the Welsh Government's current plan for Mid Wales. We are forgotten about, but I am determined that that will not be the case. My constituents are determined that we will not be ignored and will not stand still.

The other clause that I want to focus on is clause 6, which makes a small but important change for our military community—employers who hire an armed forces veteran immediately after they leave the forces will be able to claim a new zero-rate national insurance contribution. Employers will be able to claim the relief from April '22, and transitional arrangements will allow a retrospective claim for the 2021-22 tax year. This is extremely close to my heart, and I declare an interest in that my partner is a serving member of the armed forces.

Brecon is a proud garrison town and, like the Minister, we have a number of military sites and personnel of whom we are very proud. The barracks and the infantry

[Fay Jones]

battle school, Sennybridge training area, are important military assets and I am fiercely proud of them. Although my campaign to save Brecon barracks from closure is a persistent thorn in the side of the Ministry of Defence, our support for veterans must go beyond maintaining high-quality sites and shiny silverware in the mess. We must look at a suite of policy instruments and make swift but sweeping changes to improve things for veterans once they leave active service.

The changes outlined in the Bill could save an employer, who employs a veteran, up to £5,500. This makes a veteran even more attractive to an employer, and the Minister should be commended for pursuing this, especially as we remember that our veterans are getting younger. The House of Commons Library estimates that the percentage of veterans of working age is projected to increase from 37% at the moment to 44% in 2028.

I am particularly pleased that the Bill covers veterans right across the United Kingdom equally. All four nations need to be comprehensive in the way that we look after our veterans. Wales is currently the only part of the United Kingdom not to have a dedicated veterans commissioner—someone on the side of veterans who can challenge local authorities and health boards to ensure that veterans can access the services that they need. Earlier this year, I called on the UK Government to address this imbalance and create a veterans commissioner for Wales, and I am extremely grateful to both the Secretary of State for Wales and the former Minister for veterans' affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), for the work that led to the announcement on St David's Day that they were actively considering creating such a post, but this needs to be done in co-operation with the Welsh Government, so that the postholder has oversight to challenge Welsh health and education services. May I take this opportunity to urge both sides to come together and create this role so that Welsh veterans can benefit from the protection that their colleagues have in England?

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this small, but important Bill and wish it swift passage through the House.

5.39 pm

**Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP) [V]: The Bill makes provision for NI exemptions in what we believe are a number of important and necessary areas. We are generally supportive on such matters, but there are issues in each area—both within and outwith the scope of the Bill—that require some attention and that we will likely seek to address or draw attention to as the Bill proceeds. For the moment, however, I shall confine my remarks to the general principles and the remedies offered in the Bill.

First, I made clear the SNP's support for freeports during the debates on the Finance Bill. We feel strongly that, given the scale of financial support on offer in the Bill, in terms of the customs exemptions and NICs, it is important to make sure that other wider policy objectives—such as environmental obligations, the commitment to net zero and fair pay for those employed in freeports—are met. That is what the Scottish Government's greenports aim to do, by marrying up all the incentives of a freeport with wider obligations to ensure the payment of the real living wage, the implementation of the

Scottish business pledge and the making of contributions towards net zero emissions. All those objectives must be met before companies are able to benefit from the substantial tax status benefits that freeports offer. The fair and sustainable greenport model can be an exemplar of those values while adding value to goods, services and the country's brand.

If the UK Government wish to take a more laissez-faire approach to the securing of such outcomes, that is a matter of choice as much as it is a matter of regret. However, it should not be allowed to become a matter that contributes to any further delay in allowing the Scottish Government to take their approach or in allowing those who wish to invest in Scotland under the conditions I have set out to do so. I urge the Minister to ensure that the UK Government move quickly to allow the model to proceed so that the bidding process can begin.

Let me turn to veterans. Those with experience of serving in our armed forces bring valuable life skills and experience to the workplace. The NICs exemptions are therefore a positive step, making it even more attractive to employers to hire ex-service personnel and bring their skills and experience into the workforce. We very much welcome that step on its own terms. It is important to provide every support possible to former service personnel as they transition to civilian life.

Anyone who is in contact with the veterans community will be all too aware of the gaps in the support available. The Scottish Government have sought to fill those gaps by funding the translation of military qualifications so that they can be fully recognised by civilian employers—another key step that can help to incentivise the employment of ex-service personnel; setting up the national veterans care network to ensure parity of access to specialist services; actively supporting attempts to improve access to employment for the spouses and partners of those serving in the military, through Can Do hubs and the Forces Families Jobs website; and setting up, in conjunction with the Welsh Government, the Capitalising on Military Family Talent initiative. All those things are key elements in making sure that we deliver the best for our service personnel, and they sit well beside the NICs exemptions.

However important the NICs step will be, it cannot and must not be seen as any kind of substitute or sticking plaster for what we believe is a planned 40% reduction in the budget of the Office for Veterans' Affairs. That cut stands in stark contrast to the support that we should be offering and my party will continue to oppose it.

Let me turn to the treatment of self-isolation payments—another measure that we are happy to support fully. The purpose of the payments was clearly to incentivise people on low incomes who needed to self-isolate to do so, to help to prevent the spread of the virus without their having to suffer any adverse financial consequences. The intention was only ever to help people to make the right choices for the benefit of themselves and others, with the NICs consequences quite understandably something of an afterthought. The move to exempt the payments from NICs, thereby removing the administrative and cost burdens on local authorities and employers, is therefore a positive step. If the payments can be made exempt from NICs, it makes it harder to justify the continuation—apparently at UK ministerial insistence—of the situation whereby any past or future thank you payments made to NHS and care workers in Scotland remain liable to income tax.

Finally, we welcome the move to allow changes to the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes regime as it applies to NICs avoidance schemes. That may be a small step towards closing another area of potential abuse in the tax code, but it is necessary. However, what is really needed is a workable set of general anti-avoidance rules that tackle tax avoidance in all its forms; do not exempt existing and established abuse from action; include in their scope international tax abuse; give a tax authority the right to take action against tax avoidance, which it defines, in an objective fashion capable of being numerically assessed, without the consent of any unelected authority; and place the burden of proof on this issue on the taxpayer.

We are happy to see the Bill progress, and to address it in greater detail and attempt to improve it as it continues its passage through the House.

5.45 pm

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. When we talk about levelling up, we tend to think about things such as new railways or roads, or the dualling of carriageways such as the A64 in my constituency, which is long overdue, of course. It is absolutely right that we should think about those things—they are important—but they are just part of the picture.

Really, levelling up is about one very important thing: prosperity. We cannot achieve prosperity in some of the places that fall well behind the average income in this country without a combination of private sector and public sector investment. That is what the Bill is about—incentives for the private sector to invest.

Those are much needed, particularly in areas such as the north-east, which borders my constituency. In relative terms, the gap in productivity and economic output per person between London and the south-east, and the north-east, is as large as the gap between East Germany and West Germany prior to reunification. It took three decades and \$2 trillion to narrow that gap, and it is still not fully narrowed, so this is a huge undertaking. To achieve what it has achieved so far, Germany required not just public sector investment—the roads and railways—but incentives for businesses to start up and scale up in East Germany.

Mark Littlewood, chief executive of the Institute of Economic Affairs, pointed that out in an interesting article in *The Times* a few months ago. He asked why, if prosperity is all about connectivity—roads and railways—Doncaster is not more prosperous. Doncaster, which you are obviously well aware of, Madam Deputy Speaker, is very well connected in terms of transport links, but in terms of prosperity it leaves much to be desired. That is what this is all about: freeports will create incentives for businesses, small and large, to relocate to those areas, or to start in those areas and grow.

That is why I am a little confused by some aspects of the Opposition's approach. One of their shadow Treasury Ministers said that freeports are "economically illiterate". Tell that to Teesside, which expects to create 18,000 jobs due to its freeport status. That is far from illiterate. The incentives are not just the waiving of national insurance contributions for employers, but things such as buildings allowances, capital allowances and stamp duty exemptions.

Of course, it required our leaving the EU to bring about this legislation, because the freeports that we are contemplating are far more comprehensive than the ones that could be delivered in the EU, particularly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones) said, with things such as inverted tariffs, which are not an issue for us with freeports, and the very restrictive state aid regime in the EU.

Teesside freeport, my nearest, will be 4,500 acres. Ben Houchen, the very good Mayor of the Tees Valley, has established the South Tees Development Corporation. We heard the interesting news today that Northumberland Estates may be interested in bringing forward a bid for much of the Teesside freeport region on the back of these incentives. That is proof, if it were needed, that private sector capital will come in and invest in those regions. Of course, public sector capital is important, but Governments do not always have a great track record of allocating capital in the most efficient way, whereas those in the private sector are much more likely, because it is their money they are putting down, to allocate that capital reasonably. So I very much support the measures to exempt employers from paying national insurance contributions up to £25,000.

The other thing I would like to talk briefly about is in part 3 of the Bill. It covers the disclosure of issues around national insurance in relation to the arrangements for contribution avoidance for promoters of tax avoidance schemes. The Government have done much to clamp down on tax avoidance, with the digital services tax, the diverted profits tax and the recent negotiations at the G7 on minimum corporation tax, as well as a number of measures in the Finance Bill to clamp down on these tax avoidance promoters, which are absolutely key.

I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. In my own business background, the only time a tax avoidance scheme was ever discussed in our businesses was when our own advisers—our own accountants—came to us with a tax avoidance scheme. It looked pretty contrived, in our view, and it was not something for us at all. We were very clear about that. It is clear, I feel, that these advisers—these promoters—are the ones who are principally responsible for the number of schemes that are being used to avoid tax in the UK.

I know that the Government have done much on this, including in the Finance Bill, and that they are consulting on further changes. However, I am also an officer and vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax, along with the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), and the Minister will have heard us talk a number of times about a double reasonable test for tax promoters and the schemes that they are promoting. Indeed, he was kind enough to attend a roundtable on the issue. It would work very simply, and I often use the loan charge as an example. At the moment, the requirement, as I understand it, is that a promoter considers a scheme reasonable. I could argue that I thought a scheme was reasonable, and someone else could do the same, and a court could decide whether it was reasonable or not, but if it was not reasonable, I could still argue that, in my judgment, I thought it was reasonable.

[Kevin Hollinrake]

We are seeking to bring forward a change in the form of a double reasonable test: would a reasonable person have considered that scheme reasonable? A promoter might offer a highly contrived underlying scheme behind a loan charge, in which someone would move their money into an offshore jurisdiction and bring it back as a loan, on which they would pay no tax. That is a highly contrived scheme. I could argue that I thought it was reasonable, but a court could not possibly decide that a reasonable person would describe that scheme as reasonable. In that way, it would be far easier for HMRC to take forward prosecutions against promoters to stop this stuff happening in the first place. So I ask the Minister to consider that proposal again; I know that he is fully aware of it. On that note, I wish the Bill a quick and easy passage through the House.

5.53 pm

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) [V]: I want to focus my remarks on the parts of the Bill that relate to freeports, as others have done. During the debate on the Finance Bill, I highlighted the corporate tax reliefs available and the lack of any projections of the impact on the Exchequer, or of any impact assessments on the areas where freeports will be located and on their neighbouring areas. I might be a bit old-fashioned, but I still believe in evidence-based policy making. Ministers seem to have come to Parliament asking MPs to sign a blank cheque and—apologies for the mixed metaphor—to take a leap in the dark on a policy that, in my experience, failed to deliver in the 1980s, when I was in local government, and in the 2010s, when I was an MP in Parliament.

I asked the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), what estimate the Government had made of the cost to the Exchequer. The Minister could not answer, but insisted:

“The National Insurance contribution relief will be important in supporting the Government’s objectives for the Freeports programme, which includes regeneration through job creation.”

Given that the Government’s objective, as stated by the Financial Secretary, is job creation, I then asked him how many jobs would be created as a result of the national insurance contributions relief contained in this Bill. I received the answer to my written parliamentary question today, and it is a classic—worth framing. It states:

“The National Insurance contribution relief will be key in supporting the Government’s objectives for the Freeports programme, which includes regeneration through job creation. The Freeports tax sites have not yet been confirmed and so the Government is currently unable to give an accurate estimate of the number of employees that benefit in 2022-23 as this will depend on how many employees use the relief and will vary depending on a number of circumstances, including the location of the Freeport tax site.

The Government will publish an updated Tax Information and Impact Note (TIIN), when further information is available following confirmation of the tax sites.”

Can the Minister estimate when that will be published? Can he commit to publishing it during the passage of this Bill? I do believe in evidence-based policy making, and in recent months I have seen not just evidence-light policy making; we are now in a bizarre situation of non-existent-evidence-based policy making.

I just hope that the Government have learnt something from the failure of this policy under George Osborne. I remind the Minister that in May 2014 the Public Accounts Committee described the impact of George Osborne’s enterprise zones as “particularly underwhelming” and criticised the Government for “over optimistic” claims about job creation. The job numbers failed to materialise. The Centre for Cities, the think-tank, found that the jobs created were “overwhelmingly low skilled” and therefore low paid.

Despite their refusal to countenance in the Finance Bill the proposals that I put forward, just to get the information, I hope that the Government have reflected and will commit to publishing data annually on the impact of freeports on local and regional job creation; on tax revenues, locally and nationally; and on neighbouring economies. They failed to countenance that in the Finance Bill, but they could in this Bill.

This Bill is also a missed opportunity. The Government could have made provision for increasing the national insurance contributions paid by the highest earners. Currently, higher earners pay only 2% above the upper earnings limit. Raising that by just a small percentage would raise billions from those with the broadest shoulders. Instead, the Government are imposing a huge stealth tax on millions of low-income workers by freezing tax thresholds. They have imposed a pay cap or pay freeze on millions of public sector workers. In just a few months, shamefully, the Government are proposing to cut the incomes of some of the poorest families in the country by £20 a week. I have heard a lot of the Government’s claims to be levelling up. Instead, they seem to be keeping people down.

5.58 pm

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): The Bill seeks to achieve a range of aims, but like most things that the Government are currently attempting, it misses the opportunity to achieve a great deal more.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the provisions that will enable a 0% rate of national insurance contributions to be paid by employers of former members of the armed forces. Glass Door, a charity in my constituency that provides shelters and outreach for homeless people and rough sleepers, has described to me how past trauma is a key risk factor in becoming homeless and how the two groups most at risk are survivors of childhood sexual abuse and armed forces veterans. Like many Members across the House, I am deeply concerned about how we care for our servicemen and women, and I support all measures to assist them in their post-service life. The Liberal Democrats unequivocally welcome an incentive for businesses to bring them into new employment.

We also welcome the straightening out of any unintended tax consequences that have arisen from covid payments in the past 18 months. The British public have been extraordinary in their response to the crisis and have willingly played their part in staying at home to protect the NHS and save lives. For many individuals, that will have had a direct financial consequence, and it is absolutely right that any payments made to mitigate such financial consequences should be free from tax and national insurance. There is no doubt that people would willingly have gone out and earned national insurance contribution income if the Government had not asked them not to. It is only fitting that their financial sacrifices be properly recognised in our tax and benefits system.

I support the comments made by the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) about tax avoidance schemes and the extent to which they are being promoted. I support measures to clamp down on such schemes, particularly where vulnerable taxpayers are being targeted and potentially lured, dare I say it, into investing in schemes that would bring them into default in their tax affairs; we have seen that happening in relation to the loan charge, as he mentioned. I would like to see the Government doing more to clamp down on these schemes, and I welcome any measures to do so.

The Bill also makes provision for 0% national insurance contributions for employers in freeports. The Government have made a great deal of their plans for freeports; they appear to have great hopes for their abilities to bring economic revival to our country following Brexit and the pandemic. The extent to which that looks likely to be achieved remains uncertain. The Government have not yet published an assessment of the likely impact of this national insurance reduction, which leads me to believe that that uncertainty is continuing. If the Government are unable to say how much the Treasury will lose from the cut in national insurance, one can conclude only that they do not yet have any confidence in how much they expect freeports to boost employment.

What is certain is that the Government have not yet brought forward any other plans to boost economic growth following Brexit and the pandemic. I regret that they are missing the opportunity to boost growth in other sectors and in regions that are not lucky enough to benefit from a freeport.

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch):**

The hon. Lady says that the Government do not have any additional plans for growth. We launched a plan for growth in the Budget with three pillars—infrastructure, innovation and skills—to tackle net zero post covid and take our opportunities for global Britain on leaving the EU, so she is quite wrong to say that we have not done anything to plan for growth.

**Sarah Olney:** I very much welcome the Exchequer Secretary's intervention. I am happy to stand corrected, and I very much look forward to seeing the impacts of those plans right across the nation, because as far as I am concerned, the significant weakness of the plan for freeports is that it cherry-picks areas for investment while ignoring the needs of many other communities across the country. That is why I say that the Bill is a missed opportunity: because to target the national insurance cut just at areas that will have a freeport is to ignore the impact that such a cut could have across many sectors that could provide fantastic opportunities for employment as we come out of the pandemic. There is a very real danger that freeports will divert business activity from areas outside freeports, and that this measure will hit the public finances without any subsequent increase in economic activity.

I believe that the Government would make much better use of the national insurance contributions scheme by stimulating economic growth in ways proven to be effective. For example, an increase in the annual employment allowance to £16,000 could benefit every small and medium-sized enterprise. It would allow employers to take on up to five workers each without making contributions, which would be a substantial boost to

communities across the country and would do much more to boost employment across the nation than these hand-picked benefits whose impact cannot be measured.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** As the next speaker has withdrawn, we will go straight to Jim Shannon.

6.4 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. When you are in the Chair, I always seem to get called earlier. I am not sure why that is, but thank you very much.

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I add my support for the Government proposals. A lot of hours have gone into them, so I will make some comments about them.

Broadly, the national insurance contributions that are raised in a year look after the benefits that are used in that year. They are therefore very important. We deal with an enormous number of people every day in our offices who have benefits issues, and we know that our contributions and everybody's contributions make a difference. I have stated numerous times in this House over recent months that now is the time to ensure that the investments we have made through the furlough scheme and the coronavirus grants system to secure business pays off by having businesses repay their debt through tax and national insurance over many years of success.

The end must be clear: sustainable and expanding small and medium businesses. In my constituency and, I believe, in many other constituencies, small and medium businesses contribute to everyday life through employment and by creating the prosperity we wish to see. I want to see them encouraged on every possible occasion.

The Bill is one cog in that mechanism of growth, regrowth and enhanced growth. I welcome that the Government are completely committed to that. My attention was immediately drawn to a few components of the Bill. Of course, time prevents me from delving into them all, but I first highlight the proposed new zero rate of secondary class 1 national insurance contributions for employers who hire an armed forces veteran during their first year of civilian employment after leaving the armed forces. Employers will be able to claim relief on the earnings of an eligible employee up to the NICs upper secondary threshold from April 2022, and transitional arrangements will allow retrospective claims for the 2021-22 tax year. Like everyone, I really welcome that. I am pleased as punch to see it in the Bill. There is a clear commitment to our veterans, and here is one way of showing it.

I say gently to the Minister that many veterans are missed by the charities. I know some of them in Northern Ireland, and I deal with them regularly in my constituency. They seem to fall under the radar of the charitable organisations. I want to ensure that when the Treasury works to make the proposal happen, there is clear help, co-operation and co-ordination with the veterans' charities, because they identify the people and then this system can help those people get the jobs. It is therefore logical to me that they work together. If they work together closely, they can bring the real benefit that I wish to see.

[Jim Shannon]

This is a fantastic step, and I thank the Minister and the Government for it. It is welcome that we will remember veterans in actions, not simply in prose. I congratulate the Government on proposing these steps to make it more attractive for a business to put its faith in a serving soldier, who may well be acclimatising to civilian life and the different burdens it entails. I have regularly met soldiers who come out of the forces after 20 or 25 years, or even fewer, and who find civilian life extremely difficult. Two weeks ago, I went to a horse charity, People for Horses, where June Burgess helps people who have served in the military or in the police or prison service in Northern Ireland to deal with their post-traumatic stress disorder through contact with horses. I believe that we can do the same thing here in a really important way.

The point that this provision flags up for this humble man is the fact that the Government have managed to extend it to the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and rightly so. I am truly grateful for that, because every regiment in our armed forces is made up of men and women from every corner of this great United Kingdom. That is right and proper, yet it does highlight that other armed forces promises do not similarly extend to each part of the UK. The ungenerous might highlight that such failings have perhaps made President Macron think it acceptable to comment that Northern Ireland is not part of this great nation; wow, does he need a lesson in geography. A mixed message may be seen by those who wish to push their own narrative, but I commend the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary for making it clear to President Macron that Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. For that reason, I again wish my Government to make abundantly clear the absolutely bedrock foundation that, in every aspect of life, without a successful border poll the six counties of Northern Ireland were, are and will be British.

This legislation regarding troops is for every serviceman and woman, regardless of their accent. Whether we have my very broad Northern Ireland accent, the Scots accent of my colleague on my right, the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill), or a Welsh accent, we are all going to qualify for this, which is good.

We also welcome the Minister's commitment to freeports. From reading the Library notes and listening to the Minister beforehand, it is clear that the commitment is not only to freeports here in the mainland but to freeports in Northern Ireland as well. That is really good news and I welcome it. There is some work for the Northern Ireland Assembly to do; there seems to be work for the Northern Ireland Assembly to do every day, and that is the way it should be. In this case it has clear job to do, and I want to make sure that that happens and that we all gain advantage.

I also noted that some of the correspondence on freeports in the notes referred to ensuring the incentives are not exploited for tax avoidance purposes. The Government have taken on the task of making those who pay tax accountable in their own country, as they should be, and I want to make sure of that and therefore ask the Minister to comment on it in summing up. Some correspondents pointed out that freeports had

gained a negative reputation for enabling tax evasion through the storage of high-value goods, but the Government have proposed the creation of a tax site within any UK freeport to support and facilitate a robust system of monitoring and ensure that the available reliefs are claimed legitimately. I therefore think the Government have addressed this, but want to make sure that it is on the record. I also ask the Minister to indicate what discussions the Government have had with the Northern Ireland Assembly to ensure that the freeports issue continues to move forward for Northern Ireland.

I welcome as well the move to address tax avoidance in the form of a provision to allow changes to the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes regime as it applies to national insurance contribution avoidance schemes. I am informed that these changes also mirror amendments to the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes regime as it applies to other tax avoidance schemes made by provisions included in the Finance Act 2021.

When I speak to the ordinary businessman in the street—the self-employed trader, or the employer of five members of staff in a small shop—they talk about the fact that they cannot afford to hire a high-flying accountant who can find and use loopholes, and they watch on with increasing frustration as the big companies that could afford to pay any contributions get away with not paying. I believe that the Government are again setting the marker for those companies by ensuring they are accountable; they should pay tax in their own country and make sure that they pay the right amount as well.

Our businesses need a level playing field and help, and it is my hope that this Bill will enable those avoiding and evading tax to be brought into line. It is my hope that this Bill helps to ensure that those who can pay should pay and do pay. If we make that happen, we will be going in the right direction. If we all do the right thing—us here and those outside—we will all benefit.

6.14 pm

**Robin Millar** (Aberconwy) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak today and to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and I take this opportunity to reiterate his unequivocal statement that Northern Ireland is indeed part of the United Kingdom.

I welcome this opportunity to make a few brief remarks in support of the Bill's provisions on freeports and the benefits that it will represent for one in north Wales, in particular. But before I do, I note that the Bill demonstrates once again the Government's commitment to levelling up. It is also set to reduce the tax avoidance that disadvantages our small and medium businesses, which cannot afford access to the specialist experience available on avoidance, as has been referred to. In addition, it seeks to offer the dignity of decent employment to our veterans, which, again, I welcome.

Freeports are a common feature of the world's most ambitious free-trading nations and are used by many of our closest allies. They have propelled many previously impoverished nations to prosperity and have proved a valuable means of ensuring structured investment in export-led industry. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) asked for evidence, and he might consider the words of the directors of the

World Customs Organisation and the former director of the Swedish customs body, who noted that freeports create local supply chains beyond the facility, so long as firms have ease of access. In that way, freeports have the potential to boost investment and trade in the surrounding region. For an island nation such as Britain, with a rich history of trade across the globe—trade that, despite criticisms of it, has driven developments, innovations and improvements—investment in freeports is a signal to the world of the Government's commitment to secure the UK's place at the heart of global trade.

There has been speculation in the media in recent months as to what levelling up means. I speak as a representative of the region—north Wales—in which I grew up, and I have seen it change over the five decades I have known it. Indeed, I have spoken in this place before about how residents of north Wales have grown used under devolution to being overlooked and underfunded for much of the past two decades. However, I am also a Conservative, and it is a hallmark of conservatism to see constituencies such as mine not only in terms of handouts but in terms of their potential—to treat them according to their distinctiveness and not to mistake equal treatment as sameness. That is why I describe Aberconwy not solely in terms of needs or deprivation, for there are both, but also in terms of its potential, and that potential will be different for every other constituency across the UK—a point the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) might consider.

The practical provisions set out in the Bill will help to realise that potential. Despite north Wales being one of the UK's most under-invested regions, the British Private Equity & Venture Capital Association notes that it is also one of the fastest growing parts of Wales. North Wales is part of an expanding advanced manufacturing cluster worth more than £30 billion a year to the UK economy. We have world-beating green energy research in Ynys Môn and an industry-leading centre for 5G telecoms innovation at the University College of North Wales. Our Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board has a vision for a best-in-class medical school and primary care underpinned by technology.

We also occupy a significant strategic location. The Romans may have built the first version of the A55 on ancient paths across our hills, Thomas Telford may have developed it, and Irish MPs may have driven the development of our road and rail links to ensure their smooth transport to this place, but today north Wales finds itself astride a trade route stretching from Dublin to Moscow. In its day, the tunnel carrying the A55 underneath the Conwy estuary was the largest construction project in Europe. Today, fully four fifths of our UK trade to Ireland passes through Wales, with most of it going through our Holyhead port in Ynys Môn.

That is potential, and it needs unlocking. A freeport offers a remarkable opportunity to build on those natural advantages and offer a site of structured relief for international investors. The practical provisions in this modest Bill will help to secure that; they are practical incentives for investors and employees, and I suggest that that that is at the heart of levelling up.

This Bill demonstrates how, beyond the provision of a simple designation as a freeport, supporting legislation and incentives such as those before us, can create an exciting opportunity for investors and an opportunity for co-operation with other parts of Government—even

the Welsh Government in Cardiff. Indeed, I urge all parties to do what can be done to bring this opportunity to north Wales. Given the strategic importance of Holyhead to trade with Northern Ireland, such co-operation would also be an investment in our Union.

To conclude, it has been said that ports are the power cables to the UK economy. A Bill such as this, creating incentives by removing national insurance on workers, will help flick the switch, so I will be supporting the Bill.

6.19 pm

**Anthony Browne** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I know that the public like it when different political parties work together for the common good, and I notice that the National Insurance Contributions Bill, which we have been discussing this evening, has been subject to absolutely glutinous harmony. I have counted five different political parties expressing support for it, which means it must be doing something good, and I fully support the measures in it.

I am particularly keen on the freeports, which have been widely discussed, but I will keep my very brief comments to the national insurance contributions deductions for veterans. We all know, as various other Members have said, that veterans have amazing skills and great strengths, which they bring to many different jobs, including in this House. We have many Officers who are veterans and, indeed, Members of Parliament who are veterans, but we also know that veterans suffer from a veteran employment gap. They suffer higher unemployment than the national average. That is not just a UK thing; it applies to other countries and is a very big issue in the United States.

One thing we can do with national insurance is tilt the employment market in veterans' favour. I say this from an economics background, but there is a market failure occasionally in the employment market, where the interests of wider society, employers and the state in terms of the Treasury are not always aligned. Making small adjustments to incentives through the national insurance system or otherwise can actually help align those incentives for the benefit of employees, employers and the Government.

I fully support the veterans measure, but the principle of it could be extended to other areas where there are structural issues around different groups and unemployment, particularly the long-term unemployed and the disabled. There is a particular issue. If someone has been unemployed for a year, they lose motivation and lose contacts. Employers start looking askance at them and do not want to take them on. If someone has been unemployed for two years, they are more likely to retire, never having worked again, than to ever find a job. There is a reason for that.

Say an employer has two candidates who are equally good in front of them. One is already working and one has been unemployed for two years. The employer will take the risk-averse approach and think, "There might be something about that long-term unemployed person. I will stick with the employed one." That might be a rational decision for the employer—one might argue that it is not, but most employers would behave that way. It means that the Government will carry on paying the welfare bills of the long-term unemployed person. It means that the long-term unemployed person finds it

[Anthony Browne]

even more difficult in future to find a job, and it is not good for society to have a cohort of people who are so detached from the labour market.

There is therefore a big economic rational argument for the Government to tilt the labour market in favour of long-term unemployed people. They could do that through national insurance—there are other ways of doing it—by having deductions for people who have been unemployed for a year or two years.

The second group I will mention is the disabled, and the same issues apply there. Somebody who is blind or severely visually impaired may be very good at a job, but a lot of employers would be worried about the adjustment costs, for example, or other things—they may just be nervous and have not had experience of it before. There is a huge societal and Treasury incentive to help disabled people to get into work rather than languishing in long-term unemployment. Again, there is a rational economic argument to create an incentive to align the interests of employers, the Government and the long-term unemployed to get the disabled or others into work.

I fully support this national insurance deduction for veterans precisely for that reason: it will be good for veterans, good for employers, good for society at large and good for the Treasury. I wish this Bill the swiftest and smoothest passage through this House.

6.23 pm

**Abena Oppong-Asare** (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate on behalf of the official Opposition. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray) said earlier, we will not be opposing this Bill today. We support the intention behind it and many measures within it.

I thank all hon. Members from across the House for their contributions to the debate. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) spoke about his concerns about how freeports will operate, which were shared by the hon. Members for Gordon (Richard Thomson) and for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney).

I will now make a few brief points about the different elements of the Bill and echo the questions asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North in the hope that we can get some clear answers from the Minister. On freeports, which we debated at length over the course of the passage of the Finance Act 2021, we have consistently said that we support and protect British businesses and want every region in the nation of the UK to thrive. We have asked important questions about exactly how freeports will operate. On my hon. Friend's specific questions about the national insurance relief being introduced for freeports, we need clarity on why the relief is conditional on employment beginning after April 2022 given that freeports are expected to begin operating in 2021, and why the level of the relief is set at £25,000, which is below both median pay in the freeport areas and the rate for those employing under-21s and apprentices.

My hon. Friend asked the Minister for some transparency about the Government's approach to the global minimum corporation tax rate. Specifically, why did the Chancellor

support the weakening of the proposals and the reduction from the 21% rate to the 15% rate? The Government must be ambitious and argue for a higher rate in order to level the playing field for British businesses and build a strong economic recovery.

I turn now to the measures related to veterans. I pay tribute to all those who have served in our armed forces and all those who currently do so. They make great sacrifices on behalf of this country and they deserve nothing but the best from this Government. Clearly, an important part of this is supporting veterans as they transition into civilian employment. We therefore welcome the new relief on employers' national insurance contributions for veterans. I hope the Minister can answer my hon. Friend's specific points about the length of the relief and why it is shorter than the freeport relief, and on what the upper secondary threshold for the veterans' relief will be.

The second part of the Bill exempts self-isolation payments for national insurance contributions for the self-employed. Again, we welcome this measure. We have consistently called for the Government to do more to ensure that people do not have to choose between self-isolating and paying the bills. Recent figures show that still only about half the people who should be self-isolating are doing so. Clearly, this will not be about the financial element alone, but there is clear evidence that the system is not working as it should. First, only about one in eight of the workforce are eligible for the £500 payment. Of those who apply, only 30% succeed, and of those who apply for the discretionary scheme, only about 20% succeed. We urgently need some action from the Government to improve this. Although we welcome the small step in the Bill to reduce the administrative burden associated with self-isolation payments, will the Minister set out what more the Government intend to do to support people to self-isolate in the coming months?

We welcome the anti-tax avoidance measure in clause 11. My hon. Friend asked what action the Government will take to clamp down on the most active promoters of tax avoidance schemes, and I hope the Minister will address this.

We will not oppose the Bill today. We support the measures to boost jobs across the country, to help veterans to find employment, to ensure that people can self-isolate, and to tackle tax avoidance. We will of course use further stages of the Bill to seek to improve it. I hope the Minister can respond to the specific questions that I and other hon. Members have asked.

6.29 pm

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch):** I would like to thank Members for their well-considered contributions to what has been a very productive debate, and I am very grateful for the support across the House on Second Reading. A range of perspectives has been presented here today, but I think we are all agreed that this is an important piece of legislation, which assists this country's recovery from covid-19 and helps us prepare for a better future.

Before I address some of the specific points raised by Members today, I will briefly reiterate the Bill's main measures and outline what they seek to achieve. First, this Bill supports the delivery of the Government's

freeports programme and boosts regional growth. It achieves this through the introduction of an employer national insurance contributions relief for businesses based in freeports that take on workers. This measure will play a major part in helping these new economic zones to create jobs, drive growth and revitalise local communities.

Secondly, this Bill delivers on a Conservative party manifesto commitment by introducing an employer national insurance contributions relief for organisations that recruit armed forces veterans. This will encourage firms to take on former services personnel, as so eloquently put by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne), boosting veterans' employment prospects. On this point, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised an excellent point about working better with veterans charities, and I agree that this is something that employers and Government should do more of. In turn, this measure will allow even more businesses to benefit from veterans' abilities, skills and experience, and I am sure Members would agree that this represents a valuable opportunity for firms up and down the country.

Thirdly, this Bill provides an exemption from self-employed national insurance contributions for test and trace support payments, which will apply retrospectively. This measure will ensure self-employed workers benefit from parity with their employed counterparts and are not penalised if they need to self-isolate and therefore submit a claim.

As I have outlined, the Bill supports workers and the wider economy, but it also contains measures targeted at those who threaten our country's financial wellbeing. The final measure is the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes regime introduced by this Bill, which boosts HMRC's powers to deal with the promoters of such unscrupulous arrangements. In addition, it will help ensure that taxpayers are better informed about the risks posed by avoidance schemes. This measure will deter the operators of such schemes and better protect consumers.

I will now move to the specific questions raised by Members. There were several questions from the Opposition Front Bench. The hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) asked why the self-employed national insurance contribution exemption was not legislated earlier. The answer is that class 1 NICs exemptions were made in regulations. However, the self-employed exemption requires primary legislation, and therefore is included in this Bill, as this is the earliest opportunity to legislate.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the upper secondary threshold for freeports and why, at £25,000, this is lower than for other reliefs and what the rationale was. The answer is that, unlike other NICs reliefs that are available to employers nationally and generally are targeted at specific groups of employees with particular characteristics, businesses operating in a freeport are likely to be able to claim the relief on almost all of their new hires. To balance generosity of support with the need to consider the public finances, this broader eligibility has been balanced by limiting the amount of salary that can be relieved. We have chosen to set this limit at £25,000 per annum, which is approximately the average salary in the UK. Employees with earnings at or below this limit will be eligible for full employer NICs relief, and employers

will still be able to claim up to approximately £6,500 of relief on the salaries of employees earning more than this.

The hon. Gentleman asked why the relief was not starting until April 2022. The Government have been clear that this relief is only available on new hires from April 2022, and set this out in the "Freeports Bidding Prospectus" published in autumn 2020. The reason why is that having a clear start date is a simple approach that will support the freeport businesses. Further, a freeport tax site needs to be designated so that the location requirements can be met, otherwise there would be no reference in legislation for what geographical area constitutes a freeport tax site.

On the veterans scheme, I believe the hon. Gentleman asked why the relief was just for a year compared with that for freeports, and he said that it needed to be longer. The answer is that the relief provides employers with up to £5,500 in savings per veteran that they employ. The aim of that policy is to support veterans' transition into civilian life through encouraging employers to hire veterans.

Finally, on corporation tax, the hon. Gentleman asked a question about the 15% rate. The reason the global rate of 15% was settled on is that, at that value, it will protect against multinational tax avoidance while leaving appropriate room for countries to use corporation tax as a lever to support their economic, fiscal and environmental objectives.

I now turn to some of the questions raised by the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who asked why we are having freeports now, after they have not necessarily worked in the past. He has forgotten one thing: we have left the European Union. Leaving the EU means that we have an opportunity to do things differently. We have developed an ambitious new freeport model to ensure that towns and cities across the UK can benefit from fantastic new international trade opportunities. Freeports can attract new investment and employment in left-behind communities across the UK, and the further benefits include a simplified customs process. Our freeports will offer tax measures to incentivise private business investment, carefully considered planning reforms to facilitate much needed construction, and additional targeted funding for infrastructure improvements in freeport areas to level up communities and increase employment opportunities. This is therefore a much more ambitious policy than the previous freeports that the right hon. Gentleman referenced.

On the right hon. Gentleman's question about evidence-based policy and the wider impact of freeports, we believe that the relief will significantly reduce the cost of taking on new employees and doing business in the freeport. That, along with other tax reliefs being offered as part of the wider package, will support businesses, but the Government have not yet agreed and finalised successful bidders' tax site proposals. Any modelling that we have done to support the process remains sensitive to the locations chosen, and we will be in a better place to conduct more detailed modelling once tax sites have been agreed with the Government. The right hon. Gentleman asked whether that would be completed before the end of the passage of the Bill. That will not be done before we finish this Bill. However, the Government will outline the process for confirming tax sites in due course.

[Kemi Badenoch]

There were several questions about the Union. Freeports in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones), the hon. Members for Gordon (Richard Thomson) and for Strangford, and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar). I say to all of them that we want to ensure that the whole of the UK can benefit. We are thrilled that there is demand for freeports across the United Kingdom, and we remain committed to establishing at least one freeport in Wales as soon as possible. Discussions about the best way to establish a freeport in countries outside England, such as Scotland, are complex. It would not be appropriate for me to elaborate on those private discussions. However, those are things that the Treasury is considering in detail.

On the point that the hon. Member for Strangford made about Northern Ireland, we are working with the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that a suitable model for an NI freeport is developed. We will ensure that we meet our international legal obligations in Northern Ireland. It is appropriate that we take our time to ensure that the freeports model for Northern Ireland meets these obligations while delivering a competitive offer for the ports, businesses and communities in that country.

There was a question about displacement of economic activity from other local areas—I believe it was from the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington. That is something that we have considered. We still believe that this proposal will encourage new investment and create jobs in deprived communities, and will not cause harmful displacement.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to explain this Bill's measures and the context behind them. To sum up, this Bill supports the regional growth that is integral to furthering our levelling-up agenda, and is part of our plan for growth, as I said to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). It plays a part in shielding self-employed people from the full financial impact of covid-19, while boosting our veterans' employment prospects. It strengthens HMRC's powers to tackle the organisers of tax avoidance schemes. There are clearly a number of points that we can expect to discuss at greater length when this legislation moves to Committee stage, but for the purposes of this debate I commend it to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a Second time.*

### NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS BILL (PROGRAMME)

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),*

That the following provisions shall apply to the National Insurance Contributions Bill:

#### *Committal*

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

#### *Proceedings in Public Bill Committee*

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 22 June.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

#### *Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading*

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

#### *Other proceedings*

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—  
(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

*Question agreed to.*

**Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab):** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Further to earlier points of order, as matters seem to have moved on, I seek urgent clarification on the process that we are in the middle of, given that Mr Speaker appeared to be deeply unhappy earlier and that we are now facing a wait of possibly up to two hours to hear from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on a matter that the Prime Minister has already addressed the press about.

We understand that the Prime Minister was not available at 3.30; we know that and that is reasonable. Since then, though, the Prime Minister has addressed the press. His comments are causing concern and confusion, but the House has to wait two hours more. This is treating the House with disdain. Parliament is sovereign. What is more, the Prime Minister himself ran on a campaign of Parliament being sovereign—sovereign, Madam Deputy Speaker. Our constituents deserve better.

I wonder whether those on the Treasury Bench have had time to reflect on the matter since the earlier points of order. Can you tell me, Madam Deputy Speaker, whether you or the House have had any word from No. 10 about coming here now to clear up the confusion and whether the Prime Minister is willing to face questions from Members of Parliament on behalf of our constituents? I seek your urgent clarification, because we feel that the Prime Minister is treating this House with contempt.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the hon. Lady for that point of order, and realise that she has set out the fact that the Prime Minister has made a statement to the press, not to the House. However, the best thing I can do is repeat what Mr Speaker said earlier:

“I have repeatedly made it clear how important it is that announcements should be made in this Chamber.”

He went on to say:

“The Secretary of State will be making a statement at 8.30 pm on covid. That will give Members of the House an opportunity to question him on the Government's policy.”

He then went on to say:

“However, it is not what I would have expected, which is a statement to the House before an announcement to the press. It is not acceptable. The Government determine when Ministers make statements, but, in doing so, they must show respect to this House.”

That is what Mr Speaker said earlier, and I do not think that there is much more that I can add to that, but the hon. Lady wants to follow that up.

**Thangam Debbonaire:** Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can we be absolutely clear that the Prime Minister has not made any attempt to contact Mr Speaker about making a statement and that there is literally nothing else to add at all? Given that Mr Speaker made it very clear in his ruling earlier that he was deeply unhappy, may I just check that there has been no response from those on the Treasury Bench or from No.10 about the Prime Minister coming to this House so that he, having made a speech to the press, can face questions from this House?

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** As I have said, the hon. Lady can rest assured that Mr Speaker will have made his views very clear. I am not aware of any discussions that have taken place, but I think we would know if the Prime Minister were shortly to arrive here. Instead, I suspect that the Secretary of State will make a statement at 8.30.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is somewhat different. It relates to the fact that if the Government are extending the provisions in England in relation to the restrictions on people's freedom because of covid beyond 21 June, that is also the date when matters change as to how we do our business here in Parliament.

It is actually quite difficult to get a rail ticket from Wales to London because of covid restrictions on trains. People have to book some time in advance. I just wonder when there will be a business statement that will lay out exactly how we will be doing our business in a week's time. There are perfectly sensible measures that could be put in place very quickly; I am sure that we would all want to assist in that, but it is important to get these things right. Sometimes, when the Government rush them or do not consult on them, we end up having to tidy them up afterwards.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. I suspect that the shadow Leader of the House will be having discussions with the Leader of House about that issue, and it may be something that comes forward in a business statement at some point.

I am suspending the House until 8.30 pm.

6.44 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Speaker's Statement

8.30 pm

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call the Health Secretary to make his statement, I want to repeat the point I made earlier. It is entirely unacceptable that the Government did not make today's announcement to the House first. It was disrespectful to the House and to our constituents. The Government clearly planned that the media would be told information today not far from this Chamber, and that this House would have to wait until tomorrow. I want to say very clearly to the Government that this is not how this House should be treated.

The Government's own ministerial code says:

"When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of Government policy should be made in the first instance, in Parliament."

The Prime Minister polices the ministerial code. He wrote the foreword to it. He must now lead from the top and follow the guidance in it. The House can be assured that I will be pursuing this matter with him.

I do not find it acceptable at all. Members of this House are elected to serve their constituents here, not via Sky or the BBC. Questions should be answered here. The Prime Minister should be here. I am sorry if his dinner would have been affected. I was told that he would be in Brussels—I think the nearest Brussels tonight were the sprouts in the dinner being served. I say now, Prime Minister, you are on my watch, and I want you to treat this House correctly.

I now call the unfortunate person who has had the pick up the pieces, the Secretary of State, Matt Hancock, to make the statement.

## Covid-19 Update

8.32 pm

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock):** Mr Speaker, these past six months, we have all been involved in a race between the vaccine and the virus. Our vaccination programme has been delivered at incredible pace: we have delivered 71 million doses into 41 million arms; and over 93% of people aged 40 and over have now received at least one dose. Because of this pace, we are able to open up vaccinations to those aged 23 and 24 tomorrow.

It is this protection that has allowed us to take the first three steps of our road map, meaning that right now we have one of the most open economies and societies in Europe. We have been able to remove the most burdensome of the restrictions and restore so many of the freedoms that we hold dear. At every stage, we have looked at the data, set against the four tests that the Prime Minister set out to this House in February. The fourth of those tests is that our assessment of the risk is not fundamentally changed by new variants of concern.

The delta variant now accounts for over 90% of cases across the country. We know that the delta variant spreads more easily and there is evidence that the risk of hospitalisation is higher than for the previously dominant alpha variant. Case numbers are rising, up 64% on last week in England, but the whole purpose of vaccination is to break the link between cases and hospitalisations and deaths. That link is clearly weaker than it once was. However, over the past week, we have seen hospitalisations start to rise; up by 50%. Thankfully, the number of deaths has not risen and remains very low.

Sadly, before the vaccine, we saw that a rise in hospitalisations inevitably led to a rise in deaths a couple of weeks later. The vaccine in changing that, but it is simply too early to know how effectively the link to deaths has been broken. We do know that, after a single dose of the vaccine, the effectiveness is lower against the delta variant, at around 33% reduction in symptomatic disease. However, the good news, confirmed with new data published today, is that two doses of the vaccine are just as effective against hospital admission with the delta variant compared with the alpha variant. In fact, once you have had two doses, the vaccines may be even slightly more effective against hospitalisation if you have caught the new delta variant. This gives me confidence that, while the protection comes more from the second dose, and so takes longer to reach, the protection we will get after that second jab is highly effective—and, if anything, slightly better—against the delta variant. So, for the purpose of the restrictions, while it will take us a little longer to build the full protection we need through the vaccine, all the science is telling us that we will get there. Of course, all this says that it is so important that everyone gets both doses when the call comes. Even today, I have had messages from people who have had their jab, and I am so grateful to each and every person for making our country safer. At every stage of the road map, we have taken the time to check it is safe to take the next step. Our task is to make sure the vaccine can get ahead in the race between the vaccine and the virus.

I know that so many people have been working so hard, making sacrifices, being cautious and careful, and doing their bit to help this country down the road map.

I know that people have been planning and arranging important moments and that businesses have been gearing up to reopen. So it is with a heavy heart, and faced with this reality, that we have made the difficult decision not to move ahead with step 4 next week. Instead, we will pause for up to four weeks until 19 July, with a review of the data after two weeks. During this crucial time, we will be drawing on everything we know works when fighting this virus and will use the extra time to deliver the extra protection we need.

Despite the incredible uptake we have seen in this country, there are still people we need to protect: 1.3 million people who are over 50 and 4.5 million over-40s have had a first jab but not yet a second. The pause will save thousands of lives by allowing us to get the majority of these second jabs done before restrictions are eased further. We are today reducing the time from first to second jab for all people aged 40 and over from 12 weeks to eight weeks to accelerate the programme. If, like me, you are in your 40s and you have a second jab booked 12 weeks after your first, the NHS will be in touch to bring it forward, or you can rebook on the national booking service. Our aim is that around two thirds of all adults will have had both doses by 19 July. I can tell the House that we have been able to deliver the vaccine programme faster than planned, so we can bring forward the moment when we will have offered every adult a first dose of the vaccine to 19 July, too. In this race between the vaccine and the virus, we are giving the vaccine all the support we can.

We have always said that we will ease restrictions as soon as we are able safely to do so. Even though we cannot take step 4 on Monday, I am pleased that we are able carefully to ease restrictions in some areas. We are removing the 30-person gathering limit for weddings, receptions and commemorative events—subject, of course, to social distancing guidelines. I am very grateful for the work of the weddings taskforce on this relaxation. We will be running another phase of our pilots for large events at higher capacities, including some at full capacity, like the Wimbledon finals. We are easing rules in care homes, including removing the requirement for residents to isolate for 14 days after visits out, and we are allowing out-of-school settings to organise residential visits in bubbles of up to 30 children, in line with the current position for schools. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) for his work in this area.

Even though we have not been able to take the full step as we wanted, I know that these cautious changes will mean a lot to many people and move us a little bit closer to normal life. As we do this, we will keep giving people the support they need. We are extending our asymptomatic testing offer until the end of July. We have put in place one of the most extensive financial support packages in the world, and we will continue to deliver enhanced support for the worst-affected areas.

We have seen how this approach can work—for example, in Bolton. Cases in Bolton have fallen by almost a third over the past three weeks. Even as hospitalisations have risen across the north-west, in Bolton, they have fallen by more than half. Last week, we introduced enhanced support in Greater Manchester and Lancashire, and I can now tell the House that we are extending these extra measures—surge testing, cautious guidance and extra resources for vaccination—to Birmingham, Blackpool,

Cheshire, including Warrington, and the Liverpool city region. We know from experience that this approach can work, but we need everyone to play their part, so I urge everyone in these areas to get tested and to come forward for the support that is on offer. When you get the call, get the job and help keep us on the road to recovery.

Finally, none of this would be possible without our vaccine programme. Without the vaccine, faced with these rising cases and hospitalisations, the clinical recommendation would have been to go back towards lockdown. The Vaccines Taskforce is critical to the work to deliver supplies, the work on booster jabs and ensuring we are protected for the future. Dame Kate Bingham did a formidable job in melding the best possible team, and I would like to congratulate her and everyone else who was recognised in Her Majesty's birthday honours this weekend. I am delighted to be able to tell the House that Sir Richard Sykes, one of Britain's most acknowledged biochemists and industry leaders, has agreed to take up the position of chair of the VTF. Sir Richard brings to bear experience from leadership positions in both the public and the private sectors, and I am delighted to have him on board to lead the team in the next stage of this mission.

This race between the vaccines and the virus is not over yet. These difficult restrictions challenge our lives in so many ways, but they play a vital role in holding the virus back and protecting people while we get these jabs done. So let us all play our part to keep us safe from this dreadful disease. I commend this statement to the House.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call Jonathan Ashworth, who has five minutes, I remind the public that this statement is being interpreted by the British sign language interpreter.

8.41 pm

**Jonathan Ashworth** (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I congratulate Sir Richard Sykes on his new role and I thank Dame Kate Bingham.

Tonight's announcement was both predictable and, sadly, predicted. Many of our constituents and local businesses will be deeply disappointed. Our constituents did what was asked of them. They queued up for vaccination. We praised them in this House. The Secretary of State shed tears on the news and boasted, "Cry freedom," on the pages of *The Spectator*. Yet we are now in the grip of a delta wave that is spreading with speed, and our constituents face further restrictions.

The Prime Minister's complacency allowed this variant to reach our shores. On 25 March, there were warnings of a new variant in India. It is reported that Ministers first learned that the delta variant was in the UK on 1 April. The Government red-listed Pakistan and Bangladesh on 9 April, but did not red-list India until 23 April, by which point 20,000 people had arrived from India. Our borders were as secure as a sieve, and all because the Prime Minister wanted a photo call with Prime Minister Modi. It is astonishing that these Ministers promised to take control of our borders and conspicuously failed to control our borders at the very moment it mattered most.

Not only did the Prime Minister open the back door to this variant; he failed to take measures to suppress it when he could. It has been growing in prevalence among school-age children, yet mandatory mask wearing has

been abandoned in secondary schools, and the Secretary of State has never explained why, despite being repeatedly asked. We know that isolation is key to breaking transmission, yet, 16 months on, people are still not paid adequate financial recompense to isolate themselves. When asked at the Select Committee last week, he claimed that people would game the system. The only ones who gamed the system are the mates of Ministers, Tory donors, spivs and speculators who made a fortune supplying duff PPE.

The Secretary of State seeks support for extending restrictions by pointing to plans to go further on vaccination. We will support extending restrictions in the Lobby, but even after extending the doses that he has outlined, there will still be large proportions of the population left unprotected, having had one dose or none—exposed to a variant that, if left unchecked, could accelerate and double every week, putting us on track for tens of thousands of infections per day by the end of this period. That will mean more hospitalisations, more long covid, more disruption to schools and more opportunities for variants to emerge. Will the Prime Minister lift restrictions in those circumstances, as he appeared to promise tonight, or will infection rates and hospitalisations have to fall before he does so?

Vaccination will get us through this in the end, so what is the Secretary of State's plan to bring down infections and to extend vaccination rates in hotspot areas? We have learned that in Leicester surge vaccination has been abandoned. In parts of the north-west—in Chorley, Mr Speaker, in Tameside, in Salford and in Wigan—the dose numbers have gone down. Has vaccination surging been abandoned in those hotspot areas?

Finally, we are likely to see more infections in the coming days, and we are likely to see more contacts of infected cases in the coming days. Will the Secretary of State finally give those people isolation support so that they can isolate and quarantine themselves from the rest of society?

The chief medical officer said tonight that we would be lifting restrictions if it were not for the delta variant. The Prime Minister should have moved at lightning speed to prevent the delta variant reaching our shores. Instead he dithered, and tonight he is responsible for this delay.

**Matt Hancock:** I think that in that response, we saw a lifting of the veil on the Opposition's position. The right hon. Gentleman knows that he has supported the Government's position for a very large part of the crisis. We will be grateful for their support in the Lobbies, and quite rightly, because the Labour party has clearly accepted the logic of the position.

However, the logic of the questions the right hon. Gentleman just raised moved towards a position of never escaping from restrictions. I want us to escape from restrictions, and the vaccine is the way for us to escape from restrictions. The truth is—it is not the easy thing to say, but it is the right thing to say—that in this country and around the world, covid-19 will be with us and we will have to learn to live with it in the same way that we have learned to live with other deadly diseases like flu. The vaccine will help us get to a state in this country in which we can manage it and live our normal lives. The logic that the right hon. Gentleman set out is one in which we never escape.

[*Matt Hancock*]

It was a logic based on flawed thinking about how things work in practice, because the right hon. Gentleman's other argument was that this is all due to the Government not taking decisions on India, based on information that we did not have at the time. His argument is that he has now seen in the published data that there was a problem in India—too right! And as soon as we saw the data, we acted on it. The whole case that he set up was that on 2 April we should have acted, but on 2 April neither the original B1617 Indian variant strain, nor the B1617.2 delta strain, had yet been designated a variant under investigation or a variant of concern.

Captain Hindsight over there is arguing, “Never escape from restrictions, and base your logic and evidence on things that haven't been recorded yet.” That is no way to run a pandemic. Instead, we will put the interests of the British public first. We will take a cautious and irreversible approach. We will take difficult decisions if they are necessary, but we will get this country back on the road to recovery.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

**Jeremy Hunt** (South West Surrey) (Con): May I start by saying that I totally agree with your expression of disappointment, Mr Speaker, that in a parliamentary democracy Parliament heard about this news after the media, and much as I respect my right hon. Friend it should be the Prime Minister who is here this evening?

I happen to support these measures and the caution the Government are showing, but may I suggest to my right hon. Friend that one of the reasons for the disappointment many people feel is the use of words like “irreversible”? Tonight, Sir Patrick Vallance said that we will be living with covid for the rest of our lives. If there is a vaccine-busting variant that threatens another 100,000 lives, these measures will not be irreversible, and we have a duty to be completely honest with people about the bumpiness of the road ahead. So may I urge the Health Secretary to be as cautious with the language we use as he rightly is with NHS bed capacity?

**Matt Hancock:** The goal is that the steps in the road map are irreversible; that is the goal, and I am sure it is a goal that my right hon. Friend agrees with. We have demonstrated repeatedly during this crisis our willingness to take difficult decisions if they are necessary and if they are needed by the data, but it is also important to try to take steps when we can have a good degree of confidence that we will then be able to deliver that irreversible route, as opposed to moving faster than that, which might lead to a reversal. I hope that that explanation is one with which my right hon. Friend and indeed the House can concur in terms of what we mean when we say that we seek an irreversible approach to the road map.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: While hospitalisations and ICU admissions are, thankfully, not increasing as fast as covid cases, they are both rising significantly, so this delay was inevitable. According to Public Health England, the delta variant appears to be about 50% more infectious and reduces the protection

against infection from one vaccine dose to just 33%. As a single dose is therefore less effective, by what date does the Secretary of State expect all adults to be fully vaccinated with both doses and would that not be a more appropriate time for the removal of all restrictions, rather than setting another arbitrary date when younger adults will not be fully protected?

So how did we end up here? Having ignored the Scottish Government policy of all arrivals undergoing hotel quarantine, the Secretary of State then delayed adding India to the UK's red list at the same time as Pakistan and Bangladesh. He previously claimed it was because of greater positivity rates among travellers from Bangladesh and Pakistan but that is not borne out by the published data. Between 25 March and 7 April the test positivity of arrivals from India was 5.1%, lower than Pakistan at 6.2% but significantly higher than Bangladesh at 3.7%. Was the delay not just because the Prime Minister was still clinging to his plan for a trade visit to India? The whole point of border quarantine is to protect the UK from variants that might be more infectious or show resistance to vaccine-induced immunity, so having allowed the delta variant to enter and become the dominant strain in the UK, does the Secretary of State not recognise that the Government's border strategy has failed?

**Matt Hancock:** I thought that the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) on the Opposition Front Bench was Captain Hindsight, but, seriously, this argument is completely divorced from reality. The data that the hon. Lady has just recommended to the House is data about what happened between 25 March and 7 April, and she complains about a decision the Government took on 2 April because we did not know of the data up to 7 April; so she brings to this House information from after a decision was taken and asks why it was not taken into account for that decision, and the answer is because it had not happened yet.

**Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): Virtually everybody in the most vulnerable category, which made up 95% of hospitalisations and deaths, is protected by both jabs, the vaccines work against all variants thus far, and the latest Office for National Statistics data estimate that eight in 10 of us have antibodies. So will my right hon. Friend tell the House precisely how much better these metrics need to be in order for full freedom to be restored?

**Matt Hancock:** Our goal is that, by 19 July, two thirds of adults—around two thirds—will be double vaccinated. The data published today shows that the protection from transmission of this disease from a single jab is quite a lot lower for the delta variant, but the protection from hospitalisation from both jabs is that bit higher. That means that we do have to take a bit more time to get the protection from the double dose, whereas previously the single dose got a very significant proportion of the protection, but it does mean that once we get there, we have confidence in the effectiveness of the jab at keeping this virus at bay.

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): Professor Chris Whitty's slide earlier this evening was very clear: we were on track to ease all restrictions next week until the delta variant hit our shores and took off in the UK. Apart from the late decision to red list India, could the

Secretary of State explain why it was that, on 19 April, he told this House that the delta variant was a variant of concern and there would be surge testing, yet it was not officially designated a variant of concern until 6 May? This is important because that is what unlocked the surge testing. Why was there a delay of 17 days, and what impact does he think this delay has had on the spread and therefore on today's announcement?

**Matt Hancock:** I took action to tackle this variant before it was designated even as a variant under investigation, because I was worried about what was happening in India, so in a way the hon. Lady makes my point for me. On the delta variant, we acted before it was recommended as a variant of concern by the scientific process. In fact, I have kicked off a review of that process, because I think it is the process and the scientific advice that should advise me that a variant is of concern. But having looked at and seen the data in India, we took action even before it was recommended.

**Andrew Griffith** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con) [V]: The tremendous effort by the Secretary of State and his colleagues in delivering 71 million doses has clearly made a difference, and it is why we are not going backwards today. I have previously raised the cause of the wedding industry in Arundel and South Downs, so will he accept my thanks for saving summer for this vital sector, but would he kindly support the Culture Secretary to ensure a successful summer of motorsport?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes, I work very closely with the Culture Secretary on making sure that these events pilots can go ahead. We are working very closely with F1. I am delighted that we will be able to see the Wimbledon finals go ahead, on a pilot basis, with 100% capacity. It is fantastic to see the crowds at Wembley. We are making progress, and these freedoms have returned. We are not yet able to make the full step 4, but we are making the progress that we can.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. We can all understand the difficulties that have been presented for those who are waiting to get married, have put off their weddings and have lost deposits, and who have been holding on and hoping against hope that their special day will come. Does the Secretary of State not agree that the importance of a wedding celebration is equal at least to the importance of a football match or a summit, and that if there is to be a delay, consideration must be given to those getting married in July and August? Will the Secretary of State task a working group of experts to outline the safest way to allow these family events to take place, and then ensure that those decisions will be discussed with and conveyed to the Northern Ireland Health Minister?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes. The weddings taskforce has worked very hard on ensuring that there are covid-secure ways of progressing, including opening up weddings, removing the cap on numbers and doing this with social distancing. I hope that that will allow lots of the thousands of weddings planned over the coming weeks to happen in a way that is consistent with social distancing. I am very happy to talk to my opposite number in Northern Ireland, Robin Swann, who does an exemplary job. I know that he looks at these things very carefully, and I have no doubt we can have a conversation about that.

**Mr Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): Before I ask the Secretary of State my question, I should just say—as a former Government Chief Whip, it does not give me any great pleasure to do so—that I wholly associate myself with your remarks earlier, Mr Speaker. This statement should have been made to this House by the Prime Minister before it was made to the media. I hope that we do not see a recurrence of it and I wish you well in your meeting with him.

The Secretary of State has set out that it is not the Government's policy to get to zero covid—indeed, that is not possible. Can he say whether it is the Government's policy to maintain a low prevalence of this virus? If it is not, can he confirm the Prime Minister's sentiments today that 19 July is a terminus date, and can he rule out bringing back restrictions in the autumn and winter when we see an inevitable rise in what is a respiratory virus?

**Matt Hancock:** Well, it is not inevitable—I do not think it is inevitable. It may happen, but it is not inevitable because we also have the planned booster programme to strengthen further the vaccination response. But it is absolutely clear, based on all the clinical advice that I have seen, that a goal of eradication of this virus is impossible. Indeed, there is one part of this country that tried it for a bit in the summer and found it to be impossible. Therefore, we must learn to live with this virus and we must learn how we can live our normal lives with this virus, so I reflect the Prime Minister's words, which, of course, I concur with entirely, on 19 July. Our goal is to make sure that we get as much vaccination done between now and then—especially those second doses—to make sure that we can open up safely, even if there is a rise in cases, by protecting people from hospitalisation and especially from dying of this awful disease.

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): This is a hammer blow to hospitality businesses, many of which are trading currently at a loss, and to the night-time economy, which has been preparing to reopen and now faces more uncertainty. Many of the financial support packages that the Secretary of State referred to—the furlough, the rent moratorium, the VAT and business rates support—are due either to end or to be reduced, and businesses are still racking up debts for which they need a solution. If businesses are going to stay closed, support has to continue for as long as the restrictions last, so what are the Government going to do to give extra support to businesses, many of which are in real danger of collapse?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes, of course I understand the impact of this decision on the businesses that are affected—both those that were hoping to open but will stay required to be closed by law, like nightclubs, and those that can open but will find it harder to trade than they would otherwise. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has put in one of the most extensive sets of financial support in the world. Of course, the more affected a business is, the more it is able to draw down on that support—on things like furlough. Furlough continues until September, but there needs to be a step towards the restoration of normal economic life. Nevertheless, we are determined to support businesses, hence the degree of support that has been put in place—that was put in place at the Budget—not just to cover the period of the road map based on the “not before” dates, but to run further than

[*Matt Hancock*]

that, in case there needed to be a delay of one of those “not before” dates, because the whole principle was that we take these steps based on data, not dates.

**Sir Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that many of those who are going to hospital now with covid are staying in hospital for a far shorter period than was the case earlier in the pandemic? Will he break down those figures for us? Will he also publish figures showing the breakdown between those who present in hospital for other reasons but subsequently test positive and those presenting with covid?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes, I am very happy to seek to publish all those data. The latter data, I think, are published already. On the former data, the best estimate I have is that the average length of stay for somebody in hospital owing to covid has fallen from 10 days to eight days, so it has fallen to a degree, but not a huge degree. That is partly because of treatments, but it is also partly because some of the people in hospital have had at least one dose of the vaccine, which is highly likely to have reduced the severity of the disease. In the 10 most affected hospital trusts, on average, the number of people going to hospital who have had both doses is under 20%. A further approximately 20% of people have had one dose. The remainder—the majority—are people who have not been vaccinated at all.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): May I first associate myself with your remarks, Mr Speaker, about the Government’s behaviour and their complete contempt for this House—for both sides of the Chamber?

On current rates, I understand that we are looking at something like 40,000 cases by the first week of July, according to the Secretary of State’s own Department’s data. That is on trend. What does that say about the Prime Minister’s decision not to put India on the red list when it clearly had twice the infection rate of Pakistan and Bangladesh? Was that not simply a very expensive photo opportunity that is going to cost Warwick and Leamington businesses and those across the country dear?

**Matt Hancock:** No, because any businessman or woman in Warwick or, indeed, Leamington will understand that it is literally impossible to take decisions on data that has not yet occurred. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) had it right when she pointed out that we did not know this data at the time.

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will be well aware, people in Keighley and Ilkley have never come out of some form of restrictions; in fact, in July last year, we went into some of the toughest local restrictions. Going forward, will he rule out using a regional approach, so that communities such as mine can come back out of this pandemic and recover as normal?

**Matt Hancock:** We have in the last month or so surged in testing and changed recommended advice, but we have not taken a regional approach to the legal restrictions. Frankly, I think that has been a better way of doing things. I know that that is what the people of Keighley would prefer, and they are very wise folk.

**Mr Speaker:** May I congratulate Tony Lloyd on his knighthood? I call Sir Tony Lloyd.

**Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: Thank you for your remarks, Mr Speaker, both at the beginning of this session and to me personally. I am grateful.

It is axiomatic that the higher the rate of infection, the higher the rate of transmission. In this battle between the virus and the vaccine, the virus wins, with those high rates. The only antidote to that is, as we saw in Bolton, surge vaccination. Bolton now has the second highest rate of the Greater Manchester boroughs; we have been overtaken, alas, by Salford. That is why people across Greater Manchester do not understand why we do not have surge vaccination. Yes, it would be good for Greater Manchester, but it would be good for the whole country. Can the Secretary of State explain?

**Matt Hancock:** I would love to surge vaccinate the whole country. Supply is the rate-limiting factor; it has been from the start. To surge the whole country would be to go as fast as we can, which is what we are doing already. Yes, we can surge in relatively small areas. In the areas that need extra support, which now constitute about 10% of England, we are increasing testing where we have the spare capacity, especially of the lateral flow kits; we are putting in place the guidance to be more cautious; and we are putting in place the extra support we can give to get the vaccines out, especially to groups who are harder to reach. But we need to bring the whole country forward with the vaccination programme. That is why we are going as fast as we can, and I am delighted that we are able to bring forward the date by which we will have been able to offer all adults a dose from the end of July to 19 July as part of what we are able to announce today.

**Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend has taken the wedding industry up to the top of the hill and told them they can open up without restrictions, but marched them down again and said, “Only if you can socially distance.” Many wedding venues do not have huge rooms, so that is going to be very difficult. I am very concerned that the wedding industry, and the couples who want to get married are going to be incredibly disappointed by the announcement today. Is there no way that the Secretary of State can overrule that and allow them—with care, obviously—to go ahead with no restrictions so long as they are sensible, but without the fear of social distancing?

**Matt Hancock:** I of course understand why many in the wedding industry and many who are planning to get married in the next month would prefer to be able to do so without any of these rules at all. I do not want these rules either, but, unfortunately, we have a virus that is growing again. We have to take the extra time to allow the vaccines to come through, so the social distancing rules are staying in place right across the board. Carving them out for one very specific activity is something that we looked at, but that we found a very, very difficult decision to take for all sorts of reasons, legal and practical, and in terms of fairness to everybody right across the board in different circumstances.

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: I wish to return to the question of surge vaccinations. Case rates in Salford are higher than they have been

since mid-January. They are five times higher than the national average and they are doubling around every seven days. We need to get vaccines into arms as quickly as possible, but this week we only have 3,500 doses of Pfizer, and that is falling to 2,200 doses next week. Despite promises from the Secretary of State of enhanced support and some talk of surge vaccinations in hotspots such as Salford, that lack of doses of the Pfizer vaccine is the major barrier to getting everyone in Salford jabbed. Will the Secretary of State remove that barrier? Will he make sure that we get the supply of Pfizer and the flexibility to vaccinate all our over-18-year-olds?

**Matt Hancock:** I am afraid that my reply is the same as it was to the hon. Member for Rochdale (Sir Tony Lloyd), which is that supply is the rate-limiting factor.

**Barbara Keeley** *indicated dissent.*

**Matt Hancock:** The hon. Lady shakes her head, but it is a matter of fact that supply has been the rate-limiting factor throughout. We will do everything we can to support vaccination using the doses that we have. As she well knows, the UK, thankfully, is right at the front of the global race to get vaccinated, and that is because we bought early in very large bulk. Of course, we have worked to make that supply as big as possible as fast as possible. We go as fast as we can, but we cannot go faster than we can.

**Sir Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: Thank you for calling me, Mr Speaker, and for what you have said tonight as well.

Has my right hon. Friend not recognised that just a few weeks—or “a little longer” in the Prime Minister’s parlance—make the difference between survival or closure for some businesses? Will he recognise therefore that forcing businesses to remain closed for a further period without financial support being extended for the same period is unjust, unconscionable and unsupportable? Will he take that back to the Chancellor and the Prime Minister, please?

**Matt Hancock:** I happily will, but I urge my hon. Friend to see the financial support that is in place and continues to be in place, most of it through to September. It was extended over that period in case we had to make an extension to the road map, and while I fully understand the impact on business—of course I do—I also can see the impact on saving lives. The advice is that this change will save thousands of lives because the protection of the vaccine, especially against dying of covid, is very, very strong, but the vaccine coverage is not yet comprehensive, especially with those second doses, so we need to get that done.

**Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): Thank you for calling me, Mr Speaker. There are now huge differences in the vaccination rate between Britain’s poorest wards and Britain’s richest wards. In Heartlands ward in my constituency, we have sky-high infection rates but rock bottom vaccination rates, yet, as the Secretary of State knows, the ward is the home to Heartlands Hospital. Down the road, GPs told me this afternoon that there is no Pfizer left in their fridges. There is no certainty about when it is going to arrive, and they do not know how much they will get when it does come. We know that when we open mobile units there is a five-hour queue.

We know that pharmacies are successful, but in Birmingham tonight, there are, at best, vaccines for just 10% of the population of 18 to 29-year-olds. Over the next 34 days, how many Pfizer doses will arrive in Britain’s second city? We cannot unlock until we unblock this pipeline.

**Matt Hancock:** Before making an intervention like that, the right hon. Gentleman should first thank the teams who have supplied so much vaccination to this country, acknowledge that we have gone faster than almost anywhere in the world and work with us—work with the West Midlands Mayor and work across Birmingham—to make sure that we get the testing done as well and that we get vaccination done wherever possible. The fact that the fridges ran out of Pfizer demonstrates that we are getting through this as fast as we can, but supply is the rate-limiting factor on vaccination—it always has been—and on that the team have done a pretty amazing job, and I support them to go as fast as they possibly can over the weeks to come. That is what we will get done.

**Mr Steve Baker** (Wycombe) (Con): Across our country, alarming numbers of people not only forecast that this extension would happen, but increasingly believe that they are never going to see true freedom again—freedom from these restrictions, which the Secretary of State has promised us. What more can he say about the conditions under which we will get to step 4, to reassure those people that this Government will actually set them free and indeed in due course set them free from all the paraphernalia of the management of this pandemic?

**Matt Hancock:** I want to get rid of all the restrictions that have been put in place to manage this pandemic, and we will get there. My hon. Friend will have noticed that the link we have explicitly made is to the rate of vaccination and getting the vaccines done over these four weeks to come. Of course it is my duty to recommend to the Prime Minister the actions I think are necessary to keep people safe—as a Health Secretary, that is my duty—but I am also a parliamentarian who represents constituents who want these restrictions removed as soon as safely possible. That is our goal, and this is a difficult balance. I think we have got the balance right, unfortunately, today—I say “unfortunately” because I wish it was easier. It is not, but we are able to make some progress and I very much hope we can make the full degree of progress that my hon. Friend wants to see in the not-too-distant future.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I want to ask about the Test and Trace app, because this relates to freedom as well. As I understand it, the Government intend to keep the legislation in place on Test and Trace all the way through until next March. At the moment, tens of thousands of people every day are pinged by the app. The app does not tell them when the infection might possibly have taken place. I know of schools where four whole classes were sent home because a single teacher had been pinged over the weekend. I have known of construction businesses where every single person has had to be sent home. If we keep on doing this, particularly in some parts of the country where there are high levels of infection, we are going to have large parts of the economy constantly being closed down. I know that there are some measures in place, but the financial problems are still very difficult, especially for middle-class families.

[Chris Bryant]

They may have the financial freedom but they still find it very difficult to stay in work and be able to do their work when the rules are all changing. If we really want freedom, we are going to have to turn this blunderbuss into something more precise, are we not?

**Matt Hancock:** Of course the purpose of the app is to identify people who have been in close contact with somebody who has tested positive and let them know that, and therefore ask them to self-isolate—that is what it is there for. The hon. Gentleman asks me to get more data so that it can be more targeted. He will know from last summer's debate that the restrictions on the amount of data we can gather through that app are put in place by the companies rather than by us, so we cannot be more targeted. I am very happy to arrange a briefing for him on the details of that. But the goal is to ensure, in time, especially for those who have been vaccinated, that we follow through on the pilots we have done under which people who are contacts—not the “cases” themselves—are able to go into a testing regime, rather than having to isolate. There are pilots under way to check clinically that that works, and I look forward to seeing their results.

**Dr Liam Fox** (North Somerset) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend advise us about the demographics of those he believes are likely to be hospitalised? Today, Public Health England said that both the Pfizer and the AstraZeneca vaccines can cope as well with the India variant as the Kent variant. The Pfizer vaccine is 94% effective against hospital admission after one dose and 96% effective after two, while the AstraZeneca vaccine is 71% effective against hospitalisation with one dose and 92% effective after two. Who would be hospitalised to the extent that the NHS would be swamped? Will he promise us that our country will not be locked down because some individuals who could be immunised choose not to be?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes. Thankfully, the take-up rates are very high, so only a very small proportion of people have chosen not to come forward to get the jab when offered. My right hon. Friend makes an important point, which is that the state's obligation to get the country out of this situation falls more heavily on ensuring that vaccinations are offered than that they are taken up. Our goal is to ensure that take-up is as high as possible but, given that we are not going for mandatory vaccination across the board, the commitment that we make is to offer, and there is an important distinction between the two, as my right hon. Friend draws out.

On the make-up of those hospitalised, the average age has fallen considerably since the vaccination programme started, which is probably in large part due to the fact that, of course, the older cohorts were vaccinated first. That also, on average, reduces the acuity of those in hospital and therefore helps to break the link between hospitalisations and deaths yet further. I hope that answers my right hon. Friend's first point.

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Secretary of State will be aware of the evidence that women who contract covid during their pregnancies are twice as likely to experience a stillbirth or a premature birth. He will also know that the Joint Committee on

Vaccination and Immunisation decided in May that it was not worth prioritising such patients for the vaccine because the “low infection rates” made the “absolute risk” to pregnant women “very small”. Given the data that has been presented today and the evidence of the high risk of infection rising throughout the country, will the Secretary of State now rethink that decision and ensure that all pregnant women, at any age, and especially those in their third trimester, are fast-tracked to have both doses of the vaccine, so that we can protect not just them but their unborn children from harm?

**Matt Hancock:** This is an issue I have discussed with my clinical advisers, because it is very sensitive. I am sure that the hon. Lady would join me in urging all pregnant women to come forward and discuss vaccination with their clinician, because that is important, and she set out some of the reasons why. Of course, we have opened up, from tomorrow, vaccination to all those aged 23 and over, so vaccination will soon be available to every adult, which means that questions of prioritisation will be for the past—other than the question of the vaccination of children, which is separate in many ways and an important question that we will address in the coming weeks.

To anybody who is pregnant, I say: as soon as you are eligible for a vaccine, please discuss it with your doctor, because for the vast majority of people who are pregnant the right thing to do is to get the jab as soon as possible and get both jabs as soon as is practicable. I think that is something on which the hon. Lady and I would agree.

**Steve Brine** (Winchester) (Con): Last week, the Secretary of State told me:

“Our goal...is not a covid-free world...the goal is to live with covid”.—[*Official Report*, 7 June 2021; Vol. 696, c. 678.]

Well, you could have fooled me, and many of our constituents. There is dismay out there tonight. The reopening of the wedding industry is not a meaningful reopening and I think it is cruel the way some are being misled. The Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend have been very clear today that 19 July is not a new “not before” date but an end to all this, so will the Secretary of State tell the country his assessment of risk and personal responsibility and whether he feels that as a country we remotely have that right at this time?

**Matt Hancock:** In a pandemic, the balance between risk and personal responsibility is different, because someone can affect somebody else in a life-threatening manner even without knowing it. If we go to the philosophy of this, the first duty—in fact, the legitimate duty—of the state for any liberal is to prevent harm by individuals to others. Unfortunately, in a pandemic that is what people do if they have the disease, especially asymptotically—they could be harming others without even knowing it.

Once we have the offer of a vaccine to everybody, and once we have protected and mitigated the large part of that risk, we do need to move back to a world based on personal responsibility. That is right, and that is where we intend to go. I think that we have made steps already in that direction in steps 1, 2 and 3. This country is freer than almost any other in Europe in terms of our economy and of our society. That is partly because of the very rapid vaccination effort here, but I hope that my hon. Friend can take from that the direction we intend to go.

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: We are in this position because of the delta variant, the spread of which the Government could have slowed by putting India on the red list earlier instead of waiting while the Prime Minister fuffed around over his trade trip. By late March, Canada was warning of high levels of covid cases arriving from India. By early April, similar warnings were coming out of Hong Kong. By 7 April, hundreds of people were arriving here from India with covid, and half of them had new variants. Yet even when the Minister finally announced India was on the red list, he inexplicably waited another four days while many more people with the delta variant returned. So can he tell me why he is still refusing to publish the analysis and advice provided on India by the Joint Biosecurity Centre that the Select Committee has asked for? Please will he publish it now?

**Matt Hancock:** We published the data for the number of imported cases of B1617 and other variants at the time the decision was taken. That data was the data—including up to 7 April—on which we took the decision, which was announced on 19 April, but it does take that time to see the sequencing, because it operationally takes time. Since we have published that data, I have heard endless calls from those on the Opposition Benches, including from the right hon. Lady, that I should have acted on data that we could not see and that had not been gathered, and that is only a way to make a point if you do not care about the truth of what actually happened.

**Caroline Nokes** (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: As the evictions ban comes to an end and rate relief ends, what reassurance can my right hon. Friend give businesses such as Fiskskool in my constituency, which is still operating under restrictions, that this delay to full step 4 really is the last delay?

**Matt Hancock:** I understand entirely the point that my right hon. Friend is making in terms of these restrictions and the impact on businesses and, in particular, the link to those in rent arrears. That is something I have been discussing with the Communities Secretary, and I am very happy to meet her to discuss how in the short term we can ensure that businesses, such as the one in her constituency that she mentions, get the support they need.

**Tahir Ali** (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State refers to Captain Hindsight as cheap political point scoring to deflect from the seriousness of the debate. May I suggest that he refers to the cartoon character—much suited to his own Government—of Danger Mouse? Can the Secretary of State explain why India was included on the travel red list a full two weeks after countries with much lower rates of infection? This decision came almost immediately after the planned visit by the Prime Minister to India was cancelled. In my constituency of Birmingham, Hall Green, many residents believe that the decision to include Pakistan and Bangladesh as red list countries was politically motivated. To restore public confidence, can the Secretary of State indicate when countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh will be removed from the red list and put on the amber list?

**Matt Hancock:** The hon. Gentleman refers to political point scoring, and then makes points that he knows are not supported by the facts. As I have said to this House

before, when the decision was taken on the 2 April change to put Pakistan and Bangladesh on the red list, test positivity of travellers returning from Pakistan was 4.6%—three times the 1.6% positivity of returning travellers from India. Those are the facts—the basis on which the decision was taken. I am not quite sure, but I think the hon. Gentleman asked at the end of his question whether we can now take those countries off the red list and put them on to the amber list. I do not support that approach, because it is important to keep this country safe.

**Jackie Doyle-Price** (Thurrock) (Con): My right hon. Friend will understand my dismay because, as we have discussed between ourselves, economic harm and the sustainability of businesses is a real concern of mine. I worry about the distress that this announcement has caused. Let me take one particular sector of international travel businesses: cruises. The cruise industry has been closed for international sailing for more than 15 months, and there really needs to be clarity if we are going to save the sector, which supports 90,000 jobs and is worth £10 billion a year to the British economy. I ask my right hon. Friend to really make it clear to the chief medical officer that the cruise industry needs its own road map to be able to embark on international travel again.

**Matt Hancock:** My hon. Friend makes a strong and important point. I get the impact on business—of course I do—and especially on international cruises. I am glad we were able to work with the cruise industry to get some domestic cruise trips going again, admittedly in a small way, essentially to pilot it. It is more difficult on an international front. I am very happy to work with her and my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary on what more we can do.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) [V]: Does the Secretary of State feel any shame that the reason we need to delay the easing of restrictions is entirely down to the incompetence of his Government—not only the three-week delay in putting India on the red list, but the utter failure to suppress the virus through basic infection control, tracing and effective isolation? This is the fourth time the Government have let the virus spread. That might be great news for Serco, whose profits are up today, but it is a disaster for everyone else.

Does the Secretary of State recognise that, to protect people at home, we also have to do much more to vaccinate people in poorer countries, both because it is a moral imperative but also so that we reduce the chance of new variants being imported here? Will he therefore adopt a jab-matching policy so that, for every single dose administered in the UK from now on, we donate another dose to COVAX, as well as scaling up the UK's vaccine production? The UK's pledge of 100 million doses includes only 5 million by the end of September, and that is too little, too late.

**Matt Hancock:** No, I do not agree with most of that. In particular, I think the hon. Lady and the whole House should welcome the Prime Minister's announcement that we will be ensuring that when we have excess supplies—I stress when we have excess supplies—we will donate 100 million doses around the world. I am not going to do that before we have excess supplies because we want to make sure people are vaccinated here at home.

**Caroline Lucas** *indicated dissent.*

**Matt Hancock:** The hon. Lady shakes her head, but my first duty is to protect people here in this country, while at the same time making sure that people get access around the world, as we have done, for instance, with the Oxford-AstraZeneca jab—half a billion jabs have been done around the world. That is my order of priorities; I am very, very clear about it. We will help the rest of the world to get vaccinated, but we also need to look out for and vaccinate the British population. As for the first half of the hon. Lady's statement, it was completely wrong.

**Aaron Bell** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): My constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme have done everything we have asked of them during this pandemic. They have stayed at home and protected the NHS, and then they went out and got vaccinated in huge numbers, so any sense that these restrictions are to protect those who chose not to get vaccinated will be seen by them and me as deeply unfair. Will the Secretary of State set out what assessment he or his scientific advisers have made of the extent to which these restrictions are required to protect those who chose not to get protected?

**Matt Hancock:** This change is emphatically not for the purpose of protecting those who have chosen not to get vaccinated. It is emphatically to ensure that we have the time to offer the jab—both first jabs to all adults and second jabs for those who have had their first. To go through the data on that, currently, 93% of over-40s have had their first jab, but there are still 4.5 million who have not yet had the second jab. We can get through the majority of those over the next four weeks. Then, of course, we have been able to bring forward the date by which we will have offered a first jab to everybody. This is about the ability of the people who want to come forward to get jabbed to do so, and that is what we will achieve by 19 July to that degree. I hope that we end up with an uptake of almost 100% by the end of this; the uptake figures have been absolutely astonishing, so we will keep offering, we will keep encouraging people to come forward and we will keep trying to make the system and the vaccines as accessible as possible, but the thing that is in the direct control of the Government—subject to supply, of course—is the offering of the jab, and that is the commitment that we have made by 19 July.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Secretary of State will know that the hospitality and tourism industry has probably been hit more than any other part of our economy throughout this period. One of the challenges at the moment is that the ongoing restrictions mean that hospitality and tourism businesses need more staff than normal in order to cater for fewer customers than normal. Is he aware that the biggest single issue raised with me by hospitality and tourism industry bosses in the lakes and the dales is a lack of staff? This lack of staff is largely caused by the Government's new visa rules. Would he agree to get his Immigration Minister friend to sit down with me and, more importantly, hospitality and tourism leaders from Cumbria and other rural areas—and other parts of the country involved in tourism—to discuss an emergency way of getting that vital boost to our hospitality and tourism industry just now?

**Matt Hancock:** I am happy to raise that for the hon. Gentleman. I almost thought he was going to say, at the end of that, that he was glad that Britain now controls its own borders.

**Greg Clark** (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): Young people have made big sacrifices during the pandemic and seen two years of their lives disrupted. Many students and school leavers will be leaving school and university between now and 19 July, so will the Secretary of State confirm that what he said in his statement about removing the 30-person limit on commemorative events will include graduation ceremonies and school-leaving parties in commercial venues? After all, school students in particular have been educated in bubbles with each other for months now, and it would add insult to injury if they were to be denied an opportunity to say farewell to each other.

**Matt Hancock:** I will ensure that the precise Cabinet Office guidance reaches my right hon. Friend's mobile phone as soon as possible. I am now an hour and five minutes into this, and I am afraid I am going to have to get back to him on that one.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): I am sure, Mr Speaker, that the Secretary of State for Health heard what you said at the beginning of this statement. May I ask the Secretary of State how we got ourselves into this position? He has been very good at coming to the House and making statements on covid, but on the biggest, most important day, the press were given an embargoed statement at 3 o'clock and the Prime Minister had a big showy press conference at 6, yet he could not be bothered to turn up until 8.30. This is a clear breach of the ministerial code. How did it happen? Who thought it was a good idea, and who actually broke the ministerial code?

**Matt Hancock:** All I can say, Mr Speaker, is that I am here now answering questions and I am happy to stay for as long as you need me.

**Mr Speaker:** In that case, I call Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (The Cotswolds) (Con): Mr Speaker, this is an unexpected surprise, and I am sure it is for the Secretary of State as well. I am sure that he will be interested in my question. Ultimately, these decisions are a matter of judgment. Can he publish that data on the risk to the health service and the risk to individuals of death, as opposed to those on the social harm and the harm to businesses? Can he therefore tell us why this judgment has been made?

**Matt Hancock:** The best thing that I can point my hon. Friend to is the slides that were presented by the chief medical officer today. I will see whether there is anything further that we can publish, but as a general rule, we publish all the data on which these judgments are made. Central to the judgment today is the fact that we are seeing a rise in hospitalisations, especially over the past week, and especially among those who are unvaccinated or have just had a single jab. Those people are not largely those who are unvaccinated out of choice; it is those who are unvaccinated because they have not yet had the opportunity because they are younger.

Until about a week ago, hospitalisations were basically flat. We thought that the link might have been completely broken between cases and hospitalisations or that it might be a lag. Sadly, hospitalisations then started to rise. For deaths, we have not yet seen that rise, which I am very pleased about; hopefully they will never rise, in which case the future will be much easier. It may still be that there is an element of it that is a lag, and we will be looking out for that very carefully over the couple of weeks ahead, but nevertheless our goal is to get those vaccines done in the five weeks between now and 19 July in order to make sure that this country is safe. I will commit to publishing anything further that we can that underpinned the decision, but I can honestly say to my hon. Friend that most of it is already in the public domain.

**Chris Bryant:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I completely agree with every single word of your statement earlier, as I guess you knew I would. I want to ask, however, about the provisions for our business from next week. As you know, these things were all timed to change at the same time as the national situation, which has now been changed.

I presume that there will be a knock-on effect on parliamentary business: whether Select Committees will meet in hybrid form or virtually, how we will conduct our parliamentary business in the Chamber and the Division Lobbies, and so on. I know that some of that is your responsibility solely, Mr Speaker, but some of it is the responsibility of the Government and might need changes to the Standing Orders. I wonder whether you have had any notification from the Government that they intend to bring such changes forward or of when we will debate them, when we will ensure we get them right, whether there will be proper debate and whether there will be a business statement to tell us when all that will happen.

**Mr Harper:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Listening to the Secretary of State, I was struck by what he said about the need to get people vaccinated and about the very important difference that that makes to the level of risk. In the House's decision making about how we conduct our affairs, would it be relevant to look at the proportion of Members who have been single or double-vaccinated? My judgment would be that if the vast majority of us have been vaccinated, this level of social distancing is simply not necessary and the House could get back to what I know you want, Mr Speaker: much more effective holding of the Government to account.

**Mr Speaker:** I have a lot of sympathy with getting this Chamber absolutely back to normality. What I would say is that it is not just about Members having double doses; it is also about the staff, to whom we have a duty of care. That is why I said, quite a long time ago, "Let's see if we can't get our staff and Members inoculated more quickly than we are doing at the moment."

On the other point of order, we have an important Opposition day tomorrow. Let us see whether the Government bring forward proposals on Wednesday for the House to decide on its own procedures from Monday

up to the summer recess. I expect the Leader of the House to consult other parties in the House before the Government bring forward those proposals; I hope and am sure that those conversations will take place, and take place quickly, in order for the House to know where we are going. Because the date is so close to the summer recess, my suggestion is that it would be easier to take it through to then, for the sake of three days, if this House agrees to what is being proposed.

9.43 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

*On resuming—*

## Business without Debate

### BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (PRIVATE MEMBERS' BILLS)

*Ordered,*

That Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 10 September, 22 and 29 October, 19 and 26 November, 3 and 10 December 2021, 14, 21 and 28 January, 4 and 25 February and 18 March 2022.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the draft Payment and Electronic Money Institution Insolvency Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 26 April, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

*Question agreed to.*

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### IMMIGRATION

That the draft Immigration and Nationality (Fees) (Amendment) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 27 April, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

*Question agreed to.*

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

That the draft Immigration (Collection, Use and Retention of Biometric Information and Related Amendments) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 27 April, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

*Question agreed to.*

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CONSUMER PROTECTION)

That the draft Conformity Assessment (Mutual Recognition Agreements) and Weights and Measures (Intoxicating Liquor) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 12 May, be approved.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

*Question agreed to.*

## Antisocial Behaviour (Vehicles)

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(David T. C. Davies.)

9.47 pm

**Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I begin by thanking the Speaker's Office for granting me this Adjournment debate. This will be a difficult speech to make tonight, because I, like 50,000 other couples, have today found out that—cruelly, in my opinion—their wedding is unlikely to go ahead in the next four weeks. But I will soldier on regardless.

Carshalton and Wallington is lucky to be statistically one of the lowest crime areas in London, thanks to the efforts of our fantastic Metropolitan police officers, but it still suffers at the hands of criminals. Today I want to touch on a couple of the most challenging and worrying problems facing my residents when it comes to crime: antisocial behaviour, particular that which involves the use of, or targeting of, a vehicle.

The pandemic has led to a sharp decline in crime overall in the London borough of Sutton, but this type of crime and antisocial behaviour have seen a worrying increase. Indeed, there was an increase in antisocial behaviour of over 230% last April, when we first went into lockdown. I have been in regular contact with our excellent local borough commander, and it is clear that the police are doing what they can, but the police need to be supported, either through partner organisations that need to do their part, or by new rules of powers to make their job easier.

There are two forms that I want to raise today. The first is the theft of catalytic converters, which are located on the underside of cars and remove harmful pollutant gases. However, the precious metals that enable them to do that are very valuable—some are three times the price of gold. A thief can take a catalytic converter from a car in a matter of minutes, or even as quickly as 30 seconds in some cases, often using a pipe cutter or similar tool simply to cut the converter from the exhaust pipe. Last year saw a rise of nearly 50% of catalytic converter theft in London alone. This has been for two primary reasons: the ease with which these crimes can take place; and the huge financial potential for those who are successful. The perpetrators have become more and more violent in their desperation to commit these crimes, with many stories being reported to me of residents being barred into their own homes, chased or even attacked with blunt implements, such as my constituent Saffron in Beddington.

There has been some good news in relation to tackling these crimes. I pay tribute to the Metropolitan police and the British Transport Police for their efforts to try to tackle this issue. The police set up Operation Basswood to tackle the rise in catalytic converter thefts. Collating evidence from thefts across London and parts of the home counties such as Essex, the police were able to deduce that the overwhelming majority of the crimes being committed came from one group of people based in Hackney.

On Tuesday 23 March this year, hundreds of officers were deployed to execute simultaneous warrants in Hackney and in Essex. On the day itself, there were four arrests and seven subsequent arrests have been made. Over £60,000

was seized, while multiple vehicles that were stolen or had false plates, various quantities of drugs, tools used to commit these thefts and 33 converters were recovered. This was the very first police raid of its kind and I am pleased to report that it has been successful, with a 66% reduction since 23 March, including in Carshalton and Wallington.

This hit day was followed by a further catalytic converter week of action by the British Transport Police in mid-April, which saw 244 offences identified, 664 vehicles stopped, 926 sites visited, 1,610 vehicles forensically marked, 1,037 stolen catalytic converters recovered and 56 arrests made.

However, while these operations have thankfully been successful, the fact remains that without changes this crime is still very easy to commit and the police are in a really difficult situation in tracking down the perpetrators or returning stolen parts. The difficulty in policing this comes down to the basic fact that catalytic converters are easy to steal and almost impossible to trace back to their owners. That is why I am joining local police in calling for changes to help them to tackle this crime. First, we need to look as far back as vehicle production, ensuring that catalytic converters cannot be so easily accessed by potential thieves, but also including identifiable markings on each catalytic converter, so that a recovered catalytic converter can be traced back to the vehicle it was stolen from, thereby allowing for more successful convictions in individual cases.

We must also do more to tackle the dodgy scrap metal dealers that these thieves rely on not to ask any questions when selling on the metals. In fact, this goes for all types of crime that seek to make money in this way. I would agree with the police that these dealers must keep a register of their customers, or even that we should go as far as asking a regulator, perhaps the Environment Agency, to license or certify who can handle these precious metals, again making it easier to trace criminals or to shut down dodgy scrap metal operations covering up for the criminals who use them. Although police operations have led to a reduction in catalytic converter thefts for now, they are likely to rise again unless we get on the front foot and make life more difficult for these criminals.

I want to move on to the antisocial use of vehicles more widely. We have seen scenes from across the country, particularly London—sadly, they have also manifested themselves in Carshalton and Wallington—of people using vehicles, particularly motorbikes, mopeds and quad bikes, to ride antisocially in parks and open spaces, on pavements and high streets, and much more. In my constituency, the residents of Roundshaw and South Beddington have been particularly impacted by this.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Back in my constituency of Strangford, one of the issues has been the advertising of these events on social media. There is a role for the police in relation to that. Does the hon. Member agree that it is imperative that communities are able to have a source of redress against those who sit in public car parks near to housing developments in the early hours of the morning with their altered vehicles, whatever they may be, waking children with every acceleration and leaving people at their wits' end? It is time that there was legislation to stop it.

**Elliot Colburn:** It is an honour to be intervened on by the hon. Gentleman. He was not here during my first Adjournment debate and I felt at a loss, so I am happy that he is here now. I completely agree with everything he said about these perpetrators. Although the crime or the antisocial behaviour itself might seem minuscule to some, constant abuse of vehicles in this way can cause absolute misery for local communities.

**Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab):** I am really sorry to hear about the delay to the hon. Gentleman's wedding. He is raising a number of issues that my constituents in Pontypridd and Caerphilly are faced with on a daily basis. The key issue that I hear about is that they are harassed and intimidated by these car modifications—the cars backfire with loud bangs that literally sound like a shotgun going off and can be utterly terrifying—but because it is essentially antisocial behaviour they feel unable to report it to the police. Does he agree that central to tackling these issues is improving how police support services are communicated to residents across the UK, so that they feel confident to report such incidents?

**Elliot Colburn:** I completely agree with the hon. Lady's point about reporting. I will come on to that later in my speech, but something the Metropolitan police have in place, which I find very helpful, is an online reporting system that does not require residents to phone 999 or even 101 to report a crime. I have found it much easier to persuade residents to report more regularly through that online system, because they do not feel like they are harassing the police, taking up too much of their time or being a burden by reporting something that they think is small, but that is causing them grief. Perhaps the Minister will address in her closing remarks whether we can use that example from the Metropolitan police across other police forces, because it has been a useful tool. Of course, there is always more to do.

I was talking about the impact on residents who live near Roundshaw Downs. It has had an impact on me, because I regularly use the downs to walk my two dogs, Willow and Lola, but have become more and more apprehensive about doing so. That concern is shared by Sutton Rovers football club, which is based at the site. This is not a new issue—residents tell me that it has been going on since before I was elected—but lockdown has exacerbated the problem incredibly. It has clearly gone way beyond a small band of young people looking for a quick thrill and become something more organised.

Perhaps this will explain why. Roundshaw Downs is a 52.7 hectare site of metropolitan importance for nature conservation and nature reserve, based on the site of the old Croydon airport. Some of the old airport remains there today. It is the largest area of unimproved chalk grassland in the borough and, as such, it provides an extremely valuable nature conservation resource for insects, birds and wild flowers—my partner Jed and I particularly enjoy the cows at the southern end of the downs. However, that also makes it very attractive for those who want to use vehicles in an antisocial way.

I will talk through some of the reports I have received from residents about the impact this issue has had on them. Residents have said to me that they are too frightened to walk in the area. The noise has led some to say that it feels like they are living next to a racetrack. They speak of the destruction of the local environment

and habitats, including those of breeding pheasants and skylarks—which, by the way, are a red list species for protection—in the area where the activity has been occurring, as well as other illicit activities such as littering and drug use. There have been serious safety concerns about use of the downs as well. One resident tells me that they have experienced verbal abuse and threats simply for walking on the public pathway. There has sadly been at least one appalling incident of violence against a dog walker, when they were physically assaulted by someone riding a motorcycle.

The Metropolitan police, to their credit, have stepped up patrols where possible, and have even conducted helicopter flyovers. They have managed to stop some people, remind them of the law and seize vehicles, and so on. However, these are expensive and temporary measures, at best. Antisocial behaviour is not reduced solely by reactive police activity; it needs to be tackled by working together with local authorities and communities to introduce preventive measures to stop it happening in the first place.

That has proven difficult because Roundshaw Downs straddles the boundary of the London boroughs of Croydon and Sutton. For well over a year, I have attempted to get both councils in a room with the police to thrash out a solution. Sadly, neither council has been forthcoming.

**Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD):** I associate myself with the comments of the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones)—I am very sorry to hear about the hon. Gentleman's wedding. I am a former police officer and I know the damage that antisocial behaviour does, but I want to press him on his point about Sutton Council. I know that my Liberal Democrat colleagues on Sutton Council are working hard to stop the offenders. My understanding is that the hon. Gentleman refused a briefing from the ward councillor leading on the issue. If he is as passionate about solving it as he seems to be tonight, would he not better serve his constituents by working with local councillors?

**Elliot Colburn:** I am happy to correct the hon. Lady. I asked for the meeting to take place, and it was actually the Liberal Democrat ward councillor who blocked me from attending, so I am afraid she has been given incorrect information. But that proves the point I was going on to: only the police have bothered to engage with me properly on this issue; the councils have been engaged in politicking and game playing, and residents are suffering as a result, because the Lib Dem council is unwilling to work with the Conservative MP.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. Under Standing Orders, we have to adjourn the House again. Then you can resume from where you left off. I promise you do not have to start again.

10 pm

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).*

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(David T.C. Davies.)*

**Elliot Colburn:** The police have told me that about 90% of the solution to this problem is about how the vehicles get on to the downs in the first place. The two councils need to secure all entrances to the downs

[Elliot Colburn]

to prevent vehicles from accessing them in that way. The answer is not, as I understand the Lib Dem councillor has suggested to the police, that they act as a permanent bodyguard, stationed there 24/7. Obviously, that is not feasible. The issue is easily prevented, so could the Government look at what more we could do to give the police powers of compulsion when partner organisations such as councils are being slow or intransigent in doing something that will help the police to do their jobs or reduce crime.

That is important, because the downs are not the only place this antisocial behaviour is occurring; it is also prevalent in other parts of my constituency, such as St Helier, Hackbridge, the Wandle trail, central Wallington and Wallington Square, Beddington, Carshalton Beeches, Clockhouse and others. Can the Government assure me that we are providing the police with the tools and powers necessary to deal with these criminals, who are intimidating and sometimes even harming others by using a vehicle?

It is not always possible to prevent a crime from happening, but we do not have to make it easier for the criminals. Where there are solutions available, such as markings on catalytic converters or vehicle barriers on Roundshaw Downs, we should be backing our police by helping to get those in place, not asking the police to continue on an incredibly difficult venture unnecessarily, unable to bring justice or give residents peace of mind.

I would like to end with a plea to my constituents to please keep reporting. I understand that it can be frustrating if they feel they have done it before and not much has happened, but each report does add to the body of evidence and will make it harder for those in authority to continue turning a blind eye to the issue. I would also like to thank the Metropolitan police for their engagement with me on these issues and for the action they have been taking where they can. The brave men and women who serve in our police deserve nothing but praise for their work, so I hope the Government will join me in giving the police our backing, and help the police and residents in Carshalton and Wallington to tackle these issues.

10.2 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins):** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing this important debate. I was sorry to hear of the adjournment of his wedding to his beloved Jed, and I hope that, the next time I respond to one of his debates, I am able to congratulate him and Jed on their nuptials.

I very much sympathise with the problems that my hon. Friend has raised extremely eloquently and powerfully, if I may say so, on behalf of his constituents. The sort of behaviour that he describes, and indeed that we have heard about on both sides of the House, has a huge impact on the residents who are troubled by it. We are absolutely committed as a Government to tackling this problem in all its forms and wherever it surfaces. The antisocial use of vehicles by a few people causes alarm and distress and can have a disproportionate and corrosive impact on local communities. Beauty spots such as the Roundshaw Downs and South Beddington are to be

enjoyed and cherished, not blighted by the dangerous, noisy and illegal use of motorbikes and other forms of motor vehicle. The Government are also aware of increasing concerns regarding the theft of catalytic converters. We very much recognise the negative impact that that can have on members of the public and on the car industry, which is why we are tackling vehicle crime as a priority.

Let me talk my hon. Friend through some of the measures that we are taking to tackle antisocial behaviour. The Government have provided the police, local authorities and other local agencies, including councils and the various agencies, with a range of tools and powers that they can use to respond quickly and effectively to incidents of antisocial behaviour through the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, which includes nuisance involving vehicles. The police also have powers under the Police Reform Act 2002 to seize a vehicle used in a careless and inconsiderate manner on or off-road. It is an operational matter for the chief constable and for the locally elected police and crime commissioner as to how this power is used. I have listened carefully to his very positive observations regarding the online reporting mechanism that the Metropolitan police use. I encourage other police forces that do not yet have that power to look carefully at this, because enabling the public to record these incidents in the way that he has described, particularly in giving them confidence that, in so doing, they are not wasting police time or getting in the way of more urgent business, will be a critical part of drawing the public's trust in how we tackle these crimes, but also in helping the police to tackle these crimes in local areas where appropriate.

**Alex Davies-Jones:** I am grateful to hear of the robust action that the Minister's Department is taking to tackle the antisocial behaviour relating to vehicles. Part of the problem, according to my local police force, is that these unnecessary modifications to vehicles that make these loud noises are currently not illegal. Will the Minister consider introducing legislation to make these unnecessary modifications that cause antisocial behaviour illegal?

**Victoria Atkins:** The hon. Lady raises an interesting point. I have to confess that I am not an expert in the mechanics of cars and other vehicles, so I am very much feeling my way in answering this. She will know that, through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, we are looking at measures in the criminal justice system, and while I do not for a moment pretend that I am creating Government policy at the Dispatch Box, I would certainly welcome an opportunity to discuss with her, perhaps outside the Chamber, the sorts of measures that she raises. It would have to be a matter on which the car industry and others have the chance to contribute, but certainly let us discuss it to see whether there are ways that we can tackle those particular problems.

The pandemic has brought into sharp focus just how important shared spaces and, indeed, nature are to community life. Local agencies can use their powers to tackle irresponsible use of these spaces, such as the Roundshaw Downs, as this kind of behaviour is both a nuisance and can present a very real danger to the public. I am pleased that my hon. Friend has taken the opportunity to advise his constituents to report these incidents to the neighbourhood policing team and to

the local authority responsible for the public land so that they understand where the problems are happening and the volume of those problems. However, as he says, we must, as communities, report these incidents so that the authorities can begin to use the powers that they have under existing legislation.

When the problem is entrenched, it is for the local authority and community safety partnership to set a strategy and response that go beyond reactive policing of this kind of repeat behaviour. Local agencies should know how best to approach this matter and how to deploy their powers depending on the circumstances. Home Office statutory guidance was created for local areas in order to support them to make effective use of the powers given to them. I cannot stress enough how important it is for local areas to encourage multi-agency approaches to this kind of issue to prevent it as well as to deal with it as and when it surfaces. The reason these powers apply not simply to the police, but to local councils, is that we understand and recognise that there has to be a whole-systems approach to tackling this sort of behaviour, which is why I was disappointed to hear of the experiences that he has had with his local council, Sutton Council. His constituents will expect, as indeed all of our constituents expect, that their elected representatives will work together to tackle antisocial behaviour.

The Home Office continues to fund projects that will increase the safety of local communities. As well as increasing police funding and the recruitment of more officers, a third round of the safer streets fund was launched on Thursday 3 June, which brings the total amount invested in the fund to £70 million over two years. I am going to take the opportunity to emphasise to colleagues across the House that the third phase of the safer streets fund has a particular emphasis on tackling violence against women and girls, so I encourage hon. Members and my hon. Friends to look at that fund with their local partners—councils, police and so on—to see whether there are projects that they can put forward in their local area to tackle that and many other forms of criminal behaviour.

Overall, police funding available to police and crime commissioners has increased by up to £668 million in 2021-22, and on 4 February this year, the Government published a total police funding settlement of up to £15.8 billion in this financial year, an increase of up to £600 million compared with the previous year. We are also committed to giving the police the resources they need to tackle crime through increasing the number of police officers by 20,000 by March 2023. I am delighted to say that, as of the end of March this year, 8,771 additional officers had been recruited across England and Wales. That is ahead of schedule, but we will continue to recruit in order to meet our target of 20,000.

In its area, the Metropolitan police had recruited an additional 1,369 officers, and a further 1,344 officers have been allocated for the coming financial year. The deployment of those officers is, of course, an operational matter for chief constables and their team of senior officers, but I am really pleased to hear of the admiration and thanks that my hon. Friend has for his local policing team.

On policing the roads, we are committed to tackling vehicle crime as a priority. We are working in the Home Office with the Department for Transport and the National Police Chiefs' Council on the first roads policing review, which is a thorough examination of roads policing in England and Wales. Responses to last year's roads policing review call for evidence are helping to shape the development of the action plan by the roads policing review governance board. The Government plan to publish the call for evidence response this summer.

My hon. Friend raised some really important points on the theft of catalytic converters. We continue to work closely with the police and motor manufacturers through the national vehicle crime working group established by the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for vehicle crime. We are working together to understand what more can be done to tackle the theft of catalytic converters, and that work is overseen by the Government's crime and justice taskforce. I join my hon. Friend in congratulating our officers on tackling this type of crime; indeed, he set out the successful Operation Basswood in March and the British Transport police's operation in April this year.

On the use of those catalytic converters that are stolen, of course that sits side by side with the recent rise in metal theft. The Government have funded, therefore, the setting up of the national infrastructure crime reduction partnership, ensuring national co-ordination of policing and partner agencies to tackle metal theft.

The Scrap Metal Dealers Act 2013 continues to be a powerful tool in the fight against this form of criminality. Supporting enforcement initiatives is key to the effective operation of the Act. Since the introduction of the Act, there has been a steady downward trend in metal-related thefts, with recorded offences of metal theft having decreased by 74% from the year ending March 2013 to the year ending March 2020. We carried out a review of the Act in 2017 and found that it had been effective in addressing metal theft and should be retained. It remains a powerful tool to combat these thefts, but, of course, it requires consistent and effective enforcement. Some excellent nationally co-ordinated efforts have recently been made to encourage local authorities, law enforcement and other agencies to carry out such activities, but we must work together to ensure that all possible actions are taken to combat this crime.

We are acutely aware of the damage and distress that antisocial behaviour causes to law-abiding citizens. I very much hope that I have reassured my hon. Friend that the Government take this problem very seriously, including when it involves vehicles, and that we are committed to giving the police the power and resources they need to tackle this type of offending. I very much join him in thanking the police for the efforts they go to, not just in his constituency, but across the country, to tackle these dreadful crimes and to try to ensure that all our constituents can enjoy their homes and their neighbourhoods in the peace and safety that we should all deserve.

*Question put and agreed to.*

10.15 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

Monday 14 June 2021

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

## Israel and Palestine

[*Relevant document: e-petition 585309, Condemn Israel for their treatment of Palestine and Palestinians.*]

*Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 25 February).*

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

4.30 pm

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice to support the new hybrid arrangements. Timings of debates have been amended to allow technical arrangements to be made for the next debate. There will also be suspensions between each debate. I remind Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive for the start of debates in Westminster Hall. Members are expected to remain for the entire debate.

I remind Members participating virtually that they are visible at all times, both to each other and to us in the Boothroyd Room. If Members who are attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks' email address, westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk. Members who are attending physically should clean their spaces before using them and as they leave the room. I also remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall. Members attending physically who are in the latter stages of the call list should use the Public Gallery and move on to the horseshoe when seats become available. Members can speak from the horseshoe only where there are microphones.

Before I move on, we will have a formal time limit of three minutes, given the amount of interest and the number of people speaking. After Catherine McKinnell, there will be a limit of three minutes, and I exhort Members to stick to it, or we will have to drop it down a little.

4.31 pm

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab) [V]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 585313 and 585314, relating to Israel and Palestine.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd, and to lead this incredibly important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. As hon. Members will be aware, the Committee decided to schedule a single debate on both petitions related to this topic.

Before I begin, I draw hon. Members' attention to something that will be depressingly familiar from previous conflicts in the middle east. According to the Community Security Trust, there has been a sharp rise in antisemitic incidents in the UK in the past month, since the violence began. That is totally unacceptable and should serve as a reminder to everyone in public life that words have consequences and that we must always avoid the kind of

inflammatory language that fans the flames of hate and racism, and puts the security and safety of Jewish communities at risk.

We were all shocked and horrified to see the tragic and heartbreaking violence in Gaza and Israel last month. I know this issue provokes strong emotions, both in the country and in the House, and the roots of that conflict are deep, complex and highly contested. I hope, however, that we can begin this debate with a point of agreement among all Members: the latest round of violence has improved conditions for no-one, be they Palestinian or Israeli. The loss of life, including so many children, is heartbreaking and my thoughts are with all those who have lost loved ones. I am sure hon. Members will have shared the horror at the indiscriminate firing of thousands of rockets by Hamas from Gaza into Israel, and the Israeli actions that have killed Palestinian civilians.

More than half a million people have signed the two petitions. One petition calls on the Government to recognise Palestine as a state, while the other advocates the blocking of all trade between the UK and Israel. As vice-chair of Labour Friends of Israel and a parliamentary supporter of Labour Friends of Palestine and the Middle East, I share the deeply held concerns for the plight of the Palestinian people. Colleagues who have visited the region will know that the desire of the Palestinians to live in dignity and peace in a state of their own is unmistakable. Their aspiration for self-determination is one that we should wholeheartedly support; it is right for the Palestinian people, and it is right for the Israeli people.

I do not believe, however, that sweeping sanctions of the kind proposed by the second petition would bring the prospect of a two-state solution any closer. As the Government's written response says, we should "not hesitate to express disagreement with Israel whenever ...necessary,"

but sanctions threaten to drive the two sides further apart, increase polarisation and extremism, and weaken the voices of Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers. Blocking all trade between the UK and Israel would destroy our relations with Israel and reduce our influence in the middle east. The only long-term sustainable solution to the conflict, and the only way that we can end the sporadic and sickening outbursts of violence, is for the two peoples of that beautiful land to have states of their own, with Israel safe, secure, and recognised within its borders, living alongside an independent Palestinian state.

Former Israeli President and Prime Minister Shimon Peres famously remarked that the tragedy of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is that

"there is light at the end of the tunnel. The bad news is there is no tunnel".

He meant that most fair-minded observers know what a peaceful resolution to this long-running conflict would look like: a gradual sequence of confidence-building measures, eventually culminating in a two-state solution. The lack of a process and a foundation to get to that point is the key problem.

It is an immense relief that the ceasefire in Gaza is holding up, but if we want to look back on this as the point at which a peace process became possible, there must be meaningful dialogue between Israel and Palestinians.

[Catherine McKinnell]

For too long it felt as though Palestinian groups did not really want a peace process, while the Netanyahu Government felt that they did not need a peace process. The latest eruption of violence shows how unsustainable such notions are.

The approval of a new coalition Government in Israel offers an opportunity to kickstart the process towards a peaceful two-state solution, but peace is not within the gift of one side alone. It will require painful compromises and concessions by both sides and the kind of leadership, imagination and generosity that has rarely been evident on the part of the Netanyahu Government or Palestinian representatives in past negotiations. A two-state solution can be brought about only by bringing Israelis and Palestinians closer together, but as we all know too well, the response of the international community has too often been marked by a combination of frenzied activity followed by long periods of inaction that are interrupted only by the occasional futile gesture. It is time for a new approach—one that does not ignore the necessity and centrality of the political process, but that is not held hostage by its ups and downs. It involves a massive programme of international investment in peacebuilding in Israel and Palestine—one that can begin to construct the civic society foundations upon which any lasting peace deal will have to rest.

Earlier this month, I was pleased to join 64 parliamentary colleagues in support of the establishment of an international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Such strong cross-party backing was also evident in the Westminster Hall debate that I led on this topic last November, and in the widespread support for the Bill that was introduced by the former Member for Enfield North in January 2017. Designed by the Alliance for Middle East Peace, such an international fund would invest \$200 million annually in grassroots people-to-people projects. Some might question whether sports and summer clubs, tech training and environmental projects can really help to bring 70 years of pain and suffering to an end, but I believe they can, because we have seen such an approach work in the recent past.

The example of the International Fund for Ireland shows the transformative impact that civic society peacebuilding work can play in helping to end seemingly intractable conflicts. Established in 1985, a dark time when the Troubles seemed as intractable as the conflict in the middle east does today, the IFI eventually grew to encompass more than 6,000 people-to-people projects. The fund opened new space for politicians and helped to bring about a reservoir of public support in both the Unionist and nationalist communities, which has sustained peace in Northern Ireland, through multiple ups and downs, over the past two decades. Not for nothing did Britain's chief negotiator, Jonathan Powell, later hail the International Fund for Ireland as "the great unsung hero" of the peace process.

The middle east need be no different. Indeed, there is now a robust body of academic research and evidence to suggest that the peacebuilding projects already operating on the ground significantly improve Israeli and Palestinian participants' attitudes to one other and lead to higher levels of trust and co-operation, more conflict resolution values, and less aggression and loneliness. The problem is that such projects have not received the attention,

focus and money that they need and deserve to really have an impact. Although the International Fund for Ireland has invested \$44 per person per year in peacebuilding work, only around \$2 per person is invested every year in Israel and Palestine. That could all be about to change, however. In December, the US Congress passed the Middle East Partnership for Peace Act with strong bipartisan support. It will invest \$250 million over the next five years in peacebuilding work—the largest such investment ever—and the legislation is designed to evolve in a multinational direction if other countries wish to participate. Indeed, it specifically creates seats on its board that are reserved for foreign Governments or other international actors.

In the Westminster Hall debate that I secured last November, Ministers promised to examine the feasibility of British participation in the new US initiative, as a step towards its development of a truly international institution. Sadly, despite endorsing the concept of an international fund in 2018, thus far the Government have dragged their feet. Last year, they even eliminated funding for the People for Peaceful Change programme, the UK's own small-scale investment in peace-building work.

Despite the Prime Minister's talk of a global Britain, last week he failed to seize the opportunity of the G7 summit to work with President Biden to galvanise international support for the fund. With or without Britain, this is a project whose time has come. It reflects the reality that no successful peace process happens without the will and the engagement of the people, as they come together and demand a better future for their children.

I will close today with the words of Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian poet:

"'Me' or 'Him'—

Thus begins the war. But it

Ends with an awkward encounter:

'Me and him.'"

4.40 pm

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd, and I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I begin by congratulating the new Israeli Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, and Yair Lapid on forming a new Government in Israel. This is the first time in half a century that an Israeli Arab party has sat in a coalition Government, and it is a very welcome development. It is a clear demonstration of Israel's vibrant democracy, and I wish the new Government every success.

It is regrettable that the petitions being debated today do not reflect the reality that Israel is a beacon of hope in a region of instability, and an important ally of the United Kingdom. I have been involved in Israeli-Palestinian affairs for almost 15 years now—that is, for a little longer than Benjamin Netanyahu was Prime Minister. People may judge which of us is the genuine survivor in all of this.

It is a simple fact that boycotts of Israel harm Palestinians, tens of thousands of whom work for Israeli companies on higher wages than they could earn elsewhere. The implications of blocking all trade and sanctioning Israel, as the petitions call for, are grave, not only for

Israelis and Palestinians but for the British people. More than 500 Israeli companies operate in the UK, employing thousands of British workers. Before covid, UK-Israel trade reached more than £5 billion a year, and it continued to grow despite the pandemic.

Generic medicines produced by the Israeli company Teva save the NHS billions of pounds every year, and I expect that at one point or another many of us have benefited from these treatments, as no one provides more medicines to the NHS than Teva. British scientists work with Israeli scientists on groundbreaking medical research, and our two countries are working closely in the fight against covid-19.

I welcome the Government's firm opposition to Israeli boycotts, and I hope that the Minister will reiterate how harmful and divisive they are. The petitions were signed during the latest violence between Israel and Hamas, when Hamas targeted Israeli civilians and put Palestinians in harm's way. Israel's strikes in response to those indiscriminate attacks were, by contrast, precise, targeting only militants and terrorist infrastructure. Every civilian casualty is regrettable—a view also held, incidentally, by the Israel defence forces, but not, it would seem, by Hamas. The crucial context is often neglected by those who call for arms embargoes and say that Israel's response was disproportionate. On that, I shall leave the matter in abeyance.

4.44 pm

**Shabana Mahmood** (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

Like many thousands of my constituents, I watched in absolute horror a few weeks ago when violence was used against worshippers gathering during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan at the al-Aqsa mosque. The scenes were truly shocking. They were deeply painful to watch and they motivated many thousands of my constituents to write to me. Like me, so many of them were thinking, "There but for the grace of God go I".

The ceasefire is, of course, welcome. We all pray that it holds and is strengthened, and that a path forward can be charted, but it is essential that all holy sites in that holiest of cities—holy to so many people of many different faiths—are protected and respected. I press the Minister to do whatever he can to ensure that there is no repeat of the scenes we saw just a few short weeks ago.

The history of Palestine and Israel is in so many ways a perpetual cycle of loss, sorrow and conflict, pierced only occasionally by moments of hope and fleeting opportunities for positive and lasting change. Even those moments have become ever rarer in recent years, with a cycle of violence that has decimated entire communities, led to the loss of countless lives, and laid bare the shaky foundations on which any aspirations of a negotiated, diplomatic settlement have been built. The goal of a viable and sovereign Palestinian state alongside a safe and secure Israel remains the shared objective of so many in this House and all over the world, but in truth, it has rarely seemed further away. The end of Benjamin Netanyahu's 12 years as Prime Minister of Israel at least suggests that a path towards a settlement, political and practical, could be charted. Indeed, the high-wire balancing act that led to his removal points to a long-missing political tenacity that could bode well.

However, among those who have removed an indisputable roadblock to peace are some with still greater belligerence, with opinions more extreme and entrenched even than Benjamin Netanyahu's. The fact that they will serve alongside those with an unequivocal commitment to a viable two-state solution is welcome, and it is perhaps to them that we must reiterate that the illegal occupation and proposed annexation of the west bank is violating international law. Only when they accept that can we make progress in the field of peace. Any and every road towards a just and lasting peace requires that the occupation is brought to a permanent end, with both Palestinians and Israelis enjoying true and meaningful security, dignity and human rights.

Some may try to argue that formal annexation has been stopped—that we no longer need be concerned. It is impossible to articulate adequately how dangerous and misguided such counsel is. The truth is that illegal settlement expansion has continued, and Palestinians are still being evicted from their homes. I cannot condone these violations of international law, nor should anyone in this House or in the international community. The Labour party has repeatedly called on the UK Government to object to the expansion of settlements in the strongest possible terms, and we have raised this issue in Parliament, in public, and directly with the Israeli ambassador to the UK. I urge the Minister today to change the dial on the facts on the ground by recognising the state of Palestine.

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** If colleagues wish to remove their jackets in the light of the heat, they should feel free to do so.

4.47 pm

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Dowd. Today's debate on recognising the state of Palestine and holding Israel accountable for its complete contempt for international law and human rights is not timely, because it should have happened a long time ago. I find it heartbreaking that after decades of violence, illegal occupation, the demolition of Palestinians' homes and complete disregard for their lives, we are still debating the very basics. This Government have a policy of a two-state solution, but paradoxically they are yet to even recognise the state of Palestine. This lip service has cost lives and entrenched the de facto annexation of Palestinian land, and it sends a loud and clear message that Palestine is not equal.

Of the 193 member states of the United Nations, 138 have recognised the state of Palestine. The UK is not one of them. I recently received a response from the Minister stating that the UK would recognise a Palestinian state at the time when it best served the objectives of peace. If we truly believe that the time is not now—frankly, it is already too late—we must deeply rethink our religious, moral and political philosophy.

A two-state solution and equality cannot be discussed without talking about the occupation, which is the root cause of so many of the issues at hand, from evictions to inequality. Such acts only entrench divisions and make peace harder to achieve. Will the Minister openly condemn illegal annexations and evictions, and urge the Israeli authorities to end their impunity? These shocking scenes during the holy month of Ramadan—far-right

[Afzal Khan]

Israeli groups chanting “Death to Arabs”, the storming of the holy al-Aqsa mosque and the bombing of the media building in Gaza—are beyond contemptible, and yet there is zero accountability for Israeli actions.

The reality is that the Minister already knows all this. We must move away from a debate on Hamas versus Israel’s right to defence, and tangibly work towards a peace process that respects and demands human rights, equality, international law, accountability and the recognition of Palestine. If the Minister is serious about a genuine two-state solution, will he commit to ending the arms trade with Israel? The UK has a moral obligation to uphold international law.

4.49 pm

**Mr Steve Baker** (Wycombe) (Con): I begin by saying that I made a serious mistake, though I was not alone in making it: in the period when hostilities were diminished, I deprioritised the issue of Israel and Palestine, prioritising instead the things that seemed most pressing. The problem, of course, is that the conflict has not gone away; it has returned with a dreadful ferocity, only made worse by the intervening events. I say to my right hon. Friend the Minister that I will not do it again; I will come back to him again and again and ask what the Government are doing to further the cause of a two-state solution. I voted to recognise the state of Palestine. If we are serious about a two-state solution, it is important that this Parliament, and Parliaments and Governments elsewhere, recognise the state of Palestine.

There is enormous passion on the issue in Wycombe. About 17% of my electors in the last census are British Asians. I think overwhelmingly that means that they are British Muslims, they are Kashmiris. I say to my right hon. Friend as gently as I can that there is a real problem that on the issues of Kashmir and Palestine British Muslims feel that people are being persecuted, and that that persecution is being neglected—a blind eye is being turned—because they are Muslims. However true or untrue that may be, it is incumbent on me, as their Member of Parliament, to call it out and to say that of course that would not be acceptable if that is what is happening. The very thought that it might be happening would tend to radicalise opinion. We cannot have that—not one bit of it. We must act, and we must be seen to act.

I wish to say a huge thank you to community leaders in Wycombe, in particular the imams. Having seen some conduct elsewhere in the UK on this issue, when a protest was held in Wycombe I feared what might take place, but I could not be more pleased or more proud of what our imams said. One speech in particular was brought to my attention that I think anyone of good faith, in particular any of the three Abrahamic faiths, could get behind as a speech of humanity and dignity.

Finally, there is a book that it has been suggested that I read over the summer that I recommend others reflect on. It is a book called “I Shall Not Hate” by a doctor called Izzeldin Abuelaish. In 2009, his three daughters were killed by Israeli shells. What a terrible thing, but if he shall not hate then I recommend that approach to everyone.

4.53 pm

**Naz Shah** (Bradford West) (Lab) [V]: As a new Administration takes over in Israel, we debate the Palestinian question in the mother of Parliaments. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has previously stated:

“I will do everything in my power, forever, to fight against a Palestinian state”.

My welcome message to Mr Bennett, and those who support him in the Knesset, is that the mood music is changing. The world is waking up to Israel’s actions, and all those who want to see lasting peace in the region know that to achieve such peace we must end the occupation, injustice and oppression, and that starts with recognising a viable Palestinian state.

In the past, Prime Minister Bennett has ruled out the transfer of even a centimetre of land to the Arabs and boasted:

“I’ve killed lots of Arabs in my life—and there’s no problem with that.”

The unwelcome news to him is that those of us around the world who condemn the killing of all civilians, be they Israeli or Palestinian, will not remain silent if even a centimetre more of Palestinian land is illegally annexed, and we will not be silent in pushing for Israel to be tried in the International Criminal Court for war crimes if any more Palestinian blood is unjustly spilled under a perverted interpretation of a right to self-defence, while completely ignoring the crucial principles of distinction, precaution and proportionality.

For five decades, the Palestinian territories of East Jerusalem, the west bank and Gaza have been under occupation—the longest lasting occupation in the world today. If Palestinian children in Gaza make it to the age of 21, they will have witnessed five brutal wars, 14 years of which they have spent in one of the largest open-air prisons on the world, under a land, air and sea blockade. Human Rights Watch has declared the situation in Israel as “apartheid”. Amnesty International has stated that Israel’s

“systematic discrimination, dispossession and displacement” of Palestinians is

“at the root of the ongoing violence we see today.”

War on Want declared:

“The UK government regularly approves military technology and arms exports to Israel, including for weapons of the type used in clear violation of international law. This means that the UK is providing material support for Israel’s illegal use of force, and an infrastructure to sustain that force through the ongoing trade in arms.”

Our Government have an immediate moral and political duty to act on Palestine. The Government cannot meet their word about a two-state solution while they recognise only a single state—it will not work. Let me be clear: the only party stopping the UK from recognising the state of Palestine is the Conservative Government. While they send empty words, the only thing stopping the UK supporting, rather than blocking, a United Nations inquiry to investigate the underlying root causes of the conflict in the region is the Conservative Government.

In the recent siege, for every Israeli killed, more than 21 Palestinians were killed. For every Israeli child killed, 33 Palestinian children were killed. While all the parties condemn aggression and illegality on either side, the only party that turns a blind eye to Israel’s actions and questions of violation of international law is the Conservative

Government. The blinkers have been taken off the eyes of the world. The reality of Israel's actions is clear. The Palestinians have suffered for too long. The time for empty words is over. The Government must act or the electorate will.

4.56 pm

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: The desire of Jewish people to have their own homeland existed for a long time before the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. I want to see Israel exist as a secure state, at peace with all its neighbours and free from the appalling rocket attacks that its people suffered recently at the hands of Hamas terrorists. It is vital that Jewish people all over the world can live in safety and complete security, and free from fear. I have been struck by the heightened sense of fear that my Jewish constituents have expressed to me in recent days. Our commitment to the safety, security and wellbeing of Jewish people in this country must be complete and absolute.

Palestinians on the west bank and in Gaza and the occupied territories all share that same desire for self-determination and a state of their own. The British Government are committed to the creation of a Palestinian state, and said in February that they will recognise the Palestinian state at the time of their choosing and

“when it best serves the objective of peace”.

That has been the position the British Government for many years. I want to probe the Government further on when the time of their choosing will be. My particular concern is that the increase in the building of illegal settlements in the occupied territories may mean that any recognition comes too late, because the land will simply not be there to create a viable Palestinian state.

I was struck by the words of Yossi Mekelberg, a professor of international relations and associate fellow of Chatham House. He said:

“For too long, the issue of recognition has been framed as a prize waiting for the Palestinians at the end of negotiations. This has always put Palestinian negotiators in an inferior position around the negotiation table vis-a-vis Israel, which is not only a superior military and economic force that is occupying its land, but one that is formally a state. Laying to rest the question...of Palestinian self-determination would accelerate the peace negotiations and give them a better chance of succeeding.”

Is that not the central point? A peaceful and viable Palestinian state would also be in Israel's best interests, and profoundly in its long-term security interests as well. The dividend to Israel of having a generation of young Palestinians growing up next to it who no longer hated Israel would be immense. Recognition could be a spur to achieving peace. Many of us are left thinking, “If not now, when?”

4.59 pm

**Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I declare a non-pecuniary interest as the chair of Labour Friends of Israel, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for the reasonable and conciliatory tone with which she introduced the debate. Like her, I am committed to a two-state solution as the only way that the Palestinian and Israeli people can hope to live in peace and security.

It is my view that, following the recent conflict, we cannot just settle for a ceasefire and another stalemate. We should take advantage of events such as the formation of the new Government in Israel, the Abraham accords and President Biden's support for an international peace and reconciliation fund as an opportunity to push for fresh peace negotiations. It would be really heartening to hear from the Minister that, following the G7, the UK will commit to playing our full part as a member of the international peace and reconciliation fund.

I say to colleagues who disagree with me that, like them, I want a viable and democratic Palestinian state, but I doubt the wisdom of willing it as a unilateralist gesture. I remind those who are keen to use international law in such debates that conditions for statehood in international law include an independent Government who exercise control over a defined territory. Those conditions are not met. The reality is that there are now two Palestines—one under weak Palestinian Authority control, and the other under Hamas military occupation.

What exactly are we being asked to recognise? Hamas has already taken advantage of the weakness of Abbas. What is the incentive for a negotiated outcome, if we capitulate to them now? Are those who push for sanctions saying that they oppose Israel's right to defend itself? Is it okay to live each day with the threat of an air raid siren? How would we feel if a bomb shelter was part of everyday planning requirements for a new home? How would we feel about going to bed with the threat of a tunnel attack occurring in the night?

Those who deny the threat from Hamas and the existence of its propaganda, and who fail to acknowledge the actions that it engages in, are making excuses for it. They are too willing to condemn Israel, and too ready to turn a blind eye to Hamas atrocities. We need a better approach to this. We need an approach that is diligent, serious and designed to bring about proper and lasting peace.

5.2 pm

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I find myself agreeing with virtually every word that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) just said, and I concur with his viewpoint on this issue. Clearly this debate is very timely, with the formation of the new Government in Israel. I am sure we all wish them well, as they have managed to bring together different partners in the new Government. Many people's hopes for reconciliation and peace rest on them.

I long for us to be able to recognise the state of Palestine, as one of the petitions calls for, but we have to be absolutely clear about the main roadblock to being able to achieve that: Hamas. For as long as the Palestinian territories are in the grip of a proscribed terrorist organisation whose the stated aim is to wipe Israel and the Jewish people off the face of the earth, Hamas is the biggest roadblock to our being able to recognise the state of Palestine and move forward with a peace process. I am convinced, as I know the vast majority of people in the House are, that the only answer to peace in the region is a two-state solution, but that cannot be achieved while we have one party in that process in the grip of a terror organisation. I often think how we in the UK would react if camped on our doorstep was a terrorist

[Steve Double]

organisation the stated aim of which was to wipe us off the earth and drive us into the sea. We would not welcome other parties recognising that state officially, and we have to be realistic about the real roadblock.

I do not believe that Hamas are friends to the genuine, decent people of Palestine. Let us remember that in the recent attacks, one in seven rockets launched by Hamas were actually misfired or landed on Palestinian territory. In that conflict, more Palestinians were killed by Hamas rockets than by any action by the Israelis. I do not say that the Israelis are blameless; sometimes what they do is provocative and disproportionate, and they do have to take some responsibility, but I will always stand up for Israel's right to defend itself against those terrorist attacks, which are the key block to peace.

I am privileged to chair the all-party parliamentary group on Christianity in the holy land. The APPG works to promote the rights of Christians and other religious minorities in the middle east. I know that the Minister is aware of the work that we have done, and I have invited him to meet Christian leaders there. Israel is a beacon of democracy and freedom in the middle east, and we should stand up for the rights of all religious minorities in that place. No one other than Israel in the middle east is doing that, so I believe that we need to stand up for Israel's right to defend itself and be clear about what the main roadblock to peace is.

5.6 pm

**Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. The decades of conflict and violence between Israelis and Palestinians have been a source of unimaginable horrors and of pain and suffering for generations with little hope of peace. What we saw in the attacks on the al-Aqsa mosque, and in the cycle of violence between the Israeli military and Hamas, is the reality of civilian suffering in the latest escalation of the violence.

Although the ceasefire is welcome, let us ensure that our Government take the necessary steps to make sure it is maintained. Let us take stock and remember how many people have sadly lost their lives: a total of 256 Palestinians, including 66 children and six people with disabilities, were killed during the 11-day military assault on Gaza, while nearly 2,000 were injured between 10 May and the ceasefire announcement on 21 May. Since 7 May, 35 Palestinians have been killed in the west bank and occupied East Jerusalem, and, according to the Palestine Red Crescent Society, 7,056 have been injured. In Israel, 13 people were killed by rockets fired by Palestinian armed factions.

We need to ensure that the international community, led by the US with our Government and others, works together to ensure a negotiated settlement to secure peace in that region, otherwise the cycle of conflict and violence will continue. That is why it is so important that our Government listens to the many, in Parliament and across the country, who have campaigned for the recognition of Palestinian statehood. Some of us were in Parliament when campaigning for statehood came up previously. We need our Government to work with our international partners to ensure that the Israeli Government, as well as Hamas, are held to account for the atrocities

that they have committed. We need to ensure that civilians are not caught in the crossfire and that they are protected against the conflict.

Ultimately, the only way we can prevent the cycle of violence is through a negotiated settlement. That is why it is vital that our Government play their part and, frankly, their actions have been found wanting.

5.9 pm

**Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I am sure that hon. Members will join me in congratulating the new Israeli Government, and Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, on gaining a majority in the Knesset yesterday. I say to him, mazel tov and good luck.

I am deeply concerned by the substance of the petitions. I consider myself a friend of both Israel and the Palestinian people, and I do not believe that these petitions will result in any positive outcome for either. The language that these petitions employ is clearly inflammatory, breeds misunderstanding and foments hatred and hostility.

As we have seen in recent weeks, divisive language has directly fuelled antisemitism in the UK, leading to attacks on our Jewish communities, including in my constituency, in Prestwich and in Whitefield. The Community Security Trust recorded more antisemitic incidents in May than in any month since records began. I pay tribute to CST for its important and fantastic work in protecting the community, but it should not be necessary. We should not need security guards at our schools and places of worship. In my very first meeting with its staff, I told them that it is my duty to make sure that guards are no longer needed, and I will continue to do that work.

We have seen vehicle convoys intimidate Jewish people and mezuzahs removed from Jewish homes and desecrated. In my constituency, Jewish people have told me that they were afraid to even walk to synagogue. This is a truly terrible state of affairs. Openly antisemitic banners were held at last weekend's rally in central London, with Israel described as a Nazi state. It is shameful that British politicians were present and did not condemn the overt antisemitism on display.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is deeply complex, and it is reckless to make over-simplifications by suggesting that Israeli actions are disproportionate or that Israel is persecuting Palestinians, as these petitions do. We are talking about a liberal democracy, the world's only Jewish state, being attacked by an internationally proscribed terror group committed to its destruction. There cannot be any justification for these attacks, which have targeted communities, homes, schools and even nurseries.

I welcome the Government's commitment to ban boycotts against Israel, which divide our communities, and I hope this legislation is brought forward soon so that we can provide the peace of mind that my constituents seek.

The overdue EU study of the Palestinian Authority's school curriculum has reportedly found evidence of antisemitism and incitement to violence. Will the Minister ensure that that report is published as a matter of urgency? It is a troubling prospect that teachers supported by UK taxpayers' money use textbooks that normalise violence. Just as we rightly call out antisemitism in the UK, we must call it out abroad, in the west bank and Gaza.

It is only through direct peace talks that a two-state solution will be achieved. Although I will not start my own petition on this subject, I hope that such a petition will gain far more support than those we are debating today.

5.12 pm

**Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. It is a real honour to speak on such a critical issue. I also wish to declare a non-pecuniary interest as chair of Labour Friends of Palestine and the Middle East.

We recently passed the 54th anniversary of the occupation of the Palestinian territory, one of the longest occupations in history. The daily lives of Palestinians are worse than ever. This is a disgrace, and the British Government, who have an historic responsibility in this area, should work with the international community to take action now to end the deterioration of the situation and improve the lives of Palestinian people as well as of Israeli citizens.

I condemn violence whoever perpetrates it, and I feel strongly that those perpetrating violence should be held accountable. The reality of the recent violence is that since 7 May, during the 10-day military assault on Gaza, 256 Palestinian people have been killed, including 66 children and six people with disabilities, with almost 2,000 injured. In Israel, 13 people were killed by rockets. This is the disproportionate nature of the violence. This is not self-defence by Israel—this is aggression. I defend Israel's right to self-defence, but this is not that. Every one of those deaths and injuries is wrong, a tragedy and should not happen. Accountability, whether for the Israeli Government or Hamas, should follow. The Government have a responsibility to try to make that happen through the international courts.

The situation post ceasefire is not the status quo, which in itself is not good enough. Only this morning in occupied East Jerusalem, municipal inspectors in the Al-Bustan area of Silwan were handing out demolition notices. The situation in Gaza is deteriorating, not de-escalating, not improving. The medical situation in Gaza is desperate. During the assault, two prominent Palestinian doctors were killed and nine hospitals were damaged, as were 19 clinics, including a covid-19 testing centre and Gaza's only covid-19 laboratory. In East Jerusalem, 48 attacks happened, damaging 16 ambulances, and there were 18 incidents of denying medical access. These latest attacks are examples of decades-long violence against healthcare.

The violence may have stopped but the situation on the ground has not improved. The Government should ban goods from illegal settlements and recognise the state of Palestine now. They should take action with the international community to ensure that international law is upheld.

5.15 pm

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd, and thank you for squeezing me into the debate.

All of us will have been appalled at the loss of life in the conflict in Gaza and in Israel last month, particularly the loss of life of non-combatants and many children, who we saw on our television screens. The real tragedy is not that, but rather that this will happen again—next

week, next month, next year—and it will keep happening until the root cause of the conflict is tackled. As the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) has just said, the root cause of the conflict is the fact that Israel is in military occupation of the Palestinian territories that were designated for a future state of Palestine.

From an Israeli point of view, it makes sense to continue that occupation. Not only do the Israeli Government not set any policy to end that occupation, but with every day and week that passes, through the process of settlement building, evictions and other measures, that occupation is entrenched, to the point where, in the words of B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights organisation, there is now a “one-state reality”.

Within that one-state reality, people's life chances and how they are treated are fundamentally different depending on whether they are Palestinian or Israeli. For more than 50 years, Israel has maintained this policy almost consequence free. Of course, there have been many UN resolutions and people have wrung their hands and said, “It's not right,” but Israel has been able to maintain this military occupation pretty much unrestricted.

The petitions before us today are from people who are clearly concerned about the plight of the Palestinian people. I ask colleagues, particularly those on the other side of the argument, to see things through their eyes for a moment. If we do not take action to persuade Israel to end the occupation and bring about a two-state reality, we are breeding further despair among Palestinian communities and galvanising the extreme right wing of Israeli politics, resulting in a situation where groups such as Hamas fill the political void. That is why we need to take action.

The new Israeli and American Governments provide a moment for this country to step up to the mark and do something. If people say that a boycott of Israel will not work, the question that the Government have to answer is, “What sanctions should be applied to try to make the Israeli Government behave in a manner consistent with international law?” Surely this must be the time to recognise Palestine. If we are sincere about a two-state solution, we cannot say that on the one hand and refuse to recognise one of those states on the other.

5.18 pm

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I remind the House of my interim entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and that I serve as a director of the advisory board of the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding.

The two petitions address probably two of the most substantial issues that we could have hoped to have before us. I thank the Petitions Committee for allowing this debate, but I am afraid that the belief that any meaningful analysis of the issues at hand can be achieved in a three-minute speech represents optimism beyond even that which I possess.

Picking up on the point made by the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), I have visited Palestine twice and have seen what he refers to as the “one-state reality”. I know exactly what he means. However, the point about the one-state reality, as he describes it, is that it is no solution. The only solution is a two-state solution, and if it is a solution that does not involve two states in a meaningful way, it is no solution.

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

The yardstick by which the Minister and British foreign policy should be guided is always to ask one simple question: will this make the achievement of a two-state solution more or less likely? Looking around Palestine, we see that the settlement-building programme on the west bank makes the achievement of a two-state solution manifestly less likely, and it should be condemned by our Government accordingly. It is also beyond peradventure that Britain should recognise Palestine as a state. To those who have suggested that that is not possible because it is not quite the right time, I gently say that the reason that Palestine does not control her own territory goes back to the circumstances that pertained in 1967 and subsequently. There is now no good reason for that not to be the case.

In the context of the recent conflict in Palestine, I hope that the Minister and our Government will look very closely at the deployment of arms that would have come from this country. Like others, I bow to no one in my acceptance of Israel's right to defend herself, but we all know that self-defence in law, wherever we find it, must always be commensurate, appropriate and proportionate, and what we saw was none of those things. The idea that these events were contributed to by arms sold from this country is something that many people, wherever they stand on the debate, find disturbing.

5.21 pm

**Sam Tarry** (Ilford South) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for securing this important debate at a crucial fork in the road for Israel's Government, following Naftali Bennett's replacing Benjamin Netanyahu as Prime Minister yesterday. I hope that the new Administration will listen to the voices of Governments around the world on the issue of justice in Palestine and urgently change direction, because for too long peace and the hope of peace has been crushed by military might. I know that a large number of my Labour colleagues wish to speak in the debate, including my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum), whose constituency had the highest number of signatories, alongside mine, to the petition that urges the UK Government to recognise the state of Palestine.

In recent weeks, we have witnessed millions of people marching in almost every major city in the world. Israel's illegal occupations, annexations and bombardment of the Palestinian people and those trying simply to exist in Gaza can no longer be ignored. Indeed, there is an enormous sense of anger and injustice in my constituency of Ilford South, which has the highest number of signatories to the petition, at around 6,000. Individually, 5,000 people in my constituency have written to me. This has happened during the covid pandemic, which shows that people care deeply about what is happening around the world. My constituents rightly feel that human rights abuses should be challenged, be they in Kashmir, Myanmar, Yemen or, indeed, in Gaza.

Although people are rightly concerned about events in the middle east, I want to be clear that it is never acceptable for members of the Jewish community, both in my Ilford South constituency and across the UK, to be subject to criticism, abuse and attacks because of the

actions of the Israeli Government. It is clear that there is a huge groundswell of support for justice as the escalation of this conflict has continued, with the needless deaths of civilians on both sides, the recent illegal seizure of land and the incendiary storming of the al-Aqsa mosque. The proliferation of evictions, demolitions and new settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories not only runs counter to international humanitarian law, including the fourth Geneva convention; it also serves to make a viable two-state solution ever more distant.

The Labour party has long urged both sides to come together to ensure a just two-state solution that enables Palestinians and Israelis to peacefully co-exist. I have travelled to Israel and Palestine extensively, on more than half a dozen occasions, and I have seen at first hand the conditions in which Palestinians are forced to live. However, I have also met many progressive activists and politicians in Israel, and I encourage Members from both sides of the House to forge links with those groups and with partners for peace on both sides of the divide. As we have seen in recent weeks, they were highly effective in helping to bring the latest conflict to an end. The many powerful protests in the likes of Lod, Ramla and Umm al-Fahm show that hundreds of thousands of Israelis are united with the Palestinian people in their condemnation of the events in Palestine and Gaza.

The UK Government should therefore consider every possible avenue to put pressure on the Israeli Government. That includes reviewing the £360 million-worth of arms that they sell to Israel, and challenging—

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** Order. Can you wind up, please?

**Sam Tarry:** Indeed, Mr Dowd. The UK Government have an historical obligation, as do all of us on both sides of the House, to support the state of Palestine in coming into being, and to ensure a future of hope, in which two peoples can co-exist on the same land.

5.25 pm

**Alyn Smith** (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. We are discussing two very important petitions: the first is a call to recognise Palestine as a state, and the second a call to implement sanctions on Israel for continued breaches of international law. Scottish National party foreign policy is based on principles. It is human-centred, feminist, egalitarian, ecological, multilateral and, above all, about the promotion of international law. We are not an aspiring international rights non-governmental organisation; we are an aspiring state, from my party's perspective. Small countries need international law in a way that big countries do not, so international law is at the heart of everything that we do. We view Israel and Palestine, and everything else, through those prisms.

I am a friend of Palestine. I am also a friend of Israel. It is worth making a few things clear for the record. We condemn all violence, whoever it is perpetrated by and whoever is a victim of it. We utterly reject false equivalence. There is hurt and heartbreak on all sides of this dispute, and it is not just between two sides; it is far more complex than that. Israel has a right to exist and to security within its borders, and the Palestinians have a right to live in dignity and peace in a state of their own.

We do not view those statements as exclusive. We view them as quite compatible, but how can there be a two-state solution, which we all say that we are in favour of, when there is not a two-state reality?

We believe that we should indeed recognise Palestine. We recognise the flaws, which we have heard about, in the Palestinian Authority, and that Palestinian unity is not where it needs to be, but we believe that recognition would level the discussion and give it an impetus that is, sadly, sorely lacking. It is not an outlandish position; we are actually in the majority, as 139 of 193 United Nations members already recognise Palestine as a state. The UK should do the same.

On sanctions, we have a rather more delicate call to make, because we need to consider the effect of any policy change on the ground. I said that Israel has a right to exist and to security, and I will defend that. It does not have a right to annex other people's land and then to claim victimhood when there are consequences to that illegality. Settlements are, on a daily basis and in fundamental ways, making a viable, just peace less achievable. They are illegal. Their products are illegal. We should not deal in them. The UN agrees. UN Security Council resolution 2334 is clear on their legal status; we should not deal in settler goods, but ban them. At the very least, we should ensure that they are properly labelled.

On the petition's call to implement wider sanctions on the state of Israel itself, however, we disagree for the moment. We do not think that that would help the situation. We think that it would do more harm than good—just. However, I urge our Israeli friends, who I know are paying attention to the debate, to pay attention to where that call is coming from. We cannot simply say that there must be consequences to the illegality but then not implement any of them. We must do better than we have done to date. We respect individual organisations that feel a need to implement such a policy themselves, though we would stop short of sanctions as a party.

It is not good enough to say that we are in favour of a two-state solution but to do nothing to bring about a two-state reality. We will continue to be part of the problem unless we give impetus to the discussion, and we can do that from here because we are bound to the people of Palestine and Israel by empire and by international law and trade. We have influence. As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) says, perhaps there is a moment for new momentum with the new Israeli Government and the new US Administration. Colleagues, let us seize that moment and build a just peace, which we all want to see.

5.29 pm

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Dowd. I am pleased that this debate is taking place today, because there is tremendous public concern about this issue: witness the fact that two very significant petitions have been submitted to the House, and I am pleased that the Petitions Committee has brought them forward for a debate. Let me say at the outset that there can be no justification whatever for antisemitism in any shape or form, whatever people's views are on the Israel-Palestinian issue: let us be clear about that.

Just a few weeks ago, nearly 300 people, Israelis and Palestinians, lost their lives in a violent conflict between Hamas and the state of Israel. The Labour party strongly condemns the firing of rockets by Hamas, and we strongly condemn the air attacks by Israel that led to such a large loss of life. Labour called for an immediate ceasefire, and we were pleased that international mediation led to a ceasefire. The immediate issue that led to the conflict was the appalling violation and desecration of the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. That was disgraceful, and the international community must do all it can to ensure that such scenes never happen again. Religious sects must be respected at all times.

The second immediate reason for the conflict was the prospect of the forced eviction of Palestinians in East Jerusalem, and in particular from the community of Sheikh Jarrah. Labour believes that the occupation of East Jerusalem by Israel is completely wrong, and we do not recognise the annexation of East Jerusalem by the state of Israel. The city of Jerusalem must be shared by Palestinians and Israelis. It is totally unacceptable that illegal Israeli settlers are trying to displace Palestinians from their homes—homes that their families have lived in for generations.

There are also longer term issues at the root of the conflict, which must be addressed. They stem from the Israeli occupation of 1967. Since then, and especially over the past few years, we have seen an increase in the size and number of illegal Israeli settlements. International law states clearly that those settlements are illegal, and we stand four-square behind international law—no ifs or buts. We have also seen a dramatic increase in the number of demolitions of Palestinian structures on the west bank by Israeli authorities, which again contravene international humanitarian law via the fourth Geneva convention and the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court.

At the same time, we have seen the totally unacceptable treatment of Palestinians throughout the occupied territories. As a former youth worker, I have long taken a keen interest in the treatment of children by the Israeli authorities in the occupied territories. The military court system operates in a cruel and unacceptable way: young people are denied basic rights, frequently denied contact with their parents, and incarcerated in a way that inevitably leads them to be psychologically scarred for the rest of their lives.

If we are talking about injustices, we have to focus on Gaza, too. Before the recent conflict in Gaza, the situation was bad: now, it is much worse. Whatever the profound disagreements that the Israeli Government have with Hamas, there is no justification for the present blockade, which exacerbates the humanitarian suffering of the people of Gaza. Those injustices cannot be resolved through conflict. They can be addressed and resolved only through meaningful negotiations, which must lead to a two-state solution: a viable Palestine alongside a secure Israel. In 2014, this Parliament called on the UK Government to recognise the state of Palestine. The Government say that they are committed to such a recognition, but as the Leader of the Opposition made clear last week, it is high time for that recognition to happen.

**Christian Wakeford:** While it is certainly politically expedient to call for the recognition of Palestine right now, given certain by-elections, does the hon. Gentleman

[*Christian Wakeford*]

not agree with his own colleague: how can we recognise something when we cannot define it? What borders would it have, and without any real borders, is it really a state?

**Wayne David:** With all due respect, what I am saying is what I believe to be right, and what the Labour party deems to be right. There is no expediency about it—it is a long-standing commitment that we have, and we stick to it. Of course, there are issues to be worked out, but it sends an important signal that we believe that there should be an active Palestinian state and that we recognise it as a matter of principle.

I am sure that the Government would wish to see a peace process recommence as soon as practicable, but if the goal of negotiations is a two-state solution, it would seem sensible for the UK to join 139 other countries across the world to recognise the state of Palestine now. With regard to sanctions, particularly on arms, it is important that we take stock of the changing situation. Some Members will recall that Labour called on the Government to implement a ban on goods from the illegal settlements and any annexed territories. I am pleased that the Trump-Netanyahu plans for annexation were not implemented, and President Biden has called for all new settlements to be stopped.

We have a newly elected Government in Israel, and I for one am pleased to see the back of Netanyahu. It is sensible to wait a little to see how the Israeli Government respond to the situation. The British Government must assess, in line with all our obligations, the use of exported arms and equipment in the recent conflict. We need a report to Parliament setting out whether any licences for exports could be used to commit acts of internal repression, external aggression or violations of international law.

The reality is that a peace process will not be established overnight, let alone a lasting peace. What is the case, however, is that for peace to be negotiated, achieved and maintained, we need an ongoing process of reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), I very much hope that the Government will make real their commitment to a peace fund, and join President Biden to ensure that it is established as quickly as humanly possible. I genuinely believe that the overwhelming majority of Palestinian and Israeli people want to live in peace. It is our responsibility in Parliament to make sure that we do everything we can to make their dream a reality.

5.37 pm

**The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for securing this debate, and I pay tribute to the work that she has done on the issue. I am grateful, too, for the thoughtful contributions made by Members on both sides of the House on this delicate issue.

We welcomed the announcement of a ceasefire in Israel and Gaza on 20 May. It is an important step towards ending the cycle of violence and the loss of civilian life. The UK offers its deepest condolences to

the families of all those who have lost their lives. We echo the condemnation of the antisemitic actions that, unfortunately, we saw on the streets of the United Kingdom, and I am pleased that Members across the House have condemned those actions.

**Christian Wakeford:** The tone of the debate has been incredibly helpful in condemning the antisemitism on our streets. Does the Minister agree that every single Member in the House has a duty to do so, and when we see banners calling for Palestine to be free from the river to the sea—which is actively calling for the ethnic cleansing of Israel—we need to condemn that wholeheartedly? Will he make a statement in the House doing so?

**James Cleverly:** I thank my hon. Friend for the question he has asked. As we have seen today, there is widespread condemnation of those acts and where there are small pockets of resistance against condemning those actions, I think that those individuals stand out with the mass of the viewpoint in the House. This is an issue that I do not doubt will come up in departmental questions tomorrow.

While the ceasefire holds, we must make sure that every effort focuses on making it not just durable but permanent. The Foreign Secretary travelled to the region on 26 May and met with Israeli and Palestinian leaders. As he made clear on that visit, the recent escalation demonstrates the urgent need to make progress towards a more positive future and address the long-standing drivers of the conflict in the region. We have worked actively during this crisis to urge all parties to work with mediators towards a ceasefire. We fully support the Egyptian, Qatari and United Nations actions to that end, and we work closely, of course, with our friends and partners in the United States of America.

It is important now for Israel to facilitate rapid humanitarian access to Gaza, and we urge the continued opening of all crossings. The UK will provide £3.2 million of new aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, responding to its emergency flash appeal, launched on 19 May. The funding will help to provide food, water and emergency shelter to Palestinians affected by the recent escalation of violence in Gaza.

**Christian Wakeford:** Will the Minister give way?

**James Cleverly:** Let me make a little more progress; I am conscious that we are a little tight on time.

We thank UNRWA for its support for Gazans displaced during the conflict and for its continued courage and dedication. The UK continues its diplomatic efforts to build confidence between the parties and to find a political way forward. We welcome and echo calls for equality of safety, security, freedom, peace and dignity, both for Palestinians and for Israelis. I have spoken regularly with a number of ambassadors from the Arab states to reiterate the need for progress towards our shared goals—to reiterate the need for a peaceful two-state solution. We also play a leading role in this on the United Nations Security Council.

Let me address the subjects specific to the petitions. There have, of course, been many calls over the years for recognition of Palestinian statehood. The UK Government position is clear: the UK will recognise a Palestinian state at a time when it best serves the object of peace. Bilateral recognition in itself cannot, and will not, end the occupation. The UK Government continue

to believe that without a negotiated peace agreement, the occupation, and the problems that come with it, will continue. We are committed to the objective of a sovereign, prosperous and peaceful Palestinian state, living side by side with a safe and secure Israel. That is why we are a leading donor in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and why we have set so much store by strengthening Palestinian institutions, fostering private sector-led sustainable economic growth in the west bank.

Economic progress can never be a substitute for a political settlement, but it is vital in the interim that Palestinians see tangible improvements in their daily lives. We call on the Palestinian Authority and Israel to resume dialogue on economic issues, to reconvene the Joint Economic Committee and to address the financial and covid crisis together. The UK enjoys strong relations with the Palestinian Authority, and they have made important progress on state building, which has been recognised by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. It is so important now that the PA return to Gaza to ensure that good governance is extended throughout the territories that will make up a future Palestinian state.

It has been said by Members representing parties across the House, and I echo it from the UK Government's position: we condemn in the strongest terms the firing of rockets at Jerusalem and other locations in Israel by Hamas and other terrorist groups. All countries, including Israel of course, have a legitimate right to self-defence and a right to defend their citizens from attack. In doing so, it is vital that all actions are proportionate, in line with international humanitarian law and calibrated to avoid civilian casualties.

On the second petition, the Government have made their position on sanctions clear. Although we do not hesitate to express disagreement with Israel whenever we feel it necessary, we are firmly opposed to boycotts or sanctions against Israel. We believe that open and honest discussions, rather than imposing sanctions or supporting anti-Israel boycotts, best support our efforts to progress the peace process and to achieve a negotiated two-state solution. The Government take their export control responsibilities very seriously, and operate one of the most robust arms export control regimes in the world. We consider all export applications thoroughly against a strict risk assessment framework. We continue to monitor the situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories to keep all licences under careful and continual review as standard. We continue to urge all parties to work together to reduce the tensions in the west bank, including East Jerusalem, so that, hopefully, we will not see images as we saw during May.

Several Members stated their desire for the UK to oppose evictions and demolitions. Let me assure them that the UK position on evictions, demolitions and settlements is long-standing, public and has been communicated directly to the Government of Israel. That position is that we oppose those activities. In all but the most exceptional circumstances, evictions are contrary to international humanitarian law. The practice causes unnecessary suffering for the Palestinians and is detrimental to efforts to promote a peaceful two-state

solution. We urge the Government of Israel to cease their policies related to settlement expansion and, instead, work towards that two-state solution.

The Foreign Secretary and I have made the UK view clear in meetings with Israeli leaders. Most recently, the Foreign Secretary did so on his visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories on 26 May. We continue to call on all parties to show real leadership, including the willingness to make tough compromises and to refrain from unilateral steps that move us further from our shared goal of sustainable peace. We will continue our intense diplomatic efforts in the region, focused on creating the conditions for a sustainable peace, and we will work with our international partners towards that goal.

5.47 pm

**Catherine McKinnell [V]:** I thank all the contributors to this debate. It is clearly a highly complex situation and will require a range of measures, actions and compromises to resolve it. But I share the hope of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) that the Government, alongside the Biden Administration, will take the opportunity of the formation of the new Israeli Government to push for renewed negotiations based on a safe and secure Israel, alongside a viable sovereign and recognised Palestinian state. The current lack of a peace process has created a vacuum, and we have seen too often around the world that vacuums are filled by violence.

The Government should examine what more they can do to disrupt the flow of rockets into Gaza, while ensuring the delivery of urgent humanitarian assistance, vital medical support and fuel. I hope the Minister will take away what I said in my opening comments about encouraging and supporting the creation of a new climate in Israel and Palestine by backing projects that promote peaceful co-existence in the long term, such as the creation of an international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Those are not warm words; they need to be met with real, tangible action and funding to make them a reality.

Political negotiations will always have their ups and downs and false starts, particularly in such a complex conflict, but there is no reason why efforts to build understanding and trust between Palestinians and Israelis on the ground should be held hostage to what the politicians are doing. I hope the Minister will take that away to the Prime Minister, and urge him not to row back from our international commitments. I truly believe that the new US legislation, and President Biden's own strong commitment to multilateralism, could provide a platform to galvanise support for an international fund at this most pressing of times. It is something practical that we can all do to create a more secure future for both Palestinians and Israelis.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered e-petition 585313 and 585314, relating to Israel and Palestine.

5.50 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Football Governance

[JULIE ELLIOTT *in the Chair*]

[*Relevant document: Summary of public engagement by the Petitions Committee on football governance, reported to the House on 8 June 2021, HC 243.*]

6.15 pm

**Julie Elliott (in the Chair):** I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice to support the new hybrid arrangements. Timings of debates have been amended to allow technical arrangements be made for the next debate. There will also be suspensions between each debate.

I remind Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive at the start of debates in Westminster Hall, and are expected to remain for the entire debate. I also remind Members participating virtually that they are visible all times, both to each other and to us in the Boothroyd Room.

If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks, whose email address is [westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk](mailto:westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk). Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and as they leave the room. I also remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall.

Members attending physically who are in the latter stages of the call list should use the seats in the Public Gallery and move into the horseshoe when seats become available. Members can only speak from the horseshoe, where there are microphones.

I must also say that, because of the weather today, I am very happy if gentlemen wish to remove their jackets. To try to get everybody in, at this point I will impose an informal three-minute time limit.

6.16 pm

**Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 583310 and 584632, relating to football governance.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott, for this hugely important debate, and it is great to see so many Members in attendance and on the call list, even more so after a thumping 1-0 victory for England against Croatia. I am sure that Members from Wales and Scotland may not be feeling as perky, but obviously I look forward to the big game on Friday, when I expect England to give Scotland a sound thumping.

In this place, we often split along party lines in our debates, but I am confident that there will be an unusual level of consensus here today, because I think we all recognise the vital role that football plays in the communities that we have the privilege to represent. Before I get started properly, I must thank all those who took the time to share their views with me before this debate. I heard a wide range of opinions on this issue, but across the board—from club owners and ex-players to the fans who are the lifeblood of the game—it is fair to say that there is now widespread acceptance that change is needed.

I also thank Our Beautiful Game, the campaign group that includes senior figures from the game, such as David Bernstein, a former Football Association chairman, and Gary Neville, as well as my hon. Friend

the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), who really got this debate rolling with her private Member's Bill earlier this year. I thank Our Beautiful Game for lending its time and expertise to help me to prepare for today. I will give a special mention to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who is leading the fan-led review of football for the Minister's Department. I thank her for that and for the time that she has shared with me.

The recent debacle of the European super league, which for football was the equivalent of the 2008 banking crisis, shocked everyone involved in the game. It showed why there is a real need to shake things up. Let us be clear: had the so-called big six succeeded with their breakaway attempt, football as we know it in our country would have died. Our premier league, the most watched and indeed the best league in the world, would have been split apart, and the pyramid of English football would have crumbled.

It was quite right that the ESL was met with disgust and ridicule across the board, and I am very pleased that for now it has been seen off. However, we know that football is now big business and the ESL is not the only reason why change is needed. Fans already had long-standing concerns.

There have been many examples of the identity of football clubs, which are essential to the identity of so many communities, being changed, with fans unable to resist that change. A couple of glaring examples spring to mind: the relocation of Wimbledon from its traditional home in London to Milton Keynes; and the decision by the owner of Cardiff City to change the club's colours from the traditional blue to red.

Inappropriate owners may come in and run clubs in an unsustainable way, with devastating impacts on their local communities. Two examples of this came recently, with the sad demise of Bury in August 2019 and Wigan entering administration in July 2020. Unless we change the way football is run and ensure that clubs are treated not only as businesses but as community assets and heritage brands, these events will be repeated.

That brings me on to the first of our petitions, on the 50+1 model, submitted by Angus Yule. Angus launched the petition because he feels that this model of ownership would ensure that the decisions of our clubs fall into the hands of a collective of people who care about the good of the game, instead of just one owner. In Angus's opinion, elite clubs especially are now run as businesses, with profit appearing to come before anything else and with fans' loyalty exploited through expensive tickets and merchandise.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I have been a supporter of Leicester City since I was a wee boy of 16 years old—52 years. I say that because it does not have to be a big team for people to support it. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that fans care about the nature of the team? They care about more than the price of a ticket. They care about the integrity and history of their club. They care about team pride. That is what it is all about, and that is what fans want. They do not want a super league; they just want to support their club.

**Jonathan Gullis:** In advance of the debate, I spoke to members of the Foxes Trust, who were very complimentary about the dialogue they have with Leicester City's owners.

I know the hon. Gentleman was buzzing from Leicester City's recent FA cup victory, and I am sure he will be cheering on Blighty in the upcoming game against Scotland; I will not put him on the spot with that one, but I am sure he will, secretly.

I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. Football clubs are massively important to the history and identity of their communities. In fact, communities were built around such clubs, as we saw in Bury. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) has banged on relentlessly about that; I do not think there is any doubtier a champion for Bury football club's return to its proper ways. In Burslem, the mother town of Stoke-on-Trent, is Port Vale, surrounded by the terraced houses of the old potbank workers. It very much is the beating heart of the community, as the Minister saw at first hand when he recently came to visit.

As Angus says about the 50+1 model, having fans in charge of key voting rights around the club would help to stop the clear greed of some owners and would allow clubs to be run in a way that benefits the fans, local communities and the good of the game. Clearly, there are some good owners who run their clubs sustainably and allow fans a good level of access to the behind-the-scenes running of the club. My bias will be obvious, but I will mention the Wembley of the north, Port Vale football club's Vale Park, and Stoke-on-Trent's second team, Stoke City; obviously I was being sarcastic there, before I get a deluge of abuse on Facebook. I am very lucky to have Port Vale in my constituency and Stoke City FC within the community. Both are run in a truly sustainable and fan-friendly way. To give just a few examples, Stoke City offer free travel for their fans and have frozen their season ticket prices for 14 successive years. Port Vale recently became the English football league community club of the year, having distributed more than 300,000 meals to local people in need during the pandemic. It also has the Port Vale Foundation; with the Hubb Foundation, it was one of the early pioneers in the holiday activities programme, which started in 2017 with the Ay Up Duck programme.

A small club, Milton United football club, raised £1,000 for a local lad, Ashton Hulme, who is getting a top-quality prosthetic leg. Sadly, due to a rare type of bone cancer, he lost his leg, and the academy at Crewe Alexandra have been doing fantastic work to support Ashton and his family at this difficult time, with more than £110,000 raised by local givers. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, there are great clubs in the Premier League, such as Leicester City football club. The Foxes Trust tell me that it is broadly happy with how the club's owners operate and the access it gets to the inner running of its club.

There are many more examples of owners who do not operate in this way, so I agree that there needs to be some reform, giving fans greater input into their clubs. There must surely be a way to protect key aspects of clubs, which are so much more than just businesses, so that their identities are not changed unrecognisably and they are run sustainably. However, the 50+1 model is not realistic for English football. It is hard to see how this kind of ownership structure could be brought in. I also have concerns about the impact it could have on our game. A range of voices, unsurprisingly including club owners but also fan groups, have said that the 50+1 model could seriously discourage investment.

In Germany, which made the 50+1 model famous, Bayern Munich has now won the Bundesliga nine years in a row. There is no significant investment into other clubs in the German league—unless we look at RB Leipzig, for example, where the fans and supporters are all Red Bull employees. One could say that that brings the beautiful game in Germany into disrepute. I do not think that anyone wants to see such things in our country. The 50+1 model is not the only reason, but it does seem to prevent ambitious owners coming forward. Frankly, owners will not want to invest in a club without being able to control its direction. If the 50+1 model is not the answer, what is?

One way to safeguard clubs for fans was suggested by Gary Neville. We could look at the 50+1 model as a veto or a voting structure rather than an ownership structure. Something along the lines of a golden vote on key decisions could be viable. To make changes to the club on heritage issues such as the name and location of the stadium, owners would need to seek the approval of supporters. Another option, as suggested by the Football Supporters' Association, would be to let supporters buy equity in their club up to a certain percentage—10% or 15%, say—to give them a real say in how the club is run.

As well as giving fans more say in how their clubs are run, wider issues in football need addressing. That is really the crux of the debate and brings me to the second petition, which calls for the introduction of a new, independent football regulator. The petition, which was started by Alex Rolfe, calls for the Government to use the fan-led review of football's governance to establish an independent regulator. Alex says:

"Like a referee, an independent regulator would safeguard our beautiful game impartially."

He says that a regulator

"could protect the game against another attempt at a super league or other efforts to put money ahead of fans."

Gary Neville and Alex agree that, like water companies, energy providers, financial services and the media:

"Football matters to millions and should also have a regulator of its own."

It does seem that without an independent regulator, the glaring issues in English football will not be resolved. There is no overall leadership, so vested interests continue to prevail. The financial disparity between rich and poor has become obscene, frankly. The game is devoid of agreed priorities. The high-ups in football all know what the problems are, but to date there has been no collective will or incentive for the decision makers to get on with sorting it out.

As many of the people I have spoken to before today have spelled out, the issues are financial disparity and unsustainability, owner suitability rules, a power structure that is fundamentally out of balance, societal issues such as racism and homophobia in the game, and the exploitation of clubs and fans. Gary Neville put it well when he said that the banking crisis was the moment an independent regulator was needed. The European super league is the equivalent crisis in football, and if we are to ensure that the game remains something that we can enjoy as fans, as well as export around the world, the crunch time has arrived.

I will give a few examples to illustrate the scale of the problems. The team placed 20th in the premier league—thankfully, it is not my team, Fulham, which

[Jonathan Gullis]

my grandmother indoctrinated me into supporting at the age of five—gets £100 million, whereas the winner of the championship gets just £6 million. Financial sustainability is in real danger, with clubs in the championship spending £837 million on wages despite receiving only £785 million of income in 2018-19.

**James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): My hon. Friend has just made the key point. The fixed costs and wage structure of 99% of teams involved in English football are completely unsustainable. The wages paid out currently are simply unaffordable. My team, Bury, had 3,000 or 4,000 people watching every two weeks, and players were paid thousands upon thousands. How do we address that problem?

**Jonathan Gullis**: I know that Gary Neville is actually working on the salary cap committee that the EFL has set up to have a look at that very thing. My hon. Friend is right. Although Gary Neville used the term “redistribution of wealth”—as a Conservative, that made me shudder at the idea of socialism coming down the line—he meant that, at the end of the day, the Premier League holds all the wealth.

The Minister spent what probably felt like a long 10 months locked in a room with the head of the Premier League and the head of the EFL to come to some sort of consensus on bailing out clubs such as my beloved Port Vale in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke. It should not have taken 10 months to come to that conclusion. Ultimately, football is for the fans, and in that moment, the fans were almost forgotten. I am very grateful to the Minister, who spoke regularly with me and other Members from across the House to keep us informed about what was going on in the negotiations. I am very grateful that he was able to bang heads together and get that important deal over the line.

Stoke City football club is owned by those who run Bet365, and although it would openly submit that it is not in need of financial support, it is very aware of clubs around it and below it that are, including Port Vale, which gets similar crowds to Bury. We need to see a fair share of the money in football trickling down, particularly to the grassroots, where the future generations will be coming through.

Those in the premier league have so much power that they can set their own punishment. The big six premier league clubs have been able to decide their own punishment for trying to break away and join the ESL, paying just £3.6 million each as a gesture of good will. Let us put that into context. These clubs spent more than £150 million over the last year on agents’ fees alone, and they seem to think that offering £3.6 million each is a suitable punishment for trying to destroy our beautiful game. Football has proven itself incapable of sorting itself out, and there is now a widespread consensus that an independent regulator is needed.

What would that independent regulator look like? We all agree that for a regulator to have real bite, it must be independent of current structures such as the premier league clubs and the FA. It must sit above the existing bodies and be able to enforce targets and judgments without the game structures. As voices such as the former Governor of the Bank of England Lord King have emphasised, the regulator will need an emphasis

on financial as well as legal knowledge, to enable it to decide on new ways of distributing funds to the wider game, based on a funding formula to spread funding more fairly throughout the English football pyramid. This will also be important in introducing a new, proper, robust process to check owners before they take on a club. Indeed, it is not just the fans I spoke to who agreed on the need for a proper test of an owner’s suitability; that opinion was also shared by the owners I spoke to.

Supporters’ groups and those with experience of the game at the highest level agree that the regulator must not have any role in how the game is played. For example, it must not have a role in deciding on the place of VAR—the video assistant referee—in football, but must be limited to governance issues. There is also the question of how long a regulator would need to operate for. There seems to be a consensus among a cross-section of people involved in football that the FA should really be the regulator. However, it is a commercial organisation, as well as having some regulatory functions, so it does not really work. It is also reliant on the Premier League for its income, so is not independent in any meaningful way. An independent regulator could be set up, lead change in the game for a few years and then hand over to the FA once it has been made fit for purpose.

On the societal problems in football such as racism and homophobia, as well as representation of different groups, there are already targets in place. However, a regulator could enforce those targets and punish those who continue to pay only lip service to them. As David Davies—former executive director of the FA and member of the Our Beautiful Game campaign group—has said, football has the power to be a fantastic force for good. How to enable it to be a power for good is the question.

6.32 pm

**Christina Rees** (Neath) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: It is always a pleasure to serve under you as Chair, Ms Elliott. I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) for his excellent introductory remarks and my Neath constituents for signing the petitions, and I congratulate Wales on securing a draw in their first Euro match last Saturday, despite not playing their best.

The anger and furore over the recent efforts of six English premier league clubs to form a breakaway European super league sparked universal condemnation from fans, yet it demonstrated the importance of football to the sporting community and wider society, and was evidence of a deep disconnect between football clubs and the communities they once represented. Many clubs are now global business, far removed from the supporters and communities from which they were established.

At the heart of the problem is ownership. The defining feature was once supporters and their interests, but now the footballing model pushes clubs into greater financial insecurity at the hands of unscrupulous owners with scant regard for fans and communities. Fans are taken for granted, and it is taken for granted that they will always support their club, irrespective of their having no say in how it is operated. The UK Government’s fan-led review is welcome, but wholesale reform is needed, putting ownership at the forefront.

Fan ownership has been part of a campaign that the Co-operative party has been conducting for the past 20 years. In 2007, the Labour party and the Co-operative

party founded the fan ownership organisation Supporters Direct and campaigned for funding and resources to enable supporters to start fan-owned trusts and then progress to take over their clubs. We fought for supporters to have a place on club boards, so that fans could have a voice. We campaigned for the community shares model often used in supporters' trusts and to strengthen community asset legislation to prevent the sale of football grounds.

The Football Association and governing authorities should welcome community ownership as a necessary means to safeguard clubs and ensure their survival. Football clubs are too precious to their communities and supporters to be at the mercy of unregulated, unscrupulous owners, and suffer weak governance from the Football Association, which is unwilling to take on those with vested interests in the game. A robust, effective, independent regulatory framework, with statutory backing, is vital to safeguard football.

Unless supporters can influence or have ownership of clubs or assets, we will continue to be second-class spectators. The 50+1 rule is the ownership model in the majority of German football clubs; commercial investors are unable to gain a majority share and supporters retain a majority of voting rights. The rule would not be suitable for shared ownership of the top English premier league clubs that have invested millions of pounds, but would be suitable as a voting structure. The five parts of the game should work together for the benefit of football.

6.36 pm

**Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. Football governance has been debated in Parliament and has been the subject of Parliamentary and Government reports over the last 10 years. What all those reports have in common is a consensus that there needs to be more independent regulation and supervision of what happens within football, to stop bad things happening.

Many financial failures could have been resolved before they happened if there had been proper independent scrutiny of the finances of the clubs. Issues around ownership could be resolved if there were a fit-and-proper person test that could be administered against people when they buy clubs or during their management of those clubs. Time and again, we have seen that no such effective operation exists and that the football leagues simply do not have the resources to enforce that. Too often, when a club gets into difficulties, fans speak up, but find the football authorities can do nothing to help and, when they turn to Parliament, we do not have any legislative power to intervene.

If the fan-led review, the latest football governance review, is to be meaningful in its outcome, it needs to recommend an independent regulatory body that can oversee the financial management of clubs, have the power to intervene when things go wrong, see accounts to ensure clubs are spending within the limits of their rules and not overspending, and ensure that clubs are being run in a sustainable way, so that they are there for the future. These are the basic common failings. Why do they exist? Because football does not have an effective governing body in this country. It is run by a combination of vested interests that do not always agree with each other and at league level it is run by a rule book that is

set and voted on by the chairs of the clubs themselves. Historically, they have not been interested in independent scrutiny of what they do.

Football clubs are unlike any other business. They deserve to be run in a sustainable way. The community should expect that they will be there for future generations to enjoy. They are cultural assets, really. Yes, they can be run in a commercial way and they can be competitive, but they have to be run in a sustainable way as well.

In other industries, such as broadcasting, we have regulators in place with certain special powers that mean they can intervene and even withdraw the licence to broadcast, should they need to. Such a regulator in this country for football would similarly need a golden share. I believe it should be independent of all the existing football bodies, including the FA, have a strict and limited remit regarding the financial performance and governance of clubs, and have very clear powers to intervene and even to put clubs into a form of sporting administration if things go wrong.

The review should also consider other aspects of commercial pressure in football that can have a detrimental impact, particularly the relationship between agents, clubs and players, where agents can end up representing all three parties in a transaction. It is difficult to break that model when clubs want to sign players. These are other financial issues that a regulator could look at. This is a reform that has been long needed to make football sustainable.

6.39 pm

**Sir Mark Hendrick** (Preston) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The state of our national game has been a story of rich man, poor man, with the very rich clubs with billionaire owners seeking to make themselves even more revenue. We have seen that with Project Big Picture and the European super league. At the same time, much-valued and cherished local clubs such as Bury, Bolton and Wigan have not survived, or are struggling to survive. The major organisations in England—the Premier League, the Football Association, and the English Football League—are becoming both unable and unwilling to act responsibly in the interests of the wider game of football, and of supporters and their communities. It is therefore important to review the ownership structures and mechanisms of football clubs in this country so that they can be made to act responsibly, and to look at the governance of football clubs going forward so that they can be obliged to behave responsibly and conduct themselves in a manner that satisfies all the stakeholders in the game.

There are also a wide variety of levels of effective engagement and communication between clubs and their supporters throughout the various leagues in England. This can be improved in a number of ways, such as by allowing fans on to club boards and examining new methods of allowing fans to take some ownership of the club they support. In addition, carrying out comparisons between the organisation of leagues in other countries and those in this country could yield some answers. The often-cited 50+1 model in the German Bundesliga may not be implementable in England—although the Prime Minister has threatened that—but there may well be other ways of increasing fan influence over club decision making that fall short of that model. There is also some discussion about the ownership of golden shares, which

[*Sir Mark Hendrick*]

could give some special ownership rights or privileges to fans, enabling them to bring additional influence to bear on decision making.

There is a view that foreign owners should be treated differently for a variety of reasons, some relating to human rights and some political. Those views could be put under the remit of the football regulator and taken into consideration when the licensing process takes effect. However, in my view, where clubs have been shown to have conducted themselves responsibly over the years, there should be no attempt to not grant a licence when the owners of the club are not responsible for the behaviour of the Government or regime of the country in which they reside, or from which they come. The review should not be an excuse to bash foreign owners who have made investments in, and brought tremendous footballing talent to, this country.

There is no doubt in my mind about the need for a regulator who can exercise his or her powers through such a licensing system. Too often, clubs have not taken their responsibilities seriously, or indeed have not accepted that they have them. Their financial responsibilities have been made clear, but clubs should have additional responsibilities in how they engage with fans, and social responsibilities to ensure that players and fans do not engage in behaviour that would bring the game into disrepute. By that, I do not just mean violence or hooliganism: I believe in taking a firm stance on issues such as racism and homophobia. In my view, the regulator should have the power to do what individual football clubs, the Premier League, the FA and the English Football League have failed to do over the years, which is to properly regulate and police the game so that clubs have responsibilities as well as rights. That approach is far preferable to commentators, fans, and even Government Ministers giving their views from the sidelines, and nothing changing in the process.

6.42 pm

**Mrs Helen Grant** (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con) [V]: The governance of English football is broken; our national game, the beautiful game, is certainly in crisis; and now is the time for fundamental reform, reform that can only be achieved through the creation of an independent football regulator. This was the central recommendation of “Saving Our Beautiful Game—Manifesto for Change”, a report co-authored last year by a group of which I was a member. These experienced individuals, with a deep interest in football, brought everything together and produced a document that has proposed the creation of an independent football regulator. That regulator would be absolutely independent; would be funded from within football, not by public money; and would not require Government to run the game, which is extremely important.

The impact of an independent regulator would be more far-reaching than any of the specific responsibilities it would have, because an independent regulator would change the culture of the business of football in our country. Such a step would be a crucial milestone in the long-overdue process of rebalancing our national game, to make it a game that works just as much for the grassroots, the community, and the lower-league clubs as it does for the big six in the premier league.

An independent football regulator would be an affirmation from this place that football is part of our history, our culture and our communities, and deserves protection.

I pay tribute to the Minister for the leadership he has already shown on this issue in recent months. I am also delighted that the concept of an independent regulator is to be considered by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). She is well suited to the task, and I know she will carry out a review that is both broad and forensic, and that places the opinions of the fans at its very heart. We know that an independent football regulator would enjoy enormous support from the footballing public across the country. The fact that the petition reached 100,000 signatures in less than 12 hours speaks for itself.

Association football is the most popular sport in the entire world and is played by more than 250 million people in over 200 countries. It was born in England over 150 years ago, and it has a huge connection with communities across the length and breadth of our country, but if we want to protect and preserve that fabulous heritage for generations into the future, our football governance needs emergency surgery, and it needs that surgery now. Let us drive through the radical change required, let us create an independent football regulator, and let us make the governance of this beautiful game, which we all know and love, fit for the 21st century.

6.45 pm

**Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott, and I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) for leading this important debate.

I want to begin by mentioning the league two club in my constituency, Tranmere Rovers. Tranmere were unfairly relegated during the first lockdown because the season ended. Behind the English Football League’s decision to end the season for league one and two clubs lay one thing, and one thing alone, and that was money. Maintaining the prize of entry into the premier league for three lucky championship clubs meant that Tranmere and others were relegated without a ball being kicked. That is one example of why I firmly believe that the fan-led review of football governance must result in the establishment of an independent regulator for football in this country. It is a burning necessity in the light of the scandal of the recently proposed, and thankfully abandoned, European super league.

However, my fear is that, like the Terminator, the ESL will be back unless action is taken now to reform the governance of the entire sport. Compare and contrast the fabulous wealth of the premier league with the tragic scuppering of clubs such as Bury. Compare and contrast the attempt to set up a selfish and permanent closed circle with the work that Tranmere Rovers do in their local community. During the lockdown, the club invested £60,000 in an abandoned recreation facility in one of my town’s most deprived estates, the Beechwood. They have installed a gym and transformed it into a community asset that is giving youngsters an alternative to the lure of county lines drug dealers, and Tranmere fans have supplied 50,000 meals to vulnerable people, more than 1,000 shopping and medication drop-offs, and hundreds of toys to those in need at Christmas. That highlights the reality that most football clubs are

community assets. They are there for the local people and the fans, and the best of them work with their fans for the common good of the club and community. I know that many hon. Members have local clubs that do similar activities, but we need to go beyond simply applauding the good work of some and address the key issues that could so easily undermine the game in a way that the threat of the ESL almost did.

There are two issues that I believe an independent regulator can and should tackle. First, we need to reform the distribution of money in the game. *The Independent* reported the following comment from an official of one of the premier league's top six:

"We don't want too many Leicester Citys."

That outrageous comment comes from a representative of a monopoly—not just in this country, but across European football. The financial giant Deloitte estimated that football clubs require a minimum of £400 million a year to compete at the top level. That needs reform, because it creates a scramble for money, instead of a scramble for sporting glory. The No. 1 priority on the independent regulator's list must be to devise a genuinely fair and equitable distribution of wealth throughout the football pyramid. Otherwise, there will be a lot more Burys and Boltons.

The No. 2 priority on the list must be to tackle the fractured nature of football governance. We now have the Premier League, the FA and the EFL all pushing different agendas and looking after different aspects of the game, without checks or balances. I believe that the regulator we need is one that represents the whole of the game and ensures that, rather than sacrifice the long-term interests of the game for short-term financial gain, the entire football pyramid works as one. That way, we can put paid to the ESL Terminator ever coming back.

6.49 pm

**Alun Cairns** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) for securing this extremely important debate, and for the way he introduced it.

In the brief time I have, I want to highlight two key issues. First, I remind colleagues that although it is the English Football League pyramid, four Welsh teams are part of that: Swansea, Cardiff, Wrexham and Newport. We are always aware of the Union of the United Kingdom, and we share our passion for football and sport in the same way. Therefore, although Welsh teams share the privileges of the English Football League structure, we are also subject to the same risks as all the other clubs. We must remember that fans come from all over the United Kingdom and beyond. Whatever actions come out of the petition and review, they will be relevant to fans wherever they are in the UK or around the world.

The second issue I want to highlight is that the presence of four clubs in the English pyramid system does not detract from the importance of the Welsh pyramid structure. I refer to an experience that is relevant to the English structure: Barry Town football club, which is now known as Barry Town United. I declare an interest as the honorary president. It was a highly successful club over many years, with a long history that included European success. It has passionate fans, just like every other football club, but it also has the most professional

coaching structure. I pay tribute to Gavin Chesterfield and his wife Hannah Chesterfield, and the whole structure behind him, for what they have achieved. I hope hon. Members will indulge me for a moment to highlight that.

In 2013, we ended up with a disgruntled owner who had lost interest in the club and initially allowed the supporters to run the club for most of the season. He then decided, for whatever reason—we can all make judgments on that—to withdraw the club from the league with two games left in the season, in spite of having an extremely successful season. Of course, we wanted to qualify as a phoenix club, but the regulatory challenges meant that we, a local club, ended up in the High Court, costing us tens of thousands of pounds to get reinstated. We eventually won, but that was purely because of the passion of the supporters, the coaching structure and the supporters committee that ran it.

In the 15 seconds I have remaining, I must say that much of the attention of this debate has understandably focused on wealth and the exploitation of fans through overcharging, merchandising and drawing them to a super league. But there are local clubs with owners that are disgruntled for whatever reason, and the structures and laws as they stand do not lend themselves to the fans taking control, unless they are as determined as the fans and supporters of Barry Town United.

6.52 pm

**Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I begin by proudly declaring my interest as an AFC Wimbledon season ticket holder—a club with historically symbolic roots in this debate. We all know that football clubs have meaning far deeper than any result on a Saturday afternoon. I have cherished childhood memories of Wimbledon match days with my dad, and particularly his joy at receiving tickets to the famous 1988 club final against Liverpool, to see the Crazy Gang beat the Culture Club. I will never forget him racing down to the King's Head from the post-match reception to show off his autograph book bursting with his heroes' signatures. But just three years later, his joy turned sour: our club left its home on Plough Lane in 1991, being stolen 60 miles up the M1 to Milton Keynes—an event that shook sport and, just like the super league, exposed the hyper-commercial world of football.

So began one of English football's greatest stories: the birth of fan-owned AFC Wimbledon—according to the FA commission, a club that was not in the wider interests of football. How wrong they were. A democratic supporters organisation, the Dons Trust, owns AFC, giving fans control of the future of our club. After six promotions in 13 seasons, we soared our way to league one, coming an awful long way from the open trials on Wimbledon Common, where a team was cobbled together to face Sutton United just a few weeks later. The result that day did not matter; our dream was now real. Anybody who wants a little light summer reading might want to read the book by our former chief executive Erik Samuelson, "All Together Now: How a Group of Football Fans Righted a Wrong and Brought Their Football Club Home."

When a club is truly fan-led, the results for the community can be remarkable. Throughout the pandemic, the Dons Local Action Group, a 2,000-strong volunteer

[*Siobhain McDonagh*]

group of AFC fans, expertly led by Xavier Wiggins, honoured in the Queen's birthday list, Cormac van der Hoeven, and Craig Wellstead, has distributed hundreds of thousands of food boxes, tablets and laptops across south London—a club that gives heart and soul back to the community to which it belongs.

Dad would have been so proud to see our team back at Plough Lane next season. Margaret, my sister, and I hope to sponsor a match in his memory in his birthday month of February. I assure all Members that people will be able to hear us shout as far away as Milton Keynes: "Come on you Dons!"

6.55 pm

**James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott, and, as ever, to take part in any debate that my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) is involved in. What we have just heard is what football is about. I am fed up to the back teeth of football being talked about through the prism of only five or six clubs in the premier league who think that they have a God-given right to dominate football and to decide what happens to other clubs in their vicinity. I would not have believed the lack of care within English football from those major clubs, the EFL and the FA regarding Bury until I became an MP and found out the complete negligence of the history, hope and passion that has just been displayed.

Every single person in Bury was let down and nobody cared, and still nobody cares. I support the call for an independent regulatory body. Bury football club is not very important to the football pyramid—two times FA cup winners. Gigg Lane was built in 1885, and is one of the oldest football stadiums in the world. Along with Ashington and Greenwich in London, we produce more English footballers than any other town. Stewart Day took over the club in 2013. Four years later, wages had jumped threefold to £4.5 million. This was the point that I made to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North. During the same period, the club's revenues grew by less than 50% to £3.2 million. That meant that Bury was spending 140% of its entire turnover on wages. The club was persistently late paying other clubs and making loan payments. The EFL and the football regulatory bodies did nothing. When Mr Day's property business collapsed, the club was effectively insolvent. The EFL and the FA knew that and did nothing. What they did was allow the club to be taken over by a man called Steve Dale.

I would need hours to talk about Steve Dale. He took over the club for £1 with no way of funding it. That situation was a scandal, and it led to my town's club being kicked out of the league. This does not just involve Parliament; it involves passion. I have seen personally how people in Bury have been affected by the loss of something that for 70 or 80 years people have been going to watch. It is part of their lives, their heritage, and what makes them proud of the town of Bury. The big premier league clubs around us did nothing. Manchester United and Manchester City did not come knocking on the door, saying, "What can we do to help?" There was nothing, and no local authority. The fans of Bury have been left to themselves.

The recent debate regarding the EFL super league was very nice. It suited certain people on TV to be outraged by that, but those same people never defended Bury or AFC Wimbledon because they do not care. Once we have, hopefully, a regulator that can at least give some responsibility to the football league pyramid that we have, perhaps that care will be back in the system.

6.59 pm

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Elliott. I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) for introducing this really important debate.

Many football clubs were created by workers at the heart of their communities. Luton Town, the club that I am so proud to have in my constituency of Luton South, was founded democratically when John Charles Lomax and George Deacon arranged a public meeting at the town hall on 11 April 1885 to form a town club. Lutonians opposed another group's secretive plans to create a club and instead supported the transparent, democratic creation of the club that we are so proud of now.

As industry grew in Luton, so did the club, and that cuts to the heart of what football represents for so many. Sports clubs are not a business like any other; they are intrinsically linked to the communities they represent. Having met Luton Town Supporters' Trust and Loyal Luton Supporters Club, what stands out to me most is how much they care about the club as a central feature of our town's identity that should be celebrated.

The driving force of football is the comradeship among fans and communities, and at the weekend we saw an overwhelming display of heartfelt solidarity in response to Christian Eriksson's collapse, and I wish him a speedy recovery. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] The principal—indeed, the only—concern of all fans across the world was Christian's health, and to see the Danish and Finnish fans united in showing their support when the match restarted was truly moving.

Football transcends borders and communities, and fans come together through our shared love of the sport. I have experienced that first hand with the passionate Scandinavian Hatters from Norway and Sweden, who are an excellent part of Luton Town's fan base, and I call many of them friends.

Measures must be put in place to protect and extend fans' influence in their clubs.

The Labour party has called for reform of the governance of football for more than a decade. We need the Government's review to be truly fan-led, in order to make this a watershed moment that reforms our game's dysfunctional governance. We must put an end to the billionaire owners of the biggest clubs running our sport purely for profit—they clearly cannot be trusted to regulate themselves—and strict measures must be put in place to prevent any further attempts to create a European super league and to stop clubs such as Bury suffering the awful situations they have experienced.

As one of the vice-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group for football supporters, I support the Football Supporters' Association's "Sustain The Game!" campaign, which outlines a plan: to protect our clubs as community assets; to improve transparency, to ensure that everyone knows who owns their club and how they operate; to

impose financial controls with teeth, to ensure that clubs and leagues are regulated; to strengthen the football pyramid, in order to safeguard its long-term sustainability; and to ensure that supporters' voices are at the heart of their clubs.

The fan-led review needs to bring about lasting change through the introduction of legislation to create a thoroughly independent regulator. As *Saving Our Beautiful Game* has put it:

"This is an unprecedented opportunity to reboot the game and side with millions of fans during a summer of football."

I hope to read an interim report from the fan-led review in July that lays the ground for systemic change in our game.

7.2 pm

**Jane Hunt** (Loughborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott.

I first thank the 412 people in my constituency who have signed these petitions. Football is deeply rooted in the fabric of our society, particularly in Loughborough, the national centre of sport. Football unites local communities and brings together people from all backgrounds and all walks of life. As one of my constituents said:

"Football is a living, breathing part of British culture, which must be protected from the heights of European football all the way down to the Sunday league."

As we know, there has been a huge backlash against plans for a European Super League. I very much welcome the Government's fan-led review of football governance. Loughborough University has offered to assist in that review, and I would be grateful if its offer and its expertise were taken up.

I also hope that examples of good ownership shine through in the review and serve as reminders of how football clubs can do right by their fans and support their local communities. For example, Leicester City football club not only delivers football and other physical activity sessions for local people, but supports refugees to rebuild their lives in the area and has facilitated donations from fans to refurbish a hospital unit at the Leicester Royal Infirmary. The groundsman at the club's training ground has even shared his expertise with the bowls club in Sileby in my constituency, to help to improve its bowling green to Commonwealth games standard. That is a fantastic example of what club owners' priorities should be and the contribution they can make to the area in which their club is based.

Ahead of today's debate, I met the Foxes Trust, a non-profit supporters' trust for fans of Leicester City football club, to discuss the Government's review and to hear its thoughts on the petitions. The trust stressed that its relationship with the owners of Leicester City works very well, because the owners fully understand the community aspect of the club, and that understanding is backed up by prudent financial management. However, given recent incidents throughout football—including many that we have heard about today—the trust believes that meaningful dialogue with properly constituted supporter groups needs to be legislated for.

The trust feels that the 50+1 share model will be difficult to instigate in the UK. Furthermore, while fans should not have the ability to veto all decisions made by the board, the trust has said that it should absolutely have more say over the club's finances and business plans, and be able to veto certain decisions to protect a

club's heritage, location and playing facilities. For example, that could be through a golden share, which would be administered via an elected fan to the club's board and an independent executive director with responsibility for club heritage who is elected by fans' groups via a vote of key stakeholders, such as season ticket holders.

With regards to the independent regulation of football, a local resident has contacted me to say that an independent regulator is needed to

"preserve the integrity of the English football pyramid and prevent its destruction by overseas owners and investors who do not understand its importance to the people of this country and wish to impose their own vision purely for profit purposes without understanding its place in the community."

I would be grateful if the Minister could take those comments into account as part of the discussions.

7.5 pm

**Claudia Webbe** (Leicester East) (Ind) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Elliott. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) on securing this hugely important debate.

Like football fans up and down the country, I strongly opposed the European super league proposition—not only because it contravened basic sporting principles of integrity and competition, but because it was driven entirely by the greed of a few wealthy clubs. Ultimately, sport and culture should be for everyone, not just for millionaire owners and investors to make a profit. I congratulate all football fans who made their voices heard and forced the big six into an embarrassing U-turn. That showed how sport can bring our communities together, and it was a reminder that the ultra-rich owners are merely temporary custodians of the teams that were created by working people.

Despite the increasing commercialisation of the game, football clubs—nearly all of which were forged from working-class communities—continue to provide a strong sense of belonging and civic pride to so many people in Leicester and across the UK. I support all proposals to increase fan ownership of clubs, including the 50+1 model that is successfully used in Germany to ensure that fans have majority voting rights. That can shift the balance of power away from rampant profit-seeking and back towards fan accessibility and affordability, and help to ensure that nothing like the ESL fiasco ever happens again. To that end, I fully support introducing an independent football regulator to prevent the ultra-rich owners of elite clubs from using our game as their plaything.

I am a Leicester lass, and winning the FA cup for the first time in our 137-year history was a fantastic achievement that speaks to the excellent work done by everyone associated with Leicester City football club. This sustained success provides the perfect antidote to the greed and unfairness that define the recent European super league proposals. Leicester City provides the best example of why that is an unjust model, and is an excellent case study of the need to reform the game in favour of fans and communities.

Football can of course be an immense force for good, yet the sport has a deeply unhealthy side that is in need of regulation. The appalling racist abuse of footballers online and in stadiums remains endemic. It is shameful

[Claudia Webbe]

that the Prime Minister and members of his Cabinet did not forcefully condemn the booing of England players by a small minority of so-called supporters. The Government's tacit endorsement of such hatred gives oxygen to the far right. We must reform football in favour of the fans and the working-class communities that created the beautiful game. While we do so, we must eradicate all forms of hatred from the sport.

7.9 pm

**Zarah Sultana** (Coventry South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Elliott.

I want to begin by congratulating England on their win against Croatia. This group of players showcase the very best of a multicultural, socially conscious country. Sunday's goal was assisted by a player of Jamaican and Irish descent, and finished by a striker who was born in Jamaica and raised in a diverse borough in north-west London. However, what is special about this team goes beyond the pitch—from Raheem Sterling, who was recognised this week for his anti-racist work in sport, to Marcus Rashford, who has ensured that millions of working-class kids have been fed during the holidays.

It is not just the players. In response to boos by supposed fans and to Conservative MPs who said that they would boycott the team, the manager has been clear that we have a duty to stand up for our values, so I would like to commend Gareth Southgate, the players and the vast majority of the fans, who backed the decision to take the knee.

Our clubs are not just businesses; they are part of our communities and the social fabric that binds us together. The European super league debacle showed once and for all that clubs should not be the playthings of billionaires, but that was not the beginning of the problem. Football has been going down this trajectory for a number of years, as can be seen in the ever widening gap between the clubs at the top and the rest of the pack. In a single season, the premier league clubs made combined operating profits of £900 million, compared with the combined losses of more than £400 million for the 72 clubs in the championship, league one and league two. Financial unsustainability for these clubs is now an ever present danger. We know this also from Coventry, where financial challenges prevented the Sky Blues from owning the stadium that they had helped to build, repeatedly forcing the team to play home games outside the city. I am pleased to say that next year they are returning to Coventry, but the underlying problems remain.

The European super league plans might be gone, but billionaire owners will continue to put their greed before our clubs and our communities. Instead of tinkering around the edges, we need to address the problem at its root. That means taking ownership out of the hands of the out-of-touch elites and giving it back to the fans, and that is what the 50+1 rule would do, as it does in Germany, where no teams were part of the super league plans and where ticket prices are significantly lower. Football was created by the working class, but it has been stolen by the rich. It is time that we took it back.

**Julie Elliott (in the Chair):** I call Alex Davies-Jones.

7.11 pm

**Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab) [V]: Diolch, Ms Elliott; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) on securing this vital debate. It is also an honour to follow my good and hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana). Like her, I am a proud Liverpool fan. Football, and specifically the huge range of issues that the game has faced in recent years, is a topic that I know is particularly close to all our hearts. It is a privilege to speak in today's debate.

Football is clearly beloved by many, yet far too often it finds itself in a huge mess. Widespread and meaningful reform is urgently needed. The structures in place at the moment are failing at all levels. Currently, clubs, including my beloved LFC, have a huge amount of power if they are in the premier league, yet shockingly it is absolutely clear that at that level no one is truly accountable to the supporters and their interests. And make no mistake, it is the fans—the ones who turn up come rain or shine, and win or lose, and who pour their hearts, and often their earnings, into the game—who should be at the very centre of the game's governance.

I was pleased to see that some clubs, including Manchester United, have finally decided to engage with fans through a fans forum, but clearly, given everything that we have witnessed over the last few months, those forums should have been in place decades ago. The Government's fan-led review of football is thankfully in the safe hands of the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), but we also must remember that sports clubs are not just a business, as other Members have said. These clubs are at the very heart of our communities. My area has a number of thriving local teams, including Tonyrefail AFC, Pontyclun FC, Ponty Town FC, Treforest FC and Church Village FC, among many others. They have all helped our local area through the pandemic and will be central to the recovery, too.

Alongside the big premier league teams, these much-loved clubs at grassroots level desperately need support. Indeed, we need only look at the situation that Wigan Athletic found themselves in last year for a stark reminder of how urgently widespread reform is needed. It really does not have to be this way. It will come as no surprise when I, as a proud Welsh Member of Parliament, invite colleagues to look across the border at the success that national league side Wrexham have seen in recent years. The takeover of the club was fairly unique, given the new owners' links to Hollywood, but it is a model that others across the UK could do well to take note of. Soon after the deal was announced, the new owners launched their mission statement, which had transparency at its root. Met with overwhelming support from fans, Rob McElhenney and Ryan Reynolds do not describe themselves as owners, but rather as custodians of the historic football club that they have the privilege and honour of guarding.

In short—as I realise time is short—it is absolutely vital that the Government use this opportunity and their fan-led review of football to make lasting, impactful change for a sector that for too long has remained unregulated. On a personal level, I will always stand ready to work with colleagues across the political divide for the good of the beautiful game. Diolch, Ms Elliott.

7.14 pm

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) [V]: Ms Elliott, you have a succession of Liverpool supporters, I am afraid. I am a member of the Spirit of Shankly supporters club. We are currently in discussions with the club about the role that supporters will play. I can say to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) that I was at Wembley when the Crazy Gang beat us—I am still trying to work out how, to be honest. I am also a season ticket holder at my local club, Hayes & Yeading United. We are the club that discovered Les Ferdinand, Cyrille Regis and Jason Roberts. It is the sort of club that contributes so much, even though it is not in the league itself.

Fans have now made it absolutely clear that they want immediate safeguards for supporters to be able to protect the best interests of their clubs. That is why I support the idea of legislation that requires every English club to secure the support of a 51% majority of its registered season ticket holders for any major decision that fundamentally affects its identity or future—for instance, the competitions in which it plays or any change of home ground, name, club colours or badge.

Fans also need longer-term control, and we need to adopt the German 50+1 rule on supporter ownership of clubs. How do we get there? It is simple: where club shares are being sold, either by shareholders or through new share issues, legislation should require vendors to make shares available on a first-refusal basis to recognised, democratically controlled supporters clubs. This rule would apply until the trust owned 51% of the club shares.

While we are talking about football, let me throw in one other issue. I make a plea to include in legislation control of the sporting “crown jewels”, so that at least 20 Premier League games a season, equally split among the clubs, are shown on free-to-view channels, allowing fans to enjoy at least 2 of their club’s matches every season. That would give a fairer distribution of access to football on television.

I support the overall campaign for a new regulator. The regulator could be responsible for the approval of takeovers, the application of a strengthened fit-and-proper person test process, the oversight of a club licensing scheme to ensure high standards of governance, and the management of a system of redistribution of club revenues to ensure the health of football at every level of the pyramid. Most of those policy proposals were developed by us and were in Labour’s 2019 manifesto, but it would be gloating to refer to that.

7.17 pm

**Kate Osborne** (Jarrow) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. I thank all those who have signed the petitions and the 9,000-plus people who responded to the Committee’s survey.

More than 10 million people sat down yesterday to watch England play Croatia. Football is our national sport, and football clubs stand as historic institutions in our communities across the UK. Although I acknowledge that a move towards a 50+1 ownership model for clubs in England cannot be achieved overnight, the forthcoming review must be used as an opportunity to rebalance the current ownership structure in favour of match-going supporters.

In April, I co-ordinated a letter from more than 60 MPs and peers, cross-party, calling for a simple change in the law to force Premier League and English Football League clubs to give their long-standing season ticket holders a 51% voting majority on any decision affecting a club’s identity or future. The ESL debacle highlighted why it is essential that supporters are given the majority vote in their clubs. It underlines a growing sense that our clubs are all too often run in the interest of remote and unaccountable owners.

The Glazer family takeover of Manchester United is a prime example. Before the Glazers took over in 2005, Manchester United had no debts. Today, the club’s net debt stands at around £455.5 million, yet the Glazer family continue to pocket huge dividends. The forthcoming review must recommend additional criteria to prevent rogue owners from buying clubs solely for their own gain.

I represent thousands of Newcastle United fans in my Jarrow constituency. Their club has stagnated under Mike Ashley, who applies to his football club the same business model as that used by his Sports Direct empire—minimalism, low spending and little or no regard to decent, hard-working people. It would be remiss of me not to mention that I also have a few thousand Sunderland fans in my constituency.

There is no doubt that the football pyramid needs reform and improvement. It must ensure that a proportion of money from Premier League clubs trickles down to teams below them and to grassroots football, in turn securing the future of the game. It goes without saying how much grassroots clubs matter to our communities. Earlier this year, Hebburn Town won the FA vase, which got the town noticed and had a massive impact on Hebburn’s civic pride. However, a huge number of our grassroots teams are on the brink. If they go, it will not just hit the football pyramid, but tear the heart out of many post-industrial communities that are already struggling. That is why it is essential that the forthcoming review recommends an independent financial regulator to represent the interests of supporters, protect against bad practices and generally seek to prioritise the wider good of the game rather than allowing clubs to act solely in their self-interest.

Football must act as an equaliser. Clubs must do all they can to ensure social justice in their own communities and in the wider football community. We cannot allow further disconnection between fans and their teams while a wealthy few line their pockets, because, ultimately, football is nothing without its fans.

7.21 pm

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Elliot, particularly in the light of your expertise in this subject. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) on securing the debate and on leading it ably. We have had many such debates in my time as a Member of Parliament, and yet again, the subscription to the debate shows what an important issue this is to us all.

I congratulate in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on her excellent contribution—her dad would be so proud—even though she reminded me of the 1988 FA cup final, which sends a shiver down my spine even to this day.

[Alison McGovern]

I do not know what is going on in Kent, but we had brilliant contributions from the hon. Members for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) and for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), and everybody wishes the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) the very best in her endeavours, so thanks to Kent for sending us MPs who are doing such great work on football reform. I think it is fair to say that many of the points they made are supported not just by those Members who have spoken but by others right across the House.

We want to see change happen. I will make three very brief points on what I think that change should look like. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) pointed out, previous Labour party manifestos—in 2019, 2017, 2015 and 2010—called for reform of football governance, so this will come as a surprise to nobody. Indeed, I apologise to the Minister because he will have heard me say much of this before, but my hope is that the repetition affirms our cross-party position that we want to see that change and we will make it happen. If anybody in the world of football is in doubt about that, they should read the contributions made to this debate, because we have made our intentions clear.

First, on football finances, I support the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, as well as all the contributions that she and her expert group have made about the need for an independent regulator. If we are to have an independent regulator, many people will rightly ask, “To what end?” The answer has to be finances. As the ESL debacle made abundantly clear, if we believe in competition, we cannot let the finances of football undermine that principle. We need competition not in name only, but in reality. At the moment, what we call the football pyramid has very significant financial cliff edges—to get into the Championship and to get out of League Two. Those are significant problems in our football pyramid. We need an independent regulator to change how the football finance system works, so that we have a real pyramid and real competition again.

To anybody who thinks that that is too hard, I say that, as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North pointed out, we did it in banking even though people said that that was too complicated and difficult. We in this country are good at creating regulators, and we need to do that for football so that there is an independent voice to speak up for the fans, not least to protect the existence of clubs. We heard from the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) just how horrendous it is for people when the existence of their club is threatened. They must have protection so that their clubs cannot be ripped away from them because of someone else’s poor financial management. It is not just league clubs that need genuine redistribution; it is the grassroots as well.

My second point is about fans. We as football supporters need to ask ourselves what we want our role in this to be. That is why I am pleased that the review is fan-led, and I know that the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford is talking to lots of fans. Do we want this veto that many have talked about, and if so, how do we get it? I ask the Minister what legislation is being prepared to look at that. What constraints do want on the behaviour of owners? We know that the test for owners and directors is good for nothing, so what kind of test do we

really want? We need not a snapshot but an ongoing check on behaviour. As many Members have said, the development of different ownership models requires support, similar to that provided in the past by Supporters Direct, so what preparation work is the Department doing?

My third and final point is about inclusion. Let us be honest with ourselves: we are not in a good moment when it comes to the fight against racism in the beautiful game. We have to be really frank and honest about this. Proper football fans do not boo their team. One of the things that I remember most about first going to Anfield is being told, “We never boo our players. If they are wearing our shirt, those are our people and we do not boo them.” That, for me, is the end of it, so I suggest we all get behind our team, not least because there are significant challenges that we need to fight together, including racism and misogyny.

The fact is that in UK sport, approximately 96% of broadcast time is for men playing football, which leads to a 99% pay gap between women and men. We now have the example of Lauren James and Reece James, who are equal in talent but, because of their gender, face widely disparate prospects for income from football. I ask the Minister: how can we make progress on that and—I know that this will receive support from across this House—on disability football, which is also very important? We need to get it on the agenda.

We have a lot to do. I hope that we will do it together and make progress quickly, because we have had many debates of this type, and now is the time for action.

7.27 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Elliott. You must have been biting at the bit to contribute directly to today’s debate, because I know how knowledgeable and passionate you are about this topic.

I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) from the Petitions Committee for having brought forward this debate on reform of the structure of football in this country, and to all colleagues from across the House and from various nations who have made constructive contributions. Again, their knowledge, insight, passion, experience and expertise has been incredible, and I am sure that many stakeholders in football have been listening.

I also thank Aston Villa fan Angus Yule, who started the petition on the 50+1 rule, and the Blackpool Supporters Trust, which started the petition for an independent regulator for football, as well as the tens of thousands of people who took the time to sign those petitions. We are having this debate because football fans want changes to be made to the structure of football in this country, and I thank them for their passion and their commitment to improving our national game. Both petitions received well over 100,000 signatures, which clearly signals the level of interest in this subject.

I also note the responses of fans to the Petitions Committee’s survey, which the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) mentioned and which asked the original petitioners for their views on the most important issues facing football governance in England today. They have highlighted areas of concern, including the need to

protect the football pyramid, how revenue is distributed, club ownership, and the ability of fans to influence decisions. The Government's independent fan-led review will look at those issues closely, as well as fans' views and suggestions for how we can change the structure of our game for the better.

Fans have a crucial part to play in the reform of our national game. They bear the brunt and fallout of bad ownership decisions; they see where the structures are not working for the good of the game; and they can articulate most clearly how important local clubs and grounds are to the local community, and how club badges and names give a sense of heritage, belonging and place. Our independent review has already started its work at pace and is hearing from fans, football authorities and experts from the worlds of finance, governance and regulation to build the framework for the future of football in England. The review's chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who quite clearly commands the respect of many who have spoken today, has already met many fan groups. I have regular meetings with the chair, but I also meet fan groups myself, most recently in Manchester, and I look forward to meeting more fans over the coming weeks and months.

In addition, the review team will shortly launch a survey to allow all fans to contribute their views. I will ensure that Members are notified when that survey is launched. That is quite important, because we have a lot of football fans in the country, and some of them are not necessarily specifically fans of an individual club, so it is important that their views are heard as well.

**Alun Cairns:** I pay tribute to the Minister for his work and the way he is following this issue. Will he consider engaging with fans outside England? The point has been made that across the United Kingdom, there are fans of clubs that may predominantly be in England.

**Nigel Huddleston:** I am confident that we will be able to do that, in electronic form, through surveys and through other mechanisms, for the very reasons he expressed. I had the pleasure of visiting Wrexham last year, and it has interesting new owners; that shows commitment and shows that it is possible to invest appropriately if international owners have the right attitude. That is important, because we should not taint all potential investors, including overseas investors, with the same brush.

The first petition calls for the enforcement of the 50+1 rule for professional football club ownership, in reaction to the—thankfully unsuccessful—move to create a European super league. The House's opposition to that showed that football can unite us in opposition to certain things, as well for things that we want. On that point, the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) mentioned the incident that occurred this weekend, which we were all very alarmed by. I wish Christian Eriksen a speedy and full recovery.

As Members will be aware, the 50+1 rule has been used in German football, during which time English football has pursued a very different model. There are clearly pros and cons to both approaches, and the terms of reference of our fan-led review include the consideration of models from other countries, so we are looking at that model. Members will be aware of the complexities of retrofitting the German model into the English

system and of the benefits that some—though by no means all—wealthy individual owners have brought to our clubs. The review will consider whether any aspects of these alternative ownership models could be beneficially translated into the English league system. At this stage, it is for the chair and panel to consider all the options available. I would not want to prejudice their recommendations, but work is under way and the review's interim report is due next month.

The review is also looking at other options that fans are keen to explore, such as voting rights, with fans having a greater say in how their clubs are run, and whether that would mean direct engagement and involvement with the club's board and executives. The review will also consider giving fans some form of voting rights or golden share on key issues affecting the club. The Football Supporters' Association supports that option, and it was supported by hon. Members today, including my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) and others.

What the panel, the Government and, most importantly, fans seek from the final recommendations is a stable and sustainable framework for our national game for the future and beyond. Key to that sustainability is responsible club ownership; integrity in club governance; recognition of the proud footballing history and heritage of our national game, as mentioned by many hon. Members; recognition of and understanding the value that football clubs bring to their local communities; and most importantly, recognition of the value and expertise that fans can contribute to their clubs.

We do not want to see again the destruction of clubs like Bury. Neither do we want to see clubs seeking to break the framework of English football simply to become wealthier at the expense of other clubs. We do not want our cherished and historic football grounds to be taken away from their communities. We do want stable and responsible ownership of our football clubs. We want fans to be involved in the crucial decisions affecting their clubs, and we want to maintain the thrill, excitement, uncertainty and competitiveness that give English leagues their status and make them the envy of the world.

I turn to the second petition, which calls for the introduction of an independent regulator for football in England by December this year. The strength of feeling on this issue among hon. Members was fairly clear. Again, I cannot pre-empt or prejudice the chair's recommendations or the Government's response, but there has been a clear message in this debate and many others that I have attended with the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern). I fully understand the weight of feeling behind the huge amount of support for the petition, which has had more than 140,500 signatures. It clearly demonstrates fans' appetite for better regulation of the structures in football.

**Alison McGovern:** Has the Minister seen the open letter on the issue of regulation, whose lead signatories are Gary Lineker, Rio Ferdinand and Jamie Carragher? We are all aware of their work in this area. The letter suggests that regulation should not be diluted by Premier League representatives or anyone else employed by, taking fees from or on the board of professional football clubs or football authorities. Will the Minister confirm that he has seen that letter, it is being taken account of and it will be covered by the review?

**Nigel Huddleston:** Yes, I have seen that letter. I have seen many submissions, and a lot of genuinely good ideas are being suggested for the review. Many hon. Members who have spoken have great expertise. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee has done a huge amount of work in this area, and we have heard from people who have been involved in various proposals over the years. It is important that we respect and accept the views of people who have been absolutely pivotal in football, and who have led and played football over the years, but the voice that we most want to hear in the review is that of the fans. It is fair and reasonable to say that those who lead football, and who have great expertise in senior leadership positions, are also fans and they genuinely speak for fans, but the most important thing is to listen to fans. We will take on board the many contributions that have come in over the years, in many formats. The fan-led review is genuinely open to all possibilities when it comes to changing the structure of football governance, and we should not prejudge its outcome.

Football governance has had some very public failures, many of which have been referenced today, and it is fans who have borne the brunt of those failures. Again, fans cannot simply move on to a new club, and that is what makes football and sport different from standard businesses. The review is working quickly and will deliver an interim report in July. From the interim report, we will have a clearer view of how any new structure would work and the preferred options for creating a new, more responsible governance model for football, before the final report in October. As has rightly been said by the hon. Member for Wirral South and nearly everybody else in the debate, it is not just a matter of having a regulator, if we should go down that route; it is about what the role, responsibilities and remit of the regulator will be. We need to think very carefully about that.

The Government have been clear that we will move quickly to assess the review's recommendations and implement any that we agree are in the interests of fans and the game. That includes any recommendations that may require legislation, for which parliamentary time would be found. The tone of the debate suggests that we can probably expect cross-party agreement on implementing the recommendations if they do require legislation.

Football fans in this country have never been simply a backdrop to the game. They are the energy and the commitment that keep clubs alive. They keep the historical traditions of football alive, and they create the new traditions. Fans support their clubs, their communities and each other. Our national game cannot survive without their involvement. I thank all the fans who have made their views known in the two petitions that we have debated.

This is only the start of fan involvement in shaping the next steps in the future of English football. I am confident that together we can look to a brighter future for our national game, in which all voices are heard.

7.39 pm

**Jonathan Gullis:** Today has shown the very best of this place: the graft that goes on here every single day—even if it might not be sexy enough to merit a 30-second tweet—as we work in consensus to find a way forward.

I want to mention the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly), who gave two extremely powerful speeches from personal experience. If anyone is in any doubt about why the beautiful game is so important to fans, I urge them to watch or read those two speeches in order to understand. I love the fact that the hon. Lady is wearing her shirt with pride, and I hope that image goes out across the world.

Ultimately, a statement has been made today by this House: change is coming. I say with all good nature that when the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and I agree that governance change is needed, that is the moment that the penny should drop for the FA and others. The right hon. Gentleman and I might not necessarily agree fully on how it should change, but when two such Members in this place agree, it makes a powerful statement.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns) and the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) pointed out, Wales plays an important part in the English game. Hearing the story of the people of Barry and their fight was very important. There were so many speeches but, sadly, time does not allow me to rattle through how brilliant they all were. The hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) talked about Tranmere Rovers and its £60,000 investment in helping the community with fitness and in tackling county lines—also a scourge of the city of Stoke-on-Trent and the towns of Kidsgrove and Talke. There will be similar issues in many of our areas.

A message has been sent that change is needed. Personally, I certainly favour the idea of change in football governance. As the Minister said, how that is done, the remit of powers and the implementation need to be very carefully thought through. It is easy to rush into such things in order to look popular, but, ultimately, we must ensure that it is something that will last. One day, I hope, that will be transferred to the FA, which should have those responsibilities. Once we have public trust in the Football Association of England, perhaps it can take on those responsibilities.

All of us—except perhaps those who are not English Members of Parliament—can agree on one thing, which is that football is coming home this summer. As I always like to say when I finish such speeches as this: “Up the Vale!”

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered e-petitions 583310 and 584632, relating to football governance.

7.42 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*

# Written Statements

Monday 14 June 2021

## TREASURY

### The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review

#### The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch):

At Spring Statement 2019, the Government commissioned an independent, global review on the economics of biodiversity. “The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review” was published on 2 February [HCWS752].

Having examined its findings, I have today laid before Parliament the Government response to the Dasgupta review (CP 466).

In response to the review, the Government commits to: delivering a “nature positive” future, in which we leave the environment in a better state than we found it, and reverse biodiversity loss globally by 2030; and ensuring that economic and financial decision making, and the systems and institutions that underpin it, supports the delivery of a nature positive future.

The response sets out the ways in which the Government are already making significant progress towards delivering that future, for example, in England, re-orienting agricultural support to improve the environment, animal health and welfare, and reduce carbon emissions. The Government have also committed to spend at least £3 billion of the UK’s international climate finance on nature and biodiversity over five years, and have set out a 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution which will mobilise £12 billion of Government investment to create and support up to 250,000 highly skilled green jobs across the UK.

Building on our nature agenda, the response also sets out the ways in which the Government will go further in light of many of the review’s conclusions, including by:

- legislating in England for a binding target for species abundance to be achieved by 2030, aiming to halt the decline of nature;
- legislating in England for “biodiversity net gain” for nationally significant infrastructure projects through a new amendment to the Environment Bill which will be tabled shortly;
- ensuring all new UK bilateral aid spending does no harm to nature;

- committing up to £3 million additional support to the development of the taskforce on nature-related financial disclosures framework, which will support financial institutions and companies to report and act on nature-related risks.

- working with the Office for National Statistics to improve the way nature is incorporated into our national accounts and maximise their use in policy-making; and

- incorporating biodiversity into the UK Government green financing framework, which will determine which projects are eligible for financing under the UK Government’s green gilt programme.

The Government’s response to the review is published at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review-government-response>

Copies of the paper are available in the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office.

[HCWS87]

## DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### Tourism Recovery Plan

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston):** The Government have published a tourism recovery plan which sets out a framework for the tourism sector’s recovery from covid-19. This is a cross-Government plan which recognises that tourism supports, or is supported by, the work of nearly every Government Department. This plan brings together recent, existing and planned support for the sector by the UK Government into one framework.

In November 2020, as part of the first global travel taskforce report, the UK Government made a commitment to bring forward a tourism recovery plan in 2021 which was reiterated in the Prime Minister’s spring reopening road map published in February. The commitment to produce a recovery plan arose from the simple fact that tourism has been one of the hardest hit sectors of the UK economy by covid-19.

The UK Government want to see a growing, dynamic, sustainable and world-leading tourism sector reaching its full potential and driving growth across all parts of the UK. Specifically, we are aiming to:

- Recover domestic overnight trip volume and spend to 2019 levels by the end of 2022, as well as inbound visitor numbers and spend by the end of 2023: both targets are a year faster than independent forecasts predict;

- Ensure that the tourism sector’s recovery benefits every nation and region in the UK, with growing accommodation occupancy rates in the off-season, visitors staying longer and world-class levels of investment in tourism products and transport;

- Build back better with a more innovative and resilient tourism industry, maximising the potential for technology and data to enhance the visitor experience and employ more UK nationals in year-round quality jobs;

- Ensure the tourism sector contributes to the enhancement and conservation of our cultural, natural and historic heritage, minimises damage to the environment and is inclusive and accessible to all; and

- Return the UK swiftly to its pre-pandemic position as a leading European destination nation for hosting business events such as trade fairs, conferences and exhibitions.

A short term focus of the plan is to provide businesses with the support they need to return back to profit. For example, over £25 billion has already been provided to the tourism, leisure and hospitality sectors in the form of grants, loans and tax breaks, and tourism has been one of the most reliant economic sectors on measures such as the furlough scheme. The Government have allocated at least £19 million to domestic and international marketing activity to help with the recovery, with a £5.5 million domestic campaign led by VisitEngland already under way. Measures such as the VAT cut for tourism and hospitality, and a continuation of business rates relief for eligible properties will continue supporting businesses, and new proposals such as the introduction of a domestic tourism rail product and the National Lottery days out scheme will help stimulate demand. There is a particular focus in the plan on maximising the set piece events scheduled for 2022: Her Majesty’s

platinum jubilee, the Festival UK\* 2022 and the Commonwealth Games, which will all act as major domestic and international tourist draws.

Once restrictions are lifted, the Government will focus on building back better. For example, the plan lays out significant levels of UK-wide investment already under way in tourism product and infrastructure, as well as new support due to come in over subsequent years, such as the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund. We will also bring forward a consultation on the introduction of a tourism accommodation registration scheme in England.

A root and branch independent review of destination management organisations (DMOs) in England, led by Nick de Bois, is already under way. This review was launched in March 2021 and is assessing how best to structure and support tourism at a regional level. Other measures, such as an expanded ministerial advocacy and industry ambassadorial programme for business events, will help cement the UK's position as a leading European destination nation for hosting business events.

To ensure the success of the plan, a new quarterly inter-ministerial group for tourism, chaired by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, will be set up to deliver and update this plan as necessary. The tourism recovery plan will be revisited at regular intervals to ensure the right policy interventions are in place. The Government will work collaboratively with the Tourism Industry Council and other key stakeholders from across the tourism sector in order to get it done.

A copy of this document will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS88]

## EDUCATION

### Teacher Training Application System

**The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):** The teacher recruitment and retention strategy, published in January 2019, committed to helping people become teachers by introducing a new streamlined application system for postgraduate initial teacher training. This application system, known as the Apply for Teacher Training service (Apply), is easy to use and designed to better meet the needs of potential trainees. The new service also ensures teacher training providers can make accurate decisions on whether their applicants are right for the courses they are offering.

During the October 2019 admissions cycle, this digital service was piloted by a number of school-centred initial teacher training providers and schools across England. In October 2020, the pilot was extended to 11 universities offering initial teacher training courses. The service has been designed and developed based on ongoing feedback from candidates, universities, and schools to ensure it is as efficient and easy to use as possible.

The new Apply service will fully replace the existing UCAS teacher training service from the October 2021 admissions cycle. I have instructed UCAS to decommission its teacher training service and all applications to postgraduate initial teacher training courses in England will be processed through the Department's new Apply service from October.

[HCWS89]

# Petition

Monday 14 June 2021

## OBSERVATIONS

### DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

#### Gambling regulation

*The petition of residents of the constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran,*

Declares that there is significant concern about the recent collapse of the betting firm Football Index following the suspension of the company's license by the Gambling Commission and its entry into administration; notes that customers collectively have over £90 million trapped in the company with average losses of around £3,000 per customer; further declares that the petitioners understand that the firm operated as a "football stock market", offering customers the ability to buy "shares" in footballers whose price would increase or decrease, and customers could be paid in "dividends" based on player performances; further that, only a few days after the company "minted" new shares in footballers and enticed customers to purchase shares, the company drastically decreased dividend payments by 82%, leading to a virtual market crash on the site which caused significant losses for customers; further that concerns have been raised that the firm operated like a pyramid scheme and that it had been admonished by the Advertising Standards Authority in 2019 for creating the impression that the product was a lucrative investment opportunity; and further that this scandal has called into question the adequacy of gambling regulation in the UK, given the Gambling Commission saw fit to give this company a license and apparently failed to ensure adequate oversight.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the UK Government to launch a full independent public inquiry into this scandal to ensure that gambling regulation is fit for purpose in protecting consumers.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

—[Presented by Patricia Gibson, Official Report, 14 April 2021; Vol. 692, c. 432.]

[P002656]

*Observations from The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale):*

The Government are taking the collapse of BetIndex Limited, the operator of the Football Index product, and the concerns of those affected by it very seriously. We have launched an independent, expert-led review into the regulation of BetIndex to establish both how this situation came about and what lessons we can learn from it. The Secretary of State for Culture has appointed Malcolm Sheehan QC to lead the review, the full details of which are set out in the terms of reference, available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-the-regulation-of-betindex-limited-terms-of-reference>

As outlined in the terms of reference, this independent review will provide an independent expert account of the actions taken by the Gambling Commission and other regulatory bodies regarding this complex betting product. This independent review is entirely separate from the Gambling Commission's ongoing regulatory investigation and the ongoing administration proceedings, and will be carried out in such a way as to avoid prejudicing either of those processes.

The independent review is expected to provide a report for publication in the summer, and will include recommendations as needed across the full range of questions set out in the terms of reference. Its findings will form part of the evidence informing the Government ongoing review of the Gambling Act 2005, which was announced in December 2020; and which will look at whether changes are required to the regulatory framework around gambling, including the Commission's powers and resources and how it uses them. Further detail about the review can be found at:

Review of the Gambling Act 2005 Terms of Reference and Call for Evidence - GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk))



# ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 14 June 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT</b> .....	1	<b>HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—continued</b>	
Cladding and Fire Safety Defects.....	6	Green Spaces .....	5
Community Renewal and Levelling-up Funds .....	10	Home ownership .....	11
Covid-19: High Street Recovery .....	14	Levelling-up and Shared Prosperity Funds .....	12
Covid-19 Memorial Wall.....	2	New Housing Developments.....	7
Environmental Protections: Development.....	9	Topical Questions .....	15
Evictions and Homelessness.....	3	Waste Collection Authorities .....	1

# WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 14 June 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT</b> .....	2WS	<b>TREASURY</b> .....	1WS
Tourism Recovery Plan .....	2WS	The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review .....	1WS
<b>EDUCATION</b> .....	4WS		
Teacher Training Application System.....	4WS		

# PETITION

Monday 14 June 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT</b> .....	1P
Gambling regulation .....	1P

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than  
Monday 21 June 2021**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE  
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

---

## CONTENTS

Monday 14 June 2021

### List of Government and Principal Officers of the House

**Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1] [see index inside back page]**  
*Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government*

**Uyghur Tribunal: London [Col. 24]**  
*Answer to urgent question—(Nigel Adams)*

**Ethiopia [Col. 34]**  
*Answer to urgent question—(James Duddridge)*

**National Insurance Contributions Bill [Col. 46]**  
*Motion for Second Reading—(Jesse Norman)—agreed to*  
*Read a Second time*  
*Programme motion—(Michael Tomlinson)—agreed to*

**Covid-19 Update [Col. 75]**  
*Answer to urgent question—(Matt Hancock)*

**Antisocial Behaviour (Vehicles) [Col. 95]**  
*Debate on motion for Adjournment*

**Westminster Hall**  
**Israel and Palestine [Col. 1WH]**  
**Football Governance [Col. 23WH]**  
*E-petition debates*

**Written Statements [Col. 1WS]**

**Petition [Col. 1P]**  
*Observation*

**Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]**

---