

Thursday  
9 September 2021

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

Thursday 9 September 2021

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 9 September 2021*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

HIGHGATE CEMETERY BILL [*LORDS*]

*Bill, as amended, considered.*

*Bill to be read the Third time tomorrow.*

## Oral Answers to Questions

### TRANSPORT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure

1. **Katherine Fletcher** (South Ribble) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the roll-out of electric vehicle charging infrastructure. [903260]

4. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the roll-out of electric vehicle charging infrastructure. [903263]

6. **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the roll-out of electric vehicle charging infrastructure. [903265]

16. **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What recent progress has been made on the roll-out of electric vehicle charging points. [903276]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean):** It is very appropriate that my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher) has asked this question because today is World EV Day. We are investing £1.3 billion in accelerating the roll-out of charging infrastructure over the next four years. On average, over 500 new chargers are added each month.

**Katherine Fletcher:** When I speak to the people of South Ribble, they are keen to do their bit to cut carbon emissions and also to get the benefits of cheaper travel from electric vehicles, but the thing that is constraining us and the problem we face is a lack of accessible charging points, not only commercially in the centre of town but in order to charge at home, across pavements and so on. Given that today is World EV Day, will my hon. Friend assure me that the Department will do everything it can to put the infrastructure in place to encourage more electric vehicle use?

**Rachel Maclean:** I heartily commend my hon. Friend's constituents for the transition to electric mobility. We are already supporting the roll-out of over 25,000 publicly available charging devices, including more than 4,700 rapid devices—one of the largest networks in Europe. I am delighted that South Ribble Borough Council is one of the 137 local authorities that has applied for the on-street charge point scheme, which has awarded funding for 16 chargers. I am happy to work with her to get further infrastructure rolled out.

**Stephen Metcalfe:** I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that it was brilliant to see earlier this week figures showing that ever more electric vehicles than petrol or diesel ones are being sold. She has talked about the on-street charging points. It is vitally important that we get those in place and that these vehicles are accessible not just to those who have driveways and private parking. Will also she talk to her friends in the Treasury about the distortion that vehicle excise duty can create, because electric vehicles tend to be more expensive than their petrol and diesel versions, sometimes pushing them into a higher excise duty bracket?

**Rachel Maclean:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the popularity of electric cars. In fact, one in seven cars sold so far this year has a plug. He will know that vehicle excise duties are obviously a matter for my friends in the Treasury, but he will be also be aware that we are continually supporting the up-front purchase of electric vehicles via a very generous programme of grants, and that is set to continue.

**Felicity Buchan:** I warmly welcome the transport decarbonisation plan, particularly the requirement that all new homes and offices have electric vehicle charging points, which is a theme that I expounded in a ten-minute rule Bill. Will my hon. Friend give me an update on the timing of legislation?

**Rachel Maclean:** I thank my hon. Friend for all the hard work she has done on her ten-minute rule Bill, which addresses a vital issue. We in Government are going to act. We have heard her calls and those of her residents. We will publish our consultation response on requiring all new residential and non-residential buildings to have a charge point, and we intend to lay legislation later this year. We have also confirmed our intention to mandate that home and workplace electric vehicle chargers must be capable of smart charging.

**Neale Hanvey:** The continued roll-out of electric vehicles and the 25,000 charging point milestone is to be welcomed, but how confident is the Minister that the investment in charging points, particularly in remote and rural areas, will meet the scale of the challenge when committed investment is still a twenty-fifth of the £1 billion earmarked from the far from carbon-neutral HS2?

**Rachel Maclean:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that his constituents in Scotland, like those across the whole country, are benefiting from the UK Government's funding support: £1.3 billion is being spent on grants, charge point infrastructure, installation, and tax breaks on electric vehicle motoring. That is a significant sum and it is benefiting his constituents in Scotland.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): When the Minister talks about electric vehicles, she just talks about cars. In York, we talk about e-scooters, e-bikes and e-Motability vehicles. What is she doing to ensure infrastructure for such vehicles so that people can go further on the cleanest form of transport and have the dual function of charging for active travel too?

**Rachel Maclean:** I thank the hon. Lady for her support for active travel. It is one of the Government's key priorities, which is why we have committed £2 billion to roll out cycling and walking infrastructure across the country. Some of those schemes are already being rolled out very safely, and many local authorities up and down the country, including York, are benefiting from them.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Residents of Regatta Point, a block of flats in Brentford, want to install electric charging points in their 60-space basement car park. They are coming up against huge logistical difficulties over transmission and getting the electricity down there for overnight charging, and a huge cost of roughly £1,500 a space. What is the Minister doing on the roll-out of EV charging for overnight charging in apartment blocks to address the financial and logistical hurdles they face?

**Rachel Maclean:** The hon. Lady has raised an important point. The Government's intention is to ensure that wherever people live—whether that is their own home, a terraced home without parking, or, as she says, an apartment building—they have access to overnight charging, because that is the most convenient way for people to charge. We will be setting out more details in our infrastructure strategy, which we are publishing soon, but we are looking closely at the challenges of installing charge points in car parks and blocks of flats.

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I declare an interest, as I have an electric car. Local charging is obviously important, but on Saturday I will be using my car to go from Sheffield to Plymouth to watch Sheffield Wednesday play and hopefully win. It is quite a challenge to find rapid charging points on the journey to get there and back in reasonable time. One of the concerns is that people get to a rapid charging point and it does not charge rapidly. Apparently there is a problem with the grid in many places not consistently providing the level of charge needed for these rapid chargers. Could the Minister have a look at that problem, because I think it is quite a serious one?

**Rachel Maclean:** I wish the hon. Gentleman a good journey. I hope his football team is successful. He has raised some vital issues, and I assure him that they are all ones we are addressing in our infrastructure strategy. We are also addressing reliability in our consumer experience consultation. We intend to lay legislation later this year to deal with many of the issues he has raised.

#### Maritime Industry: Decarbonisation

2. **Cherilyn Mackrory** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): What steps he is taking to decarbonise the maritime industry. [903261]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts):** We have set out our plans in the transport decarbonisation plan, and have committed £20 million through the clean maritime demonstration competition.

**Cherilyn Mackrory:** The port of Falmouth has a wonderful maritime heritage and huge potential in the industry. It has already done some fantastic environmental work, including the preservation of more than 100 acres of sea grass. Will my hon. Friend commit to working closely with ports such as Falmouth to ensure that we can sustainably decarbonise the maritime industry, while continuing to enable the industry to grow and prosper?

**Robert Courts:** I can absolutely commit to that. It is vital that we work with all elements of the maritime industry to accelerate the transition to net zero and to take advantage of the very real opportunities for green growth. Both the British Ports Association and the UK Major Ports Group are represented on our clean maritime council, and I and my officials regularly engage with the trade associations and individual ports on environmental issues.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I agree with the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) that fantastic projects are under way across the UK, including in her constituency, to get the maritime sector down to net zero. There is, however, a significant funding gap when it comes to making these developments a reality, and the Government, despite their record, have not done anywhere near enough to address the significant investment shortfall compared with other maritime nations that we compete with. Does the Minister agree that it is imperative that our vital maritime sector gets the support it needs? Will he commit to addressing that and providing the necessary funding to support the research and innovation that is required?

**Robert Courts:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of decarbonising the maritime sector, but I cannot agree with him about the Government investment. We have invested £20 million in the clean maritime demonstration competition. That seedcorn funding will help to develop the technology that we will be using. It is the largest technology competition ever run by the Department for Transport. I am very glad that next week we have London International Shipping Week, which is the flagship event of the maritime year. We will be able to see the glories of the UK's maritime industry next week, and I look forward to seeing the hon. Gentleman there.

#### Goods Supply Chain

3. **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What discussions he has had with representatives of (a) haulage and (b) other companies involved in the goods supply chain on recent disruptions to the UK's supply networks. [903262]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):** I have regular discussions with the road haulage industry. Over the summer, we conducted a public consultation that resulted in over 9,000 responses.

**Alison Thewliss:** Despite all the Government's protestations to the contrary, Brexit and the end of freedom of movement are the lead causes of the current driver shortage in the UK. Will the Secretary of State listen to the Road Haulage Association when it says that it does not have a cat's chance of solving the problem unless it has access to temporary labour in the short term?

**Grant Shapps:** I hear what the hon. Lady says, but actually it is a fact that there is a global shortage. In the US, for example, drivers are being hired from South Africa. In Poland, the shortage is 123,000 and, in Germany, 45,000 to 60,000. To say that this is just a Brexit issue is completely untrue; it is about coronavirus. That is why, as I said, we consulted on a series of measures, for which the consultation closed on Monday, to ensure that we can go back to pre-1997 driving licences—a Brexit bonus—to allow for more tests to be taken for HGVs so that tests for both articulated and rigid HGVs can be taken together. There are also one or two other measures that I will return to the House quickly to say more about.

**Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con):** Rugby is an excellent location for logistics, being at the centre of England and at the crossroads of the motorway network. However, despite the challenges that the sector faces, including that of drivers, our haulage and courier businesses make sure that we get the goods that we have ordered—usually online—incredibly quickly. Will the Secretary of State pay tribute to the extraordinary efficiency of our logistics sector?

**Grant Shapps:** I absolutely join my hon. Friend in that. This sector literally works day and night to provide goods, medicines and vital services around the country, for which we are hugely grateful. It has done that throughout the pandemic in very difficult circumstances. We on the Government side are pleased to see salaries for haulage drivers going up. If they are paid 20% more, or something like that, that would be good for British workers, and I thoroughly support it.

**Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op):** This has been a summer where Ministers have shown an abject failure of duty, whether on the exam fiasco, Afghanistan or the HGV driver shortage. We have seen high-profile examples of businesses impacted by supply-chain disruption and suppliers with stock that they could not get out the door, yet Ministers seem to do nothing. Will the Government finally accept that when it comes to a crisis such as this, it is their job to solve it, not just to sit on the sidelines and hope that it all works out? If they do accept that, what action is the Secretary of State taking to bring forward a road freight recovery plan to tackle head on the long-standing warnings of truck driver shortages that have been compounded by Brexit and covid?

**Grant Shapps:** First, we have introduced a temporary relaxation on drivers' hours. Secondly, we have introduced £7,000 funding for the large goods vehicle driver apprenticeship programme. Thirdly, there is an additional incentive payment of £3,000 and, as I mentioned, we have been working hard to free up space at the Driver and Vehicle Standards Authority—the testing authority—so we are now testing 50% more drivers than we did before

the pandemic. Yes, we have been acting, but we are going to go further. I mentioned removing the need for car drivers to take additional tests for a trailer—a move we can make only because we are outside the EU—removing the requirement for staged licence acquisition to obtain a lorry licence and authorising third parties to assess off-road manoeuvring for the lorry practical test.

**Jim McMahon:** If that is the best the Government have got, I am afraid that the crisis will not be sorted. They talk about solutions and interventions, but the long-term problems in the haulage industry will not be resolved by those measures outlined, such as making drivers work longer hours. It is only by training more that we can help to fill the long-reported 90,000 vacancies.

This problem has been a long time coming. The Secretary of State will know that well before covid, and a year before Brexit, 24,000 would-be truck drivers passed their theory test, but only 9,000 went on to complete their practical test, and yet even with that knowledge and the industry pleading for intervention, nothing has been done. This is a live crisis that is only getting worse. Without real action, he will be left standing alone as the Transport Secretary who stole Christmas, leaving shelves empty, gifts absent from under the tree and restaurants and bars without the stock they need to trade. Will he immediately take action and set up a taskforce to resolve this crisis once and for all?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I say to Front Benchers that these are meant to be questions—statements come at a different time—and, please, we have to shorten them. Those on each side complain to me afterwards that they have not got in, so let us help the rest of the Members of this Parliament.

**Grant Shapps:** Mr Speaker, I will be brief. This is the problem of having a pre-written statement. The hon. Member heard the previous answer—a 50% increase in the number of tests. He is right that it is not enough, but that is why we have closed the consultation, which I have just said we will act on fast, on what will introduce even more testing capacity. The fact of the matter is that we are acting on this. This is a global crisis—in Europe alone there is a shortage of 400,000 drivers—and this is the Government who are doing something about it.

**Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con):** I thank my right hon. Friend for those answers. It is clear that there are huge backlogs at the DVLA and the DVSA, and he is working to get through those, but will he also consider other measures to address this crisis, such as skills provision and signposting for jobseekers?

**Grant Shapps:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As well as things such as the provision of skills—I have talked about the £7,000 apprenticeship programme—we are looking at what else we can do working with both the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education. He mentions the shortages with the problems at the DVSA and, on the licensing side of this, at the DVLA. He may want to join me in trying to persuade Opposition Members to end the pointless DVLA strike, which is hurting the most vulnerable people in our society who cannot get their licences back, including those who drive HGVs.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Just because one side takes advantage, I do not want the other to do so.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The penny has finally dropped. For the first time the Government finally seem to understand the scale of the problem, and they seem rattled. This was the reaction of the industry to expediting the testing process, which we welcome. However, it is nowhere near enough, and it will take at least two years to fill the gap, if they attract enough drivers. Why then, as I asked the Secretary of State when I wrote to him back in June, can he not convince the Home Office to put HGV drivers on the shortage occupation list for a temporary period? This is not just about cancelling Christmas; shelves lie empty right now.

**Grant Shapps:** I do agree that this is an urgent measure. That is why, before anybody else was talking about it, we were already acting—carrying out these consultations, putting in place these measures—and we have 50% more people being tested. I hear his call for more immigration to resolve the problem, but we do have to stand on our own two feet as the United Kingdom. There are a lot of people coming off furlough, and I look forward to those people getting jobs.

#### Transport Services to Isle of Wight

5. **Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the potential merits of imposing a public service obligation on vehicle and passenger services between the Isle of Wight and UK mainland. [903264]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts):** We recognise the importance of this route. We will always keep route assessments under review, including if there is any evidence of market failure that requires intervention.

**Bob Seely:** The Secretary of State knows that I hold him and his ministerial team in high regard. However, is it right that we have in the Isle of Wight ferry services a public service without any sense of public service obligation, and can the Minister tell me of a single example elsewhere in the United Kingdom where we have a true lifeline public service with no lifeline obligation attached to those services?

**Robert Courts:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He is a long-standing advocate of improving the service for his constituents, and he and I have spoken about it on many occasions. He will of course know that service provision to the Island is a matter for the local council, working with service operators. None the less, the Government will continue to monitor the service on this route, and if there is anything he would like to discuss with me at any time he need only ask.

#### Travel Companies: International Restrictions

7. **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support travel companies that are affected by ongoing international travel restrictions as a result of the covid-19 pandemic. [903266]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts):** Where eligible, travel companies have been able to draw on the unprecedented package of measures brought forward by the Chancellor last year, such as the coronavirus job retention scheme, as well as our work to safely restart international travel under the global travel taskforce.

**Wendy Chamberlain:** In addition to being hampered by the international travel restrictions, many transport companies, such as long-distance coach companies, are struggling because of the lack of test provision for drivers. The Secretary of State spoke at length about what is happening for HGV drivers, but will the Minister confirm whether those changes will include PCV—passenger-carrying vehicle—drivers with more capacity for testing, and will the Government consider allowing tests to be taken in the delegated in-house facilities of larger companies such as Stagecoach?

**Robert Courts:** I thank the hon. Member for that question, which I know is something that matters a great deal to her constituents. We are looking to address the problem she raises, and I will be able to give her some further detail on that shortly.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Eighty-one thousand people working in air transport are currently on furlough, including approximately 2,200 in my constituency, which covers Manchester airport. Even in non-airport seats such as that of the Secretary of State, just short of 300 souls face the axe in less than a month's time. Furlough is due to end three weeks today, and if the Government continue to restrict the market in some sort of latter-day corn law way, they have to make a choice: either open up the market, or put in a sectoral deal. Which is it going to be?

**Robert Courts:** The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the importance of the air transport industry and the travel industry more generally, not just to his constituents but to all our constituents. That is certainly the case for my constituents, and I am acutely aware of it. The best way to support them all is to do what we in the Department for Transport are hard at work doing, which is to safely reopen international travel. Since we last spoke, on 2 August we expanded quarantine-free travel to passengers from the European Union and the United States. We are working to expand that further, and will continue to do so.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Earlier I mentioned the penny dropping with regard to HGV drivers, but the aviation and travel industries can only dream of the Government understanding the magnitude of the crisis they face. Tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of jobs have gone in the sector, including 3,000 in my constituency, and that is with a job retention scheme in place. If the scheme ends this month there will be further damage to the sector. Did the Minister make representation to the Treasury to extend the scheme for aviation and travel, and if not, why not?

**Robert Courts:** As I said to the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), the importance of this industry is well understood by me and the entirety of Government. We are working hard to ensure

that we get international travel up and running again safely and securely, because that is the best way to protect all our constituents. We will continue to do that.

### High-speed Rail: Hull to Liverpool

8. **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): By what date he plans to implement fully electrified high speed rail on all routes (a) into Hull and (b) between Liverpool and Hull. [903267]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson)**: Options for routes into Hull are being considered as part of the integrated rail plan, which will be published soon.

**Dame Diana Johnson**: November will mark five years since Conservative Ministers blocked a £94 million privately financed scheme to electrify 70 miles of rail track between Selby and Hull. There are still no guarantees of a date for Hull rail electrification, and there are reports that the section of High-Speed 2 that would most directly affect and benefit east Yorkshire is being scaled back or even totally shelved. Last week Ministers announced £78 million for electrifying 13 miles of line between Wigan and Bolton, with the reason given being the economic case for that upgrade. The economic case for an upgrade in Hull is even stronger, with our energy estuary and freeport status. What exactly do Conservative Ministers have against Hull and the east Yorkshire area?

**Andrew Stephenson**: We have delivered almost 700 single-track miles of electrification over the past three years, and we continue to expand the electrified rail network. That compares with just 63 miles in 13 years of the last Labour Government. Therefore we will take no lessons from the Labour party on electrification.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): If Hull, Immingham and the Humber ports are to benefit from their freeport status, it is vital that we have a rail freight corridor between the Humber ports and the west coast. What progress is being made in that respect?

**Andrew Stephenson**: We recognise the importance of rail freight, and of supporting all the newly announced freeports. I know that the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), will be happy to meet my hon. Friend.

### HS2 and East West Rail: Construction Traffic

9. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): What assessment he has made of the impact on roads along the routes of (a) HS2 and (b) East West Rail of traffic connected to the construction of those railway lines. [903268]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson)**: Assessments of the impact of HS2 construction traffic on roads were included within the environmental assessments submitted during the passage of the High Speed Rail (London–West Midlands) Act 2017 and the High Speed Rail (West Midlands–Crewe) Act 2021. For East West Rail the impact of construction on roads is monitored in compliance with the Transport and Works Act orders.

**Greg Smith**: I thank my hon. Friend, and the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), for visiting my constituency during the summer recess to see for themselves the many issues that the construction of HS2 and East West Rail are causing for my constituents, one of which is the perilous state of the roads following a number of HGV movements. Will my hon. Friend reassure me that there will be urgent and rapid action to make safe those roads affected by the construction of those two projects?

**Andrew Stephenson**: Both the HS2 and East West Rail projects undertook full surveys of road conditions for the designated lorry routes prior to the construction works commencing. HS2 Ltd and East West Rail Company must ensure that all road damage as a result of construction works is repaired to the standard reported in those surveys. My hon. Friend continues to be a vocal champion for his constituents, and I look forward to continuing to work with him on this and other issues.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): Earlier this year, the Prime Minister told this House that the Government were

“going to develop the eastern leg as well as the whole of the HS2.”—[*Official Report*, 10 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 325.]

Last year, he told the House that plans for HS2’s eastern leg remained “absolutely unchanged”. So when reports surfaced over the summer that Ministers planned to mothball the eastern leg, I was absolutely shocked. A U-turn, Mr Speaker? Another broken promise from this Government? Surely not.

Being the helpful person that I am, I want to help the Government put this scandalous rumour to bed once and for all. Can the Minister, rather than giving the evasive answer that he gave me last year about waiting for some sort of integrated rail plan, confirm that the eastern leg of HS2 will be built in full, on time and on budget?

**Andrew Stephenson**: I think the shadow Minister knows my answer. As the Prime Minister announced, we are working on the integrated rail plan, which is progressing well. It is only right that Ministers take time to fully consider all the evidence from all the stakeholders, regional leaders, the National Infrastructure Commission and the Government’s own analysis before making a decision. This is a cross-Government decision, but we intend to publish the integrated rail plan soon.

**Alec Shelbrooke** (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the problems with the HS2 phase 2b eastern leg is that local authorities seem constantly to be adding to the cost? Leeds City Council told HS2 that it could not shut any bridges or roads in the construction, meaning that the line has to be on a viaduct, which has increased the cost massively.

**Andrew Stephenson**: We are very keen to ensure that the benefits of HS2 are delivered as affordably as possible, recognising the importance of valuing every single penny of taxpayers’ money. Leeds and the regional stakeholders have brought forward ambitious plans for regeneration around a new Leeds station. That is one of the many aspects that is being considered across Government by Ministers not just in this Department but in the Ministry

of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Treasury ahead of making decisions on the integrated rail plan.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Local residents neighbouring the brand-new Old Oak Common station, which has so far cost £6.98 billion and rising, showed me last week how their east-west journeys by bus, buggy—you name it—have become impossible because they are living in a barbed wire-festooned dust bowl of a building site. Can we have an urgent visit from the HS2 Minister? It should not just be Conservative Members who get visits. I have been waiting for a long time; the last time I was promised one was when the Secretary of State's name rhymed with "failing".

**Andrew Stephenson:** I would be delighted to visit Old Oak Common again. It is the largest ever railway station built in a single stage. It is a 32-acre site, and it will offer the hon. Lady's constituents unrivalled connectivity when it is open. I have visited in the past, and I will be keen to visit again and meet the hon. Lady.

#### Kettering Railway Station: Capital Investment

10. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What total capital investment (a) Network Rail and (b) East Midlands Railway have provided for improvements and expansion of facilities at Kettering railway station in the last three years. [903269]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris):** Over the last three years, £24 million of capital investment has been provided from Network Rail at Kettering station, with £1.13 million provided by East Midlands Railway.

**Mr Hollobone:** I thank the rail Minister for visiting Kettering station in May to see all the improvements that have been made. How many permanent jobs have been created by that investment, and when does he expect the historic canopy renovation works to be completed?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for that question and for allowing me to visit this wonderful station in his constituency. Network Rail's canopy works—the canopy is truly beautiful, Mr Speaker—are planned for completion by the end of November this year. Network Rail's works at Kettering, including the mainline route enhancements, have created 16 jobs, while East Midlands Railway has created 70 jobs there.

#### South Western Railway Services

11. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): What assessment he has made of the potential impact on commuters of proposals to reduce permanently South Western Railway services from December 2022. [903270]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris):** There is a consultation, which the hon. Lady well knows about, at this point in time. I am told that South Western Railway intends to provide 93% of its pre-covid capacity should that consultation be agreed to. I continue to monitor the situation.

**Munira Wilson:** It is clear that SWR's proposals to slash services by about half from busy stations in my constituency, such as St Margarets and Whitton, is

being driven by the demands in its contract with the Department for Transport. So will the Minister intervene and review his contract with SWR to avoid these drastic cuts to services on which local residents rely and for which they pay a very high price? It is far too soon to be making decisions about post-pandemic services.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I am watching the situation and looking forward to hearing back from SWR about the consultation. I have been talking about this very much with my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), who has a similar campaign to that of the hon. Lady on behalf of his constituents. SWR has sent the consultation out to more than 3,500 stakeholders—MPs and other elected representatives, passengers and so on. Everybody knows that the number of passengers is still very much below the pre-pandemic level. We are relying on the results of that consultation to try to determine what future services need to look like.

#### Rail Services: Toton

12. **Ben Bradley** (Mansfield) (Con): If he will take steps to ensure that services at Toton are included in proposals set out in the Government's integrated rail plan. [903271]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson):** It will not surprise Members to learn that the Department will soon publish an integrated rail plan, which will confirm how we intend to take forward the HS2 eastern leg.

**Ben Bradley:** I thank the Minister for that enlightening answer. He knows that as well as for HS2 itself, the IRP has huge implications for our regional economic growth, job creation and connectivity within the region. Ahead of any decision in the IRP, will he and the Secretary of State meet me, as the chair of the regional delivery board, to make sure that that decision ticks the boxes that we need in the east midlands?

**Andrew Stephenson:** I have been impressed by the scale of regeneration plans for the proposed station at Toton and the way in which local leaders have come together to maximise the benefits of HS2 for their communities. It is important that we consider regeneration and economic impacts upon local areas, as well as how to create the right kind of transport network—the IRP will seek to balance this. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend again to discuss this issue.

#### HGV Drivers: Road Safety

13. **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the impact on road safety of the recent temporary increase to the maximum daily working hours of HGV drivers. [903272]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):** The Department's published guidance makes it clear that driver safety and that of other road users must not be compromised, and that the relaxation must only be used where necessary.



**Rachel Hopkins:** I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, and I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Longer hours behind the wheel is not a solution to the shortage of HGV drivers; it is unsustainable, exploitative and dangerous. So does he agree with Unite the union, which represents many lorry drivers and supply chain workers, that such a crucial piece of our national infrastructure needs its own national council to set decent standards across the industry and, most importantly, to restore collective bargaining to improve and protect pay and conditions?

**Grant Shapps:** It is worth understanding, as there is often misunderstanding about this, that drivers are still bound by the working time directive and still have to work an average of a 48-hour working week over a 17 to 26-week period, and that the relaxations do not increase the working time; they are in place to allow extra flexibility. However, I do agree with the hon. Lady about the need on drivers' conditions—they have been poor over the years, which is one reason why 99% of HGV drivers are men. We need to improve those facilities, to bring many more people into the sector, and I am very keen, as I mentioned before, to see better pay and conditions as well.

#### Decarbonisation Commitments

14. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent steps his Department has taken to facilitate transport decarbonisation to help meet commitments to the (a) Paris agreement and (b) forthcoming COP26 summit. [903274]

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):** We recently published the transport decarbonisation plan and set out our pathway to achieving net zero, and we are delivering an ambitious, international COP26 campaign.

**Patrick Grady:** The Scottish Government have just announced that they will meet the target long campaigned for by active travel groups of 10% of the transport budget to be spent on active travel. That is exactly the kind of ambition that needs to be highlighted at the COP. So, first, I hope the Secretary of State will invite the Scottish Transport Minister along to explain that ambition. Secondly, will the Secretary of State outline what steps the Government are taking to meet that ambition south of the border?

**Grant Shapps:** I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman missed it earlier in the summer, but we announced an active travel programme—this was all part of our £2 billion of funding, with, I believe, an additional £330 million of that being spent this year alone. Of course COP26 will provide a fantastic opportunity for the United Kingdom to showcase all the work we are doing collectively in order to improve our climate.

**Edward Timpson** (Eddisbury) (Con): With an eye on COP26, I thank my right hon. Friend for his support for the reopening of dormant railway stations as part of the Government's drive to net zero. In doing so, what assessment has he made of local authorities that have both declared a climate emergency and contributed to

the preparation of business cases for these exciting possibilities for communities such as Eddisbury, which are still ill served by rail?

**Grant Shapps:** I thank my hon. Friend. I do think that local authorities that declare a climate emergency should be prepared to pay more than lip service to the issue. I was having a look and I understand, unfortunately, that the Labour-led Cheshire West and Chester Council is still refusing to contribute a mere £5,000 to his valiant efforts to reopen Beeston Castle and Tarporley station, the only potential station between Crewe and Chester.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): In the past month, my constituents in Bath have been subjected to the pollution of helicopter joyrides flying low over Bath. Clearly, this type of leisure pursuit is hugely damaging to the environment and does nothing to get us to net zero. Currently, neither the Civil Aviation Authority nor Bath and North East Somerset Council has the power to intervene. Will the Minister meet me to find a way forward for my constituents?

**Grant Shapps:** I congratulate the hon. Lady for shoe-horning that into this particular question. I am more than happy to arrange for her to meet my aviation Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts)—to discuss it.

#### Air Travel: Covid-19 Test Costs

15. **Jeremy Wright** (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): What steps he is taking to help reduce the cost of covid-19 testing for air travel. [903275]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts):** The Government recognise that the cost of testing can be high and continue to work with industry to reduce costs further. The costs of NHS Test and Trace tests for international arrivals were reduced recently, and the Competition and Markets Authority is conducting an urgent review into the testing market.

**Jeremy Wright:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what he said and for what he is doing, but he knows that this problem affects not just those who want to go on holiday, but those who want to see family and may not have seen them now for years. To help those families—particularly larger families—with these costs and to resuscitate the aviation industry, as I know he is keen to do, will he please do more to make sure that the costs of those tests come down to be as low as they reasonably can be?

**Robert Courts:** I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for that question and particularly for his emphasis on the wide breadth of reasons why people have to travel. Bringing families back together, as well as business and leisure travel, is a major part of that and I thank him for drawing the House's attention to it. He can be absolutely assured that the DFT will continue to work with travel and testing providers to reduce costs further, for travel that is cheap and easy, as well as safe, is our aim.

### Road Conditions: England

17. **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the condition of England's roads. [903277]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean):** In addition to investing £1.7 billion in local roads this financial year, I am pleased to say that the Department has now published its position paper on road condition monitoring on gov.uk and is working with the highways sector towards a common data standard to help local authorities to target defects in their networks more effectively.

**Scott Benton:** I thank the Minister for the additional £3.2 million that her Department has provided to Blackpool Council for routine maintenance work in the current financial year. Despite this additional funding, many of my constituents are concerned that Blackpool Council has the wrong local transport priorities and is far too slow in completing routine maintenance work. What priorities does her Department have in place to ensure that money given to local authorities is spent in a timely and efficient manner?

**Rachel Maclean:** I agree with my hon. Friend and his residents that it is incredibly disappointing that Labour-run Blackpool Council is failing in its responsibilities to ensure that there are decent and reliable roads for residents, which is clearly a priority. We know from freedom of information requests that Conservative councils fix potholes faster than their Labour equivalents. I hope that Blackpool will work harder on this issue.

### Motorists: Journey times

18. **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): What steps he is taking to support motorists to reduce their journey time. [903281]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean):** The Government are investing in major enhancements across the strategic and local road networks to increase capacity and reduce delays.

**Andrew Lewer:** The car remains a great agent of enterprise and personal freedom and we should never apologise for advancing its cause, so in that spirit, what support will the Department provide to advance construction of the much needed north-west and northern parts of the Northampton ring road?

**Rachel Maclean:** I commend my hon. Friend for his sterling efforts over a long period to support investment in a key part of the local road network in his area, which, as he says, is vital for jobs and the local economy. I understand that West Northamptonshire Council is exploring options to secure funding, and discussions will take place in the spending review.

### Public Transport Use

19. **Lee Rowley** (North East Derbyshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage people to use public transport after the covid-19 outbreak. [903282]

### The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):

The Department is working closely with operators to support measures to increase passenger confidence and encourage a return to the network. On the two trains that I took this morning, I could see that it is working.

**Lee Rowley:** Buses are a clear manifestation of community across the country. Even for small-state Conservatives like me, there is a role for subsidy. Will the Secretary of State commit to a cautious approach to subsidy that balances the opportunity for communities to make services viable with encouraging them over the long term to become self-sufficient?

**Grant Shapps:** I agree that buses are essential to communities: they connect people, enable people to get to jobs and education, and drive growth. That is why we are investing £3 billion of new money during this Parliament outside London for English buses, with consequentials, and why over the pandemic we provided £1.4 billion to support the sector.

### Great British Railways: Headquarters

20. **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): If he will outline the process for selecting the location of the headquarters of Great British Railways. [903283]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris):** The formation of Great British Railways is still in its early stages. The location of its headquarters will be considered in due course.

**Mrs Latham:** The Minister will be aware of the central role that Derby has played in the history of British rail transport. Derby has also invested in the future of the industry, with local businesses helping to develop the UK's first hydrogen trains. Does he agree that that combination of pedigree and potential would make Derby an excellent location for the new headquarters of Great British Railways?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** My hon. Friend knows my affection for Derby, which I represented for 10 years in the European Parliament. She is right that Derby has played an important role in the history of rail in this country. I have heard her sales pitch this time and previous times loud and clear, but I have to say that the location of GBR's headquarters will be considered in due course.

### Topical Questions

T1. [903295] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):** Today is World EV Day, celebrating electric vehicle ownership worldwide and right here in the UK—one of the best places to drive an electric vehicle. Our extensive network of 25,000 publicly available charge points means that we have more rapid chargers for every 100 miles of key strategic road than any other country in Europe. We have made real progress, with more than half a million electric vehicles on our road. I am pleased to say that just last month, through grants and tax incentives, one in six cars sold in this country had a plug on the end of it.

**Mrs Murray:** I have been working closely with local councillor Sheila Lennox-Boyd to get improvements to the A38, including the roundabout at Carkeel, which is a National Highways responsibility, and the bridge, which is run by local councils. Will the Secretary of State meet us to discuss this key route into Cornwall?

**Grant Shapps:** I commend my hon. Friend for her very determined efforts in campaigning for road improvements, not just there but elsewhere in her constituency. I know that the roads Minister will be very happy to meet her to discuss the matter further.

**Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab):** Back in July, speaking about the Prime Minister's pledge to buy 4,000 UK zero-emissions buses by 2025, the Secretary of State said that

"there are 900 buses in production right now"—[*Official Report*, 14 July 2021; Vol. 699, c. 408.]

Allegedly, this is the Government's flagship policy, yet the roll-out of these buses seems to be little more than rhetoric, given that every British manufacturer of buses I have spoken to says that they have no knowledge whatever of any orders. Will the Secretary of State now tell the House exactly where those buses are being made right now, as opposed to being potential on a DfT internal spreadsheet or more greenwashed PR spin from this Government?

**Grant Shapps:** I will tell you what I will do, Mr Speaker: not only will I write to the hon. Gentleman, but I will publish a copy of the letter in the House, for the House's greater benefit. He will be interested to see that those buses are not just ordered or in production; some are actually on the road.

T2. [903296] **Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con):** The restoration of the through rail service from Lowestoft to Liverpool Street is vital to levelling up and improving accessibility to the Waveney area. While it is a requirement of Greater Anglia's current franchise, it has not yet been delivered. I would be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister confirmed that it is a priority for Great British Railways.

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris):** The current timetable structure and track capacity on the Great Eastern line south of Ipswich have not allowed any new direct services to be implemented to Liverpool Street at this time. I am aware of the problem; my officials have asked Greater Anglia to continue to see whether there might be opportunities to introduce direct services between Liverpool Street and Lowestoft, as I very much recognise the importance of the direct service.

T3. [903297] **Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab):** Coventry City Council is leading the development of a groundbreaking very light rail system that will offer small and medium-sized cities like Coventry an affordable tram system. Will the Minister pledge support for the securing of funds for the prototype route in Coventry and ongoing development of the concept to enable full autonomous operation, and will he commit himself to a review of the legislation governing the installation and operation of very light rail to enable a rapid roll-out of systems across the country?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** As the hon. Lady knows, I am very fond of her city, which is very near my own. I do not know much about this particular project, so I am very willing to meet her to go through it and see how we can take things forward.

**Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con):** My hon. Friend will know that there is a bid in at the moment for the shovel-ready scheme to convert the freight-only railway line from Lichfield to Burton into a regular passenger service. It is backed, in a personal capacity, by his fellow Minister, the roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), by my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Kate Griffiths), and—most important of all!—by the West Midlands Mayor, because of the connectivity. It will be driven, incidentally, by a hydrogen-powered locomotive if it is given the go-ahead. Will my hon. Friend come up to Lichfield to see for himself how vital this rail service will be?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** In his normal shy and retiring way, my hon. Friend has given me an invitation that I simply cannot refuse. As he knows, we have received a bid for the restoration of passenger services between Lichfield and other places in round 3 of the restoring your railway ideas fund, and I look forward very much to my forthcoming visit.

T4. [903298] **Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP):** The Williams review proposed the consolidation of funding streams for accessibility improvements at railway stations under Great British Railways, an issue that has been raised with me by local groups including East Renfrewshire Disability Action and Clarkston Community Council, but to date there has been no detail on this or on how the current arrangements, whereby Transport Scotland bids for improvement cash from the Department for Transport, will be improved under GBR. Will the Minister commit himself to providing details of this funding, and help to make our stations accessible to everyone?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the hon. Lady for her very good question. As I mentioned earlier, Great British Railways is in its formative stages, but I will happily work with her and the accessibility groups that she mentioned so that we can help to guide people through any new systems that come forward.

T8. [903303] **Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con):** My hon. Friend the estimable rail Minister—the antidote to Dr Beeching—is doing sterling work with the restoring your railway schemes. Perhaps he can provide an update on the bid to reconnect Rose Hill Marple, Romiley and Bredbury with Stockport. This is a cross-party effort with diverse support from me, from the hon. Members for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and for Stockport (Navendu Mishra), and, indeed, from the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner).

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** Antidotes and doctors! Following his question to one of my colleagues yesterday, I was not sure that my hon. Friend was all that keen on vaccines—or vaccine passports, at least.

I am obviously well aware of my hon. Friend's bid for the Ashton-to-Stockport line, including the Rose Hill connection, which is in round 3 of the restoring your

railway ideas fund. He has kindly given me a great deal of information about the bid, and I have met him and the other proponents of it. I promise him that we are assessing the bids, and expect to announce outcomes very shortly.

T5. [903299] **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I want to bring the Secretary of State to the Rhondda, if I may, and shove him down a tunnel. It is a tunnel that belongs to him, in fact: it is the tunnel between Blaencwm and Blaengwynfi. It is a disused railway tunnel, and there is a great project to try to get it opened up again. It would be a massive tourism opportunity—it would bring lots of people to a very poor but very beautiful part of south Wales—and it would also be a real opportunity to enable more people to get to work on the other side of the mountain. Can I please have a meeting with the Secretary of State fairly soon to explain the whole project, and can I then persuade him to come and be dangled down into the hole in the Rhondda?

**Grant Shapps:** The Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), says he has received an offer he cannot refuse. Also, I would be very happy to come and visit when the diary allows.

T6. [903300] **Anne McLaughlin** (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I am still not happy with the answers given to my colleagues about the lack of HGV drivers. The problems facing Carntyne Transport in my constituency are absolutely due to Brexit and the shortage of EU nationals to work for the company. Telling it that we will have sorted all this out in x months or a couple of years' time just won't wash. Given that the Government were repeatedly warned what would happen if they pressed ahead with Brexit, and given that that has all come to pass, what guarantee can the Minister give that his Department will at least listen and put solutions in place before pressing ahead with damaging legislation?

**Grant Shapps:** I am all in favour of having a science-led emphasis on everything to do with policy, and the fact that they are 123,842 lorry drivers short in Poland suggests to me that this is not a Brexit-only issue. I have explained the measures that are not only going to happen next year or the year after but are happening now with 50% more tests, and this will happen very quickly with the consultation result that I have already discussed.

T9. [903304] **Mark Eastwood** (Dewsbury) (Con): There has been a major increase in reports of speeding hotspots in Dewsbury, Mirfield, Kirkburton and Denby Dale, leading to an escalation in reported accidents and near misses. However, the ability to address this issue with road safety measures such as speed cameras is hampered by the Department for Transport's 2007 circular. Does the Minister agree that prevention is better than cure, and that a review of the current guidelines is urgently needed?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean):** I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. I share his concern, and I know that he is a passionate advocate for safer roads in Dewsbury. I can tell him that

the Department is currently working to redraft that circular, with a new version to be published by the end of the year.

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Two of my constituents, a Danish national and a British citizen with Danish residence, were denied boarding a BA flight by the airline's staff because they did not accept my constituent's proof of Danish residence even though it was consistent with Danish travel advice. Despite a letter that I received from a Foreign Office Minister confirming that my constituents were right, BA has refused to issue a refund and is standing by its misinterpretation of the advice. Does the Minister agree that airlines need clearer guidance on international travel documentation post-Brexit, and will he raise the issue with the airlines, the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary to ensure that this does not happen again?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts):** I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising this matter. It is difficult for me to comment on an individual case, but perhaps we could meet and if he could give me further details I would be very happy to take this up.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): This week the Transport Committee has launched yet another inquiry on international travel, and we will shortly be hearing from the chief executives of leading airlines and airports as to why they are doing less than 20% of the business they were doing in usual times while mainland Europe is now up to about 70%. They will be concerned that furlough is coming to an end, and they will want to know whether the barriers to travel will be reduced to make up the shortfall. I know the Secretary of State has done a lot already, but can he offer some optimism and encouragement on how the rules will change to allow the business to do more transactions?

**Grant Shapps:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who does a terrific job chairing the Transport Committee. We do want to see the recovery, and I can inform him that I will shortly chair the second meeting of the G7 Transport Secretaries to discuss exactly his point. We will discuss how we can roll this out internationally using the principle of fully vaccinated travel and how we can try to reduce the costs and the imposition of the tests along the way. However, those decisions have yet to be made, both domestically and internationally, so I do not want to overly raise my hon. Friend's hopes but I can reassure him that we are focusing on this.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The SMMT estimates that, in order to have the correct charge point coverage by 2030, 700 new charge points will need to be installed every single day. Can the Minister advise me on how many are currently being installed, and whether we are ever going to reach the target of 700 a day?

**Rachel Maclean:** In our infrastructure strategy that is to be published shortly, we will set out clearly how we are going to meet the charge point targets that are required. I would like to draw the hon. Gentleman's

attention to the fact that we are installing 500 charge points every month across the country, and that by 2023 we will have six rapid chargers in every motorway service station across the country.

**Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): Our very popular rail Minister is aware of the excellent work being done by the North Cotswold Line Task Force. Could he update colleagues and councils along the North Cotswold line on his conversations with the Treasury about doing more business casework on redoubling a stretch of the North Cotswold line?

**Chris Heaton-Harris**: I had a recent meeting with the taskforce, and I am due to have meetings with Treasury colleagues at which I have said I will raise this issue. I believe I am waiting for a tiny piece of work from the taskforce, so I look forward to receiving that and trying to move the project forward with my hon. Friend.

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree that as London returns to work and commuters begin to get back on the trains and into their cars, it is important that we encourage people, as much as possible, back on to public transport? In my constituency we expect the construction of some 1,500 flats over the next few years. Does he agree this is no time to be cutting South Western Railway services to North Sheen, Mortlake and Barnes?

**Chris Heaton-Harris**: As I said to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), South Western Railway is undertaking a consultation that will shape the future of services. It is important that that consultation is viewed as one that we will listen to, and we will listen to it. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) will have seen that recently, following consultation, we decided not to proceed with the east coast main line proposals because of stakeholder reaction, among other things, so it is vital that the consultation is replied to in great detail, and I hope she will do that.

## Afghanistan: FCDO Responses to Members

10.31 am

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on when he will ensure detailed responses are provided to hon. and right hon. Members regarding UK nationals and vulnerable Afghans stuck in Afghanistan.

**The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly)**: Through the shared effort across Government and our armed forces, we have delivered one of the largest and most complex evacuation operations in living memory. Between 15 and 29 August, we evacuated over 15,000 people from Afghanistan. This includes more than 8,000 British nationals, close to 5,000 Afghans who loyally served the United Kingdom, along with their dependants, and about 500 special cases of particularly vulnerable Afghans, including Chevening scholars, journalists, human rights defenders, campaigners for women's rights, judges and so on.

Now that the primary evacuation period has ended, we have moved to a new phase. We stand by our commitments to support those who have worked for us and to take all remaining eligible cases. Securing the safe passage out of the country of those who remain is an immediate priority, and we are working through diplomatic channels to that end, which is why Ministers have made calls and the Foreign Secretary has visited the region. It is our determination to continue to work rapidly with both the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence to assess all cases that have been sent through to us.

Responding to MPs' cases and correspondence remains a priority for the Government. My noble Friend the Minister for South Asia and the Commonwealth wrote on 5 September to all those MPs who sent cases to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, outlining the actions we are taking to progress the cases that have been sent to us, as well as the relevant contact routes that are now available as the initial evacuation phase is over.

The Minister for South Asia and the Commonwealth also sent a letter to all parliamentarians on 6 September outlining the work we are doing to provide safe passage for all those still in Afghanistan.

We received over 200,000 emails during Operation Pitting alone, which is significantly more than we received during the entire repatriation operation for British nationals at the onset of the covid pandemic last year. During the evacuation, our priority was rightly on getting UK nationals and those Afghans who worked for us on to the flights leaving Afghanistan. In addition, we brought out hundreds of individuals who were identified as special cases owing to the particular risk they faced because of their ties with the United Kingdom.

Since the completion of the evacuation phase, we have been urgently working through the correspondence, including the hundreds of letters that we received during the operation from MPs and peers, many of which contained multiple cases. More than 100 additional staff have been assigned to work through the caseload. Where the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development

Office has received cases that are dealt with by the Ministry of Defence under the Afghan relocations and assistance policy or by the Home Office under the Afghan citizens' resettlement scheme, we will pass them to the relevant Department. This will be completed within a week—that is, by 16 September—and those MPs concerned will be informed as to the Government Department that will be assessing the cases. Only after this assessment will the relevant Department be able to provide a more substantive update to those Members who have sent in cases.

The FCDO will continue to handle British national cases and we will be in contact with MPs about the specific cases they have raised within seven days, providing as much detail as we are able. We are deeply grateful for and pay tribute to the work of parliamentarians during this mammoth operation. I also pay tribute to the staff of many MPs who have worked around the clock responding to the concerns of constituents and those stuck in Afghanistan. Thanks to parliamentary colleagues and Members, our consular team has already been able to reach many who are in need. We are committed to addressing the concerns of parliamentarians as we move forward and will intensify our work as we end this operation.

**Chris Bryant**: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

In my 20 years as an MP, I do not think I have heard as many upsetting stories as I have heard in the past few weeks, and I think that that feeling is reflected among many Members of the House. We owe a debt of gratitude to our staff because many of them are fielding these calls, not just once but every single day, with requests for information. Let me cite just one:

"I have eligibility offer. I have submitted all documents, including passports, birth certificates, marriage certificates. I was FCDO interpreter in Helmand. I am still in Afghanistan. The British Government did not evacuate me. I might be killed by the Taliban."

Torture, rape, threats and constant reprisals are the reality for many people who stood by us in our hour of need. If anyone believed or hoped that the Taliban had changed, just listen to this:

"The Taliban are arresting people in my street. They go door to door. They knocked my house door again and were looking for me."

I will not read out any more from that email because it would reveal who it is, but this is from a UK contractor whose father had all his fingernails removed one by one the last time the Taliban were in charge before being murdered. I note also that the Taliban has now announced that women will not even be allowed to take part in sport, so what chance is there for any participation in society or a full education?

Repeating a promise made by the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister told the House on Monday that every single email from colleagues was being responded to by "close of play today"—that was Monday, not next Thursday or in a month's time. It was this Monday that has already gone. So far, all we have had is a circular—a Dear Colleague letter, not even handwritten—from one of the Ministers, as referred to by the Minister just now. There has been no answer to the 143 individual cases—sorry, it is 142 cases because one was murdered the other day.

I have to say that the way that the Government have dealt with Members has been a complete and utter shambles. I know that they may want to do good, but they have let us all down in this. This is no way to treat Members or our constituents. Why on earth have three separate channels through three separate Departments? It means that we have added to the confusion by sending everything in in triplicate, because we do not know which is the right set of criteria. We want a single point of contact and not, incidentally, the Minister for resettlement in the UK. We want a Minister for rescuing people in danger in Afghanistan—a single point of contact. The Minister has just repeated that we must go through all three Departments all over again.

Let me ask some specific questions. If someone has been rejected for the Afghan relocations and assistance policy, will they be considered automatically under the other schemes? That is not at all clear for the two who have been rejected that I know of. When will the full resettlement scheme criteria be in place and publicly available? As I understand it, it has still not been agreed by Government. I am reluctant to raise this, but why did the Government provide virtual briefing meetings for Tory MPs only fully a week, if not two weeks, before Labour MPs were engaged? I know that this is the case, because at least five Conservative MPs have raised it with me. How many MPs have written to Ministers with details of UK nationals?

Finally, will the Minister respond to the charge that was made in relation to British embassy officials telling people on the day of the explosion at the Abbey Gate that they should still be going there? That was clearly a miscommunication. The Foreign Secretary said that he was going to update us and give us the full details, but we still have not heard them.

**James Cleverly:** I completely understand the passion with which the hon. Gentleman speaks. I suspect that every single Member of Parliament has received similarly harrowing accounts. Indeed, I have had a number of communications from previous military colleagues who are themselves in touch with Afghans they had worked with. We all recognise the fear and horror that many Afghans are going through.

I also thank the many MPs from across the House who have privately thanked me and asked me to pass on their thanks to the ministerial team and, probably more importantly, to the officials in the Foreign Office, the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence for the numbers of people who have been evacuated from Afghanistan. As I said, this was an unprecedented operation, and being in receipt of over 200,000 emails has put a strain on all of the Government that is unlike anything any of us have had to deal with before.

The hon. Gentleman says that we should only have one set of assessment criteria. That cannot be the case.

**Chris Bryant:** I didn't say that.

**James Cleverly:** Well, the hon. Gentleman said that there should one scheme. There cannot be one system for British nationals, Afghan nationals who have worked with us and Afghan nationals who have not worked with us. He says that Members are being told to send things in three different directions. That has not been the case. If he listens back to the speech that I just made, he will hear me saying that the FCDO has triaged

and will triage correspondence from Members and make sure that it is sent to the appropriate Government Department so that British nationals are dealt with by the Foreign Office, where they should be dealt with; ARAP cases are dealt with by the Ministry of Defence, where they should be dealt with; and special cases are dealt with by the Home Office, where they should be dealt with.

We will ensure that correspondence that we have received before the end of this month is assessed and that Members will be told where their correspondence has been triaged to. If that correspondence has been sent to the FCDO, they will receive a status within seven days.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): As everybody knows, the last few months have been an especially harrowing time for many of our staff, and the teams in constituency offices all over our islands have been frankly outstanding and impressive. It is also true that many of those working in the Foreign Office crisis centre have been quite exceptional. I pay huge tribute as well to our right hon. Friends the Defence Secretary and the Home Secretary, whose efforts have been second to none.

The point about unity of command is one that I know my right hon. Friend the Minister understands exceptionally well; it avoids confusion, risk and danger. That is particularly important in this situation because, as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) was saying, the risk to these people is growing by the day. The biometric data that was left behind by the United States is increasingly being used against these people, to track them and find them. People are taking risks in going to the border, from which they then have to turn back when they find out that borders are closed or their papers are no good. Giving information early is therefore not just a kindness or a courtesy; it is lifesaving. Will the Minister commit to trying to bring these things more closely together, to achieving a comprehensive approach between the three Departments, and to giving answers quickly to those who stood by us in our hour of need?

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point about the speed with which these decisions are made, but we should remember that in all cases, and particularly in immigration cases dealt with by the Home Office, there is a degree of complexity that does not make speed easy. We should also remember that in many cases, because Afghans have had to flee their homes, cities and villages, they have incomplete, or in some cases are completely devoid of, documentation, which adds a degree of complexity.

We made an expansive and generous offer to support those Afghans who were at particularly high risk of reprisals from the Taliban. That created a significant increase in the number of cases brought to our attention. We absolutely will work through them at pace, but we have to be realistic about the complexity of some of these cases. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that speed is of the essence; we recognise that. We also recognise that Members who have contacted us in genuine fear for the people they have either worked with or speak on behalf of also want some reassurance, which is why we are absolutely dedicated to making sure that we pass on in a timely manner the information we are able to pass on.

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): A week ago last Sunday, *The Observer* newspaper quoted a whistleblower who had access to Foreign Office email accounts. He said that MPs were not getting replies to the emails they had sent, and:

“It’s not just that MPs weren’t getting replies—their emails weren’t being read”.

The source also said that there was a backlog of 5,000 emails.

On Monday this week, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary stood before the House and made commitments to Members on all Benches. Referring to a question from the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), the Prime Minister said:

“I can tell him that by close of play today every single one of the emails from colleagues around this House will be answered”.—[*Official Report*, 6 September 2021; Vol. 700, c. 26.]

Later that day, the Foreign Secretary said,

“we will have replied to all MPs’ emails received by 30 August asking for an update by today.”—[*Official Report*, 6 September 2021; Vol. 700, c. 47.]

Both those commitments have been broken. That clearly runs against the basic principle of this House and treats Members from all parties with utter contempt. Given that MPs continue to wait for detailed emails on hundreds of cases, it raises the prospect that the Government knew at the time that they were making a promise to Members that they could not or would not keep.

The seriousness of these cases demands a serious response. Many of the people involved are vulnerable—women, children, families, LGBT+ people, people who have worked alongside the UK in Afghanistan and people living in fear of the new Taliban regime. Members’ staff have worked incredibly hard, as have Members from all parties themselves, so will the Minister now tell us, clearly and definitively: when will these emails be fully and comprehensively answered?

**James Cleverly:** Two hundred thousand emails were received. Although it is absolutely the case that the people in Afghanistan—whether they be British nationals, Afghans who worked for us or at-risk Afghans—are a priority, it is just not possible to open, analyse and respond to 200,000 emails in the same timescale that we would normally be able to.

The commitment made by my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister was discharged: every single MP received a response so that they knew that their email had been received and opened and would be worked on. The detail on where those emails have been triaged to and, in respect of cases that are being dealt with by the FCDO, the initial status of cases will be, as I said, provided to right hon. and hon. Member from all parties by 16 September. The commitment that was made was discharged. We will continue to work on behalf of British nationals and at-risk Afghans and we will ensure that any correspondence received directly by the FCDO is triaged and sent to the most appropriate Government Department for processing.

**Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): I would like to thank all the officials who have been dealing with this matter, and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who has raised a really important subject. I will come straight to the point. How confident is the Minister that the UK will be able to reach and get out of Afghanistan

those Afghan folks who worked with us, not so much in Kabul but in Helmand and Kandahar provinces, where they served alongside the UK military and took the greatest risks to their own safety and that of their families? What is the chance of getting hold of those people who are now trapped hundreds of miles from Kabul?

**James Cleverly:** The ministerial team at the FCDO, including the Foreign Secretary, have been liaising extensively with both neighbouring countries and countries in the region to facilitate the evacuation of Afghans who have worked with us. It is not possible—it is not possible—to make cast iron guarantees. There is no functioning Government in Afghanistan, but we are liaising intensively with neighbouring countries to give the Afghans the very best chance of escaping the Taliban regime.

**Alyn Smith** (Stirling) (SNP): I warmly commend the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for bringing this matter forward, because it allows us the opportunity to express the real frustration and anger that exists. In that spirit, I commend the Minister for his statement today, because there was rather more humility and realism in it than we heard from the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary earlier this week. I think it is that mismatch between what has been said and what has been delivered that has led to the upset.

I have an auto-response for anybody who emails me. They get an automatic response generated by my inbox saying, “What is your postcode? Are you a real person? Do you live in Stirling?” So I could say, hand on heart, that anybody who gets in touch with me gets a response within seconds, but for me to suggest that that is a substantive response that actually answers the question would surely be misleading Parliament, which is why I have never made that point. I have to say to the Minister that I have canvassed opinion across the SNP group. As at 5 o’clock last night, we have 153 outstanding cases of individuals within Afghanistan needing help. We have not had a proper response. I will send all of those to him this afternoon and I would be grateful for an urgent response from his services to that.

We are trying to be constructive here. We need to learn the lessons. Can the Minister commit to a review for the future? When will the new details of the new scheme be published, so we can all learn the lessons for the future?

**James Cleverly:** Members need to be realistic about the level of detail and granularity that any organisation is able to provide in this timescale. We are talking about one of the most complicated and challenging environments anywhere in the world at the moment. There is no functioning Government in Afghanistan. These cases are incredibly complex. We made a commitment to ensure that Members knew their emails had been received, triaged and allocated to the appropriate Department. The commitment I have made today is that they will receive that information within seven days. They should know the emails have been received by the Department because they will have already, as per the commitment made by my right hon. Friends, received the confirmation that we are working on those cases. I cannot promise to be able to resolve complex cases within a matter of days. No organisation is able to do that, but we will work tirelessly to ensure these cases are operationalised.



**Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): Female Afghan MPs are particularly at risk. Many have decided, very sadly, to leave their own country. As a public service announcement, I want to say that the Inter-Parliamentary Union is working with other Parliaments to put together the complete list of those individuals. I thank the Minister's noble Friend for offering me a meeting. I know that many colleagues will have heard from female Afghan MPs. If they could ensure that they reach out to me, as chair of the British group, to make sure we have sight of all the names, we will work with other Parliaments to ensure that when they are able to get out of the country there will be a range of different countries that will give them refuge.

**James Cleverly:** We have worked extensively with countries in the region. I pay particular thanks to the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, which have worked very hard on some specific cases that I have raised with them. I am very grateful for the point that my hon. Friend has made. We do very much prioritise women, who, as we have always known but are now reminded, are in particular danger under the new regime in Afghanistan.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Can we speed up the questions and answers to try to get as many in as possible?

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): This Government are making a habit of breaking promises. However, breaking their commitment to help desperate people trying to flee Afghanistan is a new low. I have hundreds of people asking for my help to save their loved ones. Fazel Rabi Rustamkhel contacted me about his brother, a BBC journalist in Afghanistan, whose life he understandably believes to be in grave danger, yet I have not even received so much as an acknowledgment of the case from the Foreign Office. Can the Minister now tell me when I will have a reply that I can share with Fazel, and when we will receive substantive responses to all outstanding casework?

**James Cleverly:** I have already made the commitment that any cases received before 30 August will have had a confirmation response, that the emails will be, or have been, triaged to the relevant Government Departments, and that Members will get confirmation of that triage destination within seven days. For cases presented to us after 30 August, the normal turnaround time for response has been three weeks, which we have committed to reduce to two weeks. However, we are conscious that there is still a very intensive pipeline of cases being presented to us, and we will work on those as well.

**Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): Can I gently point out to hon. Gentlemen opposite that the only meetings I attended were all-party or were invited as such? I thank all at the FCDO, the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office for all the work that they have done to extricate many of the Afghans who are at risk because they have been helping the UK Government. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that we are now repaying that help with opportunities here to contribute to our society with appropriate jobs and other support?

**James Cleverly:** Operation Warm Welcome is an incredibly important part of this, because while it is of course the absolute priority to remove Afghans, where

possible, from danger in Afghanistan, we want to ensure that those who come to the UK are able to integrate and to fulfil their lives. Having a plan not just for housing but ultimately for future employment and so on is a really important part of that, and that is what underpins Operation Warm Welcome.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I note the Minister's comments about co-ordinating with the Home Office, but could I urge him to similarly co-ordinate with the devolved Administrations across the UK, who will play a huge role in looking after our refugees? If the commitment to refugees is not backed up by suitable funding to councils in the UK, the scheme will fail—it is as simple as that. So can I urge the Government to put appropriate funding into UK councils to see that this actually works?

**James Cleverly:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point about the ongoing support. He will have noted that the Government have already made a financial commitment to support local government as part of Operation Warm Welcome. He makes an incredibly important point and it is noted.

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): There is no doubt about the incredible effort that the Foreign Office and other Government Departments have put into responding to this incredibly difficult and tragic situation, and I thank the Minister for his honest and constructive responses to this UQ. This country is leading the way in offering safe haven to up to 20,000 Afghans over the next four years, but for many Afghans fleeing the country, their first port of call will be neighbouring countries such as Pakistan or Uzbekistan. Can he confirm that some of the £286 million in aid that we are allocating will be used to support refugees in these neighbouring countries?

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend is right that the majority of refugees from Afghanistan would be expected to find refuge, at least in the first instance, in neighbouring countries. We work extensively with those countries. We enjoy strong bilateral relations with most, particularly Pakistan, which has a long border with Afghanistan. I can assure him that we will continue to work closely with them to ensure that refugees that enter their countries are looked after.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): I join the Minister in thanking members of the armed forces and consular staff, who have worked incredibly hard. This mess is not of their making; it is that of Ministers. He claims there have been 200,000 emails, but they are not all from Members of Parliament. If that were the case, we would have each sent more than 300 emails. Is he saying to the House that our emails have no more weight than any others? Can I just raise with him the marked contrast with how other countries have dealt with this issue? I had a constituent in Afghanistan who is a British citizen. There was no answer from the Foreign Office. My office laterally thought, as her husband is a US citizen, to contact the State Department. It not only replied straight away, but got her out within 48 hours and phoned to say it had been done. There is a different way of doing it, and it is about how parliamentarians are treated.

[Mr Kevan Jones]

The Defence Secretary suggested that people should now move to the borders if they want to leave. I have a family in my constituency who have the ability to get to Pakistan, but want to know what happens next. The Germans last week put in place a transit route through Uzbekistan. Where are we at with this?

**James Cleverly:** As I have said, the Foreign Secretary visited the region and spoke extensively with regional partners, including Pakistan. We will continue to explore with those neighbouring countries what means can be put in place for Afghans to come to the UK, where that is their most appropriate destination. I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman pays tribute to the officials in the Government Departments, most notably the FCDO, the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office. Many other Departments provided volunteers to reinforce our work, and I also pay tribute to them.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I thank the Government for responding positively to the representations I have made on behalf of Afghans at risk. May I ask my right hon. Friend about what will happen? Given that the Taliban will increase their grip and become less and less helpful, the only way for people to get out of the country will be to run to the border. That brings them into the scope of neighbouring jurisdictions and the United Nations. What discussion has he had with the UN about trying to assist people to leave to appropriate countries, such as the UK, and specifically triage them, as has happened with the Syria resettlement programme?

**James Cleverly:** I thank my right hon. Friend for congratulating the officials who have been working so hard on this. I note that it is surprisingly common to be thanked by Opposition Members in private, and less so in public, but I will take the thanks wherever it comes. With regards to engagement, I can assure him that we are engaging multilaterally and with countries in the region. We will explore all routes for helping Afghans evacuate, whether that be land crossings or the re-establishment of air corridors.

**Sam Tarry** (Ilford South) (Lab): Like many Members, I have an awful lot of cases. I have 150 cases that I am dealing with. I will not rehearse all the details, but they include prominent women's rights activists who have death warrants already issued on their heads by the Taliban. I have veterans of the Afghan national army, and I even have the wife of a British national who has a two-month-old baby and is stuck in Kabul. I have another chap whose family have already been butchered by the theocratic fascists of the Taliban, and he is now in hiding, awaiting instructions from me or the Government on how we will get him out. I genuinely want to know what conversations the Minister is having, and whether they are being accelerated, with people such as our friends in the Pakistani Government to ensure that they have the money and support to be able to get as many people as possible safely over the border. It is clear we will not be extracting anyone directly out of Afghanistan any time soon, but we have friends there. If we can support them, we can get people out of Afghanistan and process them there to get to safe haven in our country.

**James Cleverly:** I think Members from all parts of the House will completely understand the fear that the people who have contacted the hon. Gentleman will have. We will all have had similar cases. We are liaising closely with the countries on the border. It is understandable that no country would want to accept many hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of undocumented people, so it is not as easy as saying, "Countries should open their borders to Afghan refugees." We are working closely with them to ensure that there is a process by which we can help to evacuate as many eligible Afghans as possible.

**Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I worked in the Foreign Office crisis centre and I cannot imagine what our diplomats have been through. I am so grateful that many hundreds of those whose cases I took up personally were evacuated over the last few weeks, including those who went to the Baron hotel on the day of the terror attack—yes, it was terrifying, but it got them out. This will upset colleagues, but no, I did not hear back on those who were evacuated—but the Afghans did, and that is all that matters. Sometimes, I did not know that they were out until they were in a hotel in the UK, but they got out. I still have some to get out, and I am heartbroken about that; I speak to them every single day. My ask is: reply to them. I do not need a reply; they need a reply. Let us get them out. Let us also recognise our Foreign Office staff. I am very grateful for what they did alongside our military.

**James Cleverly:** I thank my hon. Friend for her point about the Afghans whom we were able to help. During the process, we have always prioritised our ability to get people at risk out of Afghanistan—including Sir Laurie at the Baron hotel, shortly before the explosion, to help facilitate the processing of Afghans leaving. We endeavoured both to get them out and to keep Members informed, but we will prioritise getting people out.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The French Republic began its evacuation by 10 May and it was completed four weeks before the fall of the city of Kabul; meanwhile, a fortnight before, the British Government—the Minister's Government—were still sending asylum seekers back from the UK. Would it not be right that if the Minister had talked to his colleagues in the French Republic, Members on both sides would not be in this ridiculous position? The reality is, it is an utter failure of political leadership at the heart of the Government that has allowed this to happen.

**James Cleverly:** The ARAP scheme to help repatriate Afghans who had worked directly with us was put in place in April this year. The FCDO travel advice was updated in April and, prior to mid-August, many thousands had already left Afghanistan. I absolutely reject the hon. Member's point. We should remember that this is the largest and most complex evacuation scheme that the Government have ever had to deal with—certainly in anyone's living memory.

**Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): In the call that took place on 24 August, Members were told by the Foreign Secretary that cases of Afghan nationals who did not meet the ARAP criteria but on whom we had information that they had supported UK objectives and were at risk could be submitted to the

FCDO via the special cases route. I submitted a handful, as I am sure many of my hon. Friends did. All I would like to know is: are those special cases still being considered on a discretionary basis outside the ARAP and Afghan citizens resettlement scheme? If so, when will decisions be made and Members told?

**James Cleverly:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, which helps to explain why different applicants have to go through different routes. The Ministry of Defence has, understandably, taken the lead with regard to the ARAP scheme, because those were Afghans who worked directly for the Ministry of Defence, but when we made the expansive, generous offer to protect more Afghans whom we knew were going to be at risk, that increased the complexity enormously. I am completely happy for the FCDO to remain the point at which we triage applications, but ultimately the time it takes to assess applications will depend entirely on their complexity. In some instances where people have had to flee and leave all their documents behind, a very complex set of assessments needs to be made.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** I am sorry that I am having to draw stumps, but I will leave this message with the Minister. Both I and the Leader of the House are very concerned that MPs' correspondence is not being answered. I know that you have been inundated, but the fact is that people should be brought in to ensure that MPs get at least the acknowledgment that they deserve. I also have a real concern. The Minister is very generous and courteous to all in this Chamber, but I am not happy that briefings are there only for certain MPs and not for others. They should be for all. I represent everybody in this Chamber, not the select few. So, please, let us get the message across to answer emails, making sure that MPs are responded to as quickly as possible, but also that briefings should be given to the Opposition, as well as to some on the Government side.

## Business of the House

11.9 am

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

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg):** The business for the week commencing 13 September will include:

**MONDAY 13 SEPTEMBER—**Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill.

**TUESDAY 14 SEPTEMBER—**Consideration of a business of the House motion, followed by all stages of the Health and Social Care Levy Bill.

**WEDNESDAY 15 SEPTEMBER—**Opposition day (5th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. The subject is to be announced.

**THURSDAY 16 SEPTEMBER—**General debate on the role and the response of the devolved Administrations to COP26, followed by a general debate on proposed reforms to the criminal justice system to respond better to families bereaved by public disasters. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 17 SEPTEMBER—**The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 20 September will include:

**MONDAY 20 SEPTEMBER—**Consideration of a business of the House motion, followed by all stages of the Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Bill.

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

After a two-year, one-month and 14-day build-up, the Prime Minister bounced his Cabinet into accepting his so-called social care plan and yesterday bounced Parliament into accepting it by calling a vote, and now on Tuesday they want to ram the Bill through in just one day. I know the Leader of the House will say that this is not unusual, but why the urgency for a plan that does not even come into effect until next year? Is it because the Prime Minister's so-called plan is nothing more than a Tory tax rise? It is the third Tory tax rise on working families in recent months—a hat-trick of broken Tory manifesto promises.

And it is not a plan. There is nothing on workforce, nothing on how to help people stay in their own homes, which is what people prefer, and no vision for what social care should be. The Prime Minister knows that this would never get through Parliament unless the Government rush it through. This a meagre attempt to fix the NHS funding gap, which it will not, and nothing more than a statement of intent that in a few years' time the money will be moved to social care. The NHS funding gap predates the covid crisis, so I will not take that as an excuse. That gap happened under successive Tory Governments over the last decade, and no Minister can guarantee that the money raised from the tax hike will actually go to social care. It will not fix the NHS funding gap and there is still no route to fix social care: it is a tax rise, not a plan.

This is on top of the forthcoming cut to universal credit, hitting working families yet again. I thank the Leader of the House for rescheduling Labour's debate

[Thangam Debbonaire]

and vote on this that was planned for yesterday. Will the Government use the extra week to reconsider this callous cut, which is set to plunge even more people into hardship? Let us not forget that the pandemic is not over. We cannot forget that more than 150,000 people have died of covid. Bereaved families are still waiting for a public inquiry, and the work on this by my deputy, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), is really sterling. They want us to learn lessons now to plan for the future so that others will not suffer as they are, and I ask the Leader of the House again: when will the Government's inquiry be brought forward?

The Government have not only failed on the home front; they have also trashed Britain's proud global reputation. It is 20 years since British troops went into Afghanistan, yet in just weeks we have seen the complete roll-back of the gains for which 150,000 of our brave soldiers fought and 457 died. The Government's failure to plan an exit strategy means that not only thousands of Afghans are still at risk, but now our national security is at risk. We do not have eyes on the ground. They are failing at the first, fundamental duty of Government—keeping citizens safe.

We have a Foreign Secretary who could not even pick up the phone when Kabul fell, even though the sea was closed, whatever that means. His Department was completely unprepared, as we can clearly see, and he thinks that just one statement to the House will make up for all this. If this is not a resignation matter, can the Leader of the House tell us what is? I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for his urgent question. I can categorically state from the Dispatch Box that emails sent to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office before 30 August have not even had an auto-response in my own inbox, so I wonder how many other people have been put on the line to the crisis team to respond to them.

Can the Leader of the House confirm when the Home Secretary will come to this House to set out her plan for the Afghan citizens' resettlement scheme? Despite the Government's complete failure to plan over the last few weeks, the heroic effort of our troops involved in Operation Pitting is not in any doubt, so will the Government officially recognise their bravery with a medal?

Finally, this afternoon the House will debate the legacy of our dear and much missed colleague, our friend Jo Cox. This afternoon I will be thinking of Jo, as I do every day in this place, and I will think about the impact she made on us all as Kim, her sister and her successor, takes her place and makes her maiden speech. I know that all hon. Members will be cheering Kim on as she, like Jo, makes her own unique and inspirational contribution.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** May I agree with the hon. Lady about how important this afternoon's debate is, and wish the hon. Member for Batley and Spennings (Kim Leadbeater) extremely well in making her maiden speech? That is a difficult occasion for all Members, but doing so in memorial to one's sister must be a particular pressure. I am sure it will be a brilliant speech, and I wish her extremely well in doing that in an important debate.

On the other issues raised by the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), the argument about bounce is simply ridiculous. When we have a Budget, that Budget is announced when the Chancellor stands up to speak. The Budget resolutions to provide for the immediate implementation of tax increases under the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968 take place at the end of the day, and mostly happen to go through on the nod. We have a seven-clause Bill, including the clauses on commencement and so on, and including the debate yesterday, it will have had more than an hour per clause. If we had an hour per clause on every Bill, we would never have time to discuss all the Bills we have going through. This is being done in a completely proper and sensible way that is respectful of procedures within this House.

I am intrigued that the Opposition do not want the NHS to get more money. They seem to oppose that, and think that giving more money to the NHS is a bad idea. That does prove the point nowadays that the Conservative party is the party of a good health service, and the Labour party has run away from its historic background. There will be £12 billion more each year for the NHS and the catch-up programme, to provide funding for up to 9 million extra checks, scans, and operations over the next three years, with the NHS running at 110% of pre-pandemic levels by 2023-24. Some £5.4 billion was announced earlier this week in addition to that, and it is the most extraordinary injection of money to ensure that the NHS can catch up after the remarkable service it provided during the pandemic. I am sure that people up and down the country, and constituents in all constituencies, will note that the Labour party does not want the NHS to have this funding, that it wants people to wait longer for their hip and knee operations, and that it wishes there to be no catch up. No doubt we will find out more of that next week when we debate the Health and Social Care Levy Bill.

The hon. Lady referred to the uplift in universal credit. That was intended to be temporary to help people through the worst of the pandemic. It provided £9 billion in additional support, but it was intended as a temporary measure. We cannot always keep temporary measures forever; we have to balance the books. That is why a Bill is coming forward next week—it is about ensuring we are able to pay our way. This is typical socialism. The magic money tree comes back to mind, which Labour Members still seem to think exists somewhere, although it is odd that at the moment they do not want any of their magic money to go to the NHS.

The hon. Lady raised the important issue of Afghanistan and what is going on there. The evacuation of 15,000 people, including 8,000 British nationals and 5,000 people through the Afghan relocations and assistance policy is a remarkable mission. It was carried out well and competently, and that is something we should note and approve of. Of course the withdrawal from Afghanistan was not a decision taken exclusively by Her Majesty's Government. I sometimes get teased for valuing our imperial history and being proud of it, and thinking what a great country we were when the Pax Britannica was across the world. But it is not the Pax Britannica any more; it is, if anything, the Pax Americana, and if the United States does not want to stay in Afghanistan, it is unlikely that we could stay there by ourselves. In that context, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is someone in

whom we can all have confidence. He was working hard when he was on holiday, and he has attended to his duties.

Mr Speaker, may I bring people up to date with modern technology? The hon. Lady seems to think that to speak to the Foreign Secretary, someone has to go through an operator, who will pull out plugs and put them through. Nowadays, there are things called mobile telephones; they work internationally, and people can get through. Even more amazing, correspondence can arrive through electronic means; the “e” in email is for “electronic”. Lo and behold, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was working extremely hard and effectively and is a great man. That is why he is also the First Secretary of State.

Over the whole issue of Afghanistan, the Government have been doing remarkable work with local councils. I am very proud that the council that covers the area I live in, Bath and North East Somerset Council, has already volunteered to take people from Afghanistan. I know that Stoke Council has done the same, and other councils across the country are showing the natural good will of the British people in helping a nation that is in great difficulties.

**Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): May I urge my right hon. Friend to arrange for a debate in Government time on public health? This is an issue of great concern in my constituency, particularly in matters of funding allocation, education, child obesity, type 2 diabetes and healthy diet. We do not have enough time to debate those general issues of public health, and I urge him to find some time.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. Of course, Public Health England is being reorganised and will be changed in due course. We have in front of the House the Health and Care Bill, which will be an opportunity to raise some of these matters. In terms of an additional debate, I point him in the direction of the Backbench Business Committee.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Can we have a debate about what exactly is going on in this Chamber? Our constituents are beginning to notice what is happening here, and they are dumbfounded at what they see: on one side of the Chamber, nearly everybody with a face mask; on the other side, practically no one. It is as if keeping our workplace and colleagues safe has become an ideological and political position, and that somehow being a Tory MP makes someone exempt from contracting and spreading covid.

The Leader of the House knows the score. He was at a meeting with me on Monday, where we heard from Public Health England that there are high levels of carbon dioxide in this Chamber. That means the air that we exhale is being confined in here, leading to an increased risk. And those Division Lobbies are an absolute and utter disgrace—Members of Parliament trapped in confined spaces for several minutes, with card readers that are next to useless, as this bizarre and time-wasting headcount continues to go on. Come on, Leader of the House; help us keep the staff and the people in this House safe.

At that meeting, the Leader of the House said that he would wear a face mask to encourage the rest of his colleagues. Put that face mask on, Leader of the House.

We have heard from doctors again today that the face mask is the most effective means to stop the spread of this virus. Tory MPs can be as cavalier as they want with their own health, but when it comes to their colleagues and the people who work in this House, that should be a matter for all of us.

We have to stop playing politics with covid. It is going on again today. Yesterday, this House quite rightly said that there would be covid vaccine passports for nightclubs in England. Today, in the socially distant, virtually inclusive Parliament in Scotland, there will be a vote on covid passports in Scotland. The Conservatives will support them down here and oppose them in Scotland. Has the Leader of the House got a word for that type of behaviour?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I had a feeling that the hon. Gentleman would be a bit grumpy this morning, because it is the anniversary of the battle of Flodden, which was not, it has to be said, Scotland’s finest hour.

As regards the wearing of face masks, the Government guidance is completely clear on when people should wear them and when people should not. It is said specifically in the guidance that a person might want to wear one when they are in a crowded space with people they do not—[*Interruption.*] Patience; listen to the end of the sentence—in a crowded space with people they do not normally meet. We are not in a crowded space with people we do not normally meet, and people are right to make a judgment for themselves as to whether they will wear a face mask or not. As I said before, there are circumstances in which I will wear one; I went to the excellent Thomas Becket exhibition at the British Museum, which was very crowded and in a small space, and I had a face mask in my pocket and put it on. But look around—the ceilings are high, the doors are open and the Benches are not particularly full; it is perfectly reasonable not to wear a mask in this Chamber and on this estate, in accordance with Government guidelines. The House authorities have done a great deal of work, consistently, throughout the pandemic, to keep everybody safe. This is how it should be. So I think we should allow people to make choices for themselves; I do not think we should always be told what to do by politicians. Allowing freedom and liberty, and encouraging freedom and getting back to normal, in a society that is primarily double-vaccinated, seems to me to be extremely sensible.

**Sir Mike Penning** (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Yesterday, we rightly voted for more money for the NHS and for social care, but in lots of the trusts around the country the unaccountability of the senior management, many of whom are earning more than the Prime Minister, is completely unfair to those working with them within the NHS. May we have a debate on why, for instance, the Prime Minister was able to go to my trust and say that we can have a brand new hospital, only for my community and my constituents to be told that we are not going to get one and we will get a refurbished hospital because that is what the trust management want to do? It is not what the people of my constituency want.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My right hon. Friend raises a point that should concern us all; democratic accountability to this House is fundamental. I am glad to say that the Health and Care Bill, which is working its way through

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Parliament, will restore some elements of direction that may be given, because it seems to me that he who pays the piper should call the tune.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, Ian Mearns.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I am very grateful, as always, Mr Speaker. May I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business and for announcing the Back-Bench business for next week, on 16 September? This year, Baby Loss Awareness Week, on which we have regularly had a debate, will fall towards the end of the conference recess, so we are proposing, if we get the time, to try to allocate that debate on Thursday 23 September, before the conference recess. We would really appreciate it if that were to be facilitated.

Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Sir Brendan Foster and his team on, and encouraging all the participants in, this year's—the 40th—Great North Run in Newcastle and Gateshead this coming Sunday? It is almost a unique event, which showcases Tyneside at its very best. We wish everyone taking part every success.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Yes, I would happily join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Sir Brendan Foster on the 40th Great North Run, as long as nobody expects me to do any running. I offer my warmest and most enthusiastic congratulations. I absolutely note the hon. Gentleman's point about the importance of the Baby Loss Awareness Week debate. I cannot promise anything at the moment, but I have heard what he has asked for.

**Lia Nici** (Great Grimsby) (Con): On a day when we remember colleagues, Mr Speaker will be fully aware that in the summer recess we heard the sad news of the loss of Austin Mitchell, my predecessor and the longest serving MP for Great Grimsby, with 38 years. Will the Leader of the House suggest something we could do in this place to remember the amount of work that Austin did, in the House of Commons and for Great Grimsby?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend because, like many Conservative Members, I knew Austin Mitchell with great affection. I first met him when we both spoke in a debate in the Oxford Union, which must have been in the late '80s.

**Sir Mike Penning** 1880s!

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Thank you so much—Austin was not quite that old. He was a man of absolute, firm principle, enormous charm and great humour. His ability to entertain in this House and elsewhere was second to none. Like all of us aim to do, he fundamentally stood up for his constituency. He was a model of a constituency MP. Regardless of party politics, he put his constituents' interests first, even to the point of changing his name—was it to Mr Haddock?

**Mr Speaker:** Austin Haddock.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Austin Haddock, yes. So he is remembered with great affection. Perhaps, Mr Speaker, we should have an Adjournment debate—that is in your bailiwick, not mine—to celebrate a great man.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I just say to the Leader of the House that in all my years in the House of Commons, I have always found it very sensible to listen to what the Speaker says, and he has advised that masks should be worn around Parliament. I put that gently to the Leader of the House.

This week, the Transport Secretary very proudly tweeted out that old Pacer trains were being used for healthcare and school facilities for communities in the north. I very much doubt that Conservative Ministers would be proudly tweeting out that those clapped-out, knackered Pacer trains were being used for classroom facilities at Eton or Winchester or for healthcare facilities in the south of England, so can we please have a debate on what the levelling-up agenda that this Government talk about actually means for communities in the north?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I think the right hon. Lady has wrenched from its context what my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary was saying—that reusing old trains can be an enjoyable thing to do. People like seeing old train carriages. There is a former station in my constituency where a railway carriage is used as a cafeteria. It is part of the history of the railways to reuse old carriages. The levelling-up agenda is absolutely fundamental to what this Government are doing. There is the high street programme that is going to help high streets, the improvement in infrastructure, and the reversal of some of the Beeching cuts, as a railways matter. All these things are part of levelling up. The Skills and Post-16 Education Bill, in the House of Lords at the moment, is a further part of that to provide real opportunity across the country.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): Can we have an urgent statement on the planning system and specifically on consultation with residents? An enormous 15-metre-high warehouse has been erected just metres from residents' back gardens in Bynghams in Harlow, blighting their gardens and homes and having a devastating impact on their lives. The planning application was passed in 2017 and 2021 with little objection because the consultation process is weak and not fit for purpose. It should never have been allowed to pass and it can never be allowed to happen again.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Obviously, detailed planning approvals are a matter for local councils, not for the Government, unless they are called in. A planning Bill in this Session will provide plenty of opportunity to discuss and debate these issues, but it is of fundamental importance that we restore and reform our planning system so we have one that provides the houses and homes that people want to live in, that can restore our levels of home ownership in this country and that fairly represents the views of local people.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I have constituents whose son is at present in a critical condition in the intensive care unit at St George Hospital in Sydney. They have visas and an exemption on compassionate grounds to enter Australia but cannot find flights. They have tried a number of airlines with no success. Although there has been confusion as to who is responsible, the Australian Department of Home Affairs said that it would be possible for an MP to put some pressure on the airlines to help. Will the Leader of the House urgently speak to his Cabinet colleague at the Foreign Office to see if they can assist this family?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am always willing to help right hon. and hon. Members with constituency issues of this kind, if they feel that they are not getting the support they need from other Government Departments, and I would be more than happy to do that. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can send me written details so that I can look into it carefully.

**Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): The Rotherham child sexual exploitation scandal was one of the worst scandals in our history, encompassing crimes across the spectrum of exploitation. That is why I have joined brave survivor and whistleblower Sammy Woodhouse to campaign for a criminal and sexual exploitation commissioner for children who will oversee all elements of supporting child victims to rebuild their lives. Can we have a debate on the creation of a child criminal and sexual exploitation commissioner? Will my right hon. Friend lend his support to our campaign for that and make representations to the Government so that we have a stand-alone statute definition of criminal exploitation and a joined-up approach to dealing with the legacy issues, so that women, boys and girls are protected from all types of illegality and abuse and that the Rotherham sex scandal can never happen anywhere else again?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I agree that the Rotherham child sexual exploitation scandal was one of the worst scandals in our history. My hon. Friend is right to raise the matter; what has happened in his constituency has been appalling. Child criminal exploitation is one of the most heinous crimes, and the Government are determined to do what we can to tackle it. As there is already a Children's Commissioner for England whose remit is that she

“promotes and protects the rights of children, especially the most vulnerable, and stands up for their views and interests”,

I encourage my hon. Friend in the first instance to put pressure on the Children's Commissioner to focus time on this very important issue, because it is sometimes easier to use the tools to hand than to create new tools.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Tomorrow is World Suicide Prevention Day. Will the Leader of the House continue to draw attention to this really important issue, as he has done in the past, and encourage colleagues to raise it and share it on social media?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** As so often at business questions, I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who raises the most important and sensitive issues that have widespread support across the House. Yes, of course I will help in any way I can to promote World Suicide Prevention Day. It is the greatest blow to families and those left behind when a suicide takes place, and so many can be prevented with the right support, care and knowledge. Charitable bodies including the Samaritans do wonderful work to help, but if there is anything that I can do, I will work with the hon. Lady to do so.

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Much of what we consume is delivered to us by heavy goods vehicles, yet the Leader of the House will know that hauliers are suffering a driver shortfall of 100,000. Robert Louis Stevenson said:

“To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive”,

but goods cannot travel at all, let alone arrive, without skilled drivers. Will the Leader of the House therefore arrange a statement to the House explaining the absurdity of the Government's cancellation of the delegated training scheme to allow firms in my constituency and elsewhere to train drivers themselves, and letting the House know what the Department for Transport intends to do about the crisis, so that the fine Lincolnshire produce demanded across the country can be delivered quickly and efficiently?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I have had the privilege of visiting my right hon. Friend's constituency, whose fine produce is absolutely remarkable. I think that he introduced me to the largest pumpkin grower in England—by which I mean that he grows the most pumpkins, not the biggest pumpkins.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Not the biggest man?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** He is not the fattest pumpkin grower either, no.

On 20 July, the Government announced a further package of measures to help industry to tackle the issues caused by the HGV driver shortage. Those measures include support for the recruitment and retention of drivers, such as proposals to streamline the process to obtain a licence, offering financial assistance for training, and backing industry-led initiatives to improve the working conditions for driving. I have also noticed reports that wages for HGV drivers are going up. This is, as so often, a market solution.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I wonder whether I could crave your indulgence, Mr Speaker, and take the Leader of the House to Scotland once again, on a slightly different topic. An awful lot of people in Scotland are having huge difficulty in accessing confirmation of their two inoculations, either in hard copy or by email. Rather worse, where they have had one inoculation and then another via the armed forces or in another part of the UK, there is chaos. Does the Leader of the House agree that it would be appropriate for the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement regarding the availability of this information? No citizen should be disadvantaged by reason of where in the UK they live.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that where someone lives in the UK should not make it more difficult to get confirmation of a vaccination. I point out that the SNP, in coalition with rather fanatical Greens, is in charge of the Government in Scotland and is not very good at running things. That is a problem, but obviously it is difficult to interfere in matters that are properly devolved. However, I will take the matter up with UK Ministers so that we can have a UK solution.

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Recently published figures show that just over 3,500 people are currently claiming unemployment benefit in my constituency—about 2,000 more than before the pandemic. Every job lost as a result of the pandemic is a matter of great concern, but virtually every business that I have spoken to in recent weeks is struggling to fill its current vacancies. That is true particularly in tourism and hospitality, but also across the sectors of transport, food processing and construction. Could we ask for a

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statement on the action that the Government are taking to help businesses to recruit the staff they need so that we can boost our economic recovery?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend has raised an important point. It has also been raised by the Governor of the Bank of England, who has pointed out that quite a number of people seem to have left the workforce during the course of the pandemic, and it is important that they should be brought back in—should be encouraged to get back in.

The Government have a plan for jobs to give people the skills and qualifications that they need in order to take up roles in key sectors quickly. We have begun to see wage growth: for instance, Costa Coffee is hiring an extra 2,000 people, but is also increasing their pay by 5%. The Government are inviting employers from a range of sectors, including farming and hospitality, into local jobcentres, because one of the most effective ways of promoting vacancies is for employers to market their opportunities directly to work coaches and jobseekers. This is about encouraging people to look for work and showing them that the work is available, but also about helping people to gain the right skills for the jobs that are available.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent Maryam Amiri contacted me on 20 August about her sister, who has five young children, her cousin, who is eight months pregnant, and her elderly father. They are all stuck in Afghanistan. The women have no husbands because, I understand, they were murdered by the Taliban for their role in the Afghan armed forces. Can we have an urgent debate in Government time on the Government's resettlement scheme, so that I can find out whether families like Maryam's can find sanctuary and be reunited and safe in the UK?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** We had two statements on Afghanistan earlier this week, one from the Prime Minister and the other from the Foreign Secretary, and we have just had an urgent question on the subject. The hon. Lady has raised a very difficult specific constituency case, but, as I have said before, if answers have not been coming through to her, I should be more than happy to help her to obtain a specific answer.

**Mr Marcus Fysh** (Yeovil) (Con): My strong view is that the proposal set out yesterday could be substantially improved with some imaginative additions and developments. Will my right hon. Friend say a bit more about when the Bill proposed for debate on Tuesday will be published, so that we can look at it and work constructively on what I hope he agrees—I dare say he does, in his heart of hearts—would be useful amendments?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I think that the Bill is already available. I see some very helpful nodding among the wise men in the Box, so it has clearly already been published. However, the Health and Care Bill is currently going through Parliament, and in respect of any changes to any of the social care proposals that my hon. Friend thinks would be a good idea, it would be right to table amendments to that Bill rather than the Bill relating to the national insurance increase, which is a very simple and straightforward piece of legislation.

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): Even by this Government's standards, it has not been a great first week back, has it? We have had chaos and misinformation regarding Afghanistan, attempts to impose vaccine passports, and the breaking of manifesto commitments, with the Government scrapping the triple lock and rushing through the biggest tax rise of 50 years, as well as pulling an Opposition day debate on the scrapping of the universal credit lifeline. May we please have an urgent debate on probity in public office?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** No.

**Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I wish to put on record my admiration and support for the Samaritans and the work that they do, and to congratulate my local Derby branch, which is celebrating 60 years of operation. Derby Samaritans help more than 6,000 people each year and respond to about 15,000 calls for help. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Derby Samaritans and their incredible, selfless volunteers on the crucial work that they do?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am very pleased to join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Derby branch of the Samaritans on its 60th—its diamond—anniversary. She is right to thank the Samaritans for the remarkable work that they do, which saves so many lives, and to recognise the commitment of Samaritan volunteers up and down the country who, inevitably, are on call during difficult, unsocial hours and have to deal with the most emotionally wrenching problems. At the beginning of the year, as part of my "Commons Mentions" series, I spoke to Keith Leslie, the Samaritans' chairman of trustees, about the fantastic work that they do. I was very pleased to have the opportunity to thank him personally, via Zoom.

**Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): I am sorry to have to take the House back to the statement that we have just heard on Afghanistan, but the Minister was very forceful in telling us that all emails received within a certain period had been responded to. A quick straw poll in my office tells me that four emails to the Home Office have had no response, along with two to the Ministry of Defence and two to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. That is after just a quick look, so can the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in Government time or a statement on the accuracy of responses given by Ministers, so that Members of the House can get to the facts of these matters and not the fiction?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Ministers do give accurate answers, and that is always important. What Mr Speaker said at the end of the urgent question was absolutely right: Members have a right to seek redress of grievance for their constituents, and Ministers have an obligation to respond as helpfully and efficiently as they can. Every day since 24 August, the call handlers have answered more than 94% of the calls that were made, and the average wait time since 20 August has been under a minute. The FCDO replied to all emails from MPs received by 30 August asking for an update by Monday evening—[*Interruption.*] Well, that is the information that is collated: emails received by 30 August have been replied to. [*Interruption.*] I would say to people who have not received a reply: resend your email—[*Laughter.*]



I am appealing to people's sense of realism. We all know from our own constituency email inboxes that emails do not always get through, so if anyone is in any doubt about an email, I would say that they should resend it. Hon. and right hon. Members have a right to a response, and the Foreign Office is working very hard to get those responses, but if Members are not getting a response, they should resend their emails, and if they do not get a response to that, they can come to my office and I will help them to get a reply. I have said many times that, as Leader of the House, I will always do my best to facilitate Members' correspondence.

**Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time on the Government's response to the ongoing issue of the increasing numbers of illegal migrants crossing the channel? I welcome the actions that the Government have taken and are proposing to take, but an update in the House and a wider debate to explore additional solutions to this serious issue could well be helpful to the Government.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The dangerous and unnecessary small boat crossings that we saw again last weekend are wrong, and the Government are determined to crack down on the criminal gangs that drive that activity and profit from it. I can tell my hon. Friend that there have been nearly 300 arrests and 65 convictions, and that we have prevented more than 10,000 migrant attempts. I was pleased to see that efforts are going to be made to send the boats back. That policy has been used very effectively by our friends in Australia. It took the profit away from the people smugglers, who are the real cause of the problem and who trade on the distress of unfortunate people.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for doing what you can to keep this House safe. May I just say kindly to the Leader of the House that wearing a face mask is not about personal choice; it is about protecting the health and safety of other people?

I want to ask a question about correspondence that has not been replied to by the Minister for Care, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately). I wrote to her four months ago—and have continually chased that correspondence—about fault lines in the social care regulation of domiciliary care companies that are consistently breaking the law by setting themselves up and then failing staff by not paying wages or pensions and failing to turn up to appointments. This is a very serious issue. It is a fault line in social care, and it is exactly what the Government will be funding through their new levy. Can the Leader of the House get a response for me, and can we also have a debate on the quality of social care?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** In answer to the second part of the hon. Lady's question, there will be a number of opportunities to debate social care because the Health and Social Care Bill is going through this House, but a more specific debate may be asked for from the Backbench Business Committee. As regards the slow response to her correspondence, I will of course take that up after business questions and try to get her a reply. The issue she raises concerning abuse and fault lines in domiciliary care and the non-payment of employees is clearly a very serious one.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): May I add my own tribute to Austin Mitchell? I agree with what the Leader of the House said earlier. Austin was my MP for 38 years. It was always a pleasure to work with him, both as a councillor and, subsequently, here in Westminster, although I have to say that I never voted for him.

My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici) and I visited Franklin College in Grimsby last week. It is a further education college that does a great deal for young people who want to enter the new and emerging industries in the renewables sector, which is important for the area. Can we have a debate on the work of FE colleges, which are particularly valuable in areas such as the one I represent?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend is the Austin Mitchell of our time in his assiduous and tireless work for his constituents. There is a model on the Opposition Benches and a model on the Government Benches for looking after constituents and arguing the case for one's constituency.

The Skills and Post-16 Education Bill is going through the House of Lords at the moment, and when it comes to this House there will be an opportunity to debate further education, including further education colleges. If my hon. Friend wants a specific debate on Franklin College, it will come under Mr Speaker's purview in an Adjournment debate.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent is suffering mental health problems as a result of a crippling £15,000 debt. Worse, it is a universal credit debt that the Department for Work and Pensions has admitted was caused due to its maladministration, misdirection and misinformation, yet DWP Ministers want to collect that debt from my constituent. Why have this Government removed the discretionary option not to collect debts in exceptional circumstances? Will the Leader of the House make arrangements to reintroduce the guidance so that the DWP can do the right thing by my constituent?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Following what I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) is also somebody who always stands up for his constituents. On any number of occasions at business questions he has raised such issues on behalf of constituents who are seeking redress of grievance.

I cannot promise to change the policy of the DWP—it is not within my authority to do so—but I can promise to help the hon. Gentleman get an answer in relation to this specific constituent.

**Mark Eastwood** (Dewsbury) (Con): At the Harron Homes Amberwood Chase development in Shaw Cross, Dewsbury, and at a site in Lindley located within the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney), home owners are experiencing major issues with the developer not completing the two sites, leaving roads and pavements unfinished and major snagging problems outstanding. Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House consider a debate on tackling rogue house builders who entice people to buy their dream home, only for it to become a nightmare as they are left abandoned once they have moved in?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** This is an important matter, and it is quite wrong for developers to sell substandard homes. Developers must meet their responsibilities to resolve issues quickly and treat home buyers fairly when things go wrong. They must also meet planning conditions agreed with the local authority. The Building Safety Bill includes provision for the new homes ombudsman scheme to provide strong and effective redress for new build home buyers and to hold poor developers to account.

Furthermore, our future planning reforms will inject real competition and quality into our construction market, with new builders entering the market to challenge incumbents, and we hope that a wave of self-built houses and a focus on beauty and quality will follow. Members will have the opportunity to raise these issues as the legislation makes its way through the House.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** Is it not great to be back properly, with all of us here?

One of the saddest stories I heard this week was about Sarah Harding, the Girls Aloud singer who died of cancer—partly, her family said, because she chose not to go to the doctor early enough due to covid. The cancer was not detected soon enough.

My concern about getting over the massive backlog is that lots of people are already choosing to go private. Even people of very meagre means are spending £3,000 or £5,000 on new hips and knees, which seems massively unfair. Should we not be buying up all the capacity in the private sector, at cost, so that people are dealt with on the basis of need rather than their financial position?

Secondly, there is a real problem with staffing. We have a shortage of pathologists and histopathologists—the people who check whether something is a bad cancer—and a shortage of radiologists and radiographers. Can we have a debate on how we get staff numbers, not just more managers on £270,000, into the NHS as fast as possible?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I find myself in a great deal of agreement with the hon. Gentleman that it is so important that people go to their doctor if they have any suspicions. He has been an example of that and I know has recovered. It was to the great relief of the House that he had the sense to be checked out early. If there is any message one could ever give to anybody who listens to these sessions it would be to go to see their doctor if they have a concern, and I remind GPs that they are meant to be offering face-to-face appointments again. The money is being provided to deal with the backlog. I think I said earlier that it would deal with 9 million cases, but, yes, shortages of staff are an issue and it is of fundamental importance that the money goes to where it is needed in the NHS: supporting paying for the staff who will be carrying things out rather than paying very large bureaucratic salaries, which does not seem to be the best application of funds.

**Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con):** My right hon. Friend has mentioned that we have had urgent questions and a statement on Afghanistan as well as a very important debate, but would it be possible to have another debate on the future of our role in Afghanistan and our relationship, if any, with the new Government?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Obviously, the Government are held to account, and quite rightly so, for their policy in Afghanistan, and that has been a matter of interest to the House and it has been covered quite fully. A general debate, however, is more a matter for the Backbench Business Committee. It has the time available for these debates and I encourage my hon. Friend to go to that Committee and seek one.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD):** May I briefly associate myself with the comments regarding the late Austin Mitchell? It was my privilege to work with Austin for many years on matters pertaining to the fishing industry. I know that his passing will be felt not just by his friends and family, but in fishing ports around the coast of the United Kingdom.

May I recommend to the Leader of the House that, if he has not already done so, he reads my urgent question on vaccine passports in yesterday's *Hansard*? The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) opened the bidding for the Conservative Back Benchers by saying:

"What a load of rubbish."—[*Official Report*, 8 September 2021; Vol. 700, c. 307.]

What followed was three quarters of an hour that was not quite as polite and nuanced as that. Of most concern, however, was the fact that the Minister was asked three times whether this House would be given the vote that it was actually promised by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and three times he refused to give that commitment. Can the Leader of the House tell me now whether, in the time that remains unallocated, we will be allowed to debate and vote on the Government's proposals?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that important question. The Government were quite clear—and this was agreed with the Department of Health and Social Care last year—that any matters of national significance would come to this House for a vote before the measure was implemented. That was a commitment made by Her Majesty's Government and I assume that any Department that wishes to bring in a statutory instrument that meets that test would ask for time for a debate first. That is something that the House ought to expect.

**Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con):** I hope that the Leader of the House shares my concern and that of so many colleagues across this House that in the other place an eighth of the seats are effectively reserved for men, because of male primogeniture and the hereditary peerages. I wonder whether he would timetable a statement in Government time about what the Government are planning to do to end this anachronism?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** There are some titles that go down the female line by special remainder, but my hon. Friend is quite right that it is not very many. The law in relation to the Crown was changed by this House a few years ago. The 90 remaining hereditary peers who are elected and the two who are there ex-officio, as she rightly says, do mainly pass through the male line. If anybody wishes to change that, it is open for them to bring forward proposals. There is a campaign to change it, but I cannot say that the Government have any immediate plans to adopt that campaign.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Despite a so-called partnership of equals, Scotland is subjected to a Tory Elections Bill that is an assault on the democratic process, constant attempts to shift the goalposts on an independence referendum, a UK Government seeking to legislate on devolved areas and the imposition of a regressive tax hitting low-paid workers. Will the Leader of the House make a statement explaining whether he thinks those measures are strengthening or weakening the Union?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am glad to say that the Union seems to get stronger and stronger. We have seen how important it has been during the course of the pandemic, with the enormous sums of money that have come from the UK taxpayer to help every corner of the United Kingdom, with £407 billion so far, of which I think £15 billion has gone to Scotland.

On the national insurance increase, people in Scotland will get more money than they pay and they will get more money for healthcare. Is it now the policy of the SNP, along with the policy of the Labour party, that it does not want extra funding for healthcare—that it wants longer waits for hips, knees and other operations, and fewer treatments to take place? The Union is getting stronger because people are beginning to see the failures of the nationalist Government in Scotland, as Lady Mona Lott herself just goes on and on about a second referendum, rather than dealing with the problems that Scotland faces and the backlog of issues that have risen from the pandemic.

**Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): Rugby Community Ambulance Station is a valuable base for ambulances covering Rugby, yet West Midlands Ambulance Service University NHS Foundation Trust proposes closing it without any consultation with either the local community or staff. In doing so, it will be removing the last ambulance from a fast-growing town of 80,000 people. My constituents have real concerns about future response times to urgent calls. May we have a debate about decision making in the NHS?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** There will, to some extent, be an opportunity for that as the Health and Care Bill passes through Parliament, but the optimal placement of ambulance stations is an operational matter for NHS trusts to decide; that decision has been delegated to them. West Midlands ambulance service says that it has carefully considered the matter and has set out that the closure would not affect the number of ambulances in the area available immediately to respond to 999 calls as they arise, but one always understands the concerns of people living locally when they feel that a service is being removed from them.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I call Richard Thomson.

**Alyn Smith** (Stirling) (SNP) *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Oh, it is Alyn Smith. I am sorry—it is the mask.

**Alyn Smith:** I will reveal my face to you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have been called worse, so not to worry.

The chaos of Brexit becomes clearer on a daily basis, as reality dawns. Foreseen in the legislation is the establishment between the European Parliament and

this place of a parliamentary partnership assembly. The efficient, dynamic, orderly European Parliament has done its bit in establishing this important forum. Will the Leader of the House give us some insight on when the UK will match its ambition and speed?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Brexit has been a triumph, I am glad to say. We saw that not least with the vaccine roll-out; if we had done what the Opposition had wanted, we would not have been vaccinating people so quickly and opening up so soon. We have regained our freedom so we are able to make decisions for ourselves, but there is the eccentricity of the SNP, which wants to have independence only to hand it over to the European Union and to be told what to do by Brussels. If that is what SNP Members wish to campaign for, I do not think that they will be successful. The matter to which the hon. Gentleman refers is working its way between the Lords and the Commons, and I am sure that it will be set up at a suitable time.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): It is evil, wrong and unacceptable that people are being trafficked across the English channel for the purpose of making huge sums of money for evil gangs, with what is certainly perceived to be the help of the French Government. The Home Secretary is totally right to introduce legislation to turn those boats back, because that is the only way that we are going to end this evil trade. I have a serious suggestion to the Leader of the House. My private Member's Bill, the Asylum Seekers (Return to Safe Countries) Bill, does exactly that. It has had its First Reading and has its Second Reading tomorrow. I would undertake in Committee to change the wording of the Bill to that which would be acceptable to the Government. I think it would be a speedy way of moving the matter forward. Does the Leader of the House support that idea?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend is right to say that the people traffickers are evil. They are the cause of the problem and they trade on people's distress, which is fundamentally wrong. The Nationality and Borders Bill is also going through the House—it is going off to Committee next month—so other legislative measures are being introduced, but my hon. Friend is extremely helpful in bringing forward good ideas as to how we can make things work. I note, again, that turning boats back was a policy followed extremely successfully by the Australians and has had the benefit of stopping the evil trade there.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The historic tall ship Glenlee is of great cultural importance to Glasgow and, indeed, Scotland. Although it sits in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), all of us Glasgow MPs know how important it is to the citizens of Glasgow. As the Glenlee sits within the COP26 exclusion zone, it has been forced to close for not just the duration of the conference but a number of weeks before and after. As such, it is missing out on lucrative business opportunities that would quite literally help to keep it afloat. Will the Leader of the House please issue a Government statement on how businesses such as the Glenlee are going to be compensated for COP26?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Obviously, when the Government do things that prevent business from taking place, a responsibility falls on the Government to ensure that

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businesses do not lose out. COP26 ought, though, to be a huge success for Glasgow, attracting many visitors to go there and a considerable amount of expenditure, and I hope that the overall economic benefit will be good. This is a further example of the benefits of the United Kingdom, because COP26 is taking place in Glasgow because Scotland is part of a strong and powerful United Kingdom.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Leader of the House said he believed that the hybrid procedures we adopted during an earlier phase of the pandemic somehow diminished scrutiny of the Government, but today's urgent business was announced just minutes before the House sat and then changed after the House had begun to sit. I do not know how that enhances Back-Bench Members' opportunity to scrutinise the work of the Government. At the very least, may we have a debate on the lessons that might be learned from the procedures that previously we had in place during the pandemic, and perhaps on what better practice out of all that might be adopted, or re-adopted, for the longer term?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** It seems to me to be completely obvious that scrutiny is much better, much tighter and much more spontaneous in this House when we are all present. If Members are in the Chamber, they will know what the business is.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I call Wera Hobhouse.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Last but not least. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Rather than investing in green hydrogen, the Government are loudly promoting blue hydrogen made from natural gas, which will never get us to net zero. The Government say that green hydrogen is too expensive. May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the long-term cost differences of investing in blue hydrogen versus green hydrogen, and on whether the Government are considering setting an end date for blue hydrogen?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** A Somerset MP, even one from the Liberal Democrats, could certainly never be least. In my view, those from Somerset always take a primary place in the nation's affairs, and so they should.

The hon. Lady raises an important and interesting issue. The technology is developing and evolving. It seems to me that one of the fundamental things we should say in the argument about getting to net zero is that we want to improve people's living standards—we want people to have a better standard of living, with economic growth—and we can do that by technological innovation. Hydrogen is such an exciting part of that, because if we have cars running on hydrogen, we no longer need to be so mean to the motorist, to make it so difficult for them and to put in all those roadblocks and tiresome things that some local councils are doing—the hon. Lady will know of a local council that is currently doing just that. We will be able to get back to allowing people to do more of what they want and in a green and friendly way. Technology will be the solution to that.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I thank the Leader of the House for his statement and for answering questions for one hour.

## Ajax Armoured Vehicle Procurement

12.9 pm

### **The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin):**

With permission, I would like to make a statement on Ajax. I was pleased to update the House through a written ministerial statement on Monday, but given the ongoing and entirely understandable interest of the House in this long-running and important programme, I am pleased to be given the opportunity to make a statement and to respond to hon. Members' questions in this House.

On Monday, I informed the House that following the careful deliberations of the safety panel, comprising of duty holders from the Ministry of Defence, General Dynamics, Millbrook and independent advisers, a route had been established for independent testing to be safely resumed at Millbrook proving ground. Trials were expected to resume imminently. I am pleased to confirm that trials have now resumed. The independent trials at Millbrook are essential to provide the evidence to support fundamental root cause analysis, and to enable the safe resumption of wider trials and training activity. While we naturally want to see the outcome of the independent analysis as swiftly as possible, it is necessary for the teams to be given the space and time to conduct those important trials. Clearly, the pause in trials will mean that the results we are looking forward to analysing will not be available this month as we had initially hoped. However, once the results are secured and analysed, I will be pleased to update the House.

The focus for the MOD and General Dynamics remains on identifying the root causes of the noise and vibration issues to develop long-term solutions to ensure Ajax meets the Army's need. I have made it clear that no declaration of initial operating capability will be made until solutions have been determined for the long-term resolution of the noise and vibration concerns. Work continues on both, with General Dynamics heavily committed to delivering a safe resolution. We have a robust, firm price contract with General Dynamics under which it is required to provide the vehicles as set out in the contract for the agreed price of £5.5 billion.

Since the last urgent question, I met Phebe Novakovic, the global chair and chief executive officer of General Dynamics in London on 1 July, who emphasised in person the determination of GD to resolve these issues, a sense of purpose we are very much seeing at working level. Even prior to the Millbrook data being received, design modifications are being examined to reduce the impact of vibration. As I referenced in my last appearance on this issue, noise within the vehicle has two components, electrical and mechanical. Design modification to reduce the risk of noise through the communication system is in development and is currently being tested. These design approaches may represent part of the overall solution, but considerable work needs to be undertaken before any such assurances can be given.

Hon. Members raised concerns around specific limitations on use which have been issued on Ajax. As is often the case with defence procurement processes, there have been a number of LOUs placed on Ajax vehicles during the early phase of use, and they will come and go during the course of trials and testing. However, as I confirmed on Monday, the specific LOUs restricting

speed and the maximum height for reversing over steps have now been removed, preparatory to wider trails and testing being able to be undertaken in due course.

This House has been quite rightly concerned about the welfare of our service personnel. Extensive work has been undertaken through the summer on the health and safety aspects of the noise and vibration concerns. A report into those concerns is being undertaken independently of the Ajax delivery team by the MOD's director of health and safety. It is important that Defence is transparent on these issues and that not only the recommendations but the background to those recommendations is shared with the House. I have therefore decided to publish the report when it is finalised, as I said on Monday.

The report has not yet been concluded, but it is apparent that vibration concerns were raised before Ajax trials commenced at the armoured trials and development unit in November 2019. While noise and vibration are always issues of focus in the development of armoured vehicles, in December 2018 a specific army safety notice introduced restrictions on use in relation to vibration on this vehicle and identified that, in the longer term, a design upgrade was needed to reduce vibration.

Key themes likely to emerge from the health and safety report will include the importance of having a culture that gives safety equal status alongside cost and schedule. The overlapping of demonstration and manufacturing phases added complexity in this instance, as well as technical risk and safety risk, to the programme. Another theme is the value of having strong risk governance for complex projects that promotes access to expert technical advice on safety issues. Independent certification and assurance of land environmental capability should be adopted and modelled on best practice elsewhere in Defence. Following the report's conclusion, we will consider what further investigations are required to see if poor decision making, failures in leadership or systemic organisational issues contributed to the current situation, not simply in relation to health and safety but more broadly as necessary.

Following the appearance of the Surgeon-General alongside me at the Defence Committee hearing on Ajax, I would like to update the House regarding our service personnel. Initially, 121 personnel were identified as requiring urgent hearing assessments as a result of recent noise exposure on Ajax. Subsequently, the MOD broadened the scope of those who should be tested. A further 189 individuals have been identified. Of the combined 310 personnel, 304 have been contacted successfully; the remaining six are UK service personnel who have recently left service and are in the process of being traced. Two hundred and forty-eight personnel, including 113 from the original cohort of 121, have now been assessed.

The Army continues to identify and monitor the hearing of all personnel exposed to noise on Ajax, with additional testing being put in place where required. The Army is also in the process of identifying any health effects in those potentially exposed to vibration. Veterans who have been exposed to noise or vibration on this project will be supported throughout and will have access to the same assessments as those still serving. I will update the House on the number of personnel affected by noise and vibration in due course, including

[Jeremy Quin]

if any trends become apparent once the data has been analysed. I know this House will, as I am, be absolutely determined that we provide the appropriate testing and care to our service personnel and veterans.

I have previously described Ajax as a troubled programme. It is. But that does not mean that the problems are irresolvable. Ajax, a fully digitalised system, represents a step-change in the capabilities of the British Army and, while we will never accept a vehicle that does not meet our testing requirements, we remain committed to working with General Dynamics to understand and, we trust, resolve the outstanding issues. I commend this statement to the House.

12.16 pm

**John Healey** (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Minister for making the statement and for advanced sight of it. May I, through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, thank Mr Speaker for ensuring that the Defence Secretary understood his determination to see that Ministers account properly to this House, after Monday's written ministerial statement was slipped out late in the afternoon in the middle of the Prime Minister's statement on Afghanistan in the Commons?

This was the Minister's shocking admission in that statement on Monday, underlined again today, though in more guarded terms:

"it is not possible to determine a realistic timescale for the introduction of Ajax vehicles into operational service with the Army."

It is three months to the day since this House last questioned the Minister on Ajax and since then things have gone from bad to worse: the Public Accounts Committee pursuing a critical inquiry; the National Audit Office agreeing to my request and that of the Defence Committee for an urgent investigation; the Government's own Major Projects Authority again flagging Ajax red and saying that successful delivery "appears to be unachievable". This is a programme that has cost £3.5 billion to date, delivered just 14 vehicles and is set to be completed a decade late. The Minister's statement now puts Ajax on an end-of-life watch. He confirms that the vibration problems were well known before the Ajax trial started in 2019. Indeed, he said today there was an Army safety notice in place on that vehicle in 2018. How much did the Defence Secretary know about the flaws in Ajax when he published the Defence Command Paper in March backing Ajax, scrapping Warrior and scaling back Challenger?

The Minister now says that he has realised that what is required for Ajax is what he calls a full-time dedicated senior responsible owner. So for over a decade this Ajax programme, the most costly defence procurement, second only to the deterrent, has had nobody senior responsible who has taken full-time charge. No wonder Ajax is the biggest procurement failure since the Nimrod, and this has happened entirely on this Government's watch. Ministers are failing British forces and failing British taxpayers.

Specifically, can the Minister tell the House how many of the 248 Army personnel tested so far need medical treatment, and for what? What is the expected MOD cost for the additional trials and modifications? What impact will the indefinite delay have on the Army's

ability to deploy the essential planned strike brigade? Has the Minister approached the Welsh Government with a plan to support jobs at General Dynamics and the Welsh economy if Ajax is cancelled? What contingency plans are in place for the Army to have full reconnaissance and force protection capabilities while Ajax is delayed or indeed deleted?

There are alternatives to Ajax. So alongside the report that the Minister says he will commission from the new senior responsible officer on whether to complete or to cancel Ajax, will Ministers also commission full viability reports on modifying Boxer with its fourth generation ISTAR—intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance—capability, on the Combat Vehicle 90s used by our European NATO allies, and on the Warrior upgrade cancelled in the defence Command Paper? How much longer will it be before Ministers make a firm decision on the future of Ajax and provide certainty for all involved?

Finally, the defence Command Paper made it clear that the Government's rapid further cut in Army numbers is linked directly to more advanced technology based on the Ajax, so will Ministers also now halt their further cut in Army numbers at least until they have sorted out and fixed this fundamentally failing procurement?

**Jeremy Quin:** I am pleased to respond to the comments by the right hon. Gentleman. I think he was being just a little ungenerous in talking about statements being slipped out. I have always thought that it is best to inform this House as swiftly and transparently as possible. I was very pleased to make, on the first day this House returned, a statement that gave a full update as to where we were on Ajax. I was proud to make that statement in written ministerial form on Monday.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to my being guarded in this oral statement on full operating capacity. I am not being guarded. I state what is obviously and transparently the case. I cannot give a date on reaching FOC when I have said what I have said on initial operating capacity, which I mean and I will stick by—that is, that we will not accept an IOC until we have a clear resolution to the issues on noise and vibration. We are working through how that will impact and how the timetable will move on in getting from IOC to FOC, but quite transparently we need a vehicle that works and is fit for purpose, and that is what we are determined to deliver.

When this programme was initially set up in March 2010, under a different Administration, I do not believe there were, at that stage, SROs. I may be wrong, but I believe that SROs have been introduced subsequently. [Interruption.] You had them?

**John Healey:** We introduced them.

**Jeremy Quin:** I am better informed. So there were SROs in the MOD at that time, and I suspect that they would do what SROs have continued to do since, which is to have a proportion of their time allocated to particular projects. In saying that we want to have an SRO 100% committed to this project—and, I hope, the same SRO who will be able to carry it right the way through to completion—we are recognising the fact that this is a troubled programme that needs the extra resource and the commitment of a full-time SRO, and that is what we will deliver.

The right hon. Gentleman raised a number of issues. On health and safety and on medical concerns, I am determined, as I made clear in my written and my oral statement, that the full health and safety report will be published so that hon. Members can see it for themselves, and I will update the House on information regarding the medical testing at that stage.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about additional costs. There are no additional costs to be incurred by the MOD with regard to additional testing being done by General Dynamics. That is part of the overall contract. There will be additional costs incurred by the Ministry of Defence in conducting independent trials at Millbrook. I think that is right and appropriate. This is an independent process. I want to see the analysis coming to us, so we will be paying money for the Millbrook trials, but I think that is appropriate.

On the strike brigade and contingency plans, we cannot have Ajax introduced to the strike brigade until we have Ajax—that is axiomatic—but we do have clear views as to contingencies. The Army is always evolving its full process on contingencies. I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the very helpful session chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), the Chair of the Defence Committee, which was attended and spoken at by the Commander Field Army. There is a range of capabilities, including intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, as well as existing platforms, to fill any gap that is required to be filled.

I would counsel the right hon. Gentleman against what may be wholly unnecessary, inappropriate and inaccurate scaremongering about jobs. This is an incredibly important programme not only for the British Army but for thousands of people who are employed on it across the country—from memory, over 200 firms, including, as he says, General Dynamics in south Wales. We are committed to working with General Dynamics to achieve a resolution of these issues. As I have said before, I cannot 100% promise to this House that we will find a resolution to these issues, but we are determined to work it through with GD. As I have been very open and transparent in saying, an important step in that is the independent testing at Millbrook to enable us to know where the vibrations in the vehicle are originating from and whether the design modifications that are already being examined and thought through will work and achieve effect. I beg the right hon. Gentleman, and other Members, to be mindful of those people who will be concerned about their jobs and livelihoods, particularly if we can, as I sincerely hope and trust, find a long-term resolution to these issues, as we are determined, working with General Dynamics, to do.

**Mr Tobias Ellwood** (Bournemouth East) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on inheriting a dog's dinner of a procurement problem when it comes to our British Army's combat vehicle capability. He is trying to grasp this and grapple with it, but he has made very clear, and been honest with the House about, the challenges that are in front of us. As we have heard, we are reducing the numbers of tanks that we have. We are getting rid of all our Warrior armoured fighting vehicles and replacing them with Boxer, a wheeled vehicle that is excellent but does not have a turret. That makes it all the more important for Ajax to succeed, because it does have a turret. If we want to protect our dismounted troops,

they need a gun on the battlefield. Will my hon. Friend declare whether he has a deadline in mind for when this procurement process will end if the problems that he spoke about cannot be resolved? Can I recommend, anyway, that he introduces a variant of Boxer with a turret so that there is force protection for our dismounted troops on the battlefield?

**Jeremy Quin:** I thank my right hon. Friend for congratulating me on taking on this programme. As he knows from his own time in Defence, these procurements take a long time. However, I can absolutely assure him that I am very focused on this, as I am on other procurement issues, and determined to be transparent and open to this House.

My right hon. Friend raises a number of interesting points. Boxer is modular, as he knows. We have said that we are looking to expand the number of Boxers we have. It is a very useful vehicle. I was very pleased to be present in Stockport to see the assembly line beginning to go into action there. It certainly has capabilities, and we will look to see how we can add lethality to that over time, which could take a number of forms.

In terms of a deadline on Ajax, it would be all too easy to set an artificial deadline for when I can tell this House that we know all the answers, but I just cannot do that—it would not be being transparent with this place. I do not know how long it will take for the Millbrook trials to be concluded and how long it will take to analyse the results. I do not know, at this stage, whether the design modifications currently being worked on and examined will then work with the assessments that we have from Millbrook to be able to say there is a tick in the box and it will come through. I am putting on a lot of pressure to get the right results, but consistent with doing trials on a safe and appropriate basis, as my right hon. Friend would expect. As soon as I have more information to share with the House, I will be only too delighted to do so.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): In July, we had General Dynamics in front of the Defence Committee. GD's general manager for the programme was kind enough to inform us that prior to their job there, they had been director of land equipment for the MOD, meaning that they were negotiating the superb deal that they got for GD with one of the successors in the job at Main Building. By happy coincidence—this will be no surprise to those who are now going to have to take medical advice because of the Ajax failures—during these negotiations GD would also have been able to call on the advice of the former Chief of the General Staff, Sir Peter Wall: a member of its board since 2016, with just over a year having elapsed from when they had left post to take up this new role.

I hasten to add that it is not just about Ajax and General Dynamics any more. The UK's largest defence contractors are able call on the expertise of numerous gamekeepers turned poachers trousering handsome rewards for their inside knowledge of the procurement process. Can the Minister tell the House and those members of the armed forces now having to seek medical attention how they will ensure that they do not squander this most recent injection of cash in the way that their predecessors have and how they will stop allowing taxpayers' money to get taken a loan of by these defence contractors?

**Jeremy Quin:** As the hon. Gentleman is well aware, there is an Advisory Committee on Business Appointments process that former senior members of the military, as indeed do Government officials, have to go through before taking on outside roles. They are required to seek advice and stick to the advice provided by that committee. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the £24 billion that the Government have invested in defence was needed, is vital and will be well invested and scrutinised. I am determined to learn any lessons that we need to learn from this process to ensure that they are well applied and well met in our future procurements.

**Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con):** I thank the Minister for his frank and transparent response. The assembly of the Ajax in Merthyr Tydfil contributes greatly to prosperity and jobs in north Wales, but he will know that the Defence Committee has taken a keen interest in the Ajax project, and we have concerns, mainly around the effective use of taxpayers' money. Is he in a position to tell us how much the ammunition for the Ajax 40 mm cannon costs?

**Jeremy Quin:** I am not. I am writing to the Defence Committee, of which my hon. Friend is a very important member, on exactly that issue, as well as other issues that the Committee raised after my appearance before it. I have seen lots of rumours about the costs of rounds, many of which are way out, but I am constrained. As the House will appreciate, there is nothing more commercially sensitive for a supplier than the exact price of a particular product that it sells to one of its major customers.

If I may, I will explain the difference between 30 mm and 40 mm. An analysis was conducted by the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory. As the Committee and the House are well aware, there is extra weight on armoured fighting vehicles to enhance the survivability of the crew within them. Given those trends, DSTL's view was that we needed a heavier weight of ammunition to have effect and to have lethality. That was why we went for the 40 mm rather than the 30 mm option for Ajax, in combination with the entire system, including the stabilisation. The extra punch from the 40 mm, with the system that supports it, means that we would expect to get lethality from one shot. That is incredibly important to our service personnel. It means that they are not dwelling to get an accurate shot and they are not, unlike with the 30 mm, required to send a burst with a shotgun effect. They have a single precision strike. When we look for value for money, the ability to protect our crews and to provide lethality and to ensure that we get that one strike are what is important.

As a result, when we compare the costs of a round of 40 mm with a round of 30 mm, we are comparing a 30 mm burst of three rounds with, in normal circumstances, one shot from the 40 mm. That is the context of value for money, which I hope will persuade my hon. Friend that it is not just a straightforward round-for-round shell comparison. It does not give the full answer.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Can I just remind the Minister to face forward so that he is facing the microphone? I understand the temptation to look at the person who has asked the question, but it is so that things can be properly recorded. Can we have short questions and shorter answers, please?

**Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab):** The Minister will be aware that I have had a passing interest in this project for a number of years. In June, the MOD gave the impression that everything was on track. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) said, in the same month the Infrastructure and Projects Authority said that it was unachievable. I thank the Minister for his honesty and for telling us something new today—that these vibration problems were known about a lot earlier than was admitted by GD or anyone else at the Select Committee. I welcome the fact that the Millbrook trials have started, but can he indicate when they will be completed, because that is important?

Finally, the Minister said he met the head of GD recently to discuss this project and other things. If and when he cancels this project, where will the liability lie? Will it be with the UK subsidiary or the main parent company? I can envisage years of litigation on this project if it is cancelled. Where does the liability lie? If it is with the UK subsidiary, that is a very different kettle of fish from the main GD board.

**Jeremy Quin:** I will be fixed entirely in front of me in answering the right hon. Gentleman, Mr Deputy Speaker. First, I just make one point that sounds like semantics, but it is not. On the MPA report, as I understand it, "unachievable" does not mean unachievable; it means unachievable without the risks and problems associated with the programme being addressed. We are in the business of addressing those problems and issues to make certain that the projects go forward. The right hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention—it was important to clarify this for the House—to the fact that there was a recognition of vibration points earlier. I made that point to him in the Select Committee hearing, as he may recall, as well as in the written ministerial statement earlier this week.

On the contract, I hope it never gets to cancellation. I hope and trust that we will resolve this issue and bring the vehicle into service, but I understand the interest of the right hon. Gentleman and his Select Committee colleagues in that contract. I will be writing to the Chairman of the Select Committee, and I am trying to find a way that we can share more details of the contract to help reassure the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues on the Committee in an appropriate way, which I know the Committee will respect, to enhance their understanding without breaching our commercial undertakings.

**Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con):** If a remedy is identified, where will the bill for that land?

**Jeremy Quin:** With General Dynamics.

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab):** Time and time again, when it comes to defence procurement, programmes are beset by delays, costs spiralling out of control and poor oversight—in short, the abysmal contract management of public money. Ajax has been no different. The Minister will recall dodging any responsibility in July's Defence Committee sitting for the failings of this programme. A lessons learned review was then promised over the summer. Where is it?

**Jeremy Quin:** The most important report from my perspective is the health and safety report, which will deliver an entire timeline as to events that are troubling



and concerning, and that will be published in full. In parallel, we have been doing a lot of work, as I said to the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), on how we move from IOC to FOC. We are looking at all aspects of this programme. As I said in the written ministerial statement and repeated today, on the conclusion, finalisation and publication of the health and safety report, I will be saying what our next steps are, not only in relation to health and safety but across the project as a whole.

**Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): This £4 billion debacle is an example of exactly why the MOD's procurement process is completely broken. The IPA analysis has already been referred to. Each year, it goes through the top 36 MOD procurement programmes and grades them with a traffic light. Ajax is red, unlikely ever to be achieved. How many of the 36 were green and successfully on track? None. Zero, zilch, nothing. Not one major MOD procurement programme is successfully on track. This is over £100 billion of British taxpayers' money. The procurement system at Abbey Wood is a shambles, and presiding over this steaming heap of institutional incompetence is the Minister. You are losing 36-0 on behalf of the British taxpayer. *[Interruption.]* It might be nice if you were not laughing about it. This is massive amounts of taxpayers' money. You are 36-0 down, you have got a broken system and you are in total denial. What are you doing about it?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans)**: Before I call the Minister, please remember to not use the term "you". I ask for shorter questions, please.

**Jeremy Quin**: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was smiling merely at the sporting analogy, which I do not think is appropriate. I have already mentioned the MPA's valuable role, and I am grateful for the work that the IPA is doing in assisting us by looking at the project and how its management can be improved. It has a series of traffic light systems, and my right hon. Friend is right that two of our projects are rated red. There is a whole series of colours; from memory, three projects are green-amber. None is green, which would signal that there are no problems. However, in fairness, if we look at every major country acquiring major defence assets, we see that these are complex and difficult programmes. The importance of the MPA is that it draws attention to problems and to the issues that need to be undertaken and achieved to hit programme targets. A red rating does not mean that it is wholly unachievable; it does mean that there are very serious issues to be addressed, as is patently the case with Ajax, and as I would be the very first to admit that.

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): We have learnt some things today. Unachievable does not actually mean unachievable. The Minister also said that if eventually the programme ends, the liability lies with General Dynamics. What does that mean for the £3.5 billion that has already been paid for the delivery of only 14 vehicles? Will we get that back? Following the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), and my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), the most important question is: what are the timescales for the tests and for the re-engineering? What is the end date? At what stage—roughly what month, or even

which quarter—will the Minister decide whether the project is still viable or when it is time to draw stumps and start again?

**Jeremy Quin**: What we have with General Dynamics is a firm price contract. That means that it has undertaken to deliver 589 vehicles for a set specification, and we have undertaken to pay it £5.5 billion for that number of vehicles, at that specification. There is clarity on the contract. It is a strong, firm contract on which GD is determined to deliver, and we are working closely with it. I am afraid, however, that I cannot give a firm date. I know that the right hon. Gentleman, like other hon. Members, would like me to do so—and I would, too. The reality is that we need to get those trials done and the tests analysed, and then we need to find out whether the proposed engineering solutions will work. The right hon. Gentleman is generous and would not wish me to provide alarm and concern to the employees and firms that are doing the work. I know that he appreciates that we need to do the work and ensure that we do our utmost to make the programme work.

**Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con): I have great sympathy for the Minister's finding himself in this situation, but I also have sympathy for the taxpayer, who seems to be hammered on a regular basis under this Government. On the 3.5 billion, can he assure me that the taxpayer will get the money back? Also, on this and future contracts, will he make it his business to ensure that the taxpayer is completely and utterly protected?

**Jeremy Quin**: I reassure my hon. Friend that this is a firm price contract. It is a good contract. We have gone over it, as he can imagine, and there is a requirement for GD to produce the vehicles to the specification in return for the funds expended. He would not expect me to go through the details of that contract, which are commercially sensitive. He is a member of the Defence Committee, and I hope that there may be a way in which, in a different forum, we may be able to shed some more light, but he will understand that commercial sensitivities are such that to go through the details of the contract in this House at this time would not be appropriate.

**Dave Doogan** (Angus) (SNP): This fiasco surrounds a complex military fighting vehicle, but we need to be clear that the technologically advanced fighting assets are not what is at issue here. What is clearly at issue, with the intractable vibration problems, is the basic vehicle. Moreover, it is almost certainly not due to the German MTU V8 diesels or the German Renk transmissions. We are therefore narrowing it down—I am even narrowing it down for the Department—so why are we, the taxpayers, on the hook for the testing at Millbrook and why has the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory not been called in finally to analyse what has gone wrong with the vehicle? If it has, what did it find?

**Jeremy Quin**: I reassure the hon. Member that DSTL has been engaged, but Millbrook has an international reputation. As I said in the statement, one of the recommendations likely to come through from the health and safety report is that we should be more open and forward-leaning in getting independent analysis and safety verification. If a regulated entity is taking advice from independents about the nature of a product it is

[Jeremy Quin]

buying, it is better to get that advice direct and to pay for it. He who pays the piper calls the tune. I would rather be paying for that independent analysis myself and get it on behalf of the taxpayer, knowing that we have full sight and full visibility on those reports, than going through any third party. That is the rationale.

**Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): My father spent many happy years in the Royal Tank Regiment in scout cars in the desert, but he later developed tinnitus, which is an irritating condition. The Minister said that more than 300 people were involved in the trials. What concerns has he got to follow up with them in the long term to ensure that their health is monitored?

**Jeremy Quin:** To date, 310 have been identified as being at possible risk. We therefore want to ensure that all of those 310 are given the opportunity to have tests, though we cannot require it. I think I said that so far 248 have been tested, including 113 of the original 121 identified. That is part of an ongoing process to make certain that we monitor hearing over time. I am committed to reporting to the House any trends that emerge in that analysis. I am concerned about it, which is why we went down the route of the health and safety report. The surgeon general is very much focused on that as well. I will update the House as and when more news emerges.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I do not envy the Minister one little bit; he has always been most courteous in dealing with me and all my requests and approaches. Just some of that £3.5 billion would have gone a long way to sorting out one of our long-standing problems: recruitment for the British Army. I note that he did not respond to the shadow Secretary of State's point about halting the cut in the British Army. Will he now reconsider that point and perhaps address it directly?

**Jeremy Quin:** It is fair for the hon. Gentleman to refer me back to what the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) said. Ajax is a highly sophisticated technological platform. That is the intention. It will be a step change in the capability offered, but it is one of a very large number of new technologically advanced platforms. There is risk in bringing forward such platforms, but with the way the threat is and the way in which the world is evolving, we need them. Whether that be long-range precision strikes, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance or Boxer, the requirement to have more technologically advanced vehicles, effectors and ISR capabilities is absolutely real. With those capabilities, we can have greater effect with fewer personnel, be more lethal and achieve our defence ambitions and objectives against the threats we currently see.

I understand that recruitment is holding up well, as well it might. There is a great career in the armed forces, and I sincerely hope that people continue to see the opportunities.

**Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): Recent events in Afghanistan have reminded us once again—if we needed reminding—of the huge debt of gratitude that we owe our armed forces, and correspondingly underlined that

we owe it to them to do everything we can to preserve their safety. Will my hon. Friend assure me that, in defence procurement, safety will always be a priority and never sacrificed to cost or time?

**Jeremy Quin:** My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. That should always be the case. I do not think we should need a health and safety report to remind us of that, but I look forward to the report and its recommendations. Given what was said on that in the written ministerial statement, it is important that lessons are learned.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): This is a five-star shambles. The Government are guilty of negligence. This is not good enough when service personnel have been put at risk. There could be a massive waste of money and now people's livelihoods may be hanging in the balance. We should not scaremonger, but we should prepare. Can I press the Minister again: what discussion has he had with the Welsh Government to prepare contingencies should the worst come to the worst?

**Jeremy Quin:** I know the hon. Gentleman is a keen supporter of General Dynamics and employment in his constituency in south Wales, and he will appreciate what I was saying earlier—I meant it genuinely, as I always do when I say things in this House—about how we are working with General Dynamics to find a solution to this. Of course I cannot give a 100% guarantee, but I do believe that we can work together. I sincerely hope we find a solution, and I know that nothing would please him, this House and me more than to have that resolved, have it sorted and then go on to export Ajax globally. I want to raise our eyes and get the right results, rather than focus on worst-case scenarios that I sincerely hope will not be the case.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): May I commend the Minister for the forensic way in which he has tried to get to the bottom of a mess that is not of his making?

The Royal Dragoon Guards based at Battlesbury barracks in my constituency operate, or are meant to operate, the Ajax fighting vehicle, and many of them will be very concerned at the hand-arm vibration syndrome and noise-induced hearing loss that some of them may be victims of. It is a betrayal of the military covenant. He knows very well that there are senior members of the Ministry of Defence, serving and retired, who knew full well the risk of this vehicle at an early stage. Will he ensure that the institutional cloak of invisibility that the MOD traditionally operates does not apply in their case, since if they are allowed to get away with it, as it were, we will not get to grips with the cultural issues that have dogged defence procurement for years?

**Jeremy Quin:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his courtesy and generosity to me personally. Can I reassure him and this House that I will stop at nothing in making certain that we do get to the bottom of this and get to the lessons that need to be learned? He has my absolute assurance and commitment on that. I refer him to my oral statement, in which I said:

“Following the report's conclusion, we will consider what further investigations are required to see if poor decision making, failures in leadership or systemic organisational issues contributed to the current situation”.

I have said that in writing and orally, and I mean it. That does not mean that we have come to any conclusions, but it does mean that everything needs to be on the table. We need to ensure, if mistakes have happened, that we learn from them, execute on them and make sure they are never repeated.

**James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): It is relatively unprecedented for such a new and expensive platform not to make its projected IOC date because of a special report on health and safety. Does the Minister agree that there are many failures in the whole process, and could he please assure me of when IOC might be—any indication at all—because this is ultimately about the delivery of equipment to the frontline?

**Jeremy Quin:** Earlier this year I made a point of saying that, on Ajax, I did not want any IOC to be declared without its going through my office to ensure that I personally, as well as everyone else, was fully satisfied we had kit that would work. That was made clear early on, and I have made it clear when issues have re-emerged that under no circumstances would we be taking into IOC a vehicle that was not fit for purpose and that we need to find a pathway to long-term resolutions on noise and vibration. That is what my hon. Friend would want me to say. It is what the British Army would want me to say; it wants to have vehicles that work and are reliable. The flipside is that I cannot therefore, sadly, give my hon. Friend a date. What I can do is give him my assurance that we will have something that works and meets our specifications when we put it into IOC.

**Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): The Minister has been very clear with the House today that the contract in place is a firm price contract to deliver the 589 vehicles and the various variants to their specification. Can he assure the House that the rest of the system, for which he is responsible to this House, shares his determination to deliver these vehicles once the health and safety issues have been addressed—that the British Army, the chiefs of staff in their entirety and the Ministry of Defence share his determination?

**Jeremy Quin:** As my right hon. Friend knows very well from his experience, this is an important platform for the future of the British Army, and it really will help us deliver against the threats we are contemplating daily. We need to have it sorted, and we need to have it into service. The commitment that I am showing to work with General Dynamics to resolve these issues, if they can possibly be resolved—and I sincerely hope they can be—is shared throughout the Ministry of Defence and throughout the armed forces. We want this into service, but we want it into service on the basis that it will work, fill our requirements and be the effective tool that our military deserve and need.

**Miss Sarah Dines** (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I have many servicemen and women in Derbyshire Dales. Can the Minister please reassure me that sufficient money but, more importantly, sufficient effort is put into treating all those affected? I know that the culture in the institution does sometimes mean that servicemen and women will not complain and will not mention what is happening. I want an assurance about the effort that is going into tracing everybody.

**Jeremy Quin:** Specifically to reassure my hon. Friend on that point, we are not waiting for people to come to us. We are going out to the 310 service personnel we have identified in various cohorts who have had experience of Ajax. For example, we are specifically asking them to fill in questionnaires about vibration and to let us know if they have any concerns. I would encourage any service personnel who feel they have concerns to make that known so they can undergo tests and ensure that we can monitor that situation. I hope—I sincerely hope—that my concerns are not justified, but this House would want us to do the testing and to take every precaution to ensure we know what the situation is, and that is what we are doing.

**Mr Simon Clarke** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I would like to thank the Minister for his typical courtesy and thoroughness this afternoon, which has been very impressive.

I hope that General Dynamics has heard the deep concern of this House about the status of this procurement episode, because it is clearly extremely concerning. The world is getting more dangerous, and we need these vehicles in operation. Notwithstanding the very considerable sunk costs and time of this project, we will need a point of resolution in the near future. Will the Minister confirm to the House that, in the interim, alternative options are being pursued in case this project needs to be drawn to a conclusion? We cannot afford a procurement gap that might last for years, given the state of the world at the moment.

**Jeremy Quin:** To reassure my hon. Friend, I am sure General Dynamics will be very aware of this discussion. I did say in the statement that I had met the chairman and chief executive of GD in July, and she emphasised how strong its determination is to get this resolved. It wants this platform to work, and so do we. We are all focused on the same thing, and that is the point. I would rather not dwell on the second half of his question, because I do believe we can get there. I cannot give a 100% guarantee—of course I cannot—but we have a lot of investment, time, effort and focus on this vehicle, and I sincerely hope we can make it work.

**Jane Stevenson** (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): I thank the Minister for the full and open update to the House today. I am really disturbed by the health risks our armed forces personnel are being exposed to from vibration and noise. We know that hearing loss can lead to complex long-term problems, and it is irreversible in most cases. Could he guarantee that no more risk will be taken and that no service person will be put into the Ajax until these health and safety issues have been fully resolved?

**Jeremy Quin:** That is a good question from my hon. Friend. I can absolutely reassure her that the safety panel has been convened and has been working through the summer to find a way to allow limited use—and it is only limited use—to undertake the trials at Millbrook. Having done a lot of work on it, with independent advisers as well as the duty holders from the MOD and others, it believes it has found a way forward that is safe and allows the trials to take place. In due course, when we learn the lessons from those trials, they will enable us to have a safe manner of working in the future.

[Jeremy Quin]

However, the nub of this, and it is a good point on which to end, is that we need a fundamental resolution of these issues. We want Ajax to come into service, and we want it to work. We want to work with General Dynamics to achieve resolution. We need this kit—it is useful, valuable equipment that the British Army is looking forward to having—but we will only have IOC when we have a path to long-term resolution on noise and vibration, and we are committed to working towards that.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I thank the Minister for his statement and for responding to questions for the last 50 minutes.

## Committee on Standards

1 pm

**The Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household (Stuart Andrew):** I beg to move,

That this House endorses the recommendations in paragraphs 52, 55 and 64 of the Second Report of the Committee on Standards, HC 582; and accordingly suspends—

(a) Mrs Natalie Elphicke from the service of the House for a period of one sitting day, on Friday 10 September;

(b) Sir Roger Gale from the service of the House for a period of one sitting day, on Friday 10 September; and

(c) Theresa Villiers from the service of the House for a period of one sitting day, on Friday 10 September.

Today's motion follows the publication of the Committee on Standards Second Report of this Session. The report was agreed by the Committee and published on 21 July 2021. The Government have sought to schedule a debate as soon as possible, as is usual practice. It is always regrettable when such a motion is before the House. The matter has been investigated by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, and reported on by the Committee on Standards. I thank the commissioner and the Committee for producing the report. The motion endorses the recommendations of the Committee, and proposes that the hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke), and the right hon. Members for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) and for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) be suspended from the service of the House for one sitting day. I commend the motion to the House.

1.1 pm

**Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab):** I thank the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), and the Committee on Standards for their diligent work and fair recommendations, clearly expressed. It is never enjoyable for any of us when a motion to suspend Members comes before the House. It is disappointing for us all, and it does no good to the reputation of this place in which we are all proud to serve, or to the rules by which we should be bound, as I believe most Members are on a daily basis.

To a certain extent I am not at all surprised, because where there is an example from the top, such as when the Prime Minister was happy to prorogue Parliament entirely illegally, it is not surprising that five Members on the Government Benches felt it appropriate to interfere and improperly influence judicial matters in the trial of a former Member. As the Committee on Standards pointed out, it is particularly egregious that two of the Members involved had substantial legal experience, and I am disappointed to read in the report that at least one Member is continuing to maintain that he did not breach the rules, and that he would do the same again. I find that troubling, and I give notice hereby that I will be carefully scrutinising the letters of apology that the Committee on Standards recommended, because unfortunately this brings a bad note to us all.

Thankfully, and rightly, the letters were completely disregarded by the Lord Chief Justice, and I note that the Members involved—with the exception of the one I mentioned—have fully apologised and taken account of their actions and the consequences of those actions. However, this behaviour is corrosive. It does nothing but undermine trust in Parliament and damage our

reputation. It could have ended up undermining the independence of the judiciary, which is one of the standards we hold dear for this country, and one of the things that we send our armed forces out to defend throughout the world. We talked much this summer about the separation of powers as a part of British values, and about the importance of democracy and the rule of law. This issue is part of that.

The detail in the report of mitigating and aggravating factors troubles me, but I will leave it to my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda to speak about that in more detail. Instead of using appropriate and proper channels to raise their concerns, the fact that these individual Members chose to write privately to senior judges to request intervention on a decision with which they disagreed is reprehensible. I am glad that the Committee has shown that alternative courses of action were open to those Members, which they chose not to take. The Labour party thanks the commissioner and the Committee for their investigation into that conduct. That Members attempted to influence the judiciary is a matter of utmost seriousness.

I know the Leader of the House will come back and say that Friday is a sitting day—I note that it is not the Leader of the House in front of me, and it is obviously always a pleasure to see the right hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew). However, I wish to make a serious point. Friday is a sitting day, yes, but it is not the same as missing an entire day—we all know that. Yes, it is a sitting day, but it is not a Monday. It is not a day on which any of those Members will lose their right to question Ministers or table questions. It is a day on which we have private Member's Bills, and it is a pity that the Government chose to impose this sentence on that day. A different type of sitting day is available—it is called Monday.

There is no previous precedent for Members to be suspended on a Friday, and given that many Members, including those concerned, are unlikely to be here anyway, it is not as if it is an inconvenience. If the Government believe that to try to unduly influence the judiciary and bring the reputation of Parliament into disrepute is a serious offence, it would have been more fitting for them to have decided that the suspension should fall on a normal sitting day. I will be watching closely for the letters of apology, and I thank the Committee and the commissioner once again for their diligent work.

1.5 pm

**Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I have worries about this. I have worries about the Committee's report, and certainly about the behaviour of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, as I think some of her investigation methods require looking at. Regarding this case, I am concerned that the Committee is effectively setting down guidelines for the use of parliamentary correspondence with respect to the judiciary. On many occasions, I have reason to take interest in miscarriages of justice that may not relate directly to debates in the Commons or to individual constituents, but where I would want to intervene. I worry that today's judgment curtails that, and I give notice, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I will seek a debate on that issue at some point. We must ensure that this judgment does not constrain those of us who care about the rule of law and about justice, and that we do not interpret this as a

sterilisation of the position between Members of the House with real concerns, and the judiciary.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I am sure the right hon. Gentleman has read the whole of the report because he is a very diligent Member. I know that, and I fully understand the point he makes. I do not want any MP to be prevented from trying to deal with miscarriages of justice. There are proper ways of doing that, and there are improper ways. I hope Members will find it helpful that we had strong legal advice from Speaker's Counsel on the difference between those two ways, which we laid out in paragraphs 75 and 76 of the report. I hope that is helpful to Members. Our intention and hope is to send that to all Members, and of course I would welcome a full debate at some point.

**Mr Davis:** From memory, this was referring back to a previous judgment of the hon. Gentleman's Committee back in 1998-2000 on what was or was not appropriate. I think this is not a decision for Speaker's Counsel; it is a decision for this House as to how the separation of powers works. It is not simply a legal issue; it is a moral and constitutional issue, and it should be decided by the Chamber in total, not by individual officers of the House.

1.7 pm

**Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): I will be brief, because many of my comments have already been made. I join the thanks to the Chair of the Committee on Standards and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards for coming forward with this outcome. It is important that Members of the House are held to the highest possible standards and that, when sometimes behaviours fall short, actions are taken. I echo the comments of the shadow Leader of the House, because the suspension on a sitting Friday does not send the right message about outcomes if behaviour is found to fall short. I ask the Government to take account of that. We must do everything we can to ensure the independence of the judiciary, and I look forward to the debate mentioned by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis). In the meantime, it is clear that the Committee has performed its role with acclaim in taking this action, and I hope the Government will take account of the comments made.

1.8 pm

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I hope the House will bear with me if I speak for a little longer than others have, because it is important to put on the record precisely what the case is. It is always a delight to see the Deputy Chief Whip, and I understand why the Leader of the House is unable to be here. He has explained that to me, and I fully understand. However, if I might just mark the card for the future, it is inappropriate for a Whip to be moving a motion of this kind. It should be moved by the Leader of the House—that has been the tradition in the past—or by another Minister. There is a slight danger that if this gets into party politics, the whole system will fall apart, which would be inappropriate. I am not making any allegation at all about the Deputy Chief Whip; I just think it would have been better—I think he probably does too—if it had been somebody

[Chris Bryant]

else. [Interruption.] Well, I gather that he has told lots of other people that he wished it was somebody else doing it.

I do not want to rehearse every element of this issue, but I want for a start to draw an important distinction that has not been properly understood in the wider public. This is not about whether the MPs should have written character references for Mr Elphicke. They were at perfect liberty so to do. That is a service that Members provide quite often, for either their constituents or their friends and associates. It is perfectly legitimate to do so, and in normal court proceedings there is a way of doing that. In fact, the courts deliberately have a proper means of gathering and assessing those references. My Committee makes absolutely no criticism whatsoever of the Members concerned for those original character references.

The issue here was that Mrs Justice Whipple, who had presided over the original trial, had to rule in a further proceeding, under rule 5.7 of the Criminal Procedure Rules, whether and to what degree those references should be made public. I think everybody accepts that the final decision she came to was a good one. She sought representations from those who had submitted references, including the five MPs, and expected those to come through Mr Elphicke's lawyers, who by that stage were acting for the court itself.

The MPs, however, chose to ignore that proper channel, and instead sought to bypass Mrs Justice Whipple. They wrote as MPs to Dame Kathryn Thirlwall, senior presiding judge for England and Wales, and Dame Victoria Sharp, president of the Queen's bench division, only copying Mrs Justice Whipple, in the hope that they would, in turn, lean on Mrs Justice Whipple. That is the bit that we considered to be inappropriate.

The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) is absolutely right that that is not a matter for Speaker's Counsel to decide; it is a matter for the House to decide, but that is what we have come to a conclusion on. It was an improper attempt to influence a judicial proceeding, and, frankly, it is not the way we do justice in this country. It may be the way that justice is done in other countries, where politicians lean on judges; it is not the way we do business in this country. As we say, the fact that the letter was copied to Mrs Justice Whipple rather than addressed to her directly implies that the Members were attempting to exercise an undue influence over her through her superiors rather than informing the hearing.

**Mr David Davis:** I read the Committee's report at speed, so I want to be clear in my own mind what crime, or misdemeanour, we are talking about. My understanding from my reading was that the MPs were making representations to protect the privacy of other individuals who had given references. Is that right or wrong?

**Chris Bryant:** They were making representations trying to say that various of the character references should or should not be revealed in public, and that was the matter that was being decided in the judicial proceeding by Mrs Justice Whipple. Mrs Justice Whipple had engaged Mr Elphicke's original lawyers as officers of the court to seek representations on that matter, but the MPs did not go through that process; they went through a different

process by contacting the senior judges, who were senior to Mrs Justice Whipple, and that is the inappropriate action. There was a perfectly legitimate matter of concern to the court and there was a proper process, and the MPs did not use that process; they used an improper process for seeking to influence the outcome.

That is why, as I referred to earlier, in paragraphs 75 and 76 of our report, we drew a distinction between what is a perfectly appropriate means of engaging in a judicial process and what we consider to be an inappropriate one. I am not a big fan of the term "separation of powers", because, in our history, it has been a bit more complicated than people sometimes suggest. However, I do believe in comity—that is to say that Parliament has its role and the courts have their role, and the two need to be absolutely distinct if we are to make sure that there is proper justice available to everybody.

I am sorry to offend the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden, but I am going to quote Speaker's Counsel again. She told us:

"The proper relationship between Parliament and the courts requires that the courts should be left to get on with their work. No matter how great the pressure at times from interest groups or constituents, Parliament should not permit itself to appear as an alternative forum for canvassing the rights and wrongs of issues being considered by the judicial arm of the state on evidence yet to be presented and tested."

The place for those things to be contested and tested is the court, not here, which is why we have the sub judice rule, apart from anything else. Some Members have suggested to me that this is a remarkably minor point. We disagree. Indeed, the evidence that we were given—not least the comments from the Lord Chief Justice—was very clear that it is not considered to be a minor point.

We scrupulously treated each individual as a separate case. Both the commissioner and the Committee gave each Member a full opportunity to explain themselves in person and/or in writing. That is why we recommended different sanctions in each case.

I should say that the Committee has come under some criticism for being too lenient. The public commentary on this issue mostly suggests that we have been too lenient, not too strict. There are those who think that a longer suspension would have been more suitable. Some have pointed out that a Member could be suspended from the House for five days for calling another hon. Member a liar, but only a single day for what is considered to be a fundamental breach of the rules of the House. I just note that the only press that I have seen relating to today's debate says that the timing that the Government have inserted in the motion means that the Members will miss only consideration of legislation proposed by Back-Bench MPs, with Friday sittings traditionally not well attended, rather than a busy day when any crucial Government business will be considered.

To all that, I say that the Committee does not recommend suspension from the House lightly. I think it is fair to say that we pretty much agonise about doing this, because we know that it can feel like quite a blot or stain on someone's career. I have spoken, I think, to nearly all the Members concerned. It is a very serious sanction. Some have pointed out that the independence of the courts is such a basic part of the British constitution that it is genuinely shocking that Members of Parliament should have acted like this. That particularly applies to the long-standing Member who refused to accept that

he had made a mistake—although he does now, and he has written a fulsome apology—and the two Members who are qualified or have practised in the law. As we say in our report, all three of them, frankly, should have known better.

However, we also recognise that there has never been an explicit rule forbidding MPs from interfering with judicial proceedings, nor a general rule against Members attempting to use their position as a Member of Parliament to exert improper influence or gain improper advantage. In a sense, that is because we always thought those things to be self-evident.

Let me make one final point. The Committee has already expressed concern—as has the independent expert panel, which deals with cases of sexual harassment and bullying—about the Government's refusal to bring motions to the House at the earliest possibility. We normally expect these things to come to the House within 48 hours. I say this very gently, but I would worry if the Government were picking and choosing when to bring a motion to the House.

I think Sir Stephen Irwin, the chair of the independent expert panel, wrote to the Government to make the point that it would obviously be an inappropriate and partisan point if the Government were choosing to table a motion on a particular day so as either to remove a Member from a vote or to enable a Member to vote. There is an argument for the motion to be tabled by the Committee itself rather than by the Government, and for the Speaker to grant it precedence. That could only happen, of course, if we were to change Standing Orders, and that is not in the gift of the Committee.

**Mr David Davis** *rose*—

**Chris Bryant:** I was about to be on my last sentence, but of course I give way to the right hon. Gentleman—he is so tempting.

**Mr David Davis:** As the hon. Gentleman did to me. I am actually going to commend him for this. The punishment here is not denial of access to the House of Commons; the punishment is reputational. In truth, those who think that someone should be stopped from coming in on Budget day, or whatever, misunderstand the nature of the punishment. The aim of the punishment is not to deny the constituents of those MPs the right to be represented on an important day in the House. The punishment is entirely reputational, so I think the Committee did that right.

**Chris Bryant:** I completely accept that. In fact, I do not like the word “punishment”. Of course this may feel like a punishment, but we prefer the word “sanction”. We have deliberately tried over the past 18 months, since I have been Chair, to create a sort of tariff of sanctions, which we apply according to the seriousness of the misdemeanour and to a set of aggravating and mitigating factors, which we try to bear in mind in relation to each individual. We have laid that out in the report.

It is unusual to have a report that refers to several Members; I am not aware of any case where we have drawn a distinction between each of the Members who have been engaged in a similar action. I hope the House

would be reassured that the fact we have drawn a distinction between the five Members, because of their seniority, their previous careers and so on, is an indication that we are only seeking to bring in a sanction that is commensurate with the situation before us. We are not a court of law; we do not have competing parties and everybody represented by lawyers and all the rest of it. However, we seek to give proper consideration to both the reputational risk for an individual, even when an investigation is started, and the reputational risk for the House if we were not to take these matters seriously. We also try to make sure that there is natural justice for each of the individuals, from the beginning to the end.

We would like to bring in some changes to our practices in the future, and we are close to completing the report on the code of conduct, which will make some statements about this. We need to be a bit clearer from the very beginning in explaining to an individual Member what will happen in an investigation when the Commissioner is engaged and when the Committee is engaged we probably need to give a clearer indication of the exact process again, because no Member should have to have all this stored in their head against the day when they might suddenly find themselves in a difficult situation.

I have spoken for too long, as is my wont, but I hope that this has been helpful to the House. If hon. Members are ever in doubt about a course of action they are intending to take, the Commissioner, myself or the Registrar—we have a new Registrar, James Davies, who has just started—are always there to provide confidential advice if people would like it.

**Stuart Andrew:** It was remiss of me at the beginning not to give apologies on behalf of the Leader of the House, who is unable to be here today. I have deputised for him before at business questions and in Adjournment debates, so it is in that capacity that I have been doing this today.

I agree that the report raises some important points and I welcome the fact that the Committee is considering them as part of its review. It would be helpful for everybody to have clear guidance. All Members of this House want to ensure that we are not in danger of doing something incorrectly, sometimes with the best of intentions. This is about making sure that we get that balance right. I also welcome the contribution from my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), who is right to say that Members could sometimes be scared of doing the right thing. So I am sure a debate on this would be welcomed by many Members from across the House.

There has been discussion about the sitting Friday. I gently point out that it is a sitting day. The report was published the day before recess and it is logical that the suspension takes place the following day after the motion is laid. We have tried to get this motion in as quickly as possible, and this has been a busy week. We are following exactly the recommendations of the Committee.

I accept that some important points have been raised here, and I will ensure that they are relayed to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. I commend the motion to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Bill (Programme) (No.2)

*Ordered,*

That the (Order of 28 June) Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Bill (Programme) be varied as follows:

- (1) Paragraphs (4) and (5) of the Order shall be omitted.
- (2) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.
- (3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.—(*Luke Hall.*)

## Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Bill

*Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee*

### New Clause 1

#### DUTY TO REPORT ON DIRECTORS OF DISSOLVED COMPANIES

‘(1) The Secretary of State must lay a report before each House of Parliament no later than three months after the day on which this Act is passed, and during each three month period thereafter.

(2) Each report under subsection (1) must include the number of former directors of dissolved companies the Insolvency Service has—

- (a) investigated; and
- (b) disqualified both in the three-month period prior to the report being published, and in total since section 1 came into force.’—(*Jeff Smith.*)

*This new clause would place an obligation on the Secretary of State to report the number of former directors of dissolved companies investigated and disqualified by the Insolvency Service.*

*Brought up, and read the First time.*

1.25 pm

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—*Guidance on non-domestic rating and coronavirus*—

‘(1) The Secretary of State must, no later than three months from the day on which this Act is passed, publish guidance for local government bodies on the application of—

- (a) the provisions of section 1 of this Act, and
- (b) the wider local business support policy framework associated with that section.

(2) In preparing the guidance the Secretary of State must consult—

- (a) independent experts, and
- (b) representatives of companies whose non-domestic ratings determinations are affected by section 1.’

*This new clause would require the Secretary of State to publish guidance to local government bodies on the application of the provisions of section 1 of this act. This guidance must be prepared following consultation of independent experts and businesses whose business rates appeals are affected by section 1.*

Government amendments 1 to 6.

**Jeff Smith:** I am conscious that we have an important debate to follow and that time is pressing, so I shall be relatively brief. Labour’s broad support for this Bill has not changed. We recognise the urgent need to support businesses, as well as the Valuation Office Agency, and the need to close a legislative gap exploited by unscrupulous directors. The Bill remains lacking in some safeguards. Labour attempted to correct that in Committee, but we were unsuccessful. The new clause is concerned with the resourcing and capacity of the Insolvency Service to deal with the new measures relating to directors of dissolved companies.

As we heard from witnesses in July at the evidence sessions, unscrupulous directors can cause significant suffering to those who have invested in or loaned to their companies. Too often, these directors are able to



absolve themselves of their financial responsibilities by dissolving their companies and creating a financial and time barrier to holding them to account. So clauses 2 and 3 of the Bill allow for a director to be investigated and disqualified before their company is restored. That plugs the important gap and is a welcome measure; it removes a costly barrier, both in monetary and time terms, to accountability and financial responsibility.

However, as Duncan Swift, the former president of R3 highlighted in the Bill's evidence sessions, these provisions could see the Insolvency Service take on 10 to 15 times the number of investigations it currently undertakes. Despite that potential increase in workload, there is no indication in the Bill that the Government plan to increase funding and resources at all for the Insolvency Service, let alone to do so by the significant amount it might need to allow it to cope with the extra investigations. So Labour is calling for new clause 1 to be added to the Bill to ensure that there is appropriate, regular oversight and scrutiny of the Insolvency Service's ability to carry out this increased workload. If it is not given the resources to carry out its increased responsibilities, clauses 2 and 3 of the Bill become, in effect, redundant. New clause 1 would ensure that parliamentarians and others are kept updated on the Insolvency Service's ability to carry out its tasks and on any need it has for extra resources. We do not intend to press the new clause to a vote, but we think it is important to make this point, particularly given that the Insolvency Service cannot apply to court for the disqualification of a director whose company has been dissolved for more than three years. That means that the Insolvency Service does not just need extra resources to carry out the additional investigations; it needs them to carry out those investigations promptly, within that three-year timeframe.

As Dr Tribe summarised:

“The Insolvency Service needs to be properly funded to ensure that this additional disqualification work can happen.”—[*Official Report, Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Public Bill Committee*, 6 July 2021; c. 18, Q29.]

Although this Bill goes some way to helping tackle financial corruption, the Government could and should go further. The Bill is too narrowly defined for any financial amendments, but the Government could provide a stronger deterrent, beyond disqualification, for unscrupulous directors.

Let me briefly turn to the other new clause and amendments. New clause 2 stands in the name of the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and we do not disagree with it. However, we think we do not have to wait for this until the day the Act is passed. It is clear that there is cross-party support for the Bill, that it will pass and that businesses are desperate for support in the current circumstances. So we see no reason why indicative guidance cannot be published and sent to local authorities, as well as possibly indicative amounts for the grants that local authorities will receive, so that they can get on quickly with designing their schemes, ready for when the Act passes. I make the point that we made in Committee that this should not be on a per-head basis; it should take into account the effect of the pandemic on different regions and on different sectors of the economy. I also note the Government's technical solution, which allowed the backdating of these grants so they effectively apply this financial year.

1.30 pm

In Committee back in July, the Minister said that the Government were engaging with local authorities and “working on the final points in the guidance.”—[*Official Report, Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Public Bill Committee*, 8 July 2021; c. 76.]

Officials have had all summer to do that now. Let us just get on with it—let us let local authorities know what they can do and let them get on with doing it.

Finally, we support the Government's technical amendments to allow the measures to apply to Wales as well as England. We note that they are at the request of the Welsh Government and we welcome them.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP) *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I call Peter Grant.

**Peter Grant:** I beg your pardon, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am standing to speak to the wrong provision.

**The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall):** I welcome the contribution from the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith). I shall start by responding to new clause 1, tabled by the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) and the hon. Gentleman. I am grateful to him for his constructive words and the way in which he has approached the debate.

The new clause would require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the number of directors investigated and disqualified under the new provisions in the Bill every three months from the date that the Act is passed. I am grateful to hon. Members for the opportunity to confirm to the House that statistical reporting is routinely undertaken by the Insolvency Service. Regular three-monthly releases cover company insolvencies across the whole UK as well as individual insolvencies in England and Wales. The releases also contain underlying data and are published and available online to everybody.

As well as that, since the start of the pandemic, the Insolvency Service has been publishing experimental monthly releases of data concerning insolvency numbers. This was so that the statistics could act as an indicator of the impact of the pandemic on insolvencies. It may be of particular interest to hon. Members that the Insolvency Service also releases monthly updates about its enforcement activities. This information includes not only the number of companies wound up in the public interest, but the number of disqualification orders and undertakings broken down by the relevant section of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986, under which they were sought. Going forward, these numbers will include any orders or undertakings obtained as a result of this new provision. The reports also include information on lengths of periods of disqualification. Furthermore, there is an annual report on the nature of the misconduct being alleged.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman is reassured that a large amount of information is already provided that can be accessed easily through a quick online search and that future reports of enforcement outcomes will include any disqualifications made against former directors of dissolved companies. I would be grateful to him for withdrawing his new clause.

[*Luke Hall*]

Let me just add one last point. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the new burdens on councils. I somewhat couched my answer the last time we spoke about it, so I just want to put on record that we will absolutely be meeting the new burdens cost, including the associated administrative and IT costs.

**Jeff Smith:** I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.  
*Clause, by leave, withdrawn.*

### Clause 1

#### DETERMINATIONS IN RESPECT OF CERTAIN NON-DOMESTIC RATING LISTS

*Amendments made:* 1, page 1, line 2, for “an English” substitute “a rating”.

*This amendment and Amendments 2 to 6 extend the application of Clause 1 to non-domestic rating lists compiled for the purposes of business rates in Wales (as well as lists for England).*

Amendment 2, page 1, line 5, for “an English” substitute “a rating”.

*See the explanatory statement for Amendment 1.*

Amendment 3, page 1, line 8, for “an English” substitute “a rating”.—

*See the explanatory statement for Amendment 1.*

Amendment 4, page 2, leave out lines 22 and 23.

*See the explanatory statement for Amendment 1.*

Amendment 5, page 2, leave out lines 28 to 35.

*See the explanatory statement for Amendment 1.*

Amendment 6, page 2, line 40, at end insert—

“rating list” means a local non-domestic rating list or central nondomestic rating list under Part 3 of the LGFA 1988.’.—(*Luke Hall.*)

*See the explanatory statement for Amendment 1.*

*Third Reading*

1.34 pm

**Luke Hall:** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

It is a pleasure to lead this two-part Bill on Third Reading after a series of constructive debates and scrutiny sessions. The contributions of Members from across the House have underlined the importance of these business rates and insolvency measures being on the statute book and will stand the Bill in good stead as it passes to the other place.

The business rates element of the Bill is a sensible measure that will mean that the application of the material change of circumstances process meets the law’s original intention. The MCC process is designed to be used in cases such as localised roadworks, not in response to market-wide economic changes. The passage of the Bill would ensure that this continues to be the case. Instead of business rates bills potentially being reduced following lengthy appeals processes, ratepayers will instead be able to benefit from a £1.5 billion relief package to be targeted at those businesses that have not benefited from the support linked to business rates during the pandemic.

The relief will be available as soon as possible once the Bill has passed and local authorities have set up their local schemes. This approach has been welcomed by the Public Accounts Committee and will be mirrored

by the Scottish and Welsh Governments. That means that this measure has wide support, both in respect of the English business rates system and across the other nations of the UK, where ratings are a devolved matter.

Similarly, we have also seen widespread support for the second measure, which brings the conduct of former directors of dissolved companies into scope for investigation and potential disqualification proceedings. This measure is a valuable addition that will be an important tool to help to combat bounce back loan fraud and to deter others from acting in breach of their duties as company directors. I am pleased that the measure will apply across the United Kingdom, protecting our businesses and increasing confidence in doing business in all four nations.

I am grateful for the contribution of all Members throughout the Bill’s earlier passage and today. I thank them for the attention that they have paid to the Bill. I am particularly grateful to the shadow Ministers, the hon. Members for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), for their constructive scrutiny of the Bill.

Finally, I thank the Clerks of the House and my excellent Bill team at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, who have supported us in steering this piece of important legislation through the House. This important Bill speaks to the Government’s commitment to maintaining sensible and fair rating and director disqualification regimes, and I am pleased to have supported it in its passage so far. I commend it to the House.

1.36 pm

**Jeff Smith:** I will again be brief, because we set out our concerns on Second Reading and in Committee, I am aware that this might not be seen as the highlight of the parliamentary week by Members, and there is an important debate to follow.

As we said, we have always supported the Bill’s broad aims. We want to see support administered quickly for businesses that have been affected by covid and have missed out on business rates relief. We accept that ruling out material change of circumstances claims, but instead administering the bespoke £1.5 billion fund, will probably be the best way of doing so in the current circumstances. We also support the aims of clauses 2 and 3, which would close the legal loophole and give the Government the power to investigate and disqualify unscrupulous or unfit company directors.

I welcome the Government’s decision to extend the provisions of clause 1 to apply in Wales, which has been welcomed by colleagues in the Senedd. I also welcome the Government’s decision to ask local authorities, when it comes to administering the fund, to award relief against the liabilities of ratepayers for the current financial year—2021-22—as a way of getting around the restrictions on the business rates legislation so that they can effectively award it against the previous year. It is a technical solution to a technical problem caused by the timing of the funding, when it is eventually released. Local government colleagues assure me that they are happy with this.

Again, I emphasise the fact that we need to get this relief out to businesses as quickly as possible. The rates relief was announced in March and not a penny has yet

been paid out. I do not think we need to wait for the end of the Bill proceedings to get indicative guidance to local authorities to design their schemes.

There are still concerns about the resourcing of the Valuation Office Agency and the Insolvency Service and how funds will be recouped and actions taken against unfit company directors. I hope that the Minister will take those concerns into further consideration.

Finally, I thank the Minister for his engagement with me and my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) on the Bill's finer points. I thank his officials and the many, many representatives of the business community and local authority officers who have also engaged with us during the passage of the Bill.

1.39 pm

**Peter Grant:** I am pleased to make a brief contribution to the debate. As I did at earlier stages, I will restrict my comments to the disqualification of directors, which is the only aspect of the Bill that extends directly to Scotland.

The SNP supports the Bill. Our concerns are the same as those of the official Opposition: that much, much more is needed than is included. We need a much more comprehensive set of regulations, not so much to protect shareholders and directors as to protect customers, members of the public and investors from the scams that have all too often been committed by companies whose shareholders are the directors. A lot of company legislation was designed to protect investors against misaction or misconduct by company directors who are different people, but we are now looking at companies whose directors are the shareholders. They are not going to defraud themselves, but sometimes they may be willing to defraud others.

At earlier stages, I have repeatedly mentioned the conduct of a group of companies called Blackmore Bond and its directors Phillip Nunn and Patrick McCreesh. I will not go over even a fraction of their history, but why they were not at least investigated for disqualification long, long ago is beyond me. The Bill will not make it easier for such directors to be called to order, so we need legislation that fills in the gaps that are left.

As an indication of just how current such behaviour is, the BBC reported as recently as Monday that DialADeal Scotland Ltd has been fined £150,000 by the Information Commissioner's Office for making more than half a million illegal marketing calls, many to numbers that had explicitly opted out of such calls. DialADeal Scotland Ltd used false business names in its marketing, which is illegal. It disguised the number that it was calling from so that people could not phone back to complain, which is also illegal. The calls were about non-existent green deal energy savings schemes. That is not a telecoms offence; it is fraud or attempted fraud, and very probably conspiracy to defraud.

The fine was decided in September 2021, but clearly the action by the Information Commissioner's Office started before then. In May 2021, the directors of the company, Calum McKay Kirkpatrick and Yvonne McCuaig, applied to Companies House to place the company in voluntary liquidation—almost certainly with the sole purpose of avoiding the financial penalty that they knew was coming their way, because if the company were dissolved before the order was made, its directors

would get off scot-free. Fortunately, the Information Commissioner's Office was able to lodge an objection with Companies House and the voluntary strike-off action has been suspended.

The same two individuals, Kirkpatrick and McCuaig, were also directors of DialADealUK Ltd, which was voluntarily dissolved in September 2018, immediately before DialADeal Scotland Ltd was created. Coincidentally, shortly after they had started the process of winding up DialADeal Scotland Ltd, they set up another company called Simple Lead Ltd. Not one of those companies has ever filed a set of accounts with Companies House; DialADeal Scotland's accounts are now over a year out of date.

Why is it that company directors can repeatedly avoid any kind of scrutiny? As I have mentioned in relation to Nunn and McCreesh's companies, they can go for years and years without filing the very limited information that they have to file at Companies House, which just does not seem able to keep up.

**Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP):** My hon. Friend makes a very good point about Companies House and its limitations. Does he share my concern that the UK Government just do not care enough about Companies House and the massive loopholes that they are leaving for people to be defrauded and company directors to get away scot-free with the wrong things that they are up to?

**Peter Grant:** That would certainly be many people's interpretation of how long it has taken the Government to take any firm action. We keep being promised a comprehensive review of company legislation; it cannot come quickly enough. I hope that we will finally see an end to the scandal of the creatures called Scottish limited partnerships, which are too often set up purely as a means to fund organised crime.

Companies House needs to be reformed and probably better resourced. As the Opposition spokesperson—the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith)—mentioned, the Bill may place additional demands on the resources of the Insolvency Service. We know that the Financial Conduct Authority needs another complete sorting out. Either it is not doing its job or it has not been asked to do the right job; it probably does not have the resources to deal with fraud on the scale that is now going on right under our nose.

Although I welcome the Bill and we will certainly not oppose it—we have supported it all the way through—we look for assurances from the Government that it is not the end of the road. It can only be allowed to be one tiny step towards finally stopping these people. I remember one of the witnesses who gave evidence to the Bill Committee describing the United Kingdom as becoming one of the go-to places of choice for international fraudsters. That is not a badge that any of us should bear with honour. If that badge is applied to the financial services industry, and to the business community in the United Kingdom generally, it will take years—decades—to get rid of and honest businesses will suffer desperately.

The Government have to start to act now. I do not know whether the Minister is in a position to tell us today when the comprehensive review of company regulation will come forward, but I certainly hope that we will see it very soon. As DialADeal's example makes

[Peter Grant]

clear, even since we started our consideration of the Bill, further scams have been inflicted on innocent people throughout these islands.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Dame Rosie Winterton will now take the Chair for our important debate on the legacy of Jo Cox.

## Backbench Business

### Legacy of Jo Cox

1.45 pm

**Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the legacy of Jo Cox—the positive legacy of Jo Cox.

It is wonderful to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us time for this debate and the House authorities for allowing us use of the Chamber, where we have a shield to mark Jo Cox. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) for co-sponsoring the debate, to all colleagues here today, and to all those who have supported the debate, including the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), who cannot be with us this afternoon but was very supportive.

I think that most hon. Members recognise the importance of honouring Jo's memory and celebrating the love that she gave and her contribution here—a positive contribution that continues today. It has been a long six years since I sat here to listen to a new-ish friend making her maiden speech, including her immortal line that

“we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

So much has happened since then: three Prime Ministers, two more general elections, the European referendum and a global pandemic.

We sought this debate some time ago, before the Batley and Spen by-election was even called. Today it is genuinely an honour to sit next to Jo's sister. I look forward to hearing her maiden speech from the same place—albeit with a little less hair and perhaps more girth. [*Interruption.*] Me, I mean.

My hon. Friend the new Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) won the seat in her own right. I am sure that some chose her because of the family history, but many more supported her because of her dreadful opponent and the despicable campaign and divisive, aggressive tactics of the vile Galloway, who clearly has more in common with Donald Trump, given that both have made baseless legal claims about losing elections. As anyone who knocked doors in the constituency will know, my hon. Friend is infamous. I campaigned there—I actually got sunburnt in Yorkshire, which was unexpected, but I knocked doors and found people who went to her yoga class and who know her from school and work. She has her own claim and her own story to tell, and I am sure that she will make her own massive impact here on behalf of her constituents.

It is six years since Jo arrived here with what her husband Brendan called her relentless optimism. Her passions were obvious, her commitment marked and her energy uncontainable. We were both elected in 2015 and took on the organisation of socials for our intake of new MPs, including on the family houseboat just two days before she was taken from us. One of the planning sessions was on the Terrace here. Someone—it may have been my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern)—mentioned the tug of war for

Macmillan outside Parliament. Jo being Jo, she disappeared straightaway to throw her energy and all her tiny body mass into that effort—a memory that typifies her spirit.

**Mr Andrew Mitchell** (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The Government Chief Whip told me only this morning that the tug of war was one of his happiest memories of Jo. It seems to me—you may agree, Madam Deputy Speaker—that it would have been a most unequal contest.

**Neil Coyle:** Thank you.

In that horrific moment when Jo was taken, our country was at a crossroads and many of us feared that the attack risked opening up a seam of division and unleashing more extremism. I am thankful that the great British public saw her murder as the totally monstrous, unjustifiable act that it was and that there has been unity in condemning the motives behind it, as well as an extraordinary effort to better support one another—a trait that has been demonstrated even more over the past year during covid, through volunteering, community spirit and pop-up mutual aid organisations.

Even life in London, despite our population of 7 million, can be an atomised existence, incredibly lonely for some; but we have seen more people get to know neighbours and support one another through this crisis, further strengthening communities such as mine with a greater sense of commonality and solidarity, something that Jo championed and would have been pleased to see. I think we should be capitalising on that spirit, learning from the post-war Attlee legacy of truly building back better after the war, but sadly I fear that we are missing the moment, and failing to deliver a post-covid legacy that benefits the whole country in the way that we all still benefit from the Attlee Government's creation of the NHS, for example.

Today, however, I wanted to flag up not just the fact that Jo achieved a lot in the short time she was here with us, but the fact that she continues to deliver now on the issues and values on which she triumphed in her life of love. As I said earlier, I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford for co-sponsoring the debate in the spirit of cross-party unity which I think Jo also exemplified. I look forward to her contribution today, and note in advance that she was not just the country's first but the world's first ever Minister for Loneliness. It is good to see the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) here as well, as the Government in which he served helped to ensure that £10 million has been distributed across 14 countries through the Jo Cox memorial grant fund. That support and resource has empowered tens of thousands of women, and has supported more than 1,000 women into elected office.

Jo was passionate about tackling isolation and loneliness, and the foundation has delivered a legacy through, in particular, the Great Get Together events. I have the privilege of representing an area with one of the biggest Great Get Togethers anywhere in the country, and I love representing such a positive local community, whose vibrant, welcoming nature makes such events so special and successful. I say "events" because in 2019 I went to six on the same day, including the largest, which sprawled up Redcross way and Union street and beyond. I look forward to the More in Common Borough and Bankside activities that are already being planned for next year.

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Jo was a friend and a fantastic west Yorkshire MP colleague, and it is such an honour to have Kim now as our west Yorkshire neighbour. Jo's "More in Common" values are also the values that Kim and her family have championed so much, and we pay tribute to them too, in west Yorkshire and throughout the country.

**Neil Coyle:** Thank you; well said.

Across the country, some 20 million people have now been involved in Great Get Togethers, which is a testament to the positivity that Jo helped to inculcate. Even in this covid crisis, in June more than 1 million people participated in a socially distanced Get Together.

There are of course issues that Jo would have still been championing today, and that we need to step up on in her name and in all our interests. The rise in online hate and extremism continues in the UK as elsewhere. As the former chair of the all-party parliamentary group on counter-extremism, I am very aware of the alarming statistics on the growth of Prevent referrals about far-right groups. In the most recent year for which statistics are available, 105,000 hate crimes were recorded by the police, an 8% increase on the previous year. Our focus must be on tackling division and hatred, wherever it comes from—including anti-Muslim prejudice and the startling rise in antisemitism, a feature of both far-left and far-right groups.

I cannot fail to mention Afghanistan today, as I think Jo would have been campaigning against the abandonment of UK promises to the women and girls now left subject to Taliban rule. Jo would have been highlighting the refugee crisis created by the collapse of the democratically elected Government, and the need for our Government to deliver more to help neighbouring states, but also to assist more Afghans who worked for our country to reach the UK and escape harm.

I am mindful that our country's Afghan failure follows the aid budget cut and the abolition of the Department for International Development. Jo, along with the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South, wrote an excellent piece called "The Cost of Doing Nothing", which remains valid, and on which I am sure both those Members will speak today. It makes me nervous that the UK looked decidedly isolated internationally, with the US ignoring us and the suggestion from the Foreign Office in March that an alternative alliance could be built to replace American forces ultimately leading to nothing but our scrambled exit and capitulation to the Taliban.

However, the purpose of this debate was to be positive. Before I sit down, I want to pay some personal respects to people who have shone an amazing beacon through some very dark times. Through the Great Get Together events, I have met the Batley Way bike riders who cycle down all the way from Yorkshire to Flat Iron Square in my constituency, where they finish their bike ride with a pint, and they are met by Jo and Kim's parents, Gordon and Jean. We have all seen Gordon and Jean interviewed, and observed their amazing spirit. They are two of Britain's finest, and I am very pleased to see them here today. You are the best of us, and it is a pleasure to have got to know you both. Your contribution to this place is two wonderful, special people, and through them and

[Neil Coyle]

their service you have improved our country and provided opportunities the world over. Thank you for sharing them with us.

A great many Members want to speak, and I am really looking forward to hearing their contributions. I thank everyone for being here and marking this anniversary, and the positive legacy of Jo Cox.

1.54 pm

**Tracey Crouch** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): It was a privilege to co-sponsor the application for this debate with the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), who spoke very much from the heart, and I enjoyed his opening speech.

It is always an absolute honour to speak in debates such as this, especially a debate that is celebrating the legacy of Jo Cox. I did not have the good fortune of getting to know Jo, but through my subsequent role as loneliness Minister, I have had the pleasure—I think!—of meeting her sister, the new hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater). I look forward greatly to hearing her maiden speech, even though I have put on mascara for the first time in months and she is bound to make me cry! The fear for my ankles means that since she joined the House I have not yet returned to women's football. She has a fearsome reputation, and I am getting far too old to be hobbling around wearing bandages. Her wonderful parents, Gordon and Jean, are in the Public Gallery today; I will definitely go and give them a big squidge after my speech, so they had better brace themselves for some Crouchy loving.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, Jo's legacy is much wider than the issue of loneliness, but that is the issue with which I am most familiar. The commission that was established in her name to look at the issue in further detail recommended, among other things, the appointment of a Minister and the development of a strategy. Thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), not only was I that Minister, but we produced a cross-Government strategy within eight months which has provided a template for discussion around the world.

It was an enormously humbling experience for me to be that Minister. I was the world's first loneliness Minister, and curiosity about the brief reached all four corners of the globe. But this is what Jo did: she took an issue at which others had cast a glance, and then catapulted it into the stratosphere. Like many in this House, I had spoken about loneliness and isolation in older people before Jo was elected, but when she came into this place she did not just focus on the stereotype; she broadened it beyond imagination, and rightly so. While loneliness continues to plague older generations, younger people suffer equally crippling rates of loneliness, as do young professionals moving to cities for work, those isolated through disability, and—as Jo herself noted—those on maternity or paternity leave.

Why does loneliness matter, given that it is a feeling that most people will experience at some point in their lives? Well, the reason is that prolonged and extreme exposure to loneliness can seriously affect an individual's wellbeing and ability to function in society. As loneliness has been shown to be linked to poor physical and mental health, and poor personal wellbeing with

potentially adverse effects on communities, it was a no-brainer that we needed to work through solutions to combat it.

The statistics on loneliness will no doubt be quoted a great deal today, and they should be: we need them to remain in the political consciousness. Levels of loneliness in Great Britain have increased since spring 2020. Between 3 April and 3 May 2020, 5% of people—about 2.6 million adults—said that they felt lonely “often” or “always”. Results from the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey show that from October 2020 to February 2021, the proportion increased to 7.2% of the adult population—about 3.7 million adults. Mapping trends across the country also shows the types of places where a higher proportion of people felt lonely often or always, and differences in personal wellbeing. Areas with a higher concentration of younger people and areas with higher rates of unemployment tended to have higher rates of loneliness during that particular study period. Local authority areas in the countryside also had a lower loneliness rate than, for instance, urban or industrial areas.

These latest statistics reiterate what we learned from the preliminary work for the strategy, which was that all our views about who suffers from loneliness were not always entirely accurate. As an emotion it shows no prejudice. The chief executive fighting battles in boardrooms was as lonely as the retiree missing the banter of the workshop. The difference was sometimes who would, or would not, seek or receive the support or reconnection that they needed.

As the statistics show, covid has increased the numbers but many of the solutions we proposed in the strategy have not been available, thus exacerbating the problem. The Royal College of General Practitioners was amazingly helpful when it came to developing recommendations, in part because GPs themselves were seeing an increasing number of patients whose interaction with their doctor was because they were lonely. It was with that in mind that one of the core recommendations was to use social prescribing to reconnect people, and I genuinely believe that in the run-up to February last year it was gaining massive traction.

The pandemic has been a major setback, for obvious reasons, and if I had one ask of the Minister—unfortunately for him, it is actually two—it would be that there should be a major relaunch of the social prescribing programme for tackling loneliness. We have all seen really good examples of social prescribing initiatives, including in Batley and Spen, and all of us across the House and our constituents would benefit from ensuring that that programme is relaunched. My other ask of the Minister is to join me in campaigning for a wellbeing budget, similar to those in other countries, in which reducing levels of loneliness would be one target. I do not have enough time in this debate to rant about why a budget based just on GDP is simply not enough, but I will be applying for a separate debate on why wellbeing should be front and centre of our post-covid recovery. That includes many of the issues that Jo campaigned on.

As a Minister, and afterwards too, I have had the pleasure of meeting many people involved in supporting those who suffer from differing and often complex levels of loneliness. I have seen brilliant but extremely simple creative ideas such as friendly benches. I have watched men solder and build things in a shed. I have done interviews and podcasts with people around the

world, all of which have started with a confession from those on the other side of the mic that they too have felt severely lonely. I have seen pubs put up signs welcoming people in for a chat. I have heard about businesses that support existing staff with befriending networks, and others that help those retiring to reintegrate into society. Every time I see a project, hear a story or talk in general terms about loneliness, I personally find it a humbling experience, but I recognise that the progress we have made on identifying and tackling the issue is truly leading the world, and quite frankly, we have Jo Cox to thank for that.

**Mr Speaker:** Can I just remind everybody that we are now coming to a very important maiden speech? We all know about the legacy of Jo, and it is an absolute privilege to be able to be in the Chair to listen to Kim Leadbeater.

2.2 pm

**Kim Leadbeater** (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thank you to my friends—my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) and the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch)—for securing this debate. It is with a huge amount of pride and a significant amount of nervousness that I make my maiden speech today. It has been an honour and a privilege to have been the MP for my home constituency of Batley and Spen for 10 weeks now, although if I am honest, like much of the last five years of my life, it has all been a bit of a blur. Following the result of the by-election on 1 July, after several weeks of running round the streets of the area where I live asking people to put their faith in me, with not enough sleep and far too much chocolate and caffeine, I quickly found myself on a train to Hogwarts—sorry, I mean Westminster! Nobody gave me a book of spells or taught me how to play quidditch, but here I am. I am sure every new MP experiences the same mixture of pride and responsibility that I am feeling right now, but as the House does my family the great honour of paying tribute to my sister, I hope that Members will understand that I mean no disrespect to this place when I say that I would give literally anything not to be standing here today in her place.

We have already heard what an extraordinary contribution Jo made to politics in the tragically short time that she sat on these Benches. The love and respect that she earned across this Chamber is a testament to the very special qualities that she brought to the job and to the kind of person she was. Others are better qualified than I am to reflect on her talents as a parliamentarian, and for me she will always be many other things before an MP: a compassionate and caring humanitarian; a proud Yorkshire lass; a friend to many, including a significant number of those who are sat here today; a loving daughter—I am delighted that our parents, Jean and Gordon, are here today; a fantastic sister-in-law and wife; an outstanding mum to Cuillin and Lejla, who remain full of Jo's energy, optimism and spirit; and the best big sister anybody could ask for.

Jo's murder ripped the heart out of our family. I have spoken on many occasions about my ongoing disbelief and devastation following her death, and it still does not feel real, today more than ever. It was devastating for the people of Batley and Spen, too, because so many of them had also taken her to their hearts. The constituency

has much to be proud of, and I will come on to some of those things, but I am sure that I speak for all of us when I say that we take no pleasure in being known as a place that has had four MPs in the space of just seven years. My predecessors—Jo, of course, but also Tracy Brabin, Mike Wood and indeed Elizabeth Peacock before them—all made their mark in very different ways. I come to the job, as I am sure they all did, with a determination to do things in my own unique way. I could not do anything else. People may make comparisons, and they are of course entitled to, but I am very much my own person and I will always be true to myself, proud of where I come from and ready to crack on and get stuff done, no matter how big the challenges may be.

Batley and Spen has been through a lot in recent years, but time and again, when others have sought to set us against each other, we have come together. When we have been riven by violence or the politics of hatred and division, we have shown the best of ourselves. Generosity, warmth, respect, tolerance and love: those are the true qualities of the people I am proud to represent. Jo said in her maiden speech that

“what surprises me time and time again as I travel around the constituency is that we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

I believe those words are as true today as when she said them—perhaps even more so. But my sister would never have pretended that we do not have our differences and disagreements, and nor do I. Of course we do, and the world would be a very dull place if we did not, but we should also have the ability to respect each other's opinions when we disagree and the good sense to know that our communities can thrive only when they embrace each and every one of us. I am very clear that we cannot pick our equalities.

I am Batley and Spen born and bred. I have lived and worked in almost every part of the constituency: Heckmondwike, Cleckheaton, Gomersal, Batley, Liversedge, Staincliffe and Littleton. While the towns and villages that make up the constituency all have their own unique character, of which they are justifiably proud, the problems people face are often very similar. No matter where you live or what your background might be, the potholes in the road are just as deep, the dangers posed by speeding drivers are just as terrifying and the impact of crime and antisocial behaviour is just as devastating. There are no easy answers to many of these problems, but having had discussions and meetings with literally hundreds of my new constituents over the summer—on Kim's summer tour—it is clear to me that we all have a responsibility to play our part in tackling these issues, whether as individuals, organisations, communities or families. It is no good thinking that dealing with these issues is always somebody else's problem.

We should never ignore the importance of family and community and of working together. Across Batley and Spen, and indeed across the country, whatever your household looks like, the pandemic has reminded us just how much we need our family and friends and the wider community. For Jo and for me, the values we learned from our parents and the empathy and compassion that they instilled in us enabled us to make a difference in our own ways. We have seen so much of this in recent times. Our schools and colleges, our churches and mosques, our community organisations and sports clubs and our

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families and friends have helped to bind us together to face the common challenges we shared. I am incredibly proud of the work of the Jo Cox Foundation in this regard—it is such a valuable part of Jo's legacy. By building a network of More in Common volunteer groups and hosting the annual Great Get Together weekend in June, on Jo's birthday, the team have worked tirelessly to tackle loneliness and build togetherness in communities up and down the land.

There is something else we have in common in my part of the world: we do not like being taken for fools. With respect, I say to the party opposite that fine words about levelling up are all well and good, but what we have seen instead in Batley and Spen over the last decade are drastically reduced police numbers, huge cuts to the roads repair budget, growing poverty and inequality, and queues outside our food banks. There are areas of my constituency that are desperate for investment, and I will be holding the Government to account to ensure that Batley and Spen gets its fair share of whatever levelling-up money is going, so that it goes to the people and communities who need it most.

We need new opportunities for our young people, the chance to breathe new life into our villages and town centres and support for the many excellent businesses we are lucky to have. We need more jobs, but good quality jobs doing what we do best in manufacturing and services, not huge, soulless warehouses full of robots. That is the only way to ensure a bright and prosperous future.

That is my vision for Batley and Spen and, indeed, the country: happy, healthy, united communities working together across the sectors to tackle our problems, to support each other and to celebrate our successes, and where everyone feels included and that they have a role to play.

I look forward to making the case for the people of Batley and Spen as their new MP. We have all had to get used to using technology to keep in touch in recent times. I am very much a people person, so I am pleased that the business of the House is getting back to normal, although I hope it is with an appropriate amount of caution and without complacency.

I am told that one of the first skills I need to master is bobbing up and down to get your attention, Mr Speaker. As I have a background in sport and fitness, I hope that is one thing I will be good at. I might even add a few squats and lunges so I get a bit of a workout, and everybody is welcome to join in, of course.

When I do get the opportunity to speak, it will be an honour to bring a bit of Yorkshire straight-talking grit and common sense to the debates in this place. Like Jo, I will be happy to work with MPs of all parties, in the interests of both my constituency and the country as a whole. Indeed, I am grateful to the many Members on both sides of the House who have been so generous in welcoming me here.

I am quite new to politics, so I am the first to admit that I have a lot to learn. I have already nearly sat down on the wrong side of the Chamber a couple of times, although while it might be the wrong side for now, I am sure that day will come. I have got lost in the maze of corridors in this remarkable building more times than I

care to mention, but fortunately someone has always helped by pointing me in the right direction. Thank you if you were one of those people.

I am sure I will make more mistakes because I am only human, as we all are, and I think sometimes people forget that. We all have family and friends and, if we are lucky, maybe even some interests and hobbies outside politics. Putting yourself forward for public office is a brave thing to do, wherever you sit in this place, and I appreciate that now more than ever.

Since my election, the one thing that people keep saying to me is, "Kim, please don't change," and I do not intend to. I will always stay true to my roots and identity. If I can be half the MP my sister was, it will be a huge privilege to get on with the job of representing the wonderful people of Batley and Spen.

**Mr Speaker:** We are all moved, and we will always think of your sister. I know that you are going to be a great Member of Parliament. Do not forget to get involved in the rugby league group.

2.14 pm

**Mr Andrew Mitchell** (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is a tremendous delight, indeed a privilege, to follow the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater). On the strength of what she told the House today, no one on either side can be in any doubt that we will all look forward to the issues she takes up and to hearing what she has to say—in my case, from across the Chamber. I know she is going to make a tremendous contribution on behalf of her constituents.

It is 34 and a half years since I made my maiden speech, listened to by my father who was sitting on these Benches. We are all so pleased that the hon. Lady's parents are here today to hear what she had to say and to see her maiden speech in the House of Commons. She spoke with enormous eloquence about her constituency, but she also spoke so kindly about her predecessors. I, of course, served first with Elizabeth Peacock, who was a formidable colleague, and the hon. Lady follows in the finest tradition of people who are outspoken and forceful on behalf of their constituents. The whole House will have enjoyed what she had to say today.

I knew Jo well, and I first met her when I was in El Fasher in Darfur, Sudan, with David Cameron in about 2006. She was there at a meeting to fight for the rights of women who were being brutalised, murdered and raped in Darfur. She was a huge presence then, so long ago. I also remember her for the trademark scarves she used to wear.

Jo approached me when she was elected to this House to ask whether I would join her in co-chairing the all-party group for friends of Syria, which I continue to co-chair with the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern). Jo came along and asked whether I would join her, and I said I would be delighted. We worked together very closely in trying to deal with that huge humanitarian crisis, which saw more than 5 million Syrians on the move.

I well remember going with Jo to have tea with the Russian ambassador, who complained that I had said in this place that the behaviour of the Russians in bombing Aleppo was no different from the behaviour of the Nazis in bombing Guernica during the Spanish civil



war. The Russians, wrongly in my view, took exception to that comparison. I will never forget that occasion because Jo, with her principled approach and self-evident decency, shredded that experienced diplomat and left him unable to speak. I have written about that episode, along with others, in my book, which is being published on 12 October—I am advised that it will be available in at least some good book shops.

When this House met following the murder of the sister of the hon. Member for Batley and Spen, it fell to me to pay the main tribute from the Conservative Back Benches. It was one of the most miserable occasions in my nearly 35 years in this House. Today, in my very short speech on Jo's legacy, I want to share two areas where she set us all a very good example, on whichever side of the House we stand.

First, on almost any issue before the House, we would know in advance where Jo stood. That is an important point, because she was someone of such clarity and decency that, whatever the issue, those who knew her would know where she stood. She had a brand. Most of us do not have a brand or, if we do, we rather wish we did not, but she did. That is something to which all Members of Parliament should aspire—that the position we take on issues is clear and understandable.

Secondly, Jo was an example of something the public do not always appreciate about this place but which sees this place at its very best, and that is working across parties to find agreement with those who may, in many other areas, have a different political opinion. She epitomised that principled clarity of views and beliefs on so many occasions, and not just in the Select Committees, all-party groups and other ad hoc groupings that this place has in abundance. It is one of the best aspects of the House of Commons, and one that is most appreciated by our constituents when it comes to light, that where it really matters we can work together in the public interest and in the interests of those we represent and who have done us the great honour of sending us to this place.

The speech by the hon. Member for Batley and Spen epitomises that fact, and today's debate is very much about it.

2.19 pm

**Stephen Kinno** (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) who really was a true friend and colleague of Jo's. We do know that, and we have often talked about her and her legacy.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing this debate, which is such an important occasion for us here in this House to reflect on Jo's legacy, but, perhaps, above all else, I congratulate my hon. Friend the freshly minted hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater). I, too, joined her on the campaign trail in Batley and Spen. It really was quite an experience. I genuinely believe that Kim personally knew about 50% of the people and of every family on every street that we met in that constituency. We also had a chance to play some football in the streets, which I think was a vote winner. It certainly should be counted into the majority.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I had the privilege of knowing Jo—[*Interruption.*] I did not realise that this would happen so quickly.

**Jess Phillips** (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Stephen Kinno**: I would like to give way, thank you.

**Jess Phillips**: Does my hon. Friend agree that, without question, everybody in here can understand how difficult this is for many of us, but also how much we delight in celebrating our friend whom we miss so dearly? Everybody will understand that some of us may need a little time in this debate.

**Stephen Kinno**: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, but I am not sure whether that has helped me to pull myself together, but I will give it my best shot.

I had the privilege of knowing Jo for around 20 years. I shared an office with her for a year before she was so cruelly taken from us. We were elected in 2016, and I am still in that same office now, and not a day goes by when I do not think of her hurtling into our office in her cycling gear, having a chat with my staff and talking about one of the most amazing campaigns that she would be working on. These campaigns ranged widely from reducing loneliness in society to standing up for refugees and fighting for the Labour party's values, Britain's democratic values and compassionate values internationally.

Jo was truly driven by giving a voice to the voiceless and by speaking truth to power. If I was really lucky she would bring her beautiful children into the office. I am not sure whether they are here with us today—I do not think they are—but it was always wonderful to see them. If I was really, really lucky I would receive a dinosaur drawing or even get the chance to read them a story. It is these personal memories of Jo that I continue to cherish most every day.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I knew Jo for a far shorter period than my hon. Friend, but we were both candidates in West Yorkshire in the run-up to the 2015 general election. We had meetings as candidates and calls. Sometimes there were things that the rest of us were not prepared or able to articulate, but Jo would always almost read what we were thinking, think the same thing and articulate it more bravely and strongly than the rest of the group of candidates. We could see that bravery and strength after she became an MP. In the legacy and the foundation and what happens now, we can all learn from that and hold on to that as a really strong part of the legacy here in this place.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton)**: If at any point, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinno) wants me to call a speaker from the Government Benches and then come back to him, he should just tell me.

**Stephen Kinno**: It is going to be alright, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is going to be okay.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Jo had an amazing, almost telepathic, ability to connect with people, to read the mood and to read where people were going in a conversation. That was one of the reasons that she was such a persuasive person and such a great campaigner.

I remember what Jo stood for and her dedication to the values that she held so passionately—values that I hold dear, that the Labour party holds dear, and, I

[Stephen Kinnock]

know, that many Members across this House hold dear. These values represented the very best of our country: compassion, community, solidarity, internationalism and a belief that our great country can be greater still. She cared about our place in the world because she cared about the lives of the people she had committed herself to serving and understood the way that global politics affected the everyday communities in Batley and Spen and across the length and breadth of our country.

Jo was an internationalist to her fingertips, believing that we can do more good by working together with our friends and neighbours than we could ever do on our own. She wanted Britain to continue to be an open, tolerant and generous country—a country that engages with the world with its head held high, instead of turning its back on it. She wanted Britain to face the big challenges of the 21st century—from climate change and terrorism to the stresses and strains of globalisation and the impact that they have on our communities—with our eyes and our hearts open, and with the strength in numbers that comes from standing shoulder to shoulder with our democratic allies in Europe and beyond.

The years that have passed since Jo's death have been difficult for Britain politically, but I have always taken inspiration from the core messages that she sought to espouse through her politics. She was relentlessly committed to unity over division as encapsulated perfectly by her famous comment that we have

“far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 674.]

She also believed passionately in standing up for what was right and she always spoke truth to power. She encapsulated, I believe, what an MP should be, viewing our opposite numbers as opponents, not as enemies, never afraid to take on an argument, but always willing to work cross-party if there was an issue where progress could be better achieved by working together in the national interest.

Jo worked tirelessly across party lines because she understood that, in our complex and inter-dependent world, compromise is a sign of strength, not of weakness. Jo was a pragmatic idealist in every sense of the term and I hope that we can honour Jo's legacy by seizing every chance that we get to discard narrow party politics in favour of doing the right thing for the communities that we represent. I feel that a great way to honour that pragmatism would be for all parts of this House to make more effort to work together to meet some of the major challenges facing our country today—from climate change to social care.

Out of the deep darkness of Jo's death must now come the shining light of her legacy, so let us build a politics of hope, not fear; of respect, not hate; of unity, not division. While we will all cherish Jo's public legacy, I will also always cherish the private Jo. I will miss her counsel, her companionship and, above all, her friendship. She was a relentlessly positive person who could lift my spirits after the toughest of days. She was a true friend whom I miss every day that I walk through that office door. If ever I am feeling low, I just need to look at the example provided by Jo's family, one of whom is sitting on the Green Benches next to us today. They have shown such remarkable courage and dignity in the past few years. To paraphrase Jo's sister, my hon. Friend the

Member for Batley and Spen, we will not be beaten, and we must channel all our energy into ensuring that Jo's legacy is honoured.

Today I want to end by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen—I shall never stop taking pleasure in saying that. She stood for office with such courage given the circumstances and she spoke today in her maiden speech with such heartfelt passion about why she has stepped up, why she has taken responsibility, and why she will help us to carry forward the legacy of her sister. I know that she will serve those same Batley and Spen constituents with the same grace, commitment, goodwill and determination that Jo did before her, and she need not worry, because whatever happens from this day on, my word, she has done her sister and my friend and this House proud.

2.29 pm

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you for calling me despite me charging into the Chamber, barely a second late. You may think that it is because my timekeeping is poor, but it was actually a tribute to my friend Jo Cox, who, in my recollection of working with her for a very brief period, almost always came in with a crashing door, a burst of colour and an “I'm sorry I'm late.” As many Members have already said, in those moments when she would burst in, she brought with her an extraordinary ball of energy, an extraordinary passion and an extraordinary strength that I am delighted to see have returned to this House in the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater). She has demonstrated that the family who gave birth to one extraordinary individual and raised her has achieved it a second time. For that, I pay the most extraordinary tribute to a fantastic mother and father.

I am going to share with the House my experience of working with Jo, because together we had put together almost all of a paper on the cost of non-intervention. Both of us had seen, in different ways, the impact that intervention—military intervention in my case, humanitarian in hers—had had on lives around the world. We had seen the problems in Iraq and the failures in Afghanistan, and we were aware that in many parts of the world, including in the United Kingdom, there was a desire—almost a hope—that we would never do it again: that we could turn away, look past and pretend it was not happening. But we cannot—and Jo knew that, because what she also brought to this place was the reality of the lived experience of somebody who actually knew the cost. She was somebody who really saw the price, whether in Darfur or Syria, and who knew what that intervention meant to the lives of the most vulnerable and most at risk in countries around the world.

Together Jo and I pulled together most of the paper “The Cost of Doing Nothing”, which was published by Policy Exchange. But, sadly, before it was able to come out—indeed, before it was fully finished—we know what happened. That was a terrible moment, I am sure, for everybody. My memory of it was phoning her number many times, and sadly, like everyone else, getting no answer.

I pay huge tribute to my friend, the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), for the extraordinary courage that she showed after that, in taking up the

work that had been done—not imposing herself on it, but ensuring that what was published was in keeping with the words that Jo herself would have written. I also pay another tribute: to my friend, Brendan, who is up in the Gallery and who helped us.

**Jess Phillips:** While the hon. Gentleman is heaping out praise, let me refer back to what the right hon. Member for the royal town of Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said earlier. I would not ever wish to speak for Jo, or ever claim that I could, but I know what she would be thinking at the moment and over the last few weeks: she would be heaping praise on the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) for the interventions that he has made. If she and her legacy give him any courage in what he is doing, he should know that she is—in my eye and in my mind—standing shoulder to shoulder with him.

**Tom Tugendhat:** I am enormously moved, and as somebody who is my girth and size knows, that is quite hard to achieve.

It has been in thinking of the work that Jo and I did together that I have been motivated and given strength to speak out in recent weeks, because I know that these are not political issues in the narrow sense, but issues that unite the core of our country.

Let me come to my last point. The hon. Member for Batley and Spen has already demonstrated that she knows perfectly well how to find her way around Hogwarts and that she knows exceptionally well how to make her voice heard in this place. She knows, I can tell the House, how to make friends across parties. In that, she needs absolutely no advice. The one thing that I think we all need to remember—I do not single her out especially, as this applies to us all—is what this place is for. It is too easy to think of it as a place for soundbites and video clips, as a place where we pass a quick Bill or make a cheap point.

What this place is for is to have the fights that a democracy needs to have, to have the arguments that free people need to express, to test ideas, to challenge each other—respectfully, yes, but to challenge each other—and to try to make the best for this amazing country, which we are privileged to be in. That is sometimes hard to remember; I admit my own failings. It is hard to remember when too often the accusations are of immorality or deceit, or the supposition is that parties define individuals, rather than that they are defined by the individuals who make them up.

What Jo demonstrated—and, for me, what made her not just a great friend but an amazing parliamentarian and, more importantly, a great Briton—is that she knew the purpose of this place; she knew that absolutely fundamentally. She knew that it was not to back down or make cheap compromise, but, as my friend the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) put it, to make compromise from a position of strength and principle, to choose the battles to fight and to make sure that they were won, in a way not that ground down her opponents, but which brought them with her. And that she achieved—remarkably, in under two years. I still cannot believe how brief the period was. I have been here for six years and have consistently failed since, but Jo demonstrated that and that is what I try to remember here.

As I pay tribute to a fantastic maiden speech, demonstrating all the passion that we knew the hon. Member for Batley and Spen had, let me say to her that she is taking up an extraordinary mantle. She carries with her the thanks, certainly of this House and, I am sure, of the whole country for demonstrating that courage is the willingness to come forward even when it is difficult, and particularly when it hurts.

2.37 pm

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). It is also very appropriate, as will become clear when I continue with my speech, but before I get to those points, let me thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) and the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who has just popped out from her place, for securing this debate. It is important that we put on the record the positive legacy of Jo. It gives me great heart to listen to speeches from both sides of the House about just what has been achieved in Jo's name.

I thank the right hon. Member for the royal town—I think I have got that right—of Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), not just for the excellent speech that he gave just now, but for five years of friendship, for which I am very grateful. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who has also been dedicated in the work that he has done.

Today's debate marks five years since the murder of Jo Cox MP, then the Member of Parliament for Batley and Spen. She was a Member of Parliament for a short time, but her life had already shown, even before she came to this place, just how much good could be done by a person with a simple determination to serve those in the world who needed her. In the five years that have passed, many people in our country have begun their own journey into public service, inspired and comforted by Jo's words and spurred on by her example. That is the legacy that we record today.

Above all else, I must congratulate the new Member for Batley and Spen, my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater), on her brilliant by-election victory and her maiden speech. Sometimes a win really helps—and what a win that was. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon, I really cannot explain how happy I am to describe her as the new Member for Batley and Spen. I came to know her in the worst possible circumstances, but having made friends with her has been nothing but a gift, even when she made me do 1980s aerobics—and also the women's parliamentary football team. As my hon. Friend said, she is her own person and will represent her hometown in her own way, but she has shown a courage over the past five years that is worthy of a sister's love.

To Brendan, Cuillin, Lejla, Jean, Gordon and all Jo's friends and family, I say thank you for all you have done: you have been a light in the dark. To Jo's friends Kirsty McNeill, Eloise Todd, Iona Lawrence, Nicola Reindorp, Ruth Price and so many others, I say thank you. I thank Jo's friends here in this place—those who have already spoken and those who will speak, but especially those on the other side of the House—for showing that the words on Jo's plaque count just as much on the Government side of the House as they do

[Alison McGovern]

on the Opposition side. Finally, I thank everyone in Batley and Spen for putting up with us during the by-election. The towns of Batley and Spen are rightly known across the country for the kindness and care they have demonstrated.

Today's debate is a chance for us all to reflect. We reflect on Jo's life; the contribution that she made to her own community and our whole country; and the efforts of Jo's family and friends on tackling loneliness, on the role of women in society and in politics, and on the humanitarian imperative.

Others will rightly talk about Jo's legacy in our country. I have seen at first hand in Batley and beyond what an impact she has had. Her words have gone on to have very real meaning in every connection made and every friendship built. But Jo's activism echoed not just in this country but around the world, and her loss was felt not just in the UK but in every place in the world where Jo had worked. Her belief in the humanitarian principle that everyone in the world is entitled to the basic protection of their life and liberty led her to meet people from the four corners of the earth, and when she died, they grieved just as we did here.

That was why, in 2018, the then Department for International Development established a development grant programme in Jo's honour. It funds women's empowerment organisations and the prevention of identity-based violence. The Jo Cox memorial grants get UK aid money exactly where it needs to be: backing women's leadership and using protection approaches to stop violence before it escalates. That humanitarian principle that Jo fought for is made real by this work, and I thank all the civil servants in DFID, as was, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office now for working so hard to make it happen. She is not present, but I also thank the right hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), who played a leading role.

In other aspects, however, we all must go further. I have met many Syrians in the UK who spoke with Jo in the year that she served in this place, when she gave voice to the horrors taking place in their country. They miss her now just as I do. In truth, life for Syrian civilians has worsened year after year. From Aleppo to Idlib and all over the country, civilians are displaced and forced to live in deep fear for their families. It goes on and on.

Jo advocated for a strategy to protect civilian life in Syria, and five years later that is exactly what we are still crying out for from the international community. Jo spent a decade campaigning for global acceptance of the responsibility to protect doctrine and, looking at events in Syria since she was killed, it is clear that she was right to do so. On Syria, Jo said that we must

“put the protection of civilians at the centre of our foreign policy, not...sit on the sidelines while hundreds of thousands more are killed and millions flee for their lives.”—[*Official Report*, 12 October 2015; Vol. 600, c. 136.]

She was right to say that.

That which Jo feared has happened since, and it is happening right now. The International Crisis Group reported that in Daraa province in the south-west, the regime had renewed attacks throughout August on Daraa

city's besieged al-Balad neighbourhood, where fighting killed at least 32, including 12 civilians, and displaced 38,000 people by 24 August. That is not five years ago, or 10 years ago: it is two weeks ago. On 12 August, the UN special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, warned that civilians face shortages of basic goods and said that the “near siege-like situation must end”.

Ignoring starvation and terror in our world will not make it go away.

As the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling and I said in the pamphlet that he should have published with Jo, knee-jerk isolationism is not in Britain's interest any more than it is in the interests of those in the world who need our leadership. All it does is make us look powerless in the world and careless about the international norms that we helped to create. The argument that Jo made in this place—that we have a responsibility to use the tools at our disposal, be they diplomatic, development or defence capabilities—to protect, where and when we can, was the right argument, and it has rung ever more true over the past five years than it was on the day Jo made it.

However, I believe that in the current public response to the Afghanistan crisis we are seeing Jo's legacy. As Jo said, she had met battle-weary elders of Afghanistan and understood the impact of conflict. When she was killed, the then Chancellor, George Osborne, credited her with changing both attitudes and policy when it came to refugees. He said that she would never know how many people's lives she had changed, and he was right.

Finally, let me say this. In Jo's honour now, we all have a duty to see the common humanity we share with those who are the victims of conflict not of their making. Whether in Afghanistan or Syria or elsewhere in the world, there will be circumstances that cause humans to flee. Our country should be proud of every person who finds safe refuge here, as Jo's friends and family should be proud that her defence of refugees made people think again and, crucially, changed the minds of those in power. That is Jo Cox's legacy. Our responsibility is to live up to her principles.

2.47 pm

**Danny Kruger** (Devizes) (Con): I will be brief. I did not know Jo Cox, but I intrude on this debate because it is about her legacy. I did not know her, but we did have some friends in common outside politics, and I had the pleasure of having some contact with the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) before the election, and with Brendan. It strikes me that we are really debating this concept of having friends in common, and we are talking about friends in the Commons.

I am struck by everything that has been said about Jo, much of which was new to me. My impression of her, having done some work with the foundation after her death, is of someone who worked very deliberately to cross divides, build bridges and live up to her statement that we have “more in common”. I want to reflect briefly on that phrase and wonder what it actually means. What is it that we have in common? What is it that binds us together? Without presuming to speak for her, but from listening to the debate so far and from knowing what I do about her, I think it is—and it is what I think as well—that we have in common the things that we care about. What we care about

fundamentally, and what we are all here to work on in this place, is our families, our communities, our country and our common humanity. We have all sorts of different expressions of those affections and attachments, but those are really what life is about.

I just wanted to make the point—I hope it is not too politically partisan—that while we might agree that those are the things that matter, we do not necessarily agree on how to fulfil those obligations and how to serve those affections. In a sense, that is what this argument is about, but the fundamentals are the same. These are the things that matter. We serve a common set of ideals and obligations. I look forward, in a friendly way, to debating with the hon. Member for Batley and Spennings (Kim Leadbeater) about how on earth we can strengthen our families, communities and country across this House.

2.49 pm

**Abena Oppong-Asare** (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger). As a current chair of the Labour Women's Network, it is an honour for me to rise today to pay tribute to Jo Cox, its first ever elected chair. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) for securing this special debate. I speak today despite the fact that I did not know Jo personally. From hearing friends speak, I regret that considerably.

Jo led the Labour Women's Network from 2011 until her election to Parliament in 2015. Jo is remembered by our organisation as an activist, a feminist, a humanitarian, a friend, a parent, a politician, a leader and a doer. Crucially, Jo is remembered as a sister, most importantly a sister to my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spennings (Kim Leadbeater) who made an enormously moving and passionate speech. I know she will be a fantastic representative in this place.

Jo embodied sisterhood to all women: to the women she knew, who still feel echoes of her straight-talking support and gutsy humour encouraging them; but also to women like me, whom she would never meet, on whose behalf she eagerly sought to turn gender equality on its head. The Jo I hear about from LWN colleagues was proudly political and a proud intersectional feminist. Her sisterhood embraced women in all their diversity.

I stand before you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as part of Jo's legacy: as the first black chair of the Labour Women's Network and as part of the parliamentary Labour party, which is 51% female. Having spoken to many of Jo's friends, they suspect that Jo would only pause to applaud that historic achievement for a moment before rolling up her sleeves and urging the rest of the House to crack on and catch up. Jo herself said:

"One of the reasons I am entering politics is because only 23% of the House of Commons is female. If women don't make that 50/50 then the people taking decisions about our communities are never going to be reflective of the needs."

The House is now 34% women. That should be noted as part of Jo's legacy, but I am sure we can still feel her impatience for speedier change.

In that spirit, the Labour party and the LWN created the Jo Cox Women in Leadership Scheme, on which I was a trainer. It has offered intensive personal and political development to almost 175 women from every region of the UK. Among them are train drivers, firefighters

and carers. The youngest participant was 18; the oldest mid-60s. Some 30% were women of colour, 20% were disabled and 25% were LGBT. They include Seyi Akiwowo, the founder of the unstoppable digital self-care campaign Glitch; Bex Bailey, named *Time* magazine's person of the year for her role in the Me Too movement; and the award-winning sound engineer Olga Fitzroy.

The scheme uses Jo's own approach of tough love and hard work to inspire an army of feminist changemakers. We remind participants that Jo, too, hit set-backs and made mistakes, faced abuse and wavered. Nevertheless, she persisted and in Jo's name ultimately 300 women, graduates of the scheme, will likewise persist. Few women graduate from the scheme without internalising the voice of its architect, Nan Sloane, reminding them to

"Get into the room, take up the space, take politics seriously and never apologise for yourself."

I also want to take the opportunity to thank our hard-working officers Clare Reynolds and Jane Heggie and the rest of the executive committee.

Alumni of the programme include my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), now the shadow Secretary of State for International Development, and my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), now the chair of the women's parliamentary Labour party. These are all roles that, had things been different, we could well have seen Jo taking on herself. We hope she would be proud to see the graduates of the leadership scheme ably carrying the batons.

As the years pass, Jo's colourful legacy continues to grow brighter. We see it in the Jo Cox Foundation, which leads incredible work in her name. We see it in her amazing children. We see it in every glass ceiling smashed, every gesture of sisterhood and every act of brave persistence from generations of women she has inspired.

2.54 pm

**Ms Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): I was not sure if I was going to be speaking today, Madam Deputy Speaker, which is why I am not dressed appropriately, so forgive me for my attire—I would have worn far more appropriate trousers—but I felt that I just had to contribute.

The hon. Member for Batley and Spennings (Kim Leadbeater) gave a splendid speech. I am incredibly anxious that she wants us all to get fit. She will realise that in this place fitness, whether physical or mental, is not promoted in any way whatsoever. I must put on record that she is already doing wonderful work. She has already reached out to me and asked what support she can provide all Members in this House in helping Afghan men, women and children to be extracted out of Afghanistan. She is already considering what she can do within the capacity and the power that she has to support the most marginalised.

I am not sure what more I can add in reference to Jo that has not already been said so far, because I agree with everything, but I think that two things should be put on the record. Perhaps they have not been mentioned because these two skillsets are normally promoted by the men in the House, not the women. Jo was a natural born leader. She had the ability to deal with the smallest problem in her constituency and also, on the same day, to deal with the biggest problem on the international stage. That is incredibly rare for a person to be able to

[Ms Nusrat Ghani]

do, but she could do it. Jo did not mind who she worked with if she could achieve her endgame, which was always giving a voice to the voiceless and ensuring that those who are overlooked are represented in this place and internationally as well.

The other thing we do not talk about often when it comes to women is how clever they are, but Jo was just intelligent—she really was. She could speak on so many issues that mattered so much. Her voice would have been so relevant over the past two months in this place. She was just clever, on the local stuff, the transport stuff, the potholes stuff, the foodbank stuff, the international stuff, the terrorism stuff, the humanitarian stuff—issues around China, Russia and the middle east. She just knew so much. Quite often it is very difficult as a woman to come across as clever and also to ensure that people will still work with you, and Jo had the skill to do that.

Jo and I had a few difficult run-ins. We often did media together. I was obviously on the other side of the TV screen or next to the presenter, but we always came off in a positive way, had a hug and talked about what we were going to work on next. Just as my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) has done so much tremendous work on Afghanistan—I believe that Jo would have been proud—we worked together on the genocide amendment to the Trade Bill, and no doubt she would have been one of the strongest voices on that too.

Jo had a huge impact on both sides of the House. Although she is gone, she will never, never be forgotten. On the rare occasions when Jo has pulled us all together it is important to note that it just takes one strong individual to achieve so much in a short period of time. I hope that we can remember that as we deal with far more difficult issues going forward. I want to put on record my thanks. Her family must be and should always remain incredibly proud.

2.57 pm

**Anne McLaughlin** (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Despite being elected on the same day as Jo Cox, I cannot say that I knew her. I knew who she was, and in the months after she died, I almost felt I did know her. I certainly felt I should have known her. But I did not. However, I wanted to be here today, along with my hon. Friend and colleague the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), to pass on the love, best wishes and solidarity from my party to her friends and family and the communities who no doubt still grieve her loss.

We are far more united and have far more in common with each other than things that divide us. That is worth repeating. It was of course what Jo said in her maiden speech, and she was right. I share Jo Cox's positivity about human beings and their capacity for humanity, but it is not always easy to stay positive about that. She is one of the people I always think of if ever I start to feel cynical. I think also of the late Bashir Ahmad, who was the first Muslim Member of the Scottish Parliament and only ever saw good in people. I think of my late maternal grandmother, Sarah Purdie, who shared everything she had with whoever needed it, for whatever reason, and judged nobody. And I think of Jo Cox. They all believed in the goodness of people, and so should we,

because we will achieve more by reaching out to demonstrate what we have in common than by turning away.

While we are reaching out, we do of course have to keep ourselves safe, and that is one of her legacies. We all take our personal safety and that of our support teams a lot more seriously. This place takes it more seriously. We are all safer now because of Jo Cox. Let us not forget: it is not just MPs and their teams; all elected members, including councillors, face unacceptable abuse and threats. They deserve to be safe, too.

Jo sadly was not safe, and she paid a terrible price for her beliefs, but we should try not to remember her as a victim, although of course she was. Certainly when I hear her name, I picture her not as a victim, but as a kind of warrior woman: confident, strong, principled and fearless. Yes, I know she had many more battles she would have wanted to fight on behalf of other people, but she probably fought more in her almost 42 short years than most people will ever do. I imagine that she would rather be remembered for that, than have her memory defined by someone representing the wickedness in the world that she spent her time fighting.

Finally, I turn to the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater). I will not look at her, because she is going to get me going. She is the real reason I did not race up the road to Glasgow last night, as I usually do at the first opportunity. I want to offer her support, solidarity and sisterhood for the road that she has embarked upon. Most of us had no idea what we were letting ourselves in for. She has come into this with her eyes wide open, having experienced the very worst of electoral politics so close up. Still she put herself forward. That takes courage and a certain element of steely determination, which is something she clearly shares with her sister.

There was so much I could say about her speech today, but I will pick up on one thing. It was a wonderful speech and what a maiden speech should be. It was wide-ranging, but I will just pick up on one thing that I really loved, which is how she says the name of her constituency. She says "BAT-ley!" I do not know whether anyone else has noticed that she never says it "Batley"—she puts the "battle" into Batley, and it is wonderful to hear. Her speech, the way in which she conducted herself in the days and months after Jo's death, and the way she handled what looked like a pretty nasty by-election—incidentally, as a Scottish National party Member I want her to know that I cheered out loud when her result came through—all demonstrate that she is more than Jo's sister and that she will be a formidable Member of this House in her own right.

I would not dream of telling the hon. Lady what to do, but I do want to say that however she wants to approach this role is exactly how she should approach it. If she wants to spend her entire time in here doing what Jo would have done, that is not a bad shout, but she has already let us know that she wants to plough her own furrow, and that is also a good thing. I feel sure I will not be the only one saying that to her. I do hesitate, because we do not know each other, so who am I to give advice, but I want her to know that she is her own person and she won that by-election because she is Kim Leadbeater. She should be every bit as proud of herself for that, as she is proud of her sister and her sister's wonderful legacy.

3.2 pm

**Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): There are very few Back-Bench MPs who will have a lasting legacy after they have left Parliament, but Jo Cox is one of those people. I never knew Jo, but from the fondness with which she is remembered by colleagues, I know that she epitomised all that is goodness, and inspired us to be kinder to each other and to care about everyone in our communities.

On the issue of communities, I campaigned for my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spennings (Kim Leadbeater), and it was clear that she was everywhere in the community. I even met someone who had been to her gym classes and was still willing to vote for her. That shows what an amazing person she is and what a fantastic presence she has in her communities.

One area of work that I know Jo Cox was passionate about was tackling loneliness, and the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness was one of the first things I got involved with when I was a newly elected MP in June 2017. It was led by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and the former Member for South Ribblesdale, Seema Kennedy. The commission sought to start a conversation about loneliness that would lead to a less lonely and more connected world. That work is crucial and more relevant than ever.

Yesterday, I had the pleasure of meeting some covid-bereaved families and listening to their stories about lost family members and loved ones. A woman told me about the physical and mental impact of losing family members, which was then compounded by the loneliness she experienced as a result of various lockdowns. Another told me of the inadequacies of bereavement support services, and I am sure we all know people who have struggled with loneliness during the pandemic and in bereavement. The way that our communities have rallied round to support each other and those struggling in the pandemic is exactly the spirit that Jo Cox was talking about when she said that we all have more in common than that which divides us.

Loneliness affects many older people. Age UK states that about 10% of people aged over 65 say they are chronically lonely, with 1.7%—or 200,000—saying they have not had a conversation with a family member for more than a month. Carers also experience loneliness. Carers UK estimates that eight out of 10 carers feel lonely or isolated as a result of looking after a loved one. The impact of loneliness is felt even more profoundly by refugees. Many will have been separated from their families and loved ones having fled war or persecution. As well as making the arduous journey to get to the UK, they will have that loss to experience as well. That is why family reunion is so essential in these cases and something that we should all champion as much as we can.

The health impact of loneliness is well documented, and it has been estimated that in chronic cases it has the equivalent harmful effect of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Lonely people are also more likely to have mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. Loneliness is also associated with high cardiovascular disease and strokes. All those issues were raised by the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, and I am pleased that the Government not only produced a strategy but even appointed a Minister for loneliness. That is remarkable,

bearing in mind that we debate so many things but few things actually happen. That is one positive that has come from Jo's legacy.

Meaningful relationships are key to solving loneliness. We can all look to start a conversation as a first step. Much work still needs to be done to heal the divisions in our society, but with initiatives such as “the Great Get Together” spearheaded by the Jo Cox Foundation—I need to get invited to Bermondsey and Old Southwark to go to the many that my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) attends—it is clear that Jo's legacy in bringing people together will be long lasting. As this debate has shown, Jo Cox was the best of us and will continue to be an inspiration to us all.

3.7 pm

**Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spennings (Kim Leadbeater) and her incredibly moving maiden speech. That she won her seat on my birthday was a great birthday present.

I was not lucky enough to know Jo or to be able to call her a friend. However, she had a direct effect on my life that I would love to be able to thank her for in person. We all remember where we were when we heard the terrible news that day, the shock and disbelief, and watching the news over and over, hoping that the headline would somehow change, and desperately willing for it not to be true. A few months later, there was an announcement at the Labour party conference that one of Jo's legacies would be to help women like me—members of the party who wanted to progress as councillors or activists, or maybe even one day follow in her footsteps and stand to be an MP. The Jo Cox women in leadership scheme was launched. I applied—at midnight on deadline day, as always—and did not expect to hear anything back, but at least I had tried.

Fast-forward a couple more months and there was a little bit of a buzz on social media: women I knew of had started to talk about checking their inboxes. It emerged that a couple of thousand women had applied for about 50 places. There was no way on earth that I was going to get one of them. So my poor mum was on the verge of calling an ambulance when she got a snotty, sobbing and totally incoherent phone call from her daughter, who had found an email from Labour Women's Network in her spam folder with an offer of a place in the scheme. Women like me—a nobody struggling to raise my boys while working part-time as a teaching assistant and filling every other minute with running my local branch of the Labour party—do not often get breaks like that. It was my Charlie Bucket moment; I had found my golden ticket.

Jo's gift to me was a group of women from across the UK: 55 sisters, all with different strengths, backgrounds and experiences, and all with different reasons for applying to the scheme. I have made lifelong friendships with some incredibly special women, all of whom have made an impact. We had had just two of our training sessions when the snap election was announced in 2017. I had sat with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) in a hotel bar and told her I was thinking I might practise standing as an MP in 2020 in an area that she knew well. We joked that it was never, ever in a million years possible

[Rosie Duffield]

for Canterbury to be anything other than the safest Conservative seat in England. So, with absolutely nothing to lose, I practised standing in 2017, with that brilliant group of women on my phone 24/7. Ten of those women stood for Parliament in 2017, and two of us got here: the first woman ever to represent Canterbury and the first Sikh woman ever to be elected, my hon. Friend—my great friend—the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill).

Those other women have all kept making a difference, too, in continuing to stand for Parliament and in becoming councillors, community leaders, leaders of non-governmental organisations, activists, union pioneers and women on the frontline of the public sector and the fight against the covid pandemic. They are women such as Michelle Langan, who leads the Paper Cup Project in Liverpool to help to change the lives of rough sleepers in her region; Dr Kindy Sandhu, Coventry City councillor, academic extraordinaire and activist; Caroline Penn, formidable former Brighton councillor; Dr Allison Gardner, AI ceiling breaker as a leading woman in a traditionally male strand of academia; Denise Christie, firefighter and a regional secretary of the Fire Brigades Union; Anna Smith, deputy leader of Cambridge City Council; Salma Arif, the first female British Asian health lead on Leeds City Council; and our much-missed sister Assia Shah, who we sadly lost at the end of last year while she was working as a hospital chaplain and caring for those with covid.

I wish I could read the names of all those women—not just some in the first cohort of the scheme with me, but the outstanding women I have met who continue to inspire and change lives for the better in their communities and the wider world. All of us owe our thanks to Jo not just for the incredible opportunity her legacy has given us, but for the lead she took and the work she did for humanitarian causes around the world and for the women who undoubtedly would be worse off if she had not shone a light on their needs.

I was inspired by Jo's passionate commitment to stop Brexit and by her humanity and compassion for displaced people seeking asylum. I am certain that she would stand here today and make her views heard on the idea of sending people in boats back to direct harm. Jo talked about what we have in common, and that is something that inspires me every single day of my life. One thing I have in common with Jo is our friendship with my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), who has always been a great support—an encourager, a joker and a fantastic ally. Thanks to him for securing this debate today so that we can remember Jo and thank her for the real difference she brought to so many lives.

3.12 pm

**Taiwo Owatemi** (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in this debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield). Like her, I was not lucky enough to know Jo, but Jo's work has touched the lives of many in my constituency and of myself as well. I would also like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) for securing this important debate.

I would like to start by welcoming my hon. Friend the recently elected Member for Batley and Spennings (Kim Leadbeater) to Parliament and by thanking her for her powerful maiden speech. Can I just say that it was an absolute pleasure to come up to Batley and to support such a relentlessly positive, optimistic and outward-looking campaign?

Remembering Jo and honouring her legacy is not something that we must do with words just once a year at a debate; it must be with our actions in our work every day as well. Jo championed many important causes, such as refugee aid, fighting loneliness, internationalism, and empowering women and girls—to name just a few. On that note, I would like to focus on Jo's work on combating loneliness and how we can continue her work today.

Loneliness is an issue that does not discriminate based on age, gender, background or ethnicity. It is often debilitating, damaging to our mental health and can affect us all equally. Almost from the beginning of Jo's parliamentary career, she worked to bring to light the causes and effects of loneliness so that we may better understand and tackle it. She co-established a cross-party loneliness commission with Seema Kennedy to do just that. That commission brought together 13 organisations to highlight the scale of loneliness across all areas of society and at different stages in everyone's life. Partly because of the awareness that that commission brought to loneliness and mental health more broadly, those issues receive greater consideration and resources today.

There is still much work to be done, and the Jo Cox Foundation, which campaigns relentlessly to combat loneliness, cannot do it alone. In my patch of Coventry North West, grassroots community groups have worked to ensure that no one in my community feels alone. During the pandemic when we were all socially distancing, loneliness and poor mental health became a more pressing issue. Those groups stepped up to stop the spread of loneliness. Holbrooks community centre in my constituency has organised many community events and provides a safe space for residents to come together and socialise, and Grapevine in Coventry has done much to stamp out isolation and to support vulnerable people, planning events such as socially distanced gatherings at our local parks. With our high streets and town centres struggling, the Government must consider more innovative ways to empower such groups. They must also consider how we can better support community pubs, repurpose community and disused buildings, and make our green spaces more accessible to combat isolation and loneliness. My constituency would certainly welcome such support. I am incredibly grateful to be able to honour Jo and her work, and to speak on such an important issue.

3.16 pm

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) and the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) for securing this important debate. I congratulate my wonderful hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spennings (Kim Leadbeater)—as others have said, it is fantastic to be able to say that—on her excellent, indeed sublime, maiden



speech. I have no doubt that she will go on to do great things and I am excited to be able to watch and, I hope, help her in any way I can. No one knew Jo better, and that love and admiration shone through today. I know Jo would have been very proud, as indeed her whole family rightly are.

Sadly, we all remember hearing the news on that horrific day in June 2016, as well as the conversations that followed with friends, family and, particularly for MPs, our children. Jo's children, Cuillin and Lejla, were much younger than mine, but I have no doubt that children of MPs, like my Joseph and Emily, who kiss goodbye to their mam or their dad when they head off for a regular constituency day, were united that day, both in fear for their parent's safety, but also in heartbreak, love and understanding for Jo's children.

I have always reassured my family, as I am sure we all do, that I am safe in my work. Although the weeks and months after Jo's murder were difficult for everyone who knew her in so many ways, we have all been comforted by Jo's words that we all know so well:

"we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us."—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

Jo put those words into action and, like me, as we have heard she was a pragmatic idealist. Also like me, she believed in cross-party working—for any advice on setting up all-party groups, I'm your girl! I truly believe that in order for something to succeed, it must be done with the support of colleagues across the political spectrum and across the House. Anyone who knows me in this place will know that I stand by that.

Soon after becoming an MP Jo set up the cross-party loneliness commission, together with the former Member for South Ribble. I am proud of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) who was able to continue Jo's work on that important issue. Loneliness is not just a problem for the elderly, as the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) said in her excellent contribution. As I discovered when my daughter went to university, although surrounded by many young people, she was desperately lonely and felt very isolated for the first few months, so I would add students to the list that the hon. Lady gave earlier.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness found evidence that loneliness can adversely affect a person's health, so it is indeed a public health issue that we all need to take seriously. I am sure that Jo would have been working throughout the pandemic, among other things, to keep people connected and help tackle loneliness, as I know the Jo Cox Foundation has been doing.

Last December, as the then shadow Minister for Veterans, I asked the then Veterans Minister, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), to support and promote the Jo Cox Foundation's Great Winter Get Together for veterans. I am pleased to say that we were both able to attend a very large virtual roundtable discussion with hundreds of veterans, hosted by the fabulous Jo Cox Foundation and the Royal British Legion. That was just at the beginning of this year—in February, I recall—and it was excellent.

As we have heard, Jo achieved so much in such a short space of time as an MP. We will never know what might have been, but I am confident that it would have been magnificent. Jo's legacy lives on in the organisations,

charities and work that continue in her name. Through the Jo Cox women in leadership programme, we are seeing more women who love and act like Jo enter politics, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) and my wonderful hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield). We are all the better for it.

It is an honour, as well as heartbreaking, to sit under the Jo Cox memorial plaque, a reminder of the impact that she had across the Chamber and, indeed, the world. It is our duty to ensure that Jo is remembered and that her legacy lives on. On days like today, I am confident that it will.

3.21 pm

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Like everybody else, I thank the hon. Members for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) and for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) for bringing this debate forward today. It has been incredibly moving for everybody. We all remember where we were and what we were doing when the news came through. I was coming back from a surgery myself. I could not believe that that could happen to anybody, and certainly not that it could have happened to Jo.

I was reflecting this week on the day we all came back here—the memorial and the tributes that were paid, and how we all felt that day. I was sitting up at the back, and I could not take my eyes off Brendan, and Cuillin and Lejla, up in the Gallery. They were those tiny wee bits of children, and I felt so awful for them about what had happened. I think we can all agree that we all think of them and keep them in our hearts. They can be incredibly proud of their mum's legacy and the things that she has done, which we still hear about today in this place, and that so many of us have come to remember her and to thank her for what she has done.

It is interesting that this House remembers Jo often and speaks of her often. I noticed that the Library briefing—I tried to research this myself and could not quite do it, so I am glad that the Library did—says that her name had been mentioned on 129 occasions since the last election, prior to today, when, obviously, there have been many more mentions. That really reflects that while she may not be in here, she is always with us and always in our thoughts. I think that is important. That legacy, of course, has brought us here. It has brought us here in emotion, in love and in solidarity with one another. Keeping those values is very important, too.

We welcome Jo's sister, the new hon. Member for Batley and Spennings (Kim Leadbeater), who has already achieved so much in coming here and being here. We look forward very much to seeing what she will do in this place for her constituents—the causes she will champion and the things she will do. She will do her constituents very proud, I am sure. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) was absolutely right that we all cheered at seeing the hon. Lady elected. It is unusual, I suppose, that we would do that, but the context was very different. We are delighted, particularly given the awfulness of that campaign, that she got through that and that she is here with us in this place. It is an absolute joy for democracy and for the values that we all share.

[Alison Thewliss]

The Jo Cox Foundation has not been talked about enough, although lots of people have mentioned it. I want to mention some of the things that the foundation does. I have been to and enjoyed the Great Get Togethers. There is the More in Common Network, the Connection Coalition, which is really important, and the local Yorkshire projects, which stand as a local legacy to her work. There is the work around civility in politics. It is so important that we find ways to agree and disagree respectfully, and to work with one another whatever our common causes and across political divides, wherever possible.

Many have mentioned the international work, and the Jo Cox memorial grants through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office are more valuable today than they ever have been, with the situation in Afghanistan. The work on loneliness was mentioned and is incredibly important, and I thought the reflection about the widening of that scheme and the widening of the concept that Jo took to it was very interesting. I know from speaking to many of the refugee groups in my constituency how much that loneliness work has meant to them—to have their pain and isolation recognised and to take positive steps to try to change that and make that right.

I want to reflect on some of the things that were said about the Labour party from a Scottish Labour perspective. I did my best to reach out across political divides and I contacted Labour MSPs and former MSPs who I thought would have something that they wished to say. I wanted to make sure that her legacy in Scotland was also recognised. My predecessor, Anas Sarwar, now MSP for Glasgow, organised a Great Get Together event and, very charitably, given the circumstances in which he and I know each other, invited me along. He had no obligation to do so but he reached out across the party political divide and organised a wonderful event at his constituency office, which brought the community together and allowed people to have those conversations and be together. I hope that we will be able to make that happen more in the years and months to come.

I also reached out to Kezia Dugdale, the former leader of Scottish Labour and a very good egg, I would say. She is working for the John Smith Centre at Glasgow University. Kez was Scottish Labour leader at the time Jo was taken from us. She reflected on—the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) also mentioned this—the power of Jo's sisterhood. Kez described Jo as

“the ultimate feminist, lifting women up, giving her time to mentor people and open doors.”

She felt that the Jo Cox women in leadership programme that the Labour party has is that fitting tribute, as others have said, including the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), because it is about not only political education, but helping women to organise and prepare for life in politics. Far be it from me to commend the women going into the Labour party but it does sound like a very good scheme and a very meaningful legacy. Kez said that

“for me and many women like me, Jo's legacy was about supporting women to realise their own power and agency to effect change”.

I think we can all agree, whatever party people want to stand for, that that is definitely something worth valuing.

I also heard from Monica Lennon, MSP, who I understand has had the privilege of meeting the new hon. Member for Batley and Spennings (Kim Leadbeater) at events. She is also very delighted for her to be here. Monica reflected the power and essence of Jo's legacy in bringing our diverse communities together—people from different parties and people from different backgrounds in a space where we can chat and be together. Her feeling was also of solidarity. She said that women of all political parties have looked out for one another more since Jo's death and that we can all take inspiration from the way that she lived her life. I think that is incredibly powerful, regardless of whoever has said these things, and I thank those colleagues in the Scottish Labour party for getting in touch with me to do that, because they also miss her and thank her for all that she has done.

In reflecting that there are those who have come to this place as Jo's legacy, it is really important to remind ourselves, in all our qualities, what we should be and how we should approach things.

I have written down some words that have been mentioned today: passion, enthusiasm, commitment, clarity, decency, principle. Being a campaigning MP, in whatever aspect, and a humanitarian; having commonality of cause; bringing a voice to the voiceless; being intelligent and proud of it; having humanity and seeing the goodness in people—those are all qualities that we should seek in Members of Parliament. They are always qualities that we and the public recognise, but we should talk about them more as a way to bring people who have them into this place and make our politics better.

I want to take a small second to thank all the people who have spoken so far and say to them all how much I appreciate them, how much I like them and how much I thank them for being in this place and sharing this strange world that we all inhabit. We do not say that enough when we have the chance, so I will close by thanking everyone who has spoken; saying my appreciation to Jo's family, who are here, and her friends; and wishing everybody the very best on what has been a very difficult day for so many of us.

3.30 pm

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) for securing this debate and opening it with such an important reminder not just of what we have lost but, as all hon. Members have said, of what we have gained from the life of Jo. I thank all who have attended; whether they have spoken or sat and reflected, their presence means so much to us.

Today we have searched for words to show our affection and admiration for our dear friend Jo. Her legacy has left its imprint around the world. In contrast to the dark moment that stole her life, the light through which she lived her life and that she shared with others has ignited hope, lit movements and sparked a generation of people to step into a space where they too can make change and make a difference to the people around them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spennings (Kim Leadbeater) has more than stepped into that space today, in her own unique way. In one of the most personal and passionate speeches ever heard in this House, she has moved us all—or certainly will with one

of her work-outs. As a younger sister myself, I recognise the unique bond between sisters, and today the Leadbeater family spirit filled this Chamber.

Just as the memorable words of Jo's maiden speech called us to draw together through recognising the unity we share, overwhelming that which divides us, my hon. Friend's speech today will echo not just in this place, but across nations in years to come; indeed, today it has sparked unity in our place and perhaps a fresh start for politics to bring us closer together to do the job that we were called to do. But it was the powerful words first spoken by Jo that have called on our communities, time and again, to draw close and seek our common bonds, and that have beckoned us to share our lives in unique ways.

Jo did. As so many of us recently witnessed in Batley and Spen, Jo's legacy is sewn into the hearts that she touched in her own community. As we knocked on doors, people were eager to share how Jo had been there for them, spoken for them and, above all, turned her words into actions. She knew the honour of being sent to Parliament to speak for them—a task that she diligently devoted herself to, as we have heard today. She reached out across the House to draw people into her space and turn their attention to the cause, whether she was highlighting the acute humanitarian crisis in Syria or listening with compassion to those who have known the searing pain of loneliness. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) for all that she has done in continuing Jo's work on Syria, putting the victims of conflict at the heart of all we do. Her tenacity has furthered Jo's legacy.

Jo sought answers, laboured for solutions and focused on the transformation that she believed politics could bring. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) reminds us, she strove for unity over division and to stand up for what was right, speaking truth to power. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), who cannot be with us today, wanted to pay this tribute:

“Jo was such a good friend and a wonderful human being. Compassionate. Kind. Honest. Funny. Courageous. She was a doer with an infectious enthusiasm.

Jo's legacy as a humanitarian shines strong and her memory will continue to inspire for generations to come. We miss her dearly.”

Jo, of course, spent time working in the EU, and there, too, her legacy continues. The chair of the Labour party, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), has said:

“Jo's legacy is keenly felt by so many people within the Socialist and Democrat group and reflected in the naming of her own square in Brussels, ‘Place Jo Cox’. Jo's message, continues to be a rallying cry for a grown-up politics which promotes the incredible things people can achieve when they come together.”

It is those words “more in common”, which we read daily, of which we remind ourselves at the start of each session and from which we draw perspective as we look to the coat of arms placed above these Benches. We embrace those words: we must have more in common. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), who cannot be here this afternoon, said:

“When in the Chamber, I look at Jo's plaque and think how I can make a positive contribution the way Jo did; inclusive, warm, intelligent and challenging. Jo lives on in our contributions both to address our, at times divided communities, always with a sense of urgency and hope.”

It was communities here and around the world that Jo served. Having seen the difference that the Royal Voluntary Service was making to the lives of older and vulnerable people in her constituency, she became determined to tackle the issue of loneliness. Jo's support to ensure that no one, of any age or from any background, experienced loneliness led to a commission on loneliness, to the subsequent strategy and to a named Minister for loneliness—and it is such a pleasure to see the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) back in the Chamber today. It was her legacy that moved the agenda forward as the commission became a strategy, and in October this year it will mark its third anniversary. Its importance has been noted by us all over the last 18 months as we have navigated our way through the covid 19 pandemic. It is not without significance that my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) have all drawn on that in their speeches today, recognising its role among the bereaved and those who have been so challenged in our times, those experiencing chronic loneliness—and at this time, of course, refugees too.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) reminded us all of the inspiration that Jo gave us, as women, not least through the Labour Women's Network. My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) talked of the power of women in leadership. Jo's feminism came through in all that she did, whether on the international stage or in her constituency. The Jo Cox Foundation, founded in her memory and formed by friends and family, is growing Jo's legacy, with a vision

“for a kinder, more compassionate society where every individual has a sense of belonging”.

It now marks the Great Get Together, bringing communities together—and I look forward to my invitation to Bermondsey next year to join colleagues in that place of unity. With organisations such as the More in Common Network, the Connection Coalition, Civility in Politics, Building a Fairer World and local projects in Yorkshire, the Jo Cox Foundation is certainly advancing Jo's legacy.

Others also wanted their words to be quoted today. The Freedom Fund, for which Jo worked before coming to Parliament, said:

“Jo was a powerful champion for the world's most vulnerable and marginalised. She was one of those rare people who really did fight tirelessly to make the world a better place. And with it all, Jo was warm, funny, fearless and effective.

Jo also worked for Oxfam leaving a significant and far reaching legacy. She worked on the Make Poverty History Campaign, to increase aid, cancel debt, improve trade for the world's poorest countries, and advocated for the protection of civilians globally.

An inspiring, positive and energetic leader who was passionate about justice and equality. Oxfam's vision of a kinder, fairer world—a world less divided by borders, money, race or gender—is rooted in Jo's values. Her work and her impact is still felt across Oxfam and the development sector today.”

It was no mistake that Jo, a passionate advocate here and around the world, was a Labour MP. Her politics mattered. She was an active member of the GMB too, and Neil Derrick, the regional secretary, has paid this tribute:

“Jo radiated happiness and it was infectious—you couldn't help but smile when in her company, as many of us did. She wanted to do so much and had so many plans to try and improve

[*Rachael Maskell*]

things, not just for her constituents, but for GMB members across the region. A little bit of Jo lives on in every one of us, every time we do a good deed or show compassion to one another. We are incredibly proud at GMB to call Jo one of our own.”

And as hon. Friends have said today, she is one of our own. Jo’s search for a fairer and more just world drove her in all she did. At this time of such failed global politics, Jo would have been not just identifying the challenges but gathering people to advance solutions, build bridges and determine a better path forward.

The hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) reminded us that Jo showed us what this place was for, the purpose for which we are called to serve and, as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) also said, knowing where we stand.

Above all, Jo was an extraordinary woman: a mother, a wife, a daughter, a sister, a colleague and our friend. In leaving us, she has challenged us all to take up her call and create a far fairer and more just world where we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.

3.41 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman):** It is an honour to respond for the Government in this important debate and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing it, but I hope the whole House will agree that it is right to turn first to the extraordinary speech from the new Member, the hon. and brave Member for Batley and Spennings (Kim Leadbeater). She spoke movingly about her journey to this place, what it means to be here and her passion to diligently represent the area that she loves and that Jo Cox loved too. If I may, I will pick out two areas of her speech specifically. The first is what she said about public service.

Every day in this Chamber we see that, for doing this job, some Members of Parliament have made the ultimate sacrifice. We all, in one way or another, make sacrifices doing it, but there are too many shields on these walls. We all know, though, that Parliament, this place, is where we can make the lives of our constituents and this whole country greater still. As the hon. Lady said, both she and her sister sought to reach across party lines to do that. We are strongest when we can make that work and when we can “crack on and get stuff done”, as she said. In so doing, perhaps we will make the divisive, damaging, fractured politics that we have seen in recent years a little bit less painful. Over the last few years, we have lived through some of the most polarised times in British politics. From the tone of today’s debate, we all think that we should do better. I know from speaking to Members across this House that Jo Cox worked across party from the moment she was elected, and I know from speaking to the hon. Member for Batley and Spennings herself before this debate that she will continue that legacy. We have, as so many have said, more in common than that which divides us, wherever we sit in this House. We forget it too often.

The second thing to say is that while this debate is not focused solely on the Jo Cox Foundation but on her legacy as a whole, it is the foundation that will ensure that so much of that work lives on. Legacies are always

about the future, not the past. Those values of stronger communities, a better public life and a fairer world are all things that the past 18 months have shown to be more vital than ever. Whether that is, as Jo put it herself, to “turbo-charge the public’s awareness of loneliness”

or to tackle the scandal of online hate, this Government are committed to tackling the issues that the foundation is involved in. That is because those issues mattered profoundly when she identified them and they still matter profoundly today. I could talk at great length about how the Government are supporting the superb initiatives that have been mentioned a lot today, including the Jo Cox memorial grants and the Jo Cox Foundation’s Great Get Together campaign. Collectively, Jo’s legacy is already benefiting tens of thousands of people across the world, but I will highlight three areas.

The first is intimidation in public life and the behaviour that can stop talented people, particularly women and those from minority backgrounds, standing for public office. We recognise that in the past several MPs have referenced abuse as a reason for standing down. To humanise that, it means there is hardly a woman in Parliament who has not received a death threat, even though many men have not. It means the police judge that we need security in our homes, and it means an emotional toll on our families who worry that this job poses far more risk than it is worth, as the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) said.

For all those reasons, and more, the Government are taking action to tackle this culture. I do not think that today is a day to introduce partisan politics, but let me say simply that the need to tackle intimidation of every sort drives the Government’s agenda, from online safety to defending democracy.

Secondly, as Jo said:

“Young or old, loneliness doesn’t discriminate.”

The covid-19 pandemic has, as so many Members have today, highlighted the importance of social connection to everyone across society. I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), and our former colleague Seema Kennedy, for all the work they have done on loneliness.

The Government are proud to have continued to play our part in building on the pioneering work that Jo Cox started. The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness carried out invaluable work that informed the Government’s 2018 tackling loneliness strategy—the world’s first Government strategy of its kind. It evolved into nearly £50 million of investment, the world’s first loneliness Minister and huge progress in destigmatising an issue on which there remains so much to do.

Thirdly, Jo Cox’s work had strong roots in her local area. Like Jo, we believe that local people understand what is needed in their community, be it local and grassroots action on tackling loneliness or on a host of other issues. We can all take action, no matter how small, to reach out with kindness to those around us, and we should never underestimate the huge impact that can have in our communities.

The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark was the first, but by no means the only, Member to mention the importance of family to Jo and the hon. Member for Batley and Spennings. It is great that the family join us today in the Gallery. There are clearly

some formidable genetics up in the Gallery, and I worry that there are now some formidable genetics on the Opposition Benches. It was kind of the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark to invite us all to Bermondsey for another Great Get Together.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford and the hon. Members for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) mentioned loneliness. One of the things I suspect the hon. Member for Batley and Spen will learn is that Thursday afternoons are a particularly great opportunity for Back Benchers to press the Government to take action on a host of issues, and she saw an adept way of doing that from my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford.

The hon. Member for Batley and Spen may also learn that she will not always get the straightest and most immediate answer from the Dispatch Box, but my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford knows that both the issues she raised are under serious consideration by the Government and that her views are shared elsewhere. Those two issues, particularly social prescribing, are hugely valuable.

Among other things, the hon. Member for Batley and Spen might learn from my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) that it is genuinely true that friendships go across parties, and I hope we can continue that. She may also learn that there is no place in which she cannot promote a book, but that is a separate issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), who is no longer in his place because he is carrying out his duties as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, made a genuinely important speech about why we are all here. I think we all value his contribution. We can all learn how to turn being late into a politically useful point, too.

The hon. Members for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) talked powerfully about the persistent emotional impact of Jo's presence and about her internationalism. We all learned even more than we had from previous tributers about the ongoing impact Jo has had on so many people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) spoke about the value of debate, which is why we are all here. The hon. Members for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) and for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) talked about the value of the Labour women's network, highlighting the progress that has been made in this House and, indeed, in the Labour party on improving diversity. We all share those ambitions, and I can think of a couple of Tory Prime Ministers who would definitely agree.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) talked about the value of leadership, which she has shown on a number of issues, and I know she will continue to do so.

Turning finally to the contributions of the hon. Members for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), both talked about cheering the result in Batley and Spen. I must confess that it is easier for a member of the SNP to cheer that result than it is for a member of the Conservative party, but that does not mean that we cannot celebrate the arrival of the hon. Lady and all her qualities.

The Government are proud to continue the legacy that we have discussed today. Whether it is through supporting women and girls internationally through the Jo Cox memorial grants, working at a national level to address intimidation in public life and tackle loneliness or supporting people to connect in their local communities, we continue to be inspired by the life and the work of Jo Cox and her belief in a kinder and fairer world for everyone.

I want to end by saying simply one thing: we have heard powerful speeches today watched by honoured guests in the Gallery, and I know that there are others, including the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), who had hoped to be here, too. Today has been an exceptional parliamentary moment and that is because we have been here to commemorate an exceptional life. We see that shield in this Chamber every day, a pointed reminder that Jo Cox's legacy is permanent in our minds and in this place. I know that the hon. Member for Batley and Spen will do justice to it and we should all work to honour it as well.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call Neil Coyle to wind up.

3.50 pm

**Neil Coyle:** Thank you again, Madam Deputy Speaker. I also thank the House authorities and the Backbench Business Committee for giving us a chance to pay our respects here in the Chamber and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) put it, to reflect.

It has been tough for many of us, and, as we saw, completely understandably so for my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). We also heard what an inspiration Jo remains, as my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) put it. All contributions made it clear that Jo's work, passions, loves and values live on through Members across this House. The message that has rung out clearly throughout this debate was the importance of cross-party work. We heard that from the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and also from my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). We would not have had the debate if it were not for the cross-party work. I thank again the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) who talked about Jo's spirit of getting things done—not just raising an issue, but getting it sorted, which, I think, is a demonstration of the Yorkshire grit that we heard about in the maiden speech.

What a brilliant maiden speech—an amazing maiden speech. It was brilliant that such a warm welcome was given to the new Member for Batley and Spen from across the House. It was also brilliant to hear how rightly proud the whole family is of the positive legacy of Jo Cox. Going forward, we all have a duty to continue Jo's efforts five years on. We could all benefit from being a bit more Jo. It would certainly improve some of my social media contributions.

It was also clear from the maiden speech that it is not just Jo's positive legacy that lives on, but that relentlessly positive family spirit that lives on through the new Member for Batley and Spen. We could all benefit from being a bit more Jo, but we could also all benefit from

[Neil Coyle]

being a bit more Kim. We will all have the chance to do it when we welcome the Batley riders to Flat Iron Square at a Great Get Together in June next year.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** This has been an incredibly moving and thoughtful debate and it has been a real honour to hear all your extremely powerful contributions about Jo's legacy. Many congratulations to the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater). It is a great to welcome another Yorkshire woman to the Chamber. She will be an incredibly effective contributor, and I get the feeling that she will also bring a certain liveliness to our debates. Many congratulations to her. She is very insightful and I was very proud to hear her contribution. It is wonderful to have her family here as well and I am sure that they share in that pride.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the legacy of Jo Cox.

## Business without Debate

### COMMITTEES

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** With the leave of the House, we will take motions 5 and 6 together.

#### COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS

*Ordered,*

That Chris Elmore be discharged from the Committee on Standards and Yvonne Fovargue be added.

#### COMMITTEE OF PRIVILEGES

*Ordered,*

That Chris Elmore be discharged from the Committee of Privileges and Yvonne Fovargue be added.—(Alan Mak.)

## Emergency Services Cenotaph: Westminster

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

3.54 pm

**Sir Mike Penning** (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It is a true honour and privilege to follow such an important debate. We have been united across the House this afternoon. I hope that this Adjournment debate, which might continue for considerably longer than some may expect for an Adjournment debate, will give me the opportunity to show that this House, both Houses and those outside the House can come together on a subject that I know is close to your heart, Madam Deputy Speaker, and which is certainly very close to mine.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you were Minister of State at the Department of Health. Before I came to this House, I had the honour and privilege of being a firefighter. I have also been the Policing Minister and the Minister responsible for the coastguard, and, as you will remember, lots of other things; for the purpose of this debate, those sorts of things are very important.

This debate is about establishing a cenotaph for the emergency workers we have lost. Some 7,500 emergency workers have lost their lives over the years, and the sad fact is that we will lose more. Another sad fact is that there is no national memorial for those who have given so much to us over the years. It was so moving to hear hon. Members talking about the sad loss of Jo and what happened to her. The emergency workers I am talking about were the emergency workers who went to Jo: the police and the paramedics. Sadly, they did not manage to save her life, but I am sure we all agree that they would have done everything that they possibly could have to save Jo, as they would for anybody else. We are talking about those who go towards a situation when very often, quite rightly, the rest of us are going in the opposite direction. Some of them do not come back. That is a commitment to humanity that I am calling on the Government to acknowledge.

As I have said before, the emergency services today are as dedicated to us now as they have ever been. I will touch on the different aspects of that. It is not just those who work for us. Believe it or not, there are 2,500 first responders out there today—mostly volunteers. There were those who volunteered, for instance, during the pandemic, to help in ways that we have probably never tried since the second world war.

We need a cenotaph here in central London. We formed a committee, which I had the honour of being asked to co-chair with the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). As a former Minister and a former firefighter, I could not think of anything that I would like to do more. I was quite determined that we should try to do this together, as a Parliament and as a country. I know that there are various memorials around the country. Certain colleagues have told me that, quite rightly, their local communities have come together and that they have memorials for emergency workers in their constituencies, but I cannot believe that in 2021 we do not have something here in London.

That is not to take away in any way, shape or form from the military memorials in London, including the Cenotaph itself, which we celebrate every year on

Remembrance Day, when we remember those who have given so much and those who continue to serve today on our behalf around the world. We are not trying to take away from that. We are just trying to put in place a memorial that is going to be here forever, for those who have served and we have lost, for those who have volunteered and we have lost, and for those going forward, sadly, long after we are gone.

I have looked very carefully at how this could be done and the committee has looked at where the memorial should be. The committee believes—and there seems to be hugely popular agreement on this, even from the Mayor of London and many others—that it should be in Whitehall.

That was a unanimous decision. As I shall say in a moment, most of the great and good of this country have said the same, including the Duke of Cambridge—the future king of this country has supported what we are trying to do.

The cenotaph will cost a lot of money, but cenotaphs do. I do not think we are fixated on where exactly in Whitehall it should be. We have made a facsimile of where we would like it to be and created photographs, and we would like it to be quite close to Parliament Square, but, actually, I do not think we really mind. I think the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford and I would agree that we do not mind where it is; we just want it in Whitehall—the place where the country comes together to say thank you.

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): It is an honour to co-chair with the right hon. Gentleman the committee that is campaigning for this memorial. Does he recognise that the 18 months we have had have really taught us that we should never take for granted those on whom we depend in so many different ways, and our emergency services are at the heart of that because we all depend on them every single day? That is why it would be right to have a tribute to them and the work that they do at the very heart of where decisions are made. Parliament, the Government and the country should come together to support that.

**Sir Mike Penning:** The right hon. Lady has hit the nail completely on the head. What better opportunity do we have? By the way, this campaign started long before covid—I shall come on to say a bit about how a lovely man called Tom got it going and how we got to this stage—but covid has brought the country together in a way that we have not seen since the second world war. Even though there is an expense and red tape—can we cut through some of the red tape?—and people will baulk at the fact that it will probably cost just over £3 million to do, who cares? In the scheme of things, £3 million is such a small amount of money when it could give so much to the country.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for bring this debate forward, and he and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) for their perseverance in this task. I believe in and support this campaign because the right hon. Gentleman is right in what he is saying. This cenotaph will be for all the nations of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales together—to

thank all the people for all they have done. I want the right hon. Gentleman to know that I fully support what he is about and endorse his comments and campaign.

**Sir Mike Penning:** The hon. Gentleman is a great Unionist. I believe in the Union of this country, and the centre of the Union is where we are today: Westminster and Whitehall. To me, that is so important.

We have already raised £180,000, which has come from public donations. This is unusual for me, Madam Deputy Speaker, because as you know I never read in the House: I am dyslexic, something I am very proud of, and there is nothing I can do about it, so I do not usually read. But there are certain things that I want to read today so that I do not get certain people's titles wrong, which I invariably do, and do not miss anybody out. We have already raised £180,000 and we need just over £3 million, but we also need two things, which I will come back to at the end: a decision on where the cenotaph is going to be and a commitment from the Government to help us to fund it.

The 999 cenotaph will be the first national monument to the NHS and other emergency workers who have served and will serve in future—it will be not just to those who have fallen. This is crucial: it is not just for those who have lost their lives, been seriously injured or been attacked in the line of duty. It will be a thank you—somewhere loved ones can go and just think about what their loved one has committed to the country. Some will have lost loved ones and some will have been injured in the line of duty. For our country not to have a central memorial to them shames us a little bit.

The 999 cenotaph is supported by His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge; the Prime Minister; the First Ministers of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales; and all the emergency services, including the fire service, the police, the coastguard and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. Also, although I do not have them on my list, we have to be conscious that there are other volunteer emergency workers who are not part of the RNLI—when I became the Shipping Minister, I learned very quickly not to forget them, because safety inshore is very much done by them. The sculptor is the renowned Philip Jackson who created the Bomber Command memorial in Green Park and, closer to us, the Gandhi statue in Parliament Square. We could not have a greater person working on it. As I said, our preferred site is in Whitehall.

I have no idea what the Minister is going to say; we have not conferred. With my co-chair, I wrote a joint letter to the Prime Minister, so there is no doubt about what we are asking for. Hopefully, we might have a bit of good news. If we can get some movement on this, the monument should be finished by December 2022, in the year of Her Majesty's platinum jubilee. If we can do that, what a fantastic message that would send.

There will be six figures on the plinth, plus one other, which I will come back to in a second. It will be in Portland stone and it will be 21 feet high from the ground to the top of the memorial. It will send an enormous message about how much this country cares. The six figures will be: a police officer, a firefighter, a maritime volunteer, a nurse, a paramedic, and a member of the search and rescue volunteer team—plus a service dog. We must not forget that it is not just human beings who go out there. Very often, they go out there with service dogs, whether police dogs or mountain rescue

[Sir Mike Penning]

dogs. The figure of a dog will be a spaniel. There was a bit of discussion about what type of dog it would be. We are great dog lovers in this country. I think the spaniel works best. Those of us who are in this Chamber on a regular basis before the House opens for business know that the spaniels are here protecting us. I cannot think of a better breed of dog to be there.

How did we get to this stage? Tom Scholes-Fogg, the gentleman I referred to earlier, has been a trustee since 2016. In 2001, his grandfather John was a police sergeant in Greater Manchester. He was months away from retirement when one of his officers, PC Alison Armitage, was tragically killed on duty. I think that sparked something in him. In my constituency, PC Frank Mason was shot by bank robbers outside a Barclays bank years ago. Every single year, we come back and pay tribute to him. That is a small memorial in a constituency, in the middle of a town centre. I want one out here for the likes of Frank as well. Tom discovered, which surprised him, that there was no national memorial. When I first looked at this issue, I thought, "Of course we have one." But actually, we do not. From one tragedy that happened to Alison, through Tom's grandfather John and through Tom's commitment, with his trustees—we have done all the directors and all the red tape; the Charity Commission is very happy—we have got to this stage.

We have some interesting quotes:

"As a society, we owe our wellbeing, and indeed our lives, to the men and women in our emergency services who work tirelessly to protect us in some of the most difficult circumstances. It is only fitting that we should recognise the vital role that they play and pay tribute to the bravery and dedication of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for their communities."

That was said by His Royal Highness Prince William, the Duke of Cambridge. I have another quote:

"It takes a very special kind of person to put your life on the line for a complete stranger."

That is from a long quote from the Prime Minister. He is fully committed to this:

"I know the dedicated men and women of the Emergency services did not get into this line of work for the accolades or applause."

They do so because they want to do it. He said:

"You are the heroes of British life".

He fully supports what we are calling for. I could go on. There was support from the First Minister of Northern Ireland at the time. The leader of the Democratic Unionist party in Northern Ireland, one of our parliamentarians, supports this. Nicola Sturgeon supports it. I could go on.

Basically, I am saying to the Minister that we have a commitment from all the powers in this country. It cannot be much greater than the future King of this country, the Prime Minister of this country and the leaders of all parts of this country. We also have, I can assure her, fantastic support from both sides of the House.

In the great scheme of things, this is a small amount of money. The least worst thing we would like is to be exempt from VAT for this project. The next best thing might be that the Treasury would match-fund us. Actually, what I would like, to show the commitment to our emergency workers and our service animals, is for the

Government to say, "We're going to help you find a spot, with Westminster City Council, in Whitehall, and by the way we're going to pay for it." I cannot think of a better way to spend the British pound than to do that.

4.10 pm

**The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage):** I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this really important Adjournment debate and on highlighting an incredibly important cause. Today, almost 2 million people—3% of the population—work and volunteer in the emergency services and the NHS, including 250,000 first responders. As the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) said, we have really seen, through the pandemic, just how acutely we rely on them as our NHS and 999 heroes have continued working and volunteering to save lives.

I have to start by paying tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead. When I was a very new Member of Parliament he came down to visit me in my constituency, when he was a very important person—probably a Transport Minister.

**Sir Mike Penning:** Shipping Minister.

**Caroline Dinenage:** Yes, Shipping Minister. He has always been a huge supporter of those of us who have constituencies on the coast and who rely on the emergency services, many of which are manned and staffed by some incredibly heroic volunteers. In my constituency, the gaffers man the rescue services that go up into the Solent, on a really frequent basis, to save lives. They are absolute heroes, every single one of them. My right hon. Friend worked really hard with me in my constituency, and with the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, which is based there, to promote its important work. He has a great track record of promoting our emergency services.

Those working in our NHS and our 999 services day in and day out are absolutely our unsung heroes. They are always there to help us in the moments of greatest need when we are at our weakest. We honour them and we must never, ever forget the sacrifices that they make for us. I therefore echo everything that has been said by my right hon. Friend and others in praising the heroic actions of all emergency service personnel. The campaign for an appropriate monument to honour those who served and continue to serve in the emergency services began back in 2017, but if ever there was a time to reflect on what they have achieved and the dedication and the service of our 999 heroes, it is now, in the wake of the covid crisis.

**Sir Mike Penning:** I thank the Minister for giving way; we have plenty of time to debate this evening, which is really nice. I am sure she is aware that this is 999 Day. Armed Forces Day is fantastic, but we need to get the message out around the country that this is 999 Day, which is when we should be out there in our constituencies and around the country praising our emergency workers.

**Caroline Dinenage:** Yes, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that. It is a day when we should all be celebrating and thanking those who do this sterling, important and life-saving work.



I very much support my right hon. Friend's calls for an appropriate 999 memorial. His letter to the Prime Minister was written only very recently, on 30 August. I have only just had the chance to look at it and start considering the proposals and suggestions that it makes, but I would be very happy to meet him and his committee to discuss some of the asks in it in more detail to see what we can do to work with them on this. It is important to celebrate positive parts of our cultural and civic life. New memorials such as this help us to understand events. They help us to acknowledge achievements and mark sacrifices. They commemorate what is important about our present and our past. Future generations can learn from them.

The Government are committed to supporting the emergency services and are steadfast in honouring the sacrifices that have been made. The Prime Minister and the Home Secretary recently attended the dedication of the UK police memorial at the National Arboretum. This memorial and others serve as a valuable symbol, acting as a reminder to the public of the sacrifices that have been made and providing a space for people to mourn and remember lost loved ones.

I know that this particular monument that my right hon. Friend is calling for is not only about those who have lost their lives in their service, but those who continue to serve, and that is why this is unique and important. It is important to say that it is not just at national level that we erect statues to remember the contributions of others—they take pride of place in local communities up and down the country and we commemorate our own local heroes. Many of these figures are a real source of local pride. Being commemorated in a public space, often funded by public subscription, is a positive way to acknowledge the contributions made by individuals to their communities and the nation.

At this point, it is only fair that I explain that it is not normal practice for central Government to fund new memorials.

**Sir Mike Penning:** I thank the Minister for the offer of a meeting. It is always a pleasure; we shared a Department when we were Ministers together. I hope we get a reply from the Prime Minister, who got the letter simultaneously to when the Minister had it. I will not hold the Minister to this, but conversations perhaps need to take place with the Treasury before our meeting, because I cannot think of a better use of LIBOR money or unclaimed assets in bank accounts than this. There are millions of pounds sitting in the LIBOR funds now—we know that—and they have been used extensively in other ways. It would be a great way of not putting the burden so much on the taxpayer, not that I think the taxpayer would be too worried about that at the end of the day, because it is a tiny amount of money. The LIBOR funds are probably the way forward, and perhaps the Treasury could have a conversation with her first.

**Caroline Dinéage:** I think that is certainly a conversation that needs to be had with the Treasury. It is true that many organisations, both public and private, are rightly able to propose, fund, develop and deliver memorials

marking a variety of incidents and historical moments. They are unfortunately not normally funded by the Government, but my right hon. Friend makes some interesting suggestions as to how that might be addressed and we can certainly talk about it further.

Those organisations and individuals are usually best placed to determine who to commemorate and how best to build commemorations that are appropriate and sensitive, and there are a great many people and organisations that are interested in establishing memorials. As a general rule, it is for those groups to work with the relevant local planning authorities and other organisations to identify suitable sites, obtain the necessary planning permission and raise the funding. In fact, since the passing of the Deregulation Act 2015, consent from the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is no longer required to erect memorials and statues in London. It is not now determined through the planning system only. Therefore, in relation to the proposed site on Whitehall, that would be a matter for Westminster City Council. But, again, we can discuss that when we chat.

There is a long tradition of funding new memorials through public subscription, which the Government support. Experience has shown that other funders, including in the private sector, are often happy and willing to contribute and donate to fund new memorials. In fact, I think much of the British public take huge pride in feeling that they have played a part in delivering something so important and significant for our national life.

There are examples of Government supporting memorials to mark specific events. Memorials have been created to the victims of 9/11 and of the 7/7 bombings in London as well as those of the Bali bombings in 2002. The Government also supported the suffragist memorial on Parliament Square and the one created by an independent Iraq and Afghanistan memorial project charity to honour those who served in the Iraq and Afghan wars. In some circumstances, the Government do support new memorials, although it is not for the Government to determine which memorials go ahead, and with limited public funds it is not possible for central Government to fund them. That said, the Government offer some indirect financial support through the memorial grant scheme, which allows charities and faith groups to claim as a grant the equivalent of the VAT paid on the eligible cost of erecting, maintaining or repairing public memorials. The scheme is administered by my Department, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, for the whole of the UK.

In a nutshell, we entirely recognise the extraordinary efforts of our emergency services in serving the public not just during the pandemic but at all times. Faced with unbelievable challenges, these incredible people look after people up and down our country and often save lives in the most difficult circumstances. We definitely support all the ongoing efforts and conversations to find an appropriate way to mark their incredible dedication and sacrifice.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.21 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

*Thursday 9 September 2021*

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

## BACKBENCH BUSINESS

### Covid-19: Immunology Research

1.30 pm

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** Before we begin, may I encourage Members to wear masks when they are not speaking, in line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission? Although the Xs on the seats have now gone, please give each other and members of staff space when seated, and when entering and leaving the room.

Members should send their speaking notes to our colleagues at *Hansard*—the email address is [hansardnotes@parliament.uk](mailto:hansardnotes@parliament.uk). Similarly, officials should communicate electronically with Ministers rather than pass them notes, as happened in the old days.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role of immunology research in responding to the covid-19 outbreak.

Thank you for calling me to speak, Dr Huq. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me the opportunity to highlight one of the many successes for this nation. Unlike yesterday, the Minister will have an easy ride in responding to my comments, and hopefully to the comments of other Members as well.

Every one of us across this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland recognises the good work that has brought about the vaccines, to deal with covid-19 in a way that could never have happened if we had still been in the European Union. I am not looking for any discussion about Brexit, but we had the independence to roll out the vaccines. The Government had the foresight to do that, and the Prime Minister put the Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment, who is present, in charge of making that happen.

Every one of us recognises that the Minister and his team across the whole of the United Kingdom, in co-operation with all the regions of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, have made this happen. We are eternally grateful to them for that. I wanted to put that on the record first, because it is so important to say that we are where we are today because of the strategy of our Government, the work of the vaccine Minister and—I say this as a Christian—the prayers of God's people. We have seen the championship of community working together.

I participated in a Westminster Hall debate over in Portcullis House; it is so nice to come back to the real Westminster Hall and to claim my seat in this corner of the room. Hon. Members have asked me why I sit here. It is because I always sit here—I think my name is written on the seat. We had a fantastic debate in Portcullis House on the issue of communities working together, and many of us took the opportunity to speak of how our communities had come together. As elected

representatives, we can all subscribe to the belief that whenever the chips are down, the goodness of people always shines through. From a community point of view, I am able to convey some of the good things from my community, and I know that others can do so as well. I have been double-vaccinated, as I suspect everyone present has been. The many victories that have happened behind the scenes should be celebrated.

The topic of the debate is immunology research into covid-19, and I thank the Library for its very helpful briefing. Page 3 gives a really good introduction to the subject:

“immunology has changed the face of modern medicine...From Edward Jenner's pioneering work in the 18th Century that would ultimately lead to vaccination in its modern form (an innovation that has likely saved more lives than any other medical advance), to the many scientific breakthroughs in the 19th and 20th centuries that would lead to, amongst other things, safe organ transplantation, the identification of blood groups, and the now ubiquitous use of monoclonal antibodies throughout science and healthcare.”

Immunology has helped our great health service to move forward. I asked for this debate some time ago, and I want to put on the record our thanks to the immunology experts and scientists. I am going to mention a lot of people in this debate today, because there are a lot of people to thank; I apologise in advance if some people are not mentioned, but that is not because we have forgotten about them. I recognise that, singly and as a team, we all came together to make this happen.

I will then speak to some of the successes that immunology research has had during the pandemic in furthering our understanding of covid-19 and the effects that SARS-CoV-2 has on our immune systems, as well as developing the technologies and therapeutics that are currently allowing us to emerge from lockdown restrictions and return to normal life—this here is the normal life we had prior to covid-19 in Westminster Hall. As I progressed around Westminster Hall, the House of Commons and the House of Lords and Portcullis House, I noticed these wee circles on the carpet. I wondered what they were all about, but then I realised: that is where the wee “Keep two metres apart” signs were. They have all gone away.

Normality is returning for a number of reasons, and I know that the Government and the Minister are committed to returning to normality in every way we can. Yesterday in the House, I asked the Minister how we can better have an agreed covid vaccine strategy within the four regions where one size fits all, as I put it. It would be nice to see that, although I know that the restrictions differ; I know that Scotland is going to do something different, as the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Anum Qaisar-Javed) may mention shortly. Lots of things have been happening, but from a news and media point of view it would have been nice at least to have had the same strategy for everywhere across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Over the past 18 months, immunology has had a disproportionately large effect in driving forward our understanding of the science of, and helping us to recover from, the covid-19 pandemic. Immunology has built our understanding of how the body responds to covid-19—and, crucially, has delivered us highly safe and effective vaccines. We all know that. I have had the vaccine, as have others: it does not give us the ultimate

[Jim Shannon]

assurance, but it gives us a 96% or 98% assurance of being safe and secure, which I believe is our way out of the pandemic.

Immunology is the linchpin linking together many of the sciences that have been used in tackling the covid-19 pandemic, such as virology, respiratory science and epidemiology; for the latter, immunologists have been working with epidemiologists to help make their mathematical models more accurate. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on respiratory health. We have recently had an inquiry on this issue and have done a number of things relating to respiratory health. Through the work of my constituency office, I have become aware of so many people who have issues in relation to asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or other respiratory problems. I am aware of those issues, and I am interested in them.

We know that a multitude of different reactions of the immune system manifest themselves through the many different symptoms and severities of covid-19 that have been observed—from the acute disease right the way through to long covid, which more and more people are reporting they are suffering from post-infection. I have had a number of people contact me about long covid; I am not sure whether there is a real understanding of how long covid affects people, and why it affects some people and not others.

A lady in my constituency contacted me just the other day, looking for some advice about her job and where she stands. Legally, there may not have been the protection that she had hoped for, but I think the Government have set in process a benefit system whereby if a person has a health condition that prevents them from working, they can claim employment and support allowance, personal independence payment or universal credit. I was pointing her in that direction, but this lady had been perfectly healthy. She worked in a wee bakery just down the street from my office. I got to know her quite well. I had not seen her about as often, but I thought that that was maybe because we were working different shifts.

Perhaps in his response the Minister could give us some idea about how we can help those with long covid. There are a number of them out there—not just that lady, but others who have contacted me recently; we got them on to benefits and tried to help them through the system. However, what that lady really wants, and what they all want, is to return to work and to normality. It may be some time before that happens. The benefits system is in place at least to help them financially, but we need to do more so that they can deal with the issues themselves, now and in the future.

Significant patient benefit and public health improvement directly demonstrate the huge value of investing further in immunology research. The Library paper referred to the

“Important research questions that will take time to answer”.

Research and development are working towards having in place vaccines and responses to diseases as they happen. I will comment on that later. The important research questions that take time to answer are:

“What is the rate of asymptomatic spread, and how does this contribute to transmission? What proportion of infected individuals mount a protective immune response? How long is natural and vaccine immune protection likely to last? What immunological

factors correlate with protection to SARS-CoV-2 by vaccines and how effective are vaccines at protecting older people? What is the role of immunogenetics in SARS-CoV-2 infection and what can this tell us about potential therapeutic targets?”

Those are all key questions for those involved in R&D, and they are clear. They help us to prepare for the future. In the research that I did—I want to refer to it later on—I found that R&D was actually working towards this vaccine even before the disease came about. When the Government announced the vaccine, there had already been a number of years of investigation and research and development into this particular subject matter.

Some of the questions that the UK Coronavirus Immunology Consortium were asking were as follows:

“How long does immunity from COVID-19 last? Why are some people’s immune systems better able to fight off the virus?” That relates to those who can recover quickly and those who have long covid.

“Why do some people’s immune responses cause damage, especially to the lungs? How does the virus ‘hide’ from the immune system and how can this be tackled?”

Right across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, again, perhaps the Minister can give us his response to this question as well.

Ulster University in Northern Ireland was working in partnership with some of the larger pharmaceutical companies on vaccine research. How important we all believe those R&D partnerships between universities across the whole United Kingdom—including Ulster University in Northern Ireland, obviously—are in bringing about some of the vaccines that we have!

Vaccines, of course, are no doubt having the most effect on people’s day-to-day lives. Immunology has made other important contributions to the science of covid-19. That includes diagnosis, for example, through antigen testing; the screening of antibodies to determine whether people have had covid-19 previously; and prognosis and patient stratification, such as triaging patients and seeing who will benefit from early ventilation and therapeutics. Why is it, for instance, that, as I heard one of the experts on BBC news say this morning, someone can be free of the symptoms of the disease but unknowingly be a carrier of it, even though they are vaccinated? Again, there are questions to be asked.

Immunology research during covid-19 has been supported well by Government, funding agencies and institutions. Our Ministers and our Prime Minister made it a priority. That is why we are where we are today, to the envy of much of the world. Immunology, especially population-based studies of actual immune responses in real people with and without disease was already a real strength of UK research to start with, and we should be grateful for that. The population-based research is facilitated by standardised procedures for researchers to access patients and their samples across the UK through the NHS. Again, we are eternally thankful for all that. The National Institute for Health Research played a major role in bringing together academic researchers and clinical services during the pandemic, and has played a crucial role in ensuring that we learn as we go, in real time. I especially thank the NIHR for that contribution. Many others have contributed as well, but the NIHR did a fantastic job.

The rapid adaptation of our funding processes to ensure that the Government research funding flowed to

collaborative groups of researchers who were well placed to deliver answers to crucial questions quickly was also a major strength. For example, UK-CIC, which I have mentioned, is another visionary group that strategised, planned and responded in a positive way. Its UK-wide study was launched to tackle some of the key questions about the immune system's response to SARS-CoV-2 and help us control the covid-19 pandemic. It received some £6.5 million in funding over 12 months from UK Research and Innovation and NIHR; that is the largest immunology grant awarded for tackling the covid-19 pandemic. Critically and crucially, it also incorporated a large element of patient and public involvement, bringing laypeople and those who had covid-19 into the scientific process in a scheme of work run by the British Society for Immunology. UK-CIC was funded in a way almost unique to covid-19 research, to encourage collaborative team science, individually but also through teamwork, sharing ideas, coming together, working together, and partnering. Rather than research groups competing against each other, which could have happened, the consortium brought them together with a singular target, a singular goal, and a way of doing it better together.

In UK-CIC some 20 of the UK's leading immunology research institutes, including Ulster University in Northern Ireland—again, team UK of GB and NI working together in a very positive way—are funded as a consortium and are focused on five themes: primary immunity, protective immunity, immunopathology, cross-reactive coronavirus immunity and immune evasion. Its successes and novel discoveries are numerous. We look at that collective and how 20 different groups came together and how they solved problems collectively. We are four regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but we can share the ideas, so we can have the ideas in Scotland in Northern Ireland, Wales or England, and vice versa.

UK-CIC has contributed to the development of covid-19 therapeutics through exploration of the role for interferon therapy and determining the effectiveness of dexamethasone. It has made a major contribution to vaccine development studies including through showing that an extended dosing schedule is more effective than, for instance, a three-week interval. It has shown that there is a stronger antibody response to mRNA vaccines such as Pfizer and that there are stronger cellular immune responses to vaccines such as AstraZeneca. Furthermore, it has curated the largest collection of covid-19 post-mortem tissue in the world, so the evidential base is significant and ready for further investigation. It has defined the four main sub-types of inflammation in covid-19 and opened up avenues for further investigation of therapeutics. It is not just about today; it is about tomorrow and that is what I love about where we are. We are already preparing for the next one. I know the Minister will respond to that because he knows vastly more about it than I do and will be able to explain and explore that for us. UK-CIC has found that our T cell immune responses are likely to overcome mutations in the virus and remain effective. This is an incredibly complex subject matter, and so important as we look to the future and whatever comes our way.

The UK Coronavirus Immunology Consortium model has proved highly effective, and should be strongly considered as a blueprint for future funding of research. Perhaps the Minister will give his thoughts on that. I believe that it is vastly important that we do that. A

number of strengths of doing research that way were identified, including avoiding duplication of research, with complementarity built into the project design instead; the standardisation of protocols, to allow science to move forward more quickly; and the ability to carry out larger studies by using patient samples from multiple sites. Again, the teamwork and connectivity brought everyone together. That led to more robust findings being produced and more diverse patient cohorts, as well as regular engagement between groups in the consortium, helping to engender ambition and to foster a sense of scientific community, working better together.

Retaining that funding model will ensure that the infrastructure is already in place should another pandemic event occur. We hope that it does not, but we did not expect the last one; we have to be prepared for the next. That is what the debate is also about: to thank the Minister, our Government and others for our response and to ensure that we are equipped and ready for the future. That infrastructure would also tackle other societal and public health challenges, such as antimicrobial resistance, cancer immunotherapy, and ageing and dementia. In the debate on social care the other day in the House, many referred to dementia, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's as diseases that are perhaps more prevalent in society now than in the past. I can vouch for that, as I seem to be dealing with more of those issues in my constituency. Again, these are complex matters, and it is about working better together to try to address them.

No debate on immunology research and covid-19 in the UK would be complete without talking about the world-leading work done by the University of Oxford team in developing the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. We are eternally grateful for all that they have done. It was not until 11 March 2020 that the World Health Organisation declared covid-19 to be a global pandemic, but the work that preceded the release of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine had begun years before. I referred to that earlier, and it is the truth: the Oxford team began its work in 2015. I do not know whether many people know that. I did not until I researched the issue.

That work was funded by the UK Vaccine Network, a partnership between the Department of Health and Social Care and UK Research and Innovation's Medical Research Council and Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, to find a vaccine for middle eastern respiratory syndrome, an illness caused by a different coronavirus. Not all the research was in place, but it was during this time that the team fine-tuned the adenovirus vaccine platform, and in 2018 the vaccine entered safety trials and was shown to cause no adverse responses while eliciting both cellular and antibody immune responses, and the trials suggested that two doses would be more effective than one. The lessons learned at that time could be initiated for our response to covid-19 when it started just last year.

The MERS virus has a spike protein on its surface similar to the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein, which meant, along with the previous testing of the vaccine platform technology, that the Oxford team already had an adaptable vaccine that had been tested and proved to be safe in humans. People should be made more aware of that information when they say, "You've brought this in. You've vaccinated everybody. Where's the trial?" Well, the research started in 2015 and the trials started in 2018, then were adapted to deal with this particular

[*Jim Shannon*]

virus. We should be encouraged by what has taken place. The vaccine has been tested and proved to be safe in humans.

Once the Chinese investigators had shared the genomic sequence of SARS CoV 2, it could then be inserted into the adenovirus to produce the prototype covid-19 vaccine that entered into human trials in April 2020—about the time that covid-19 restrictions came into play. The ability to deliver such a vaccine at pace was a product of long-term funding through UKRI over more than a decade, which ensured there was an existing vaccine platform technology, alongside optimised manufacturing methods.

The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine development was also facilitated by a £2.6 million UKRI-NIHR rapid response grant in March 2020, just at the time we needed it. Again, our Government were in place to do that at the right time. That provided funding to conduct pre-clinical investigations and phase 1 and 2 trials, and to scale up production of the vaccine to 1 million doses by summer 2020. The researchers and all those involved were able not only to produce a cure but initiate production at the level that was needed. How grateful we are for all those superhuman efforts to bring out the vaccine to immunise the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and help third-world countries.

That is truly demonstrative of previous immunological research into infectious diseases speeding up our response to SARS-CoV-2. However, after the previous outbreaks, research into these viruses tapered off, which hampered our ability to respond to SARS-CoV-2 with as much information as we would have liked. That was unfortunate. The gaps in knowledge at the beginning of the pandemic led to some of the decisions that were made in public policy and, indeed, some mistakes that, perhaps with hindsight, could have been avoided. We have all made mistakes in life—I include myself in that, and I am sure everyone is the same—and we would change them, but we make decisions at the time that we make them.

We must not make the same mistakes again. Instead, we must continue to invest in SARS-CoV-2 and covid-19 research, immunological and otherwise, so that we are properly prepared should an event like this happen again. We should be ever thankful for where we are. Coronaviruses have particular pandemic potential, as they are able to replicate efficiently on entry to the human population and are thought by experts to be the biggest threat, so we need to get ready for the future. I know the Minister will give us some of his thoughts about how we are doing that so we are ahead of the game when it comes to responding to whatever the future may hold.

The covid-19 pandemic has also acutely illustrated that the importance of both global disease networks and global disease surveillance cannot be overstated. With the truncation or termination of many non-covid-19 immunological research projects that formed the basis of these networks and surveillance due to cuts to the official development assistance budget, it is through investing in covid-19 immunology research that we can build international collaboration, as has happened in the past, and use those relationships to ensure that we are more prepared for future infectious disease outbreaks. Perhaps the Minister can tell us a wee bit more about

how we are working internationally. Again, we can do that to everyone's advantage. We should not be claiming it for ourselves; we can do that with other countries, and do it better together.

Of course, there are still many questions surrounding covid-19 that remain unanswered, including major ones like what the longevity of vaccine-mediated immunity will be and why some people contract long covid and others do not. I refer again to the constituent I spoke about this week. Covid-19 is unlikely to disappear completely, so it is crucial that we invest in discovering the answers to those and other key questions.

If we revert to pre-pandemic-style grant funding for covid-19 research, we will lose the progress that we made on the R&D infrastructure and the good will of the research community, which is needed to tackle these challenges properly. I seek an assurance from the Minister that we will not revert to that, but we will move forward and give the commitment that the R&D sector clearly wants. We must ensure that the current levels of funding are continued. Small studies that look at small numbers of people are not robust enough to achieve statistically significant results that can inform patient care and policy. We need to ensure that the R&D success of the past is a policy and strategy for the future. We must continue to conduct studies at the same scale, with the involvement of hundreds of thousands of people. That is the success of the covid-19 vaccine, and that is the success we want for all other pandemics that come along, to ensure long-term immune monitoring that can be applied to real-world questions and situations.

There has been an immense investment in immunology and covid-19 research over the past 18 months, which has allowed the UK to achieve some truly impressive bench-to-bedside science, such as vaccines that have gone from the laboratory to people's arms in record time. I know there has been lots of research into how that is done, and we can only be truly impressed by it.

There has also been great leadership from the Government's chief scientific adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, and chief medical officer, Professor Chris Whitty, in driving forward conditions that have led to the progress and discoveries made. The pandemic has illustrated the importance of the NHS. We all love the NHS and we know how important it is. There is not a debate where we do not revere what it has done for those it has helped to heal, save and make better, and for the comfort it gives people when they need it most. It is vital to ensure that is not forgotten in future, as it allows science to operate at a huge scale.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the scientists and researchers of many different disciplines, including immunology, for their work during the pandemic. The fruits of their labour can be seen everywhere from the vaccine roll-out to today's better survival rates for covid-19 patients in hospital, for which we are thankful. It reminds us that the work going on in labs across the country has a tangible effect on everyday life in this country. It is the working together and the investigations and tests done in universities and pharmaceutical companies with the financial backing of our Government and the push from the vaccine Minister and his team. We must ensure in the post-pandemic future that UK R&D is properly funded and given the resources needed to continue having a positive effect for everyone in society.

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** Since no other Back-Bench MP wishes to catch my eye, I will go to the first of our three Front Benchers. For the SNP, we have Anum Qaisar-Javed.

2.3 pm

**Anum Qaisar-Javed (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) who secured this important debate. As a relatively new Member, it is my pleasure to have made both my first hybrid Westminster Hall speech and now my first non-hybrid Westminster Hall speech in debates he has secured. While we differ on the constitution, I know the hon. Gentleman makes a valuable contribution to this House, although I have not yet worked out how he manages to be in three places at once. I gently remind him that Scotland is not a region; it is a nation.

I echo the hon. Gentleman in being grateful for the role of immunology and thanking all who are involved in the sector. Without them, this pandemic may have been very different. The pandemic has forced us in many ways to work collaboratively to overcome the challenges put in place by the virus. In our time of need, scientists from an array of disciplines have done exactly that, and have come together to share their expertise, forming our evidence-based approach to tackling the virus.

Specifically, immunology research has played a pivotal role in linking together many of the sciences that have been used to tackle the covid-19 pandemic, such as virology, respiratory science and epidemiology. Although immunology is most known for its role in the development of the vaccine, it also continues to play a crucial role in providing information that helps to form our ongoing public health response to covid-19. Working with partners across the UK and across the globe, Scotland is leading, enabling and delivering world-class covid-19 research, which is a key element of the Scottish Government's overall response to the pandemic.

Immunologists have worked tremendously hard to ensure that public understanding of covid-19 is as up to date as possible, with University of Glasgow researchers the first in the world to genomically sequence the Kent variant of the virus. Such work by scientists, medical professionals, researchers and a host of others has developed our collective understanding of the virus, its causes and effects, the mitigation strategies, and the vaccine lifeline.

The Scottish Government emphasised research investment early on in the pandemic, which has contributed to global efforts to understand the effects of the virus, to sequence it and to work on vaccine manufacturing and development. As a result, the Scottish Government supported 55 rapid research projects in 15 Scottish universities and research institutions from April 2020, funding contributions to global efforts to combat the virus and its wider effects. Such research has allowed us to tackle the virus with, as I have said, an evidence-based approach.

Being able to deliver the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine at such a pace was the product of long-term funding provided by UK Research and Innovation over more than a decade. It was this long-term funding that ensured there was an existing vaccine platform technology, alongside optimised manufacturing methods, as the hon. Member

for Strangford referred to. The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine development was also facilitated by a £2.6-million UKRI rapid response grant in early 2020. It was this funding that allowed pre-clinical investigations and a phase 1/2 trial to be conducted, as well as the scaling up of the production of the vaccine to 1 million doses by the summer of 2020.

Although the field of immunology is currently most known for its development of vaccines, it is important to note that it plays just as significant a role in contributing to public health information. As we are currently witnessing across the UK, covid-19 is by no means going away any time soon.

In addition, we are yet to understand fully the extent to which it will impact our population in the long term. Approximately 1 million people in the UK have self-reported symptoms of long covid. Of those people, around two thirds have stated that the symptoms have adversely affected their day-to-day activities. The symptoms reported include fatigue, shortness of breath, muscle aches and difficulty concentrating.

The Scottish Government have invested over £400,000 to enable Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland to deliver a long covid support service, which complements the support being provided by NHS Scotland. Along with the Royal College of Occupational Therapists, the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy and the Queen's Nursing Institute, CHSS recently published a long covid action plan, which calls on the Scottish Government to make a number of changes. Crucially, these changes include a fund to be set up for health boards to establish a local long covid service, although a figure has not yet been set; the removal of bureaucratic barriers in NHS Scotland; and improved data-sharing, so that patients can be spoken to more quickly. Additionally, the document calls for patient care plans to be developed and for medical staff to be trained on long covid, because, CHSS says, some medical staff do not actually recognise it as a real condition.

At First Minister's questions last week, the First Minister stated publicly that she wanted to discuss the recommendations with the charity in detail, and will give the capacity fund serious consideration in budget discussions.

**Jim Shannon:** I am very impressed and pleased by Scotland's long covid planning strategy, which the hon. Lady has outlined. However, it is not all about plans. For many families, it is about how they will survive financially—they all want to get better, but they are not sure if that will happen in the timescale they wish. Apart from the benefits system that we have in place, does the hon. Lady have any ideas as to how we could help them financially?

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** On the Clerk's advice, let me gently remind the hon. Member that, as we are talking about the Westminster Parliament, she should not stray too much into what goes on in the devolved Parliaments.

**Anum Qaisar-Javed:** I do not know off the top of my head, so I will get back to the hon. Gentleman on that matter.

In light of the statistics and the current rates of covid-19, it is crucial that there is continued investment in immunology research, which will allow us to develop

[Anum Qaisar-Javed]

an ongoing public health strategy to minimise and manage the impact of the virus on our population. Thanks to the production of the vaccine, when compared to those who are unvaccinated, those who are double vaccinated are at less risk not only of catching the virus, but of an infection turning into long covid.

Furthermore, it has been found that two doses of the Pfizer or Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine are 96% and 92% effective against hospitalisation with the delta variant, respectively. While the delta variant is prevalent throughout the country, it is reassuring to know that because of the work of immunologists, our population is trying to live life as normally as possible. The vaccine produced by immunologists has both literally and figuratively provided us with a lifeline—without their work, our economy would remain at a standstill.

Despite the steps we have taken in the battle against covid-19, there is still so much we do not fully understand. By continuing to fund immunology research, population-based studies—a key strength of UK research—can continue to provide us with this knowledge. For example, the National Institute for Health Research has played a major role in bringing academic research together with clinical services during the pandemic, ensuring that we learn as we go. It is this continual production of real-time information about covid-19 that will allow us to overcome and stay ahead of the virus and its long-term impacts.

I therefore ask that the UK Government follow the lead of the Scottish Government's actions and continue to invest in immunology research and ensure the necessary investment in England's NHS. It is through further investment in this research that we will get the pandemic under control. In turn, this will ensure that the country is far better prepared for any future outbreaks of emerging diseases. Immunology research has undoubtedly played a pivotal role in our overcoming the pandemic, and it will continue to form the foundation of our public health response and our knowledge of the ever-changing landscape of the pandemic.

2.13 pm

**Dr Rosena Allin-Khan** (Tooting) (Lab): It is a pleasure to wind up for the Opposition with you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this extremely important debate. I know he is hugely passionate about so many issues, and it has been wonderful to hear him set out exactly why this topic is so close to his heart.

So many heroes have emerged from this pandemic: our frontline NHS staff, shopworkers, carers, posties, delivery drivers—the list goes on and on. It is absolutely right that these people's efforts are recognised, but today we have the opportunity to express our gratitude to a different group of people—a group that is more often found behind the scenes in labs and research facilities up and down the country. Their commitment and dedication to understanding and then eradicating deadly diseases has saved millions of lives over the last two centuries. Immunologists and all their colleagues in biomedical research deserve all the gratitude we can offer.

It is through immunological research that we can treat and prevent the spread of diseases. Although it can be difficult to remember a time when we were not

consumed by information surrounding covid, it is important to remember how we got here so quickly. Without this research, we would not be able to develop vaccines or even understand basic principles in reducing infection rates. This work allows us to identify who is most at risk of certain diseases and informs both public health messages and interventions to limit outbreaks.

The work of immunology researchers and scientists led to an almost immediate understanding of this virus. We understood how to limit its spread and, ultimately, how to develop a vaccine to stop it. Considering that very little was known about the coronavirus before it began to spread ferociously around the world, this achievement is even more remarkable. Without this work and dedication, the loss of life worldwide would be far greater. For that, we already owe a huge debt.

It is only right to begin my contribution today by paying my respects to those who work in this field. In particular, I pay respect to the British Society for Immunology and the Royal College of Pathologists. I am sure colleagues will join me in doing so. Those institutions refused to be fazed by covid-19, and the work of their members has been pivotal in delivering a route out of the pandemic. We have a long and proud tradition in this country of pushing advancements in medicine, especially on immunisation. The work of UK scientists has led to vaccines being developed for numerous infectious diseases.

Edward Jenner, often referred to as the father of immunology, discovered the first ever smallpox vaccine in 1796. It had been theorised that exposure to cowpox would protect against infection with the more lethal smallpox. Jenner tested this theory and it was a resounding success. A tribute to Blossom, the cow whose cowpox was used as the first vaccine, can still be found on the wall of the St George's medical school library, which is attached to the hospital where I work. From that achievement in 1796 to covid vaccines today, we should be proud of this legacy.

The scientific community has always fully endorsed collaboration and working across borders and cultures to foster innovation. Let us be clear: the unsung heroes are our scientists, who went to work day and night throughout the pandemic, even though they were putting their own lives at risk and were concerned for their own families. They are the reason we have a vaccine today—a vaccine that has saved so many lives. For them, we are truly grateful. By collaborating with researchers all over the world, UK scientists have played their part in preventing deaths from some of history's deadliest diseases. These efforts have resulted in no less than 26 vaccine-preventable diseases, and are estimated to prevent over 2 million premature deaths globally every year.

I am proud to be part of the UK scientific community—as, I am sure, are you, Dr Huq. I am truly honoured to have met so many of the specialists who have been relentless in their struggles to get a handle on covid-19. It is imperative that the Government do all they can to support this work and to facilitate as much international collaboration as they can during the final stretch of covid-19 and long beyond. Despite all we have learned about the virus, there is still so much we do not fully understand: exactly how long immunity lasts following vaccination and whether immunity completely prevents individuals from passing the virus on, or simply prevents them from developing symptoms. Research into those



questions is, of course, ongoing, and as greater numbers are vaccinated we should be in a better position to answer them.

With the ongoing threat of new variants emerging, it is vital that we understand their potential effect on immunity. Closely monitoring new variants and their impact on our immune system will help get us to a position whereby we can begin to control the virus and exit the pandemic. It is easy to assume that, now that we have a vaccine, the hard work is over and life will inevitably return to normal. While that is what we all strive for, we cannot allow complacency to creep in. By continuing to support the work of immunologists, pathologists and the wider scientific community, we will be able to face any new emerging challenges and react accordingly.

The UK is a global leader in immunology and infectious disease research, both in the academic environment and in our industrial capabilities. We need to build on those strengths and invest in our workforce, who are the lifeblood of the discipline, to ensure that excellence continues to be recognised at home and abroad. I would be grateful if the Minister could commit to this and outline what support the Government will provide for this highly skilled workforce.

Now is the time to encourage people to take up careers in this field. We need to attract high levels of talent from around the world, while training and developing our own staff and encouraging them to forge long and successful careers here. We must continue to break down the barriers in STEM to ensure that immunology has a representative workforce who can inspire future generations, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or class.

The response from the research community to covid-19 has been immense, but it has also highlighted the need to be better prepared for the next pandemic, whatever it may be and whenever it may come. Governments around the world recognise that and must never lose sight of it. Here in the UK, we cannot afford to take our eyes off the ball. Doing so would jeopardise the results of the sacrifices we have all had to make over the past 18 months, including those in our scientific community. I implore the Government to continue to support our world-leading biomedical science sectors long after covid becomes a distant memory. We were not as prepared as we could have been for the virus's onslaught. We must learn from that and ensure that we are better prepared for the next threat, even if we do not yet know what it will be.

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** Finally, from the Government, Nadhim Zahawi. It is good to see him in person, and not on a conference call on a Friday.

2.21 pm

**The Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment (Nadhim Zahawi):** Thank you very much, Dr Huq. It is a pleasure to be here, in person, to serve under your chairship. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate, and of course the hon. Members for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) and for Airdrie and Shotts (Anum Qaisar-Javed).

The shadow Minister referred to Edward Jenner and Blossom, and of course we all owe a huge debt of gratitude to Dame Sarah Gilbert, who now has a Barbie from Mattel in her image. I hope that will encourage many young kids to take up science, as a number of us in this Chamber have done. As I am sure colleagues here

know, I am a proud chemical engineer from University College London. I think it appropriate, on a day like this, to congratulate the behind-the-scenes group—as the shadow Minister referred to them—of incredible scientists, whose incredible work has allowed us to deal with this pandemic. I am sure the whole House would want to join me in that.

I also congratulate Sir Shankar Balasubramanian and Sir David Klenerman. They have just received the \$3 million Breakthrough Prize, which is referred to as the “Oscars of science” for their work at Cambridge on next-generation genome sequencing. To bring that to life for the House, it took \$3 billion and about 10 years to sequence the first human genome. Their work on next-generation genome sequencing now allows that same work to take an hour and about \$1,000, which makes a real contribution to future discovery.

For those who do not know her, I would also encourage people to look at the work of Professor Katalin Karikó, who has also been awarded the Breakthrough Prize today. She is not from the United Kingdom, but has had to travel a long journey, from Hungary to the USA and the University of Pennsylvania. Her personal struggle and her work on mRNA allowed BioNTech and Moderna, using her patents, to develop those incredible vaccines.

By calling this debate, the hon. Member for Strangford has really provided us with an opportunity to discuss the world-leading contributions that UK researchers have made by increasing our ability to tackle this disease. Investment by the Government has assisted the science underpinning the development of many of the tools we need to harness to ultimately defeat this virus.

UK-based research has provided insights that are crucial to improving surveillance, patient care and management, and developing new diagnostics, therapies and vaccines. Identifying how the immune system responds to covid-19 is critical to understanding so many of the unknowns around this novel virus. For example, why does it make some people sick and not others? What constitutes effective immunity and how long might that immunity last?

The immune system is extremely complex. To make rapid and effective progress in our knowledge, a nationally co-ordinated approach was needed, as the hon. Member for Strangford referred to. That is why £6.5 million of funding has been provided from UK Research and Innovation and the National Institute for Health Research to the UK Coronavirus Immunology Consortium. The UK is world leading in the quality of its immunology research, and this innovative project has enabled us in Government to commission at pace the research needed to understand the immunology of covid-19, and as a result successfully deliver real benefits to patients and public health. The key themes identified by UK-CIC included the understanding of primary immunity, and describing the body's immune response to covid-19 and how this might explain the different risks presented by the virus to individuals. In other words, why do some get sicker than others?

What constitutes protective immunity? Identifying how an effective immune response can be generated and how it can be maintained to prevent re-infection was essential for the development of effective vaccines and understanding why some people remain vulnerable even after vaccination. Unpicking the mechanism of the disease caused by immunopathology—how the body's

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

own immune response to the virus can cause damage to tissues and organs, and how that can be stopped—is essential knowledge for the development of effective treatments, along with identifying immune vaccine evasion and how the virus might evade the body's protective immune response through natural infection or vaccination, leaving people vulnerable to re-infection.

I want to highlight some further research that we have commissioned and funded in the field of diagnostics. The COVID-19 National Diagnostic Research and Evaluation Platform—the CONDOR study—is accelerating how quickly promising diagnostics make it out of the lab and into real-world use. This will support the diagnosis of infection and the management of patients with suspected covid-19, which is important for the subsequent waves of infection in the post-pandemic setting.

On vaccine development and deployment, we all know the benefits that both doses of the vaccine can bring to many people. Indeed, colleagues have mentioned that today. Data from Public Health England suggests that two doses of the covid vaccine offer protection against hospitalisation of around 96%. The United Kingdom has been at the forefront of vaccine development, helped by the investment that we have made in this vital research. The ChAdOx1 vaccine platform—already shown to be safe and effective through a previously funded phase 1 trial against the middle east respiratory syndrome, or MERS, which the hon. Member for Strangford rightly referred to in his speech—was quickly adapted to develop a vaccine candidate against covid-19 and launched human trials in April 2020.

In parallel, project funding was also provided to investigate and develop more efficient vaccine manufacturing processes, enabling vaccines to be made more rapidly. However, the development of an effective vaccine is just the first step, and I commend the efforts of the NHS in the world-class roll-out of the vaccine programme among adults and young people across our four nations. Our efforts in understanding why some people do not develop a protective response even after receiving two doses of the vaccine are an important next step in our research portfolio, hence the Government have commissioned important studies to understand vaccine responses among the most vulnerable in our society.

However, despite the success of the current vaccination campaign, we are doing more by investing in research that will inform us about how to deliver vaccinations in the future and to help us to understand why some immunosuppressed people are not fully protected. I regularly meet charities that support clinically extremely vulnerable patients, and I share their concerns about the risks to this group from contracting covid-19.

There is a breadth of research activity being funded in order to look at vaccine response in immunocompromised individuals. The OCTAVE—observational cohort trial T cells antibodies and vaccine efficacy in SARS-CoV-2—study is examining covid-19 vaccine responses in clinically at-risk groups, including patients with certain immunosuppressed conditions. Building on the work that we did with the OCTAVE trial, we are funding OCTAVE DUO, which is a new clinical trial to determine whether a third dose of a vaccine will improve the immune response in people who have weakened immune

systems. Additionally, the UKRI-funded research to be commissioned following the recent research on vaccine immune failure will investigate the strength and durability of the immune response, which I know colleagues are interested in understanding better in a wide range of people, including those with conditions that result in a weakened immune system, such as HIV.

The development of novel treatments for covid-19 has been made possible by the work and funding that we have provided for immunology research. As referred to by a number of hon. Members, that includes the UKRI and NIHR-funded projects looking at the immune response generated during infection with covid-19, which revealed that the body produces harmful immune responses that attack its own tissues and organs. That leads to severe disease and may underlie some forms of long covid, but further research is needed to better understand this. Research of this type has helped the development of new and effective treatment options, including the recently approved novel monoclonal antibody treatment Ronapreve. This novel treatment development was also supported by a UKRI and NIHR-funded trial.

I will briefly turn to some of the questions that hon. Members asked. The hon. Member for Strangford asked about long covid, which can have very serious and debilitating long-term effects for thousands of people across the UK. It can make daily life extremely challenging. We are providing significant funding for several studies in order to better understand the long covid problem, improve diagnosis and find new treatments. In July, the Department provided just shy of £20 million—I think it was £19.6 million—of funding towards an extensive programme of 15 new research studies, which will allow researchers across the UK to draw together their expertise from analysing long covid among people suffering long-term effects and the health and care professionals supporting them. The projects will better understand the condition and how to identify it, evaluate the effectiveness of different care services on people with long covid, identify effective treatments, such as drugs and rehabilitation, to treat people suffering from long covid, and improve home monitoring, which is a key issue.

**Jim Shannon:** I am very encouraged by that. Is it the intention of the Minister's Department to share the results of those studies with all the different regions of the United Kingdom, so that we can all benefit? As health matters are devolved, the evidential base and final conclusion of the studies will be very important for us all.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I completely share the hon. Gentleman's concerns about that issue, and it is important that we look at it very seriously. He also asked whether we have enough supply of monoclonal antibody treatments. I can tell him that the regulatory approval and clinical policy will provide information on which patients could benefit from the treatments and how much supply is needed. We are working with the companies to ensure that we have a supply of those products in the coming months. Which patients are likely to have access to those treatments? Again, the NHS England antibody expert group is currently designing clinical guidance on how the NHS should use the treatments, which includes defining and identifying the eligible patient cohorts that are likely to benefit following a positive covid test.

In terms of deploying the treatments, part of the work of the NHS England expert group is on the clinical guidance on identifying potential deployment in hospital and possible pathways, especially through clinics and at-home services following a positive test. The hon. Gentleman also asked what research is looking at long-term immune response in individuals who are vaccinated. The Department is funding a number of important studies into immune response: the SARS-CoV-2 immunity and reinfection evaluation, or SIREN, study in healthcare workers; the Vivaldi study in care home residents and workers; and the coronavirus infection survey led by the Office for National Statistics, with repeat household visits looking at who has antibodies to covid from either vaccination or previous infection.

The hon. Gentleman asked about vaccine manufacturing in the longer term. I can tell him that in 2018, UKRI announced £66 million for the UK's first dedicated vaccine manufacturing and innovation centre, VMIC. The goal was to promote, develop and accelerate the growth of the UK vaccine industry. When the pandemic began, UKRI reacted at unparalleled scale and speed to ensure that all investments were ready and able to respond to the challenge, and that they were plugged in to the UK's wider vaccine, life science and pharmaceutical ecosystem. An additional £131 million was made available as an investment in, I think, May 2020, bringing the total for VMIC to just shy of £200 million, at £196 million. VMIC will be able to deliver about 200 million doses of vaccine, of any technology, at scale per annum, so it is a big investment.

The hon. Gentleman also asked what the Government are doing to support the development, production and procurement of vaccines for the future. As well as VMIC, we are planning for all scenarios in the fight against covid and its variants. Some of the recent analysis supports our understanding that both the Pfizer BioNTech and AstraZeneca vaccines currently being deployed in the UK appear to work well against the current dominant variants of covid, and continuing to administer those vaccines at scale remains our key to bringing the virus under control.

We are also assessing our existing portfolio against current variants, working closely with vaccine manufacturers and Public Health England, to understand the efficacy of our portfolio. We think we are in a good place vis-à-vis the interim advice from JCVI on the booster campaign, which we hope to begin later this month.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked whether there was any existing research that had helped to accelerate the development of vaccines. He quite rightly cited the work of the Oxford team, but even before the covid-19 pandemic, they were already doing that research because of funding from UKRI—and thank goodness for that.

To conclude, I fully recognise the tremendous impact that the pandemic has had on so many people. Commissioning high-quality immunology research is an essential part of our armoury in fighting this virus. We will continue to implement research findings and, at the same time, commission and fund new projects that will deepen our understanding of the disease and identify further defences that will keep us safe. Throughout this pandemic, the Government have been there to support and invest in research. As we shift our focus from the initial impact of the pandemic, we intend to continue to

provide funding and support for covid-19 research, underlining precisely why the UK has long been, and continues to be, a great place for world-leading research and researchers.

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** Finally, in this debate where all hon. Members have demonstrated quality, if not quantity, I call Jim Shannon to wind up.

2.39 pm

**Jim Shannon:** I thank everyone for their contributions, starting with the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Anum Qaisar-Javed). She spoke about devolved matters, as you said Dr Huq, but it is good to share strategies across the whole of the United Kingdom, and I look forward to doing so.

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** Absolutely. I was confused by what was going on as Members were speaking at the same time. I completely agree that the hon. Lady made a powerful speech.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Lady referred to 83 venues across the whole of Scotland that are doing research to find and perfect a strategy. We can all take an interest in and learn lessons from that.

I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), for her hard work during the pandemic. She has been on the frontline, and I think we all want to thank her personally for that. I do not think I have had the opportunity to, so I thank her on behalf of a great many patients who are indebted to her and to others for that work.

The shadow Minister also referred to the advances in medication and the cross-border culture of countries working internationally to find a cure, control the virus and exit the pandemic, with the UK as a global leader. Those words are very true and represent the consensus of opinion, as the debate has made clear.

I thank the Minister. Although I said that at the beginning and have just said it again, it does not take away from the quality of our gratitude to the Minister for the work that he does. He referred to all those working in the back room. We all know that there is a team behind the Minister who make it work, and I thank them, because they are the strength behind how it works.

The Minister referred to a better understanding of the immune system and how it works for some and does not work for others. One crux of the matter is about how we can find out why. If we do excellent research on that, we can find a cure. There are 15 new research studies, with significant amounts of money set aside. Many would have tried to accumulate that money, but it has been massive.

We are in a better place today because of our Government and the Minister. This debate has brought everyone together to say the same thing. I thank everyone for their participation and contributions, particularly the Minister.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the role of immunology research in responding to the covid-19 outbreak.

2.42 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Definition of Islamophobia

[MRS SHERYLL MURRAY in the Chair]

3 pm

**Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair):** Before we begin, can I encourage Members to wear masks when they are not speaking? This is in line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. Please also give each other and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the room. Members should send their speaking notes by email to [hansardnotes@parliament.uk](mailto:hansardnotes@parliament.uk). Similarly, officials in the Gallery should communicate electronically with Ministers.

**Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the definition of Islamophobia.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for permitting the debate. I introduce the debate as one of the co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims. It is a privilege to chair that APPG, and something that I take very seriously indeed. The year before I became a Member of Parliament in 2019, the APPG proposed a definition of Islamophobia. The group undertook widespread consultation with parliamentarians, experts, lawyers, community activists and victim-led organisations so that they could propose a working definition. This was a sincere attempt to give meaning to the word and the nature of what we call Islamophobia, and that definition has since been adopted by hundreds of different organisations and bodies. It was, and remains, a valuable piece of work.

During the 2019 Peterborough by-election, in which I came third, I canvassed a gentleman called Amir Suleman. He is, and was, a presenter on a local radio station, Salaam Radio, and he asked me what I thought about the APPG definition of Islamophobia and whether it should be adopted by the Government. Embarrassingly, I had very little to say to him, but I promised that if I were elected, I would become active on the issue. A general election and several tough interviews on Salaam Radio later, I have kept my promise, and Amir is my friend and a tremendous source of advice. I have a large Muslim population in my city and in my constituency, and I see day in, day out, the fantastic contribution Muslims make to life in Peterborough and throughout the whole of the UK.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. I want to put on record that I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. We speak out for those with Christian beliefs, those with other beliefs, and those with no beliefs. I support the campaign that the hon. Gentleman is describing; I think that the Government should respond to it in a very positive way and that the same freedom should be there for everyone of every faith in the United Kingdom, not just in word but in deed.

**Paul Bristow:** I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for that contribution. He will know as well as I do that discrimination against any faith can have a huge detrimental impact on the outcomes of people who are of that faith, so championing this cause and pushing back against discrimination and hatred against Muslims—my friends,

my neighbours, my city—seems like the most natural thing for me to do. It is something positive I can do as the Member of Parliament for Peterborough, because Peterborough would not be Peterborough without the contribution of its Muslim residents.

Back in 2013, a report published to coincide with the ninth World Islamic Economic Forum in London stated that the nearly 2.8 million Muslims in the UK contribute over £31 billion to its economy, and wield a spending power of £20.5 billion. I see that economic input all the time in my constituency, with its hundreds of Muslim-owned businesses: these are entrepreneurial and charitable people, wealth and job creators, making my city more prosperous. Successful British Muslim entrepreneurs not only contribute to the prosperity of Peterborough and our country, but contribute to the fabric of British society and act as role models for us all.

Muslims contribute to the social fabric of my city. In Peterborough, as in other places, we have Muslim doctors, professors, lawyers, journalists, teachers, academics, pharmacists, care staff, charity workers, those who work in local Government and, of course, thousands working across the private sector. They contribute to our politics, with Muslim councillors in Peterborough representing all three major parties. In the Conservative-led administration, two Muslim councillors serve in the cabinet and the mayor last year was a Muslim Conservative councillor. From the Labour party, we have some of the longest-serving and respected councillors in our city. In the Conservative party, we have scores of activists, members and the only local branch, I believe, of the Conservative Muslim Forum. Considering the recent Singh report, I think we are one of the flagship Conservative associations in the country for engaging with the Muslim community and Muslim members of my party.

The APPG published another report in 2021, which demonstrated the role Muslims have played in fighting covid-19. Again, Peterborough is a fantastic example. Muslim institutions in my city, both charities and Islamic institutions, have shown us what being in this together really means. Those organisations and community activists, such as Zillur Hussain, who was awarded an MBE for his community efforts, have had me handing out face masks on busy streets, delivering food and hot meals to those who were shielding, to rough sleepers and the vulnerable, and promoting businesses like car washes offering free services. I have been photographed scores of times across my city with Muslim businesses and Muslims doing good things for everybody in our city. They have brought me, as their MP, into their hearts and homes. During covid-19, they showed the best of all of us.

It would take too much time for me to name all the Muslim businesses in Peterborough and what they have done during covid-19, but I listed 30 or so in a previous Westminster Hall debate. They know who they are, and I thank them from the very bottom of my heart. I know that this was replicated across the country, but despite that amazing contribution and those efforts, Islamophobia remains a social evil that has a devastating impact on British Muslims and on wider society. It is not just British Muslims who are impacted by Islamophobia, but British society at large, to the detriment of social harmony and inclusion.

In September 2017 the Runnymede Trust published a report titled “Racial prejudice in Britain today”. The report found that one in four Britons—26%—admitted

to being racially prejudiced. Given that this admission is one that individuals would not readily make, the figure may be an underestimation of the actual number. A poll carried out by Savanta ComRes in 2018 found that 58% agreed with the statement:

“Islamophobia is a real problem in today’s society.”

That is a good thing. Almost one in two agreed with the statement:

“Prejudice against Islam makes it difficult to be a Muslim in this country.”

That is shocking. A further YouGov poll from 2018 shows that around one in four Britons believes that Islam is compatible with the values of British society. Alarming, around one in two believe that there is a fundamental clash between the two.

Despite the levels of prejudice evidenced in the national surveys, British Muslims continue to rise to high levels of British society, experiencing loyalty, belonging and social interaction with their fellow citizens. Some 93% of Muslims say they feel they belong to Britain, with more than half saying they felt this very strongly. The APPG report on Islamophobia clearly evidences discriminatory outcomes faced by Muslims in employment, housing, education, the criminal justice system, social and public life and political or media discourse. It contains a number of incidents widely reported in the press in order to demonstrate the breadth of Islamophobia in society. I am not going to name them all, because some of them, quite honestly, are too shocking to describe in a calm and respectful manner.

One incident really did catch my eye. An investigation conducted by *The Sun* in January 2018 revealed that the country’s top companies that provide car insurance would give far lower quotes to drivers with typical English-sounding names, such as John Smith, and far higher quotes to drivers with typical Muslim-sounding names, such as Mohammed Ali. This form of Islamophobia manifests itself in a subtler way than, say, an act of violence. This is institutionalised Islamophobia, and it impacts the lives of Muslims and leads to unequal outcomes. To make much greater progress in reversing these discriminatory outcomes, we must begin from the point of an agreed definition.

In response to the APPG’s report, in May 2019, the then Communities Secretary said that Ministers would appoint two expert advisers to work on a different definition of Islamophobia.

“To get a firmer grip on the nature of this bigotry and division we agree there needs to be a formal definition of Islamophobia to help strengthen our efforts.”

They pledged that the Government would develop an effective definition of Islamophobia that commands wide-spread support. Following this announcement, in July 2019, the first appointment was made. Imam Qari Asim, deputy chair of the anti-Muslim hatred working group, was appointed to lead the process for establishing a definition of Islamophobia. There has been no second appointment. Imam Qari Asim was appointed for his experience working with a broad range of communities to tackle Islamophobia, including in his role as deputy chair of the cross-Government working group to tackle anti-Muslim hatred. I have spoken to him and he is keen to begin this work. Muslim communities up and down the country are waiting; they are expecting something—they were promised something. This cannot wait. In the

absence of any action, the APPG definition has already been adopted by scores of councils, and the Scottish and Welsh Governments are also now considering this.

When I appeared on Salaam Radio, shortly after my election, the first question I was asked was not about the economy, the NHS or foreign affairs, but rather about when the Government were going to complete this work. I shall be on again soon; please, let me tell them that we have, at least, started this work. My message is clear: quickly appoint a second adviser, or tell Imam Qari Asim to begin his work. I shall work with him, and with the working group to tackle anti-Muslim hatred.

I know I speak for other APPG officers and Members when I say that frustration is building. A definition of Islamophobia has the potential to be a tremendous force for good, and it is brilliant that the Government recognise that. It is the first step in a country-wide effort to stamp out this evil and improve outcomes for millions of people. I cannot stand idly by and allow the children, and grandchildren, of my constituents to face the same discrimination and racism that their parents and grandparents faced during their lives. Islamophobia not only impacts lives and outcomes, it holds us back as a country. If Muslim men and women are prevented from being all that they can be, this country will never fulfil its potential. Please, Minister, let’s begin this work.

3.12 pm

**Zarah Sultana** (Coventry South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the chair, Mrs Murray. I would like to begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and the hon. Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) on securing this important debate.

Before I was elected, I was nervous about being a Muslim woman in the public eye. Growing up, I had seen the abuse that prominent British Muslims were subject to—I knew I would not be in for an easy ride. Today, I would like to say that I was wrong to be worried. When young Muslim girls ask me what it is like, I would like to say that there is nothing to worry about, that they would face the same challenges as their non-Muslim friends and colleagues. However, in truth, I cannot say that, because in my short time in Parliament, that is not my experience.

Let me read out a few examples. One person wrote to me to say, and I quote, “Sultana, you and your Muslim mob are a real danger to humanity.” Another wrote and said that I was a “cancer” everywhere I go, and soon, they said, “Europe will vomit you out.” A third called me a “terrorist sympathiser” and “scum of the earth”—and that is sanitising their unparliamentary language.

I have discovered that to be a Muslim woman, to be outspoken and to be left-wing is to be subject to this barrage of racism and hate. It is to be treated by some as if I were an enemy of the country that I was born in—as if I don’t belong. It was summed up by these words, in a hand-written letter, “If you can’t stand the racism, perhaps you would be happier going back to your country of origin—foreigner.” It is worse when I speak up for migrants’ rights, speak in support of the Palestinian people, or criticise Tony Blair for the war in Afghanistan. One abusive letter said, and I quote, “Our cities are full of Muslims. Send them to Pakistan.” Another suggested that I must support the Taliban—all because I am Muslim and against endless war.

[Zarah Sultana]

This Islamophobia does not come from a vacuum. It is not natural or engrained; it is taught from the very top. These fires are fanned by people in positions of power and privilege. When a far-right online account targeted me with racist abuse, suggesting that Muslims were an invading army, a Conservative MP replied, not by calling it out for its racism, but by insulting me instead. When our England football stars were subjected to vile racism, in the Chamber I highlighted that the Prime Minister had fanned those flames by ridiculing Muslims and black people. At the Dispatch Box, the Minister told me to watch my tone.

Although none of that is nice, the worst effects of Islamophobia and racism are not just abusive language, but policies and political decisions. This Saturday marks the 20th anniversary of 9/11. That horrific act of mass murder cast a long shadow. The war on terror, launched by George Bush and Tony Blair in its wake, set a narrative that too many readily embraced. Muslims, wherever we are, were portrayed as a security threat in need of discipline and suppression. Abroad, that was the background to disastrous wars in the middle east. False links were drawn between Iraq and the 9/11 attacks, providing false legitimacy to a war that had more to do with oil than the safety of British citizens.

At home, it meant the erosion of the civil liberties of all and the targeting of Muslims in particular, with policies such as the Prevent programme, which countless studies and human rights groups have demonstrated discriminates against Muslims, from young girls being referred to the programme simply for choosing to wear a hijab to a Muslim teen being questioned by anti-terrorism officers for wearing a “Free Palestine” badge. I knew about that at university, so I, too, feared speaking out in class. I held back where I might otherwise have criticised Blair and Bush for illegal wars.

Growing up, I might have hoped that things would be better, but if anything they have got worse. Today, our Prime Minister mocks Muslims as “letterboxes” and “bank robbers”. Far from scrapping Prevent, earlier this year his Government announced that a review of the programme would be led by William Shawcross, a man who once said:

“Europe and Islam is one of the greatest, most terrifying problems of our future.”

That appointment led dozens of human rights organisations, including the likes of Amnesty International and Liberty, to boycott the review, saying that it was just there to rubber-stamp the discriminatory programme.

Closer to home, things are not good either. My party has seemingly welcomed back a man who said that Muslims

“see the world differently from the rest of us”,

and that we are a “nation within a nation”. It has been silent after a Muslim colleague was cleared following vexatious claims and endured 18 months of horrendous Islamophobia. In a recent by-election, it supposedly had a senior source pit Muslims against Jews, demonising whole communities.

I have always known what it is like to face racism, and through my political life I have come to understand this bigotry better—to see it in its different forms and to recognise the need to confront and challenge it wherever it is found. Islamophobia is very real in Britain today. It

is something that I know too well, but it cannot be defeated in isolation. The people spreading this hate target not just Muslims but black people, Jewish people, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, migrants and refugees. There is safety in solidarity, and it is only through uniting our struggles that we will defeat racism.

**Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair):** Before I call Mr Baker, I apologise to Ms Shah, because I understand that she is a co-sponsor of this debate. I will go to Mr Baker, then I will come to her. I do apologise; I was unaware.

3.19 pm

**Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con):** I begin by referring to my unremunerated interest as advisory board chairman of Conservatives Against Racism for Equality.

I am grateful for the opportunity to follow the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana), who made a very moving speech. I am very sorry indeed that she has been treated so very disgracefully. There can be no place at all in our society for the way she has been treated. We can all see how she has been affected by it, and I do not mind admitting that I am affected by watching her report what she has experienced. It is just a disgrace, and absolutely every one of us has an obligation and a duty to stand against such intolerance and hatred in our society. I certainly will do everything I can to stand with her, despite our occasional differences, to make sure she is secure and safe in her identity and valued for it. For what it is worth, I often agree with her anti-war views, too—even as a former member of the armed forces—but that is for another debate on another day.

I am very proud to represent Wycombe. According to the last census, about one in six of my constituents are British Muslims. Some of my very best friends and supporters in Wycombe are British Muslims. I am very proud to have their support, to knock on doors with them, to go to mosque with them, to have meals together and to share and celebrate their faith at all appropriate moments. They are people who have very often taught me even about my own Christian faith.

We have a wide and rich variety of institutions in Wycombe. Let this be understood: in a Conservative, home counties seat, our largest religious institution is the Wycombe Islamic Mission and Mosque Trust, which runs a number of mosques across the constituency. We have the Wycombe Islamic Society, the Imam Ali Islamic Centre, the Karima Foundation, which educates young people, Seerah Today and Jamia Rehmania. We have many imams, people whom I regard as the most godly and dignified people, capable of teaching us all how we should relate to one another in community. We have the Council for Christian Muslim Relations, which has worked extremely hard over many years to make sure that our churches and mosques come together and share values, friendship and fellowship across a broad range of issues. The council helps us, crucially, to listen to one another when things are difficult, when there is a matter of international relations or security and so on. The Wycombe Muslim Communication Forum is always keen to give us its views, and I am always grateful for them.

This is the crucial point: if we are willing to listen to one another in good faith, we can make progress. That is what has happened in Wycombe over many years. I am extremely proud of the level of integration and the

very flourishing relations that we have. They are the products of a great deal of effort. I want to make something very clear. We have moved far beyond what one might call tolerance, where one agrees to disagree and to go separate ways. We have moved into deep integration and friendship, and that is something of which I am very proud.

There is, however, something that we cannot tolerate in our society: the kind of anti-Muslim hatred that the hon. Member for Coventry South has so powerfully described today. That is why I need to say the following to my hon. Friend the Minister. As a Conservative Government, we have been in power for 11 years, and we will go into the next election having been in power for 14 years. One in six of my electors are British Muslims, and thousands of British Muslims voted for me. That is why I am here. I am quite sure that, if I lost the Muslim vote in Wycombe, I would lose the seat—and I can assure him that people tried extremely hard to dislodge me in that way. Minister, we have to represent, value and respect the votes of those thousands of people in Wycombe, in Peterborough and elsewhere who have put their faith and trust in Conservative representatives. To do that, we really must define anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia. We must have a working definition, one that we can be proud of, that is not susceptible to exploitation for political purposes and that also—it has to be said—respects the equal worth of Muslims.

Around the world there are conflicts based, I am afraid, on religious grounds. Like Christians, Muslims around the world are persecuted for their faith. I think of the Rohingya; I think about Xinjiang. And it has to be said that Israel-Palestine is very often seen through a prism of faith. I just say in passing that we must not forget the plight of Muslims in Gaza and on the west bank as we move between periods of conflict.

Something that we can do that would be really meaningful, particularly for young people in constituencies such as mine, is to say, “We not only value you; we respect you. We respect the dignity of your identity in Islam, and we are going to define what it means for people to express Islamophobia. We are going to say, very loudly and clearly, that we absolutely will not tolerate that form of prejudice and hatred.”

I have probably spoken for long enough. I will finish where I began, by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Coventry South. I know she is not a huge fan of Conservatives, but wherever we have disagreed I would have thought that every Member of this House would agree that every person should be secure in their identity. Islam is one of the world’s great faiths and no Member of Parliament should suffer anything approaching what she has suffered. I, for one, am extremely grateful to her for speaking as she has done today. I am very humbled by it. And I am very sorry, once again, that she has ever suffered anything like that.

3.25 pm

**Naz Shah** (Bradford West) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I echo the words of the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker). This debate is much richer for the contribution made by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana). In our words, may Allah make it easy for you.

In the main Chamber right now, there is the debate on the legacy of Jo Cox. My hon. Friend mentioned what happened in Batley and the divisive attitudes from different quarters, particularly with regard to Islamophobia. I and I am sure many others wanted to attend that debate—it is a shame that we cannot—but let us in Westminster Hall not forget the words of Jo Cox, that we

“have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

We are here today because this Government have failed British Muslims. Prior to 2018, the Government disregarded the need for a definitive definition of Islamophobia altogether. Having come to their senses in May 2019, the Government were happy to accept a definition—just not the one that the Muslim community supported. Instead, the Government proposed to appoint two independent advisers on Islamophobia to go in search of their own definition, and 845 days later we have only one nominal Islamophobia adviser and no definition. It is clear that this is not a matter of the Government not trying; it is a matter of the Government not caring.

Time and again, I have raised the fact that if it is absolutely okay for women to understand and define patriarchy and feminism, for Jewish people to define antisemitism, for people of colour to define racism and for LGBTQ+ communities to define homophobia, why will this Government not adopt a definition of Islamophobia rooted in the experience of British Muslim communities? In total, 75 academics and over 750 Muslim organisations and institutions have endorsed that definition, from the Muslim Council of Britain to British Muslims for Secular Democracy, including organisations representing every single sect of Islam.

In my adult life, I have never seen an issue in the Muslim community receive such widespread formal support as this definition has. In rejecting that definition, are the Government really telling me, this Chamber and the House that their proposed definition will also garner the support of Muslim communities? The Labour party has adopted the APPG definition and we have also written to Labour councils to follow suit by adopting it on a local level. The Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National party, the Greens and even the Scottish Conservatives have adopted the definition, and yet this Government feel that they can silence Muslim communities by rejecting the definition that those communities support.

The last time that there was a debate on this issue in the main Chamber, the Government’s concerns about the APPG’s definition of Islamophobia centred on the opinions expressed in a letter to Downing Street by police chiefs, which was leaked, insinuating that it would hinder UK counter-terrorism efforts. Yet on further investigation, both police chiefs—Martin Hewitt and Neil Basu—concluded that the definition does not in any way affect counter-terrorism efforts. It was this ludicrous claim about the definition that the former Member for Beaconsfield and former Attorney General, Dominic Grieve, described as “total and unadulterated rubbish”.

Additionally, it has been repeatedly noted by the APPG and experts that the working definition of Islamophobia being proposed is a non-legally binding definition and therefore presents no challenge to statute, which takes legal precedent, and therefore it does not

[Naz Shah]

impede on free speech, as the Government claim. The APPG definition of Islamophobia is a working definition, similar to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism.

In fact, the APPG definition of Islamophobia is built on the IHRA framework; every single example used by the APPG definition comes from the IHRA definition of antisemitism. If one definition does not impede free speech, why do the Government think that another definition, which is built on the very same framework, does so? If the APPG's definition does contravene the Equality Act 2010, as the Government have previously suggested, why do they not publish the legal advice they have taken on holding such positions?

The fact is that the Government maintain their silence as hate crimes targeted at Muslims exceed 50%. They turn a blind eye to the qualified, educated Muslim women denied jobs. They benefit from the Muslim contribution to the pandemic response—need I remind the Government that more than 50% of doctors' fatalities from covid have been Muslims?—yet ignore the Islamophobia that 81% of medical professionals face. They allow social media to perpetuate narratives of terrorism around Muslims, while failing to call out the one in three articles that misrepresent and generalise Muslims. They delay a definition that is both timely and imperative; a 2019 YouGov poll found that 45% of British people saw a “fundamental clash” between Islam and the values of British society, while 73% of complaints in the Government's own party relate to Islamophobia.

This is not a matter of a Government's not trying, but of a Government's not caring. If the everyday Islamophobia faced by British Muslims is not enough to shake this Government into action—if the daughter of the Muslim Scottish Health Secretary being denied a nursery place because of a Muslim-sounding name and a young Sikh boy wearing a turban being called “Taliban” and racially attacked for being perceived as a Muslim are not enough—then the terror attacks that have taken place against Muslim communities should wake them up.

Mohammed Saleem, Mushin Ahmed and Makram Ali are the three grandfathers who have already been murdered in Islamophobic terror attacks across the UK. Across the world, we have witnessed 51 Muslims murdered by a far-right terrorist in Christchurch, New Zealand, and only this June we witnessed a terror attack that led to three generations of a single family being murdered in Ontario, Canada.

It has been a decade since Baroness Warsi, the former Conservative party chair, said that Islamophobia had “passed the dinner table test”.

We have seen not only a year-on-year increase in Islamophobic sentiments online, in the media and across society, but a terrifying rise in attacks on Muslim communities.

When I say that all the evidence points to the Government not caring, I am not saying it merely as an Opposition Member, but because if, God forbid, there is another deadly terror attack on Muslims in the UK, this Government's inaction, negligence and often silent condoning of Islamophobia will be partly responsible. When they deny Muslim communities even a simple

definition of Islamophobia and halt the work of the Government's own anti-Muslim hatred working group, it is that serious.

If the Minister disagrees, I am happy to let him intervene to tell the House the last time the Government's anti-Muslim hatred working group actually met. Who are the two independent Islamophobia advisers? Has one of the advisers the Government appointed even started his role, two years on from his appointment? The answer is no—just as I thought.

The reality is that Islamophobia is widespread. A report by the Centre for Media Monitoring, analysing media output over a three-month period in the fourth quarter of 2018, comprising analysis of more than 10,000 published articles and broadcast clips, found that 59% of all articles associated Muslims with negative behaviour, and 37% of articles in right-leaning and religious publications were categorised with the most negative rating of “very biased”. More than a third of all articles misrepresented or generalised about Muslims, and terrorism was the most common theme.

Recent research by Professor Imran Awan and Dr Irene Zempi found that, be they one-off events or a series of repeated and targeted offending, Islamophobic hate crimes not only affect the victim, but send reverberations through communities as they reinforce established patterns of bias, prejudice and discrimination. In the British context, Islam and Muslims have increasingly been seen as culturally dangerous and threatening to the British way of life. Muslims have been labelled both “deviant” and “evil”.

We know, and we witnessed through the height of the pandemic, how untrue those sentiments are. When the nation needed communities to come together, to serve, to unite and to protect our nation, British Muslims played a leading role. Sadly, however, far-right extremist and Islamophobic stereotypes peddle a narrative that can lead to worrying consequences for Muslim communities.

Adopting a definition is only the first step. Preventing, tackling and challenging Islamophobia is a debate that must still take place. Nobody—not I, nor the British Muslims here today or in my constituency—is asking for special treatment from this Government. All we are asking is simply that the Government accept the definition, so that we can help people and better understand Islamophobia. We need to put out a political statement that Islamophobia, in all its forms, is unacceptable and that attacks on Muslims must stop. That is all we asking for—literally, it is just equality. This is not about requesting a change of law, or Muslims asking for extra protection. We are simply asking the Government to recognise Islamophobia, accept a non-binding working definition and make a political statement to that effect. That is why I end by asking the Government to end the discriminatory behaviour towards Muslims. The Government should accept the definition, and let us all work together to tackle racism, prejudice and hatred in all its forms.

3.35 pm

**Mr Khalid Mahmood** (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): As always, it is a privilege to serve under your stewardship, Mrs Murray. I thank the hon. Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) for securing the debate, and I also thank the Members who spoke before me. I particularly thank my young colleague and former



constituent—her family are still my constituents—my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana), for the heartfelt issue that she raised. She is a Member of Parliament who spoke so movingly about the hate that she has received. We serve in this Parliament and it is absolutely disgraceful, in this day and age, that the media allow that sort of behaviour to take place. It is absolutely crucial that the Government look at how we deal with that sort of media. I commend my hon. Friend and hope that she continues in the same vein, because she will be a wonderful Member of Parliament and represent the interests of her constituency.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West has said, the definition of Islamophobia under discussion is non-binding. That is not good enough for me or my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South. It is not good enough for all the people who are affected by the continuing hatred of Muslims. It is not good enough for us in this day and age. Every day that we in this place vote and go through the Lobbies, we do so to vote for legislation. We have a right to protect our citizens—that is what we are here for. We can talk as much as we want, but that is the real reason we are here, and it is what this great democratic institution allows us to do—to make legislation, day in, day out.

I am concerned about the definition of Islamophobia, as I have made clear for a long time. In 1997, the Runnymede Trust referred to Islamophobia—although its first term for it was “anti-Muslim prejudice”, which it aligned with antisemitism. What we are really discussing is the issue of hatred. That should be put in legislation and it should be a legal requirement for us, and other committed people, to deal with it. That is what I am here to speak about. There is a certain irony in the fact that the chairman of the Runnymede Trust when it produced its first definition of Islamophobia was one Mr Trevor Phillips, whom I believe is still under investigation following his criticism of the definition of Islamophobia that the Labour party has now adopted.

**Naz Shah:** I might just point out that it would be very wrong of us to comment on any individual investigation. My understanding of the case that my hon. Friend mentions is that it has nothing to do with the definition. From what is quoted in the press, my understanding of the individual mentioned is that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South pointed out, he said that Muslims have a different view from that of everyone else. It is not about the definition in question. Does my hon. Friend agree?

**Mr Mahmood:** No, I would not, because my hon. Friend just got up and said that she will not discuss the individual case. She then proceeded to do the very thing that she said we should not do. We need to look at that in much more detail. Certainly, I do not wish to discuss the substance of the case; I merely pointed out the history of the individual.

The term Islamophobia suggests that it could be a medical term, with “phobia” being used. Medical phobias include tomophobia, which is a fear of medical procedures; haemophobia, a fear of blood; trypanophobia, which is fear of needles; dentophobia, which is fear of dentists—a lot of people have that—and nosophobia, which is a fear of getting sick.

**Naz Shah:** What about homophobia and transphobia?

**Mr Mahmood:** Of course. I had not completed my list, but I am grateful to my hon. Friend for completing my list.

If Islamophobia is being suggested as a medical fear, then the term Islamophobia is acceptable. If not, as it seems, and the terminology is incorrectly used, then the correct term would be anti-Muslim hatred, racism or Muslim hatred, which clearly defines on the basis that that is something being done. The actual definition that has been put forward for Islamophobia encompasses any distinction, exclusion, restriction towards or against Muslims, that has

“the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social and cultural”

and other fields.

As has been said, Muslims have been discriminated against by companies when they have Muslim-sounding names. The hon. Member for Peterborough, who led the debate, mentioned that and that is what we want to get away from. The only way we will get away from that, as with the Race Relations Act 1968, is to have definitions that are purely actionable in terms of Muslim hatred. That is what we want to look at and that is what we are here for.

We are not here to have a term for people to accept, with no real translatable meaning and which we cannot act upon. If we want to serve our constituents and tackle the issues of Muslim hatred that they go through, we should pin down the definition. We should make it clear that if people behave in such a way, somebody will call on their door and deal with it, and that if people do that through social media, somebody will look them up and call them to account. We want a definition that actually works, a definition that actually delivers for our people—not a definition that claims “a fear of”, because I never agreed with that definition.

We should push the Government—of course we should—to adopt that definition. My two learned colleagues, my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) and for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), have both been barristers. I am sure that if they were to look at this in far more detail they would find that a much more appropriate way of going forward and trying to resolve the issue. I do not know why my hon. Friend is shaking her head, because we want to have laws that enable us to prosecute people who have racist tendencies towards Muslims. That is what I want. I do not want excuses.

**Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab):** I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I was actually just moving my head; I was not agreeing or disagreeing. On the point about prosecution, yes, we have laws in place, but that does not detract from the fact that the definition of Islamophobia needs to be made. As a barrister, if someone is asking my legal opinion, I would say yes, we do need the definition.

**Mr Mahmood:** In answering that, I say to the hon. Lady, as a barrister, that I explained what phobias there are, and they are usually used in medical terms, not in

[Mr Khalid Mahmood]

legal, prosecutorial form. The Government have to define this and we have to define this in legal terms—that is what is important.

**Yasmin Qureshi:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Mr Mahmood:** For the last time, and then I want to carry on.

**Yasmin Qureshi:** Language develops over the years; language and words change and are culturalised. Language does not stay static forever.

**Mr Mahmood:** It is not static at all. Of course language develops—I am fully aware of that. However, there is language that we have to use in Parliament, which has been established for over 500 years. Our work is based on precedent; we will continue to formulate our laws based on precedent, as we have done in the past.

**Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab):** Just to help my hon. Friend, the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims had a number of lawyers engaged on this matter. Just for his assistance, I am also a lawyer. Even the former Attorney General of this country went over this. I am not sure why he is too concerned, as though lawyers were not engaged: they have been.

**Mr Mahmood:** I thank my hon. Friend for his words of wisdom. However, I said to the former Attorney General, in the debate we had in the Chamber, that I did not believe what he intended to write. He accepted that, because he said he did not have enough time to look at that. So I agree with my hon. Friend.

Again, my hon. Friend is trying to fight a battle that I do not oppose. I am saying that it has to be done properly, in statute. That is what we are here to do; that is what I want to do; that is what is important. Using the word phobia will damage us and it will not allow us to get what we want. I want there to be a law against social media abuse—a law that helps my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South, because it affects her; a law that will allow the social media companies to tackle that abuse. I want a law that deals with someone trying not to deliver a service to my constituents because of their name. I want a law under which people get recognition for the work they do, and are not targeted because their name is religious or Muslim. I want there to be no discrimination against them, and I want an ability to formally track, log and see that abuse. I am fed up of just having words. We are here to legislate, and that is precisely what I want to do.

**Paul Bristow:** I am perplexed by the hon. Member's argument. I understand that he wishes to legislate on this matter, but how will having a definition accepted by the Government stop this abuse? I do not understand how those two things are at odds with each other.

**Mr Mahmood:** What I am saying is that the Government can adopt it, and I think that they should adopt it. It means nothing. I am essentially making the same point as the hon. Gentleman. I want to put it in statute so that we can continue to deal with this properly, effectively and legally, and deter those who abuse people based on their religion—on being Muslims in this country. My great-grandfather served in the British Army; my great-grandfather and grandfather served in the British merchant

navy. We have a right because we are Muslims, and we are proud of being Muslims in this country. All I want is for our children and grandchildren to be protected by the legislation and not be targeted for being Muslim.

**Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair):** Order. Will the hon. Gentleman come to a conclusion? There are other Members who are waiting to speak.

**Mr Mahmood:** I appreciate that. There are so many people who are interested and who wanted to intervene on me. I apologise for that. Therefore I conclude by saying that I want Muslims to be put on an equal footing through legislation, so that they are protected legally by us, here in this Parliament.

**Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair):** I call Imran Hussain. I intend to call the Front-Bench spokesman at about five minutes to 4, and there is one other speaker, so please bear that in mind when you are speaking.

3.49 pm

**Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab):** Thank you, Mrs Murray. My difficulty is that I cannot do any justice to this debate in two minutes, so please bear with me. I can certainly assure you that I will not take as long as the previous speaker.

I thank the hon. Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) for securing this important and pertinent debate. I thank all individuals and campaign groups who bravely fight to raise awareness of Islamophobia and tackle it in our society on a daily basis. I also thank Bradford Council for Mosques, which this week celebrated a proud 40 years of serving our communities. I want to take this moment to commend its work, commitment and leadership, not just in Bradford but on a regional level.

Sadly, I cannot speak in this debate without feeling a deep sense of frustration and disappointment because, since we last debated this issue, Islamophobia has continued to run rife in our society. It has continued to blight our communities and, sadly, has not got any better. Indeed, the campaign group Tell MAMA last year reported that the UK had seen a rise of almost 700% in Islamophobic incidents. Let us take a minute just to take that in: a 700% rise. That is borne out by the sickening stories that people tell me of Muslim men, women and even children of all ages, in my constituency and across the country, who still face Islamophobic attacks and Islamophobic persecution on a daily basis, who are still subject to vile abuse because of their religion, and who are still told go home—even in the very town where they were born and raised.

It is a sad day when we have my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) reduced to tears for merely trying to do her job. That my hon. Friend, as one of the youngest Members, has come here and told this House that she feels she is unable to carry out her job as a democratically elected Member of Parliament is shocking and disgusting. We must all hang our heads in shame over the appalling treatment of my hon. Friend and Members like her.

At the heart of the issue is the normalisation of Islamophobia in our society. I accept the definition; I will not get into debates about a definition. The reality is the vile poison that has spread. We have seen the

creation of a culture that tells people that it is acceptable to discriminate against, to persecute, to abuse Muslims because everyone else seems to be doing it. It has spread because it has been actively promoted in the rhetoric espoused in the media, and by countless public figures who reinforce over and over again a false narrative that Muslims are dangerous, and second-class citizens in our society. It has spread because it has been pushed and endorsed even by our own politicians—even by the Prime Minister, who thinks it is okay to describe Muslim women as “letterboxes” and “bank robbers”—as well as by many others who are in the public eye, talking down Muslims, treating us as a policing and social problem and promoting divisive policies that disproportionately target Muslims, such as Prevent. It has spread because society has normalised it, and that is the real problem.

Indeed, the normalisation of Islamophobia has now reached the point where it has become so commonplace and trivialised that, even if we do not see an active discrimination against Muslims that manifests in the most extreme way as violence and a vitriolic hatred by racists and bigots, we still experience a bias against us that sees Muslims denied employment opportunities, taken less seriously, and talked down to, because it has now become so endemic and so institutionalised that it has become subconscious discrimination. This normalisation is therefore as big a threat as the far right, because it creates an atmosphere on which far-right thugs and fascists feed—an environment in which they feel welcome, and in which bigoted Islamophobia can flourish unchallenged.

Mrs Murray, I am looking at the clock. I have a lot to say, but I will cut it short because of your request. The last thing I will say is this. If we are serious about tackling Islamophobia—this is where I agree with the point made earlier—we must move on from discussing the definition. We have spent the last two years talking about a definition, but that has not stopped Islamophobia. The point is that we need a definition in legislation. At the moment when these matters go to judges in courtrooms, they are not obliged to take it into account; it is a mitigating factor that they may take into account if they so wish. We need to legislate against this, which was the point made earlier by the hon. Member for Peterborough. We must stop talking and start acting—acting to stop religiously and racially motivated hate through legislation and acting, as a society, to challenge and tackle the vile and appalling normalisation of Islamophobia.

**Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair):** You have three minutes, Afzal Khan.

3.55 pm

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Two years ago, we had a general debate on Islamophobia in which I delivered the Labour party’s position. Sadly, two years later, no progress has been made and the Government have failed to take any action on Islamophobia. The APPG on British Muslims has worked tirelessly on creating the definition. My colleagues have already touched on the detail of accepting this definition. Many councils, 800 Muslim organisations and almost all political parties, including the Scottish Conservative party, have accepted it. However, two years later, the Tory party have shown that they are in pure denial of Islamophobia through their refusal to accept the definition proposed

by the APPG and their failure to conduct an independent investigation or to appoint Government advisers on this issue. They promised all of this.

What concerns me is that the Tory party has an institutional problem and, frankly, does not care about Islamophobia. The damning Singh review earlier this year revealed institutional failings within the Conservative party in how it handled Islamophobia complaints and that it failed to engage with any Conservative Muslim parliamentarians—it did not even acknowledge or mention the term “Islamophobia”. When a definition has such widespread community support, I ask the Minister why the Government are insistent on reinventing the wheel. Let me tell him why: I know the Conservative party does not care about Islamophobia. After writing to the Prime Minister during Islamophobia Awareness Month urging him to take action and meet me and key Muslim organisations, I never received a response. It has been 10 months. Perhaps I can try again during this year’s Islamophobia Awareness Month.

The UK is home to 2.7 million Muslims, but Islamophobia is on the rise and can have distressing and real-life implications for our Muslim community. A prime example was the far right peddling false narratives during the pandemic that British Muslims were spreading coronavirus. As a result, Muslim communities have suffered a shocking 40% increase in online Islamophobia during this period, according to Tell MAMA.

The Government’s own figures reveal once again that Muslims have been victim to the highest proportion of all hate crimes committed this year. The ugly face of right-wing racism reared its head in the horrific attack in Ontario, Canada—a sobering reminder that Islamophobia can kill. Here in the UK, we have seen the chilling results of Islamophobia too. Just this week, a young Muslim student in Rotherham was repeatedly punched and kicked by fellow students, leaving him hospitalised.

These are not isolated incidents. Home Office data supports this, and shows that referrals to Prevent for extreme right-wing ideologies have exponentially increased. I, along with colleagues, have pushed for the independent review of the Prevent strategy for several years. A coalition of more than 450 Islamic organisations, including 350 mosques and imams representing thousands of British Muslims, have boycotted the Government’s review of Prevent in protest against the appointment of William Shawcross as its chair. Shawcross has openly expressed hostile views of Islam and Muslims, including saying:

“Yes, the problem is ‘Islamic fascism’”.

Will the Minister urgently outline why the Government have appointed someone with Islamophobic views? Will he also respond to the overwhelming discontent over the Shawcross appointment and put on the record why the Government refuse to engage with the Muslim Council of Britain, the largest Muslim organisation in the UK?

Finally, as chair of Labour Muslim Network and vice-chair of the APPG on British Muslims, I reaffirm my commitment to tackle Islamophobia. I hope that today the Minister will finally endorse the definition and pledge to take action.

3.59 pm

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Murray. I am grateful to the hon. Members for Peterborough

[Kirsten Oswald]

(Paul Bristow) and for Bradford West (Naz Shah) for securing this debate, and for their excellent speeches, as I am for all the excellent speeches today.

As an officer for the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims, I am always struck by what a fantastically constructive cross-party space that group is. With our collective purpose and determination, we have much to be positive about. That is just as well, because there is much to do and a great distance to travel.

Some people ask me why we need to define Islamophobia. We have to be clear about what we are talking about, what is acceptable, and why. We cannot effectively deal with Islamophobia if we and others are not confident of what it means. That matters, because we need to develop that understanding more widely. People need to know what Islamophobia is, why it is a problem, how it manifests itself, and, vitally, the impact that leaving this terrible stain on our society untackled has on far too many individuals in our communities.

We have heard the figures from Tell MAMA: there has been an increase of 700% in Islamophobic incidents. That is horrendous, and I sincerely hope that the UK Government are listening. It may be uncomfortable to confront the reality that society, even now—especially now—is Islamophobic and intolerant, but we need to acknowledge that if we hope to drive change. That is why we need the UK Government to step up and shape up.

Recently, I was pleased to receive an email from Peter Hopkins of Newcastle University; he authored a powerful report on Islamophobia in Scotland, working with the Scottish Parliament's cross-party group. Hon. Members will, I suspect, be used to me patiently explaining how Scotland is a brilliant place. It is, of course, and I am proud to represent one of the most religiously diverse constituencies in Scotland. However, it would be a mistake to suggest that Scotland is some unique haven of tolerance, or that we, uniquely, are not affected by Islamophobia. We need to be grown up about this, and about our politics. Accepting that Islamophobia is an issue is vital. I am particularly glad that the Scottish Government has the leadership of Nicola Sturgeon on this, because I know that she is absolutely unflinching on this issue, and that really matters.

We should take heart from the people in Kenmure Street in Glasgow, who came out of their houses at Eid and stopped the Home Office from deporting their neighbours. There are things to be positive about, but we must also look hard at ourselves and recognise the reality that much progress remains to be made. A big driver in my support of independence is the opportunity for equality, respect and fairness to be the building blocks of the country. However, as we move to that, we need to act. That is why the adoption of this definition, and action, matter.

I recently had a very useful meeting, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), with Zara Mohammed, the new general secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain. She is the first Scot, the first young person, and the first woman to hold that role. Zara is focused on, among many other things, the dearth of Muslim women in public life. She is absolutely right. We need far greater

diversity, particularly where it would be most visible—in the higher reaches of public bodies, in leadership roles and in politics. Although I am very pleased that the Scottish Parliament is looking much more diverse this Session—I applaud all parties that contributed to making it so, and would particularly like to mention my colleague Kaukab Stewart, the new MSP for Glasgow Kelvin and the first Muslim woman elected to Holyrood—there remains a great deal to do, and Zara's work will make a difference in that.

It is clear that women are disproportionately impacted by Islamophobia in many ways, and there are two issues to reflect on there. First, if we accept detriment to any minority group, we are opening the doors to detriment to others. Intersectionality is important, and, as the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) said in her important speech, that interrelationship between different equality groups is important, as is, I would say, the relationship between different religious groups. On the same day that I met Zara Mohammed, I also met representatives from the Glasgow Jewish Representative Council and the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities. Those organisations have very understandable concerns about antisemitism, but were also keen to discuss working with Muslim colleagues, and shared concerns regarding Islamophobia and the impact of this intolerance on all our communities.

The intolerance is increasing, as is the normalising that we heard about from the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain). There is a nasty, dark underbelly of bile, which is enabled by right-wing populists such as Trump and Farage, though they are not alone. That contributes, here and further afield, to the othering and mistreatment of Muslims. I must again reflect on the Prime Minister's absolutely disgraceful comments about Muslim women looking like letterboxes. Those comments will have contributed to countless hardships and worse. They should not have been made. They are completely indefensible, and I struggle to understand how people can defend them.

Our Governments need to be alive to and focused on this issue, as do political parties. I am pleased the Scottish Government are taking this seriously, and that the SNP Westminster group adopted the definition of Islamophobia, but this is not political—or should not be. It should be about being part of a decent society—one to which our Muslim communities contribute immensely in Scotland, the UK and further afield.

Colleagues will wish to make use of their time, and it is important to hear what the Minister has to say, so I will conclude. So many Muslim groups in my area do really important work in our communities. We heard about all the amazing contributions made during the pandemic, but I want to put on record the immense amount of work that the Ahmadiyya Muslim community and the Scottish Ahlul Bayt Society did to support people in need during really difficult periods of the pandemic. Congregations such as those in the Woodfarm Education Centre and Langrig Road in my constituency offer vital support day in and day out.

I point out, as others have done, that this is a big issue across the world, but we need to start here by looking closely at ourselves. The fact that it is a big issue is all the more reason for us to take our position in this Parliament seriously and use it to drive forward change, so that we can better challenge Islamophobia, wherever

it is. We cannot carry on as we are, so the UK Government should recognise that adopting a definition of Islamophobia is not only important, but increasingly urgent.

4.7 pm

**Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) on obtaining this urgent and timely debate. I thank all colleagues who have spoken. It has been a sterling debate. I particularly want to touch on what my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) was saying. I do not know if it will help her, but many of us Muslim women have been abused in a similar format. I have had emails and messages on social media saying that I am, and I quote, words beginning with “f” and “b”, and that I should be sent off to Saudi Arabia to be raped. There are all kinds of interesting words being used and letters written. That does not help, but I hope that she understands.

Islamophobia has been rising in this country and in the western world at a very disturbing rate in recent years. Despite this, as we have heard today, there is still no accepted definition of Islamophobia. There are three million Muslims in the UK—almost 5% of our overall population. Despite Muslims having been present in this country as far back as the 16th century, many believe they are treated as the other. Islamophobia permeates all domains of our society. It threatens education, limits employment prospects and impacts everyday issues, including health, wellbeing and housing.

It is time that we finally address the issue. In 2019, the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims worked tirelessly to create a definition of Islamophobia that was widely applauded and supported by over 750 organisations. As was mentioned, the definition has been adopted by the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National party, the Mayor of London and the Mayor of Greater Manchester. It has been debated in this House and has received cross-party support, so it is disappointing that two years later, we are still urging the Government to do the right thing. That is an absolute denial from this Government. To add insult to injury, they cannot even bring themselves to use the term “Islamophobia”.

In May, the Singh report, resulting from an independent investigation into the handling of Islamophobia by the Conservative party, was published. It was a damning indictment of the discrimination rife in the party. It found that Islamophobia is a serious issue for it, and that the concerns had too easily been denied or dismissed. Indeed, it even looked at the Prime Minister’s comments about women wearing burqas looking like “letterboxes” and “bank robbers”, which we have heard a lot about. It found that Islamophobic incidents of hate rose by 375% in the week after the Prime Minister made those comments. The report called for the party leadership to publish an action plan to set out how it will tackle the failings it found. Will the Minister today acknowledge the scale of the problem? Will he update us on the progress his party has made on the action plan and the new code of conduct?

In my party, I pay tribute to the work of the Labour Muslim Network, which brought to our attention its findings and concerns about Islamophobia. Unlike the

leadership of the Conservative party, we are seriously committed to tackling and eradicating Islamophobia, both in our party and in society.

We are often told by critics of the APPG’s definition that it should not imply that some Islamophobia is rooted in racism, yet the evidence says otherwise. Last year, the largest number of referrals to the Government Prevent programme related to far-right extremism. Indeed, the Security Minister warned that far-right terror poses a growing threat, and we all know the consequences of that ideology.

A recent report by Hope Not Hate found that Islamophobia has become the driving force behind the rise of far-right movements in the UK, and that anti-Muslim prejudice has replaced immigration as the key driver of such groups. A poll found that 35% of Britons think that Islam is generally a threat to the British way of life. We see this happening globally, and particularly in western Europe, where there has been a rise of far-right political parties and discriminatory laws passed in France and other countries. Earlier this year, a UN expert concluded at the UN Human Rights Council that Islamophobia has reached epidemic proportions globally, and that Muslims are often targeted because of visible characteristics, such as names, skin colour and clothing.

Many, including this Government, argue that Muslims are not a race. Of course they are not a race, but they are racialised when they are treated as having characteristics that mark them as wholly different. The question when it comes to racism is whether there is a set of attitudes and behaviours that are socially widespread and used to justify discrimination against a particular group. That is why it makes sense to call antisemitism and Islamophobia forms of racism.

I am the chair of the APPG on religion in the media, and last year we conducted an inquiry on religious literacy in the British media. Our report found that media reporting can be sensationalist, and that it reinforces stereotypes and contributes towards discriminatory attitudes. Headlines such as “1 in 5 Brit Muslims’ sympathy for jihadis” and references to “Muslim problems” have real-world consequences. Of course, journalists should be able to question and criticise religion—we live in a democracy that values freedom of speech—but this is about not censorship but transparency. We ask the Government to consider looking at press regulation, because the current system of self-regulation is not working.

Does the Minister at least accept the inescapable reality, which is that Islamophobia has damaging consequences for the life chances of and equalities enjoyed by British Muslim communities? There are people in the UK who are scared to leave their home for fear of verbal or physical attacks. People have withdrawn from public services, with devastating knock-on consequences for their health and education. They feel like outsiders in their own country. That should shame us all.

Last year, in the other place, when the Government were asked about the progress that they had made on adopting a definition, they said that the definition proposed by the APPG was not compatible with the Equality Act 2010, which treats race and religion separately, and

“could have consequences for freedom of speech.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 13 February 2020; Vol. 801, c. 2337.]

[Yasmin Qureshi]

Can the Minister tell us whether he or the Government have published for public scrutiny any evidence regarding the legal advice that suggests that the APPG definition is incompatible with the Act? It has been repeatedly noted by experts that the working definition of Islamophobia is not legally binding, and therefore presents no challenges to statute, which takes legal precedence. I ask the Minister not to revert to the predictable, rehearsed responses and platitudes that we have heard from the Government. Each time they do that, they show their disdain for the British Muslim community.

In this debate, the ask is simple: adopt this definition, which has been accepted by cross-party MPs, national groups and hundreds of organisations. In some respects, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood). We need a definition because it will be a starting point for addressing the real issue of Islamophobia that we face in this country. Islamophobia is rising not just in the United Kingdom but in France, Austria and other parts of the western world. Muslims are being treated as though they are fifth columnists—as though they do not belong in this society.

I referred to our inquiries on media coverage. I do not want to restrict free speech—I am sure nobody here wants to—but we ask the Government to look at cases in which the newspapers and others publish pure lies. There is a difference between covering something and carrying blatant lies, like the story about one in five Muslims having sympathy for Isis, or *The Sunday Times* coverage of a Muslim family who had adopted a child in the east end of London, which turned out to be completely made up.

Those kinds of stories cause people to view Muslims with suspicion and lead to hatred towards Muslims. Let us face it: a lot of people will probably never meet a Muslim in their life, and their understanding of what a Muslim is comes from what they read in the newspaper or watch on the television. Therefore what our media, social media, press and others say is an important part of this debate.

**Imran Hussain:** My hon. Friend makes a really valuable and pertinent point. Does she agree that the situation is far worse than that? We see Islamophobic tropes increasing under the guise of freedom of speech. Would she agree that freedom of speech is not an absolute right? It does not give you a right to promote hatred, and it certainly does not give you a carte-blanche right to attack Muslims.

**Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair):** Order. Will the hon. Lady sum up now?

**Yasmin Qureshi:** I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I hope that the Minister has heard, and takes on board the points and issues that have been raised in the debate, and I look forward to his response.

**Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair):** I remind the Minister to leave a couple of minutes at the end for Mr Bristow.

4.19 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Eddie Hughes):** I will proceed as quickly as I possibly can. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I

congratulate the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) on securing this debate.

I want to begin by saying that although, unfortunately, the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) and I agree on nothing politically, I admire her tremendously. Together, we have done the local politics programme in the west midlands—it is always a pleasure to be on it with her. I can only imagine that she is a true inspiration to women of all political persuasions when it comes to entering politics. Whatever abuse she may suffer from a bunch of idiots, she is reaching far more people as an inspiration. She should take heart from that.

I am blessed in my constituency to be aided by two excellent Muslim councillors, who are true community representatives; Councillor Gaz Ali and Councillor Amo Hussain do tremendous work across their ward, and across all demographics with people of all faiths and none. It is a pleasure to work with them. I am also delighted that Imam Hafiz Shahid Bashir Qadri gifted me a copy of the Koran, and has taken time to explain parts of it to me. My education is an ongoing project, but I am incredibly grateful for his kindness and his patience.

My point is that people learn by experience; when they experience members of the Muslim community, they see the tremendous work that they do within the community. That is to everybody's credit, and that is how we will build a better society.

**Mr Baker:** My hon. Friend has reminded me that I did a terrible thing and failed to acknowledge the great plethora of Conservative councillors who I have in my constituency. I said “supporters”, but there are councillors too. We have had many Conservative—and, indeed, Labour—Muslim councillors in Wycombe for a very long time. I am extremely grateful for all of the brilliant work that they do.

**Eddie Hughes:** I completely concur with my hon. Friend's comments.

As a man of faith, I firmly believe that Muslims in our country should be able to practise their faith in freedom. This Government have always been clear that they do not, and will not, tolerate anti-Muslim hatred in any form, and will continue to combat such discrimination and intolerance wherever it occurs. We have instituted some of the strongest legislation in the world to tackle incidents where people incite religious hatred, or are engaged in criminal activity motivated by religion. We have also supported Muslim communities in combating anti-Muslim hatred. We are supporting groups fighting anti-Muslim hatred on the ground, including through the places of worship protective security funding scheme, which has supported more than 240 places of worship, with approximately £5 million in grants enabling them to install measures such as protective alarms, security lighting and access controls.

Following the Christchurch attacks, we funded faith associations to run 22 training sessions during, and prior to, Ramadan, to provide advice to mosque leaders on how to improve security. In November 2020, we awarded £1.8 million through the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government faith, race and hate crime grant scheme to support established community groups and civil society organisations to run projects to boost shared values and tackle religiously and racially

motivated hate crime. We funded work in schools and with young people, including through the Anne Frank Trust UK and Solutions Not Sides; these two organisations, funded through our grant scheme, aim to bring religious communities together to tackle prejudice and discrimination against religious groups from a young age. Today we announced the faith new deal: a pilot fund that will provide £1 million to support faith groups to deliver innovative partnership projects that will benefit communities as they recover from the impact of covid-19.

We believe that the definition proposed by the APPG for British Muslims, although well supported, is not fit for purpose, and that, if adopted, it would create significant practical and legal issues. Islam is a religion that includes a wide range of races and thus stating, as the definition does, that Islamophobia is a type of racism is incorrect and conflates religion with race. These concerns have been raised by the Federation of Student Islamic Societies, the former chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and the director of the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding. A poll by the organisation Muslim Census found that only 21% of Muslims polled agreed with the APPG definition, primarily due to the confusion it creates between race and religion. The report says:

“For attacks on Muslims and Islam to be dealt with appropriately, selecting a definition that the majority of Muslims agree with is vital. The findings of our survey suggest that the APPG definition does not have the backing of the community.”

**Naz Shah:** I would be interested to understand whether the IHRA definition accepted by the Government was accepted unanimously, by every single person, because there is lots of debate on that—yet, when it comes to this one, the Government have said what they have said. I would really value any examples that the Minister could point me to on the issues of the legality, given that it is a non-legally-binding definition.

**Eddie Hughes:** I am not sure whether the definition that the hon. Lady refers to was completely universally accepted, but it is internationally accepted—and therein lies the difference.

As has been raised by the former commissioner for countering extremism and the Government’s current independent adviser for social cohesion, the APPG’s definition does nothing to address the issue of sectarianism or the right of minority Muslim groups such as the Ahmadiyya community, who may receive prejudice from other Muslim communities who do not agree with their views.

Finally, the definition suggested may have negative implications for free speech. Concerns have been raised that the lack of clarity in the definition could lead to its being used as a back-door blasphemy law, providing a shield for Islamists to espouse hatred, and to criticise or disregard anyone who challenges them as Islamophobic.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Eddie Hughes:** I give way to the hon. Member for Bradford West.

**Naz Shah:** The Minister just referred to the back-door blasphemy law. If there is a back-door blasphemy law, it is what the Conservative party is putting through with the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which protects statues because of commemorative feelings. That is back-door blasphemy, not this definition.

I would really like to understand: since when does any definition deal with issues among communities? It is absolutely like a dead cat on the table: “Let’s just not adopt the definition”—more than 750 organisations, more than 60 academics. This is just the Conservative party throwing the issue into the long grass, because they do not want to take responsibility and they do not care about Muslims.

**Eddie Hughes:** Time is against me, unfortunately. I will say, for all the reasons I set out earlier, that the actions taken by this Government to develop community cohesion and address some of the issues—

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Eddie Hughes:** I am afraid time will not allow interventions, if I am to conclude.

We remain committed to there being a robust and effective definition, and we will outline our steps to achieve that in due course. I thank hon. Members for the views they have put forward. However, we cannot accept a definition of Islamophobia that shuts down legitimate criticism and debate. Freedom of speech is the foundation of a healthy society, allowing for debate and disagreement underpinned by the values that bind people together—tolerance, equality and fairness. It is important that all have the right to speak freely and provide legitimate criticism.

**Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair):** Paul Bristow, you have one minute to sum up.

4.28 pm

**Paul Bristow:** Since being elected in 2019, I have heard a few speeches that will remain with me for the rest of my life. The hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) and I will agree on little, but she will find me standing side by side with her in her fight against Islamophobia. I was humbled and privileged to listen to her speech.

We have had an interesting debate today. What is clear—I hope the Minister takes this away—is the strength of feeling people have on the issue, and that Muslim communities up and down the country have. We heard some positives about the contribution that Muslim communities have made to this country, and we have heard some negatives, sadly, about Islamophobia, discrimination and racism.

The hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) made a statement about the Conservative party. There is a difference between the Conservative party and the Government; when she conflates those two things, it does her case no good whatever.

I hope that the Minister will have heard very clearly the need for this definition. Once the definition is there, we can move forward together. It is just a start, but we can start rooting out anti-Muslim hatred.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the definition of Islamophobia.

4.30 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*





# Written Statements

Thursday 9 September 2021

## DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### National Lottery Products: Sales

#### **The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale):**

Following a consultation, the Government announced last year that they were raising the age at which national lottery products can be bought and sold from 16 to 18, protecting young people from the possible risk of gambling harm. The new minimum age comes into force on 1 October and the operator and retailers have already stopped selling tickets to anyone aged below 18.

Following a further consultation which was held in July and August, the Government intend to make some technical amendments to the requirements placed on retailers in connection with the uplift in the minimum age for buying and selling national lottery products from 16 to 18, and today a statutory instrument is being laid which will introduce this change.

The approved sales system is a minor technical easement and will be based on the two existing provisions already in place for alcohol sales in England, Wales and Scotland, and for sales of tobacco and nicotine vaping products in Scotland, through which a designated person aged 18 or over can approve a transaction being handled by a 16 or 17-year-old. This approach therefore builds on an existing framework and maintains the intent of the original policy.

The majority of national lottery retailers will already be familiar with at least one of the systems. By offering both approaches we hope that the easement will meet the diverse needs of the national lottery's 44,000 retailers who range from large supermarket chains to small independent family run shops.

The consultation response is being published today on gov.uk, and thank you to everyone who took the time to respond.

[HCWS272]

## EDUCATION

### Prevailing Market Rates

**The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan):** I am announcing today a temporary reduction in the maximum student loan interest rate following the recent decline in the prevailing market rate for comparable unsecured personal loans.

In accordance with the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998, where the Government consider that the student loan interest rate is higher than the prevailing market rate for comparable unsecured loans, we will take steps to reduce the maximum student loan interest rate.

The Government regularly monitor the interest rates set on student loans against the interest rates prevailing on the market for comparable loans.

Following a decline in the prevailing market rate, I have today, 9 September laid legislation to cap the maximum post-2012 income contingent repayment undergraduate and the postgraduate income contingent repayment student loan interest rate in line with the prevailing market rate. The cap will come into effect from 1 October 2021 and last for a period of three months.

The reduction will be 0.4 percentage point on the maximum student loan interest rate to reflect the average market rates during the preceding monitoring period.

The maximum post-2012 undergraduate income contingent repayment student loan interest rate and the postgraduate income contingent repayment student loan interest rate will be 4.1% between 1 October and 31 December.

From 1 January 2022, the post-2012 undergraduate and postgraduate income contingent repayment student loan interest rates will revert to the standard rate +3%.

Further caps may be put in place should the prevailing market rate continue to be below student loan interest rates.

[HCWS275]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Covid-19 and Flu Vaccinations: Health and Social Care Sector

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid):** I wish to inform the House of the action the Government are taking to consider how to further improve uptake of covid-19 and flu vaccinations by those who work in our health and social care services.

Following a public consultation on making covid-19 vaccination a condition of deployment for those working in adult care homes, the Government informed the House on 17 June 2021 that covid-19 vaccination would be required of people entering a CQC registered adult care home, unless exempt, to protect vulnerable residents.

While residents in care homes are some of the most at risk from covid-19, the responses to this initial consultation made a clear case for extending this policy beyond care homes to other settings where vulnerable people receive care and treatment.

It is right that the Government strain every sinew to maximise the benefits of the vaccine and protect the most vulnerable as we return our freedoms and get back to a normal way of life.

The Government are therefore now undertaking a further public consultation on whether or not to make covid-19 vaccination and flu vaccination a condition of deployment for frontline health and care workers, to help safeguard the vulnerable.

While many of those working in health and social care sectors have taken up the offer of vaccination, it is crucial that this is consistent across services to safeguard vulnerable people, and that this high level is maintained as new people join the workforce.

Recent research has shown people infected with both flu and covid-19 are more than twice as likely to die as someone with covid-19 alone and nearly six times more likely than those with neither flu nor covid-19, so it is right that both are considered within the consultation.

These are complex and important issues and the consultation seeks to gather a wide range of perspectives from the public and across the health and care sectors about whether vaccination requirements should be introduced and how they could be implemented.

I will provide an update to the House, following the completion of the consultation.

[HCWS273]

# Ministerial Correction

Thursday 9 September 2021

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Covid Vaccine Passports

*The following is an extract from the urgent question on 8 September 2021.*

**Nadhim Zahawi:** On 19 July, the Prime Minister announced that

“by the end of September—when all over 18s will have had the chance to be double jabbed—we are planning to make full vaccination the condition of entry to nightclubs and other venues where large crowds gather. Proof of a negative test will no longer be sufficient.”

We will be confirming more details in due course.

*[Official Report, 8 September 2021, Vol. 700, c. 305.]*

*Letter of correction from the Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi).*

An error has been identified in my speech.

The correct statement should have been:

**Nadhim Zahawi:** On 19 July, the Prime Minister announced that the Government were planning that

“by the end of September—when all over 18s will have had the chance to be double jabbed—we are planning to make full vaccination the condition of entry to nightclubs and other venues where large crowds gather. Proof of a negative test will no longer be sufficient.”

We will be **setting out** more details in due course.



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# MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

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**not later than  
Thursday 16 September 2021**

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