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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 23 September 2021

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Mandatory Vaccine Passports

Mr Speaker: I congratulate the new Minister on his appointment, and call Alistair Carmichael.

1. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): With reference to his Department's "COVID-19 Response: Autumn and Winter Plan 2021", if his Department will publish scientific evidence in support of the efficacy of mandatory vaccine passports. [903601]

The Minister without Portfolio (Nigel Adams): And I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on a magnificent display in Chorley over the last week. I think that if there were to be an election there, the majority would be in six figures following such a splendid occasion. Chorley turned out for it.

The Cabinet Office conducted a review of covid status certification, which found that its use would have a public health benefit, on the basis of evidence gathered from bodies such as the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies and from the events research programme. Analysis of the ERP conducted by Public Health England found that certification should reduce the likelihood of someone transmitting highly infectious amounts of virus to large numbers of attendees. The autumn and winter plan published this month set out the Government's position, which is that we will keep mandatory certification in reserve in case it is required to help prevent unsustainable pressure on the NHS and to enable venues to remain open more safely.

Mr Carmichael: I welcome the Minister's very full answer, and I welcome him to the Dispatch Box. It was always a pleasure to work with him in his previous role, and I hope it will be a pleasure to work with him in this one as well.

The Government have had no fewer than 13 different positions in relation to vaccine passports. They have said "yes" three times, "no" four times, and "maybe" or "we are having a review" six times. Rather than just asserting that the evidence is there, will the Minister commit himself to publishing it? If he is ever going to

take his own Back Benchers with him, let alone the general public, the case will have to be made, and the Government have not made it yet—and, incidentally, are we going to get a vote before vaccine passports are introduced?

Nigel Adams: We have published brief summaries of the evidence in the autumn and winter plan, which is publicly available on gov.uk. As I said earlier, we are keeping vaccine certification in reserve in case it is required to help prevent pressure on the NHS. We hope that it will be unnecessary, but the responsible thing to do is prepare for all eventualities.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I welcome the new ministerial team, and look forward to working with them constructively in the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. I am sure that they share that enthusiasm ahead of any forthcoming appearances.

May I reiterate to my right hon. Friend—whom I congratulate on his appointment—that vaccine certification is useless now and will no doubt be useless then? We have fresh pairs of eyes in the Department, and fresh perspectives. Can we please just bin it now?

Nigel Adams: I thank my hon. Friend for his supportive tone! What I can say to him is that in the light of the growing voluntary uptake of certification and the latest data on the state of the epidemic, we do not expect mandatory certification to be needed from the end of September.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): In his evaluation, has the Minister looked at the experience of a number of European countries where this is happening and British holidaymakers and visitors are using the system without any detriment? Has he looked at the views of Scotland and Wales, which are introducing certificates? Can he assure the House of his view that in the event of its looking as though this may be necessary, it must be better to have vaccine passes than once again locking down the hospitality, entertainment and leisure industries, given the impact not only on customers but on hundreds of thousands of jobs?

Nigel Adams: The right hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. I can tell him that we do look at how the system is operated elsewhere. We work closely with the devolved Administrations, because there must be a four-nations approach to this. Incidentally, residents of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland can demonstrate vaccination status via a letter that can be requested from the NHS.

Policy Decisions: Use of Data

2. **Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to improve its use of data to inform policy decisions. [903602]

7. **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to improve its use of data to inform policy decisions. [903609]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Steve Barclay): The national data strategy sets out a vision to transform the Government's use of data. The declaration on government reform, published in June, further committed to data being

central to decision making, and the new Central Digital and Data Office is implementing common data standards and data-sharing frameworks to underpin better use of data in policy making.

Dr Davies: The pandemic has demonstrated how comparable data in the NHS can help to improve policy decisions and, ultimately, patient outcomes. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Health and Care Bill needs to help facilitate UK-wide comparable and interoperable data?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend brings a welcome clinical focus, and he is absolutely right on the importance of data and interoperability. He will know that the data strategy for health and social care—Data Saves Lives—along with the Health and Care Bill, which he mentioned, seeks to improve data sharing across the health system for the reasons that he rightly highlights.

Mr Speaker: I call Marco Longhi. Not here.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): We know that one policy decision that the UK Government have taken, albeit an unsustainable and undemocratic one, is that Scotland should not have a say in its constitutional future. We also know that, for example, the UK Government are spending huge amounts of taxpayers' money on research into public attitudes towards the Union. If the UK Government have taken the decision not to have a referendum, we know that it is because the polling suggests that support for independence is up. Why will the Minister not publish that polling information and be honest with the public?

Steve Barclay: I would have thought that, when talking about data, we would have been talking about the fiscal support that has been offered to Scotland, about the way in which the Scottish Government's powers have not been used and about how we can get better delivery from the Scottish Government in areas such as education and drugs policy, where the data are absolutely chronic at the moment. I would hope that the Scottish Government will welcome the data strategy, as it will ensure that policy making is informed by good quality data and focused on good outcomes.

Office for Veterans' Affairs

3. **Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con):** What recent steps the Office for Veterans' Affairs has taken to promote the interests of veterans. [903604]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): This Government have taken practical measures to support veterans, including veterans rail cards, guaranteed interviews in the civil service for veteran applicants and national insurance holidays for those employing veterans. This year we have put in a cash boost to the armed forces charitable sector and NHS Operation Courage, showing that we are determined that this country be the best in the world in which to be a veteran.

Claire Coutinho: Recent events in Afghanistan are yet another reminder of veterans' dedication and sacrifice, and I think the whole House will recognise the support that they need after serving their country. Will the

Minister set out the steps he is taking to help veterans, particularly those who suffer from substance and alcohol misuse?

Leo Docherty: I agree entirely, and we must put on record our thanks to all those involved in the two decades of operational activity in Afghanistan. I thank my hon. Friend for the support she is giving to veterans in her constituency. We are putting an additional £5 million into armed forces charities, bringing that support to more than £25 million this year, and an additional £2.7 million into Operation Courage, bringing that total support to £20 million this year.¹ But this is about more than just money; it is about ensuring that veterans themselves are at the heart of that care, and in Op Courage, as peer support workers, they certainly are.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is about more than just money, as the Minister has just said, and that support is absolutely crucial for veterans all the time, but particularly at this moment as we come out of the pandemic. Research by the charity SSAFA has found that 77% of the veterans it works with felt that they were not fully prepared for civilian life. This is clearly an area in which we need to do more work, so can he set out precisely what the Ministry of Defence is doing in working with charities such as SSAFA to prepare veterans for civilian life?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that the transition is critical, and we want to see a through-career preparation for leaving the armed forces. That is something that we are resolutely focused on in our veterans strategy, which I will be publishing later this year.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Is the Minister aware that veterans are disproportionately likely to be homeless? Will he undertake to work with the new Secretary of State for Housing to ensure that veterans have every opportunity to get service plots of land to bring forward schemes of their own, as has already been successfully demonstrated in Plymouth?

Leo Docherty: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend, and I am grateful to him for the work that he has done in this area. I think the notion of self-build will appeal to a great many veterans, and I hope that we can continue to work together to ensure that this is a central part of the veteran strategy later this year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I think the Veterans Minister for all that he does for our veterans. It is much appreciated. What steps have been taken to ensure that mental health support is available for veterans who have been further isolated during covid-19, who have suffered in silence, and who need available intervention and not just waiting lists?

Leo Docherty: We have tried to innovate during the covid pandemic by engaging online, but the bottom line is that, given the uptick, we are having to re-energise our engagement with veterans. That is why we are putting in this cash boost so that more people at the coalface can do this kind of supportive work.

1. [Official Report, 19 October 2021, Vol. 701, c. 3MC.]

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): The Minister is aware that the Defence Committee has recently undertaken an enquiry into women in the armed forces. What assurances can he give me that the Government are specifically looking at the issues of female veterans?

Leo Docherty: I have been reading the Select Committee's report with great interest. The MOD is compiling its formal response, and I give my hon. Friend my personal assurance that we take these issues seriously across a whole range of considerations, including uniform and sanitary product provision. We are determined to get this right. We have opened up every single role across the military to women, but that will not be sufficient unless there is a culture of support.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Constituents have contacted me recently, and I wrote to the Office for Veterans' Affairs about one of them on 3 August and am still awaiting a reply. What steps is the Office for Veterans' Affairs specifically taking to make sure that veterans facing obstacles to accessing services are fully and appropriately supported?

Leo Docherty: If the hon. Lady would like to raise that case with me personally after this session, I will pursue it with urgency.

Civil Service Apprenticeships

4. **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the quality of civil service apprenticeships. [903606]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Steve Barclay): The civil service published its apprenticeship strategy on 29 April 2021, and in this strategy we focus not just on the numbers but on the quality of training on offer to ensure that Departments are better equipped to nurture talent in-house and to plug skill and capability gaps.

Andrew Jones: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment. It is important to the Government that we build back better from the pandemic, which means opening up the civil service to fresh ideas, often through apprenticeships, and fresh skills. How will the new declaration on government reform achieve exactly that?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and the declaration particularly focuses on new entry routes for professionals from outside Government, encourages new entrants with specific high-demand skills, particularly scientists, and develops a pipeline of secondments into and out of the civil service, very much addressing the point he rightly highlights.

Voter ID Requirements: Turnout and Enfranchisement

5. **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential effect of proposed voter ID requirements on voter turnout in general elections. [903607]

18. **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential effect of the introduction of voter ID on levels of enfranchisement. [903623]

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): Mr Speaker, I add my congratulations about Chorley. I look forward to seeing your cameo appearance on "Coronation Street", perhaps with Speaker Pelosi.

Following his appointment, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is now responsible for this policy. As I think the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) knows, in Northern Ireland there has been a requirement for photographic identification at polling stations since 2003, and it operates with ease and is a proven and effective way of tackling fraud. It has improved voter confidence in Northern Ireland, and everyone who is eligible to vote will continue to have the opportunity to do so.

Kirsten Oswald: According to the Electoral Reform Society, around 2.1 million people risk not being able to vote in a general election due to not having recognisable photo ID. The Government's own data shows that significantly fewer people from black and minority ethnic communities are likely to have photo ID. Similarly, it is likely to be a disproportionate barrier for other minority and marginalised groups, including disabled people and homeless people.

The Paymaster General says his intention is to reduce voter fraud, but in 2019 there was just one conviction in the UK for voter impersonation. Does he not see that needlessly dampening participation in democratic processes by already excluded groups, and at significant cost to the taxpayer, will simply shut down the voices that we should most hear?

Michael Ellis: I am happy to offer the hon. Lady some reassurance. Ninety-eight per cent. of the electorate already own an accepted form of photographic identification, including 99% of black, Asian and minority ethnic electors and 99% of young electors aged 18 to 29. The Electoral Commission's survey on this matter offers reassurance because the majority of the public say that a requirement to show identification when voting at polling stations would make them more confident, and 66% of people want more confidence in the security of the system. She really ought to read the 2015 Tower Hamlets election court judgment, where she will see the nature of the problem at hand.

Mr Speaker: Geraint Davies. Not here.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I strongly support what the Paymaster General has said, and I welcome the team to their positions.

When I had responsibility for these matters, I visited and spoke to the electoral officials in Northern Ireland, which has had this system for 18 years and where it works perfectly well. People in Northern Ireland are perfectly capable of using it, and I have no doubt that it will be a great success when we roll it out in the rest of the United Kingdom. Frankly, these scare stories are more likely to depress voter turnout than the introduction of voter ID.

Michael Ellis: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, as usual. Any eligible voter who does not have one of the required forms of ID—and there are very few of them—would be able to apply for a free local voter card from their local authority. As he says, this has been

working extremely well in Northern Ireland, which in fact has had an ID requirement since 1985—it is the photographic ID requirement it has had since 2003. So the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) is perpetuating scare stories here.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that we detect more than a whiff of hypocrisy from Opposition parties, which oppose voter ID but would ask their own members to show ID to attend a meeting to discuss the issue itself?

Michael Ellis: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I understand that the Labour party does make those requirements, not that I have attended Labour conferences of course. May I offer the further reassurance that a wide range of countries, including most European countries, require some form of ID? Canada, France, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Norway do. So I have to say that the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire ought to refrain from these repeated scare tactics, which may have a deleterious effect on voter turnout.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): European countries that do require voter ID often have national ID cards, and if that is the Government's intention, they should be a little more straightforward about it.

My question to the Minister is specifically about the human rights aspects of this. The Elections Public Bill Committee has been warned that this policy may be in breach of human rights. It quizzed Gavin Millar QC, who said that there will

“inevitably be challenges to this as incompatible with the European convention on human rights”.—[*Official Report, Elections Public Bill Committee*, 16 September 2021; c. 109, Q165.]

I draw the Minister's attention to article 1, protocol 1. What legal advice have the Government had that makes them so sure that this policy is not in contravention of our human rights laws?

Michael Ellis: Of course we do not discuss legal advice, but what I can say is that people also have a human right not to have their votes stolen. In 2019, the Electoral Commission found nearly 600 allegations of electoral fraud. They had to be investigated by the police, and 142 of them were related to alleged voting offences. So this is a problem, and it needs to be dealt with. This was a Government manifesto commitment and we intend to follow through.

Cat Smith: My question was specifically about how this legislation is compatible with human rights laws, so may I invite the Minister to publish the legal advice his Government will have received in the Library of the House of Commons, so that all Members, especially those on the Bill Committee, which is currently sitting, can be confident that this legislation is not in breach of human rights law?

Michael Ellis: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her repeated question, but she well knows that successive Governments, from both sides of the House, do not publish legal advice, and there is a good reason for that. But she can be assured that this Government are very focused on protecting the human rights of all, and that includes those who have been subject to personation,

where their votes have been taken by someone else. That is also a human right that we seek to protect, and we will continue to do so.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): Some 90% of the public think that polling station voting is safe from fraud and abuse, and they are right to think that. Personation, which is the only problem the voter ID provisions of the Elections Bill are designed to address, resulted in a single conviction in 2016, 2017 and 2019, and zero convictions in 2018. Given that up to 3.5 million people may not have suitable ID and that the Government's pilots confirmed that up to 324,000 people would be denied a vote in a Great Britain election, let me ask the simple question: why are this Government prepared to embark on voter suppression on an industrial scale?

Michael Ellis: I am surprised by the right hon. Gentleman, because it is not just a question of convictions: attempts to commit crimes are also wrongs. We have to focus on reducing the criminality in this area. It is also about voters having confidence that they are not going to be subject to personation and confidence to go and vote because they know there is no interference in the voting system. Some 66%—two thirds and more—of those questioned said that they would like to see increased security around voting. In this day and age, that is increasingly important, and the right hon. Gentleman ought to recognise that, too.

Stewart Hosie: On the matter of confidence, the House of Commons Library has rather helpfully told us that half the public think there is inadequate regulation of political party spending and that only 14% think there is transparency around it. The Paymaster General knows perfectly well that there have been concerns about the influence of dark money in the UK electoral system for many years. Why could it be that this Government are planning to suppress the right of ordinary people to vote rather than tackle the real problem of dark money buying influence in the democratic process?

Michael Ellis: These bold assertions have no basis in evidence or reality and have a tendency to do exactly what the right hon. Gentleman claims to seek to avoid, which is to suppress votes. He wishes to focus on a lack of regulation in respect of voting confidence. We seek—our manifesto commitment on this has been, and will continue to be, followed through on—to protect the voting system, and we do that in the same way as has happened in all the countries I have mentioned: by increasing confidence in the system.

Fire and Rehire

6. **Kate Osborne** (Jarrow) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure that the use of fire and rehire tactics in (a) the public sector and (b) public funded bodies is not permitted. [903608]

17. **Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to help ensure that the use of fire and rehire tactics in (a) the public sector and (b) public funded bodies is not permitted. [903622]

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): Public sector bodies and employers are responsible for the management of their respective workforces. The Government have made it clear to all employers, and I wish to do so again

now—including to those in the public sector—that the use of threats to fire and rehire people to pressure workers during negotiations is unacceptable.

Kate Osborne: I thank the Paymaster General for his response, but given the increasing prevalence of outsourcing throughout the public sector, where we have seen the creation of a two-tier workforce and a race to the bottom on pay and conditions, does he agree that no company that is found to be using fire and rehire tactics against its workers should be awarded public contracts or be allowed to take over public services in future?

Michael Ellis: I challenge the premise of the hon. Lady's question. The UK has the best employment rights in the world. This Government have banned the exclusivity clauses in zero-hours contracts, and we introduced the national living wage in 2016 and the right to a day-one statement of rights for all workers in 2020. This Government—this party—are protecting the rights of workers and have established some of the best employment rights in the whole world.

Nevertheless, the point that the hon. Lady makes is recognised, and we have asked the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service to look into the matter. We want to ensure that there is clearer guidance to help employers to explore all the options before they consider what one or two have been doing in respect of the fire and rehire policy. We are interested in maintaining and encouraging good employment relations. I cannot be clearer than what I have already said, which is that we think it is unacceptable to pressure workers in such a way during negotiations.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the Paymaster General for his response, but during the pandemic I was contacted by many constituents in Vauxhall who were subject to this practice—constituents who had worked for many years for the likes of British Airways and British Gas; constituents whose lives were turned upside-down by the threat that they would lose their jobs. The Paymaster General said that he will put pressure on the organisations involved, but the pressure is not working, so will he give his full support to the private Member's Bill that has its Second Reading on 22 October and would ban fire and rehire once and for all?

Michael Ellis: I am aware of the private Member's Bill to which the hon. Lady referred. At this stage, I will say that the Government will respond to that Bill as it passes through Parliament. As I say, we have been clear that fire and rehire should not be used in the way the hon. Lady describes, or as a negotiating tactic, which is why we have asked ACAS to look carefully at the matter and to produce guidance. We will continue to keep the issue under review.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I have noticed the change in personnel on the Cabinet Office Front Bench and I would like to welcome all the Ministers to their place today. I also welcome the Prime Minister's direction on fire and rehire, which is that he does not accept this bullying practice, but when will the Government take action on this? I accept the Minister's response on ACAS, but this is just not good enough. If the Minister is committed to having good employment practices, what will he do to end this practice of fire and rehire? I

reiterate that he can back the private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), which will see the practice ended by this Parliament.

Michael Ellis: We are keeping the private Member's Bill of the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) under review. I think the hon. Lady knows that, when it comes to protecting the rights of workers, this Government have been doing just that. I ask her to bear in mind the protected earnings for furloughed workers, the review into how employers can support victims of domestic violence in the workplace, and Jack's law. There are myriad ways in which we have been protecting workers and their rights. We keep a laser-beam focus on that, and we will continue to do so.

Northern Ireland Protocol

8. **Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab):** What recent assessment the Government have made of the effectiveness of the operation of the Northern Ireland protocol. [903610]

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): As we set out in our July command paper, the protocol is not meeting its core objectives as it stands; it is causing considerable disruption to lives and livelihoods. That is why we need to find a new balance through significant changes to the Northern Ireland protocol and we are working intensively to that end.

Ruth Jones: Given that both the US and the EU have expressed serious concerns and reservations about the current practical arrangement regarding the Northern Ireland protocol, is the Minister not concerned about this protocol that his Prime Minister negotiated as part of his Brexit plan? The deal may have been oven ready, but did someone forget to turn the gas on?

Michael Ellis: We have tried to operate the protocol in good faith, but the problems are significant and they are growing. The hon. Lady should be concerned about the fact that the Northern Ireland Executive noted that, from January to March, about 20% of all of the European Union's checks were being conducted in respect of Northern Ireland, even though Northern Ireland's population is just 0.5% of the EU as a whole. It is unacceptable, and those are the sort of problems on which she ought to focus.

Government Contracts: Small Businesses

9. **Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to increase opportunities for small businesses to bid for Government contracts. [903611]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Steve Barclay): We are increasing opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises in a variety of ways, from transparently publishing contract pipelines to simplifying the bidding process. Those measures are working. The latest procurement figures show that £15.5 billion was paid to SMEs to help deliver public services. That is the highest since records began in 2013 and a £1.3 billion increase on the previous year.

Mike Wood: Dudley South has many fantastic firms doing innovative work, particularly in world-class advanced engineering, but, too often, the size of Government

contracts mean that only a handful of multinationals are able to compete. Will my right hon. Friend do everything that he can to ensure that public procurement contracts are advertised in the smallest chunks possible so that Government and public services can take full advantage of the talents in our SMEs?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend raises a very legitimate point, and, in short, yes we will. To encourage the issue he highlights, we require public buyers to divide contracts into more accessible lots, or to explain why they cannot, so that tender requirements can be matched to smaller business specialisms. I know that he is a champion for Dudley South and that is exactly the sort of measure that will help businesses in his constituency.

Infected Blood Inquiry

10. **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of the progress of the infected blood inquiry. [903612]

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): The Government remain committed to fully supporting the infected blood inquiry. The inquiry maintained pace throughout lockdown, I am pleased to say, and it is making good progress. The hearings restarted this week. The inquiry will continue to hear evidence about blood services and pharmaceutical companies until the end of this year. I take this opportunity to thank the right hon. Lady because I know that she has been doing sterling work in this area, and I wish to commend her for that. Please allow me also to commend my predecessor as Paymaster General, my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), who also worked hard in this area.

Dame Diana Johnson: I welcome the Minister to his new post. May I also join him in thanking the previous Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), for all that she did to ensure that the cause of those infected and affected by the contaminated blood scandal was at the heart of the work she carried out?

As the Paymaster General said, we are three years into the NHS infected blood inquiry, and at the start of the new review into compensation for those infected and affected. Will he say something, though, about what is happening to the bereaved partner payments that were announced in March, and about whether he is willing to look at the inconsistencies that still apply to bereaved partners and their families?

Michael Ellis: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her remarks, particularly about my predecessor. The previous Paymaster General announced in March this year changes to the four national financial support schemes to bring them into broader parity. That means increasing annual payments and lump sums where necessary to bring them up to the highest existing levels. The right hon. Lady knows better than anyone that there is an independent statutory inquiry, chaired by former High Court judge Sir Brian Langstaff. The issue of compensation is being looked at by Sir Robert Francis QC. I look forward to correspondence with her and hope to be able to go into more detail on the matter in due course.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How much compensation has been paid, and to how many families?

Michael Ellis: The matter is currently under consideration. Sir Robert Francis QC is conducting a compensation study, which will consider options for a framework of compensation when the inquiry reports. I can say this: the public consultation on the terms of reference for that study has concluded; the terms of reference were signed off by me in the last couple of days; and they will be published later today in a written ministerial statement.

EU Withdrawal: Opportunities for UK Businesses

11. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of the effect of the UK's withdrawal from the EU on opportunities for UK businesses. [903614]

16. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of the effect of the UK's withdrawal from the EU on opportunities for UK businesses. [903621]

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): Our exit from the European Union has given us the freedom to conceive and implement rules that put UK businesses first. Only last week, the Government announced further reforms to reduce burdens on businesses, which I am sure the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and her party will welcome, to help unleash innovation and propel economic growth across the whole United Kingdom. The Government's action to seize the opportunities of Brexit is already having an impact, as she well knows. The International Monetary Fund is expecting the United Kingdom to see the fastest GDP growth in the G7 this year—something about which the entire House can be proud.

Patricia Gibson: Back here on planet Earth, rather than a sea of opportunity we are drowning in Brexit despair, as the Scottish food and drink sector is sacrificed on the altar of this hard Tory Brexit, at a cost of £2 billion on pre-pandemic levels, with extensive trade barriers, extra red tape, labour shortages and damage to Brand Scotland. Industry figures are warning that they will not come close to making up the EU market losses. How do the UK Government plan to mitigate the damage that they have caused to Scotland's economy?

Michael Ellis: Our exit from the European Union provides us with positives, although I know that the hon. Lady and her party wish to focus on negatives. The relentless negativity of the Scottish nationalists really is a wonder to behold. The fact of the matter is that the opportunity to think boldly about how we regulate gives us the freedom to conceive and implement rules that will put the United Kingdom—all constituent parts of the United Kingdom, including Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England—first.

Joanna Cherry: A major export business in my constituency is in the process of relocating to an EU member state, taking with it scores of highly skilled jobs. As a result of Brexit, it has faced massive delays for shipments and EU member states preventing their public authorities from procuring from it. The rest of its export market has been killed off because of shocking delays by the UK's Export Control Joint Unit. Despite numerous correspondences and meetings with Ministers,

I have not been able to get those delays reduced. Minister, here is the evidence from my constituency of Edinburgh South West, in Scotland. The UK Government are strangling thriving businesses in Scotland. What should I tell my constituents?

Michael Ellis: What the hon. and learned Lady ought to tell her constituents is that we have, thanks to global Britain, established a new points-based immigration system on migration, and we are replacing the common agricultural policy. She can tell them that we are taking back control of our territorial waters. She can tell them that we have been striking bilateral trade agreements with 60 countries so far, with more on the way. She can tell them all those things and they will then no doubt be voting Conservative.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I apologise that this is a rather detailed question, but a few businesses in my constituency are having issues with specifics on rules of origin. Will my right hon. and learned Friend update the House as to the willingness of the EU to sit down and iron out these anomalies?

Michael Ellis: The trade and co-operation agreement provides for zero tariffs and zero-quota trade with the EU while also allowing us to regulate in a way that suits the UK economy and our businesses without being bound by EU rules. The trade and co-operation agreement includes appropriate rules of origin, as my hon. Friend mentions, to support tariff-free trade across all sectors.

Levelling-up Agenda

12. **Jacob Young** (Redcar) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on implementing the Government's levelling-up agenda. [903616]

13. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on implementing the Government's levelling-up agenda. [903617]

20. **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on implementing the Government's levelling-up agenda. [903625]

The Minister without Portfolio (Nigel Adams): Levelling up is at the heart of the Government's agenda. The landmark White Paper we will publish later this year will build on the actions we are already taking to improve livelihoods and opportunity across the UK. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will be driving forward this agenda. I, and all my ministerial colleagues, look forward to working with him to deliver bold new policies that level up all parts of the UK.

Jacob Young: I welcome the new Minister to his place. The Government are already taking great steps to level up Teesside, including our new freeport—the UK's largest—and locating the northern economic campus there. Will he update us on the progress of the new campus and join me in encouraging Teessiders to apply for these highly rewarding civil service jobs?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. That part of the country is really on fire at the moment. It is fantastic that so much is happening on Teesside. There are some brilliant local Members of Parliament assisted by a fantastic Mayor as well. I am pleased to say that the Darlington economic campus is up and running. Almost all Treasury roles are now being advertised as available in Darlington, and we are recruiting exclusively for Darlington-based Treasury roles. These are great jobs working on issues that really matter to our country. I hope to see a range of people from north-east England, and beyond, take up these opportunities.

Alexander Stafford: The levelling-up fund is going to be vital for Rother Valley to increase our prosperity, and we have a bid outstanding at the moment for Maltby and Dinnington. Can the Minister confirm when we will hear back about the levelling-up fund bid, and tell us what other steps the Government are taking so that the whole of Rother Valley, not just Maltby and Dinnington, benefits from the Government's levelling-up programme?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise Rother Valley's bid in this regard. We are committed to levelling up across the whole of the UK. The idea is to ensure that no community is left behind. The £4.8 billion levelling-up fund will invest in infrastructure to improve everyday local life and boost growth and jobs. All areas of the UK are able to access the fund, and Rother Valley is exactly the sort of area that it is designed to support. Applications for the first round of the levelling-up fund closed on 18 June, and we expect that investment decisions will be made for this funding round in the autumn.

Antony Higginbotham: Infrastructure and regenerating our town centres is a really important part of levelling up, but so too is education, skills and work. Will my right hon. Friend therefore confirm that ahead of the Budget and the spending review at the end of October, the Cabinet Office is working across Government with the Department for Education, the Department for Work and Pensions and others to make sure that we leave no stone unturned in levelling up across the country?

Nigel Adams: Absolutely. The whole team—the Minister for the Cabinet Office and all my ministerial colleagues—are well placed to do exactly that, working across all Departments. Levelling up is at the heart of the Government's agenda. My hon. Friend will not have missed the renaming of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and the former Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will lead on that work. We are committed to levelling up across the UK to ensure that literally no community is left behind. We will publish a landmark White Paper later this year.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): On 12 September, the world watched as 50,000 great north runners crossed the iconic Tyne bridge, whose peeling, faded, rusting and sad state exactly reflects the Government's level of investment in the north-east. Just what is levelling up? How will the north-east know that we have been levelled?

Nigel Adams: I do not know why, but my application for the Great North Run seems to have been missed. Maybe next year we will have a crack at it. Levelling up is not a north-south thing, a one size fits all or just for some places; it is about disparities between and within regions. I talked about the north-east not two minutes ago. We are doing some incredible work in the north-east and looking to ensure that levelling up will benefit places that have seen economic decline and the loss of industry. That is exactly what it is meant to deliver.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that the Minister will share my concern about the York Central site. We have a great opportunity to level up York and see it as an economic and jobs gateway for the north, but instead, with the development of so many luxury homes, there is a risk of it sucking down into becoming a commuter belt for London. Will he ensure that public land is used for public good and that there is greater investment in jobs in York Central?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Lady is right to raise the York Central site, which I know well. We must ensure that the local authority works with the Government so that that site comes into use. It has massive potential. I really hope that City of York Council gets its act together and works with us, because it could be a stunning opportunity for jobs and infrastructure in the city of York.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): In welcoming the new ministerial team to the Front Bench, may I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on Chorley becoming the epicentre of global parliamentary democracy?

Three of the 10 most deprived constituencies in England are in Birmingham, and 42% of children in Birmingham are growing up in poverty. However, rather than supporting hard-working families in Birmingham, the Government are hitting them with a £1,000 a year cut to universal credit and a national insurance tax rise. On top of that, they face soaring energy costs, increasing food costs, increasing childcare costs and increasing housing costs. The Government say that they want to level up, but is not the simple truth that the only thing that gets levelled up under the Tories is the cost of living?

Nigel Adams: I politely remind the hon. Gentleman that the Government have invested £400 billion in supporting the country, its businesses and public services through the pandemic. He is right to raise Birmingham, which has seen quite a transformation in recent years. I also remind him of the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund, the shared prosperity fund and the national skills fund. The Government are taking action on levelling up.

Topical Questions

T1. [903626] **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Steve Barclay): I pay tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), for his leadership of the Cabinet Office over the last two years and wish him well in his new role. I also thank my officials at the Treasury for all their support during my time as Chief Secretary

to the Treasury. I welcome the comments made by the Opposition Front-Bench team in respect of the new ministerial team and look forward to constructive engagement with them in the months ahead.

Mr Speaker, a theme this morning has been your recent G7 Speakers conference, and certainly for me, as someone born and bred in Lancashire, it is a particular honour to have the role of Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. The Cabinet Office is the strategic headquarters for the Government, supporting the Prime Minister and the Cabinet in delivering for the British people. I look forward to working with colleagues to do so, supported by an excellent new ministerial team.

Dame Diana Johnson: I join in welcoming the right hon. Member to his new post.

Whereas the NHS infected blood scandal was the biggest treatment disaster in the history of the NHS, the covid pandemic has been the biggest public health disaster in a century. In March 2020, the chief scientific adviser said if the UK could keep covid deaths below 20,000 that would be a “good result”, and now of course there have been more than 135,000. If the covid public inquiry, which we understand will not start until next year, is to be a genuine attempt to look at the rights and wrongs of what happened, will frontline staff in the healthcare and social care sectors be involved in setting the terms of reference?

Steve Barclay: We have been clear that we will have an inquiry, and that will be next spring. Clearly, there will be consultations on shaping the leadership of that, its terms and how it will be conducted. The Prime Minister has been clear on his commitment to ensuring that we learn the lessons within the covid response not just in England, but across the United Kingdom. That applies in Wales, but in the other devolved Administrations as well. I think something we all share across the House is that the right lessons are drawn so that improvements can be made.

T3. [903628] **Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): I was very pleased to hear the comments from the Minister earlier on small businesses securing Government contracts. I have been contacted by a number of businesses in Warrington—specifically, one that installs street charging for electric vehicles and another that supplies CO₂ monitors to schools. Both are trying to secure business from Government, but they have had no response from the procurement teams. Can he advise businesses in Warrington and across the country on how best to approach Government?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend raises a very good and practical issue about how such businesses benefit from the public spend. I would draw his attention to things such as the Contracts Finder, which is a free-to-use platform that publishes details of contracts above £10,000 and £25,000 exactly to enable businesses to have greater transparency on the sort of contracts that are available.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I, too, congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your charring of the G7 Speakers conference and welcome the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the team to their places.

The next pandemic or major disaster could happen tomorrow. We have to learn our lessons from this pandemic and be much better prepared for it happening again. The covid-19 national foresight group has been capturing these live lessons, and it has concluded that a “strong and persistent theme” has been the

“lack of strategy and shared plan”

in the Government’s response. Its recommendations have spent nine months gathering dust. Will the Minister commit to implementing its recommendations, and would he meet the group?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Lady is right that we need to ensure that we learn the lessons, and that point was made a moment ago. It is why within Government we have been looking more widely at our resilience, with things such as the civil contingencies secretariat and the investment recently in the situation centre to enable Government to respond in a more agile and quicker way to issues as they arise. I am always keen to hear from whichever groups have contributions to make, and either I or one of the team will follow up on the point she raised.

Fleur Anderson: I thank the Minister for that, and I will be following it up with him.

The latest allegations about the Home Secretary’s secret meeting with British Airways, a billionaire Tory donor and the then Business Secretary, but with no official present, should concern us all. She is a serial offender for breaking the ministerial code previously. Will the new Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster hold an investigation into these allegations and actually start enforcing the code, or is it just there for show?

Steve Barclay: There is a clear process set out in the ministerial code. I am not aware that any ministerial colleague has breached that. Obviously, a due process is applied through PET—the propriety and ethics team—in the Cabinet Office where concerns have been raised, but to date there is no evidence to suggest that that is the case.

T4. [903630] **Joy Morrissey** (Beaconsfield) (Con): I welcome the Government’s speedy response and short-term arrangements with CF Fertilisers to ensure the immediate restart of carbon dioxide production. Will my right hon. Friend reassure the House and the people of Beaconsfield that everything is being done across Whitehall to ensure that we safeguard ourselves against global gas price increases?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and I reassure her that the Government are working to manage the impacts of gas price rises affecting the UK. We are confident in the security of supply this winter, and we are working with industry to address any potential risks in an appropriate way. Indeed, together with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I had a call earlier this morning with those chief executives involved in our supply chain, looking at some of these issues and at how we can work closely together.

T5. [903631] **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Further to the debate on the levelling-up fund, will the Minister discuss with ministerial colleagues

the need to extend the delivery date and the first phase of the scheme beyond the end of the current financial year, due to the delay in announcing successful bids?

Steve Barclay: As I recall from my recent time in the Treasury, the levelling-up fund is not a one-shot opportunity and there will be future iterations and bidding processes. The first round is applied, but there will be future rounds as part of that. Obviously, that will also be shaped by the forthcoming spending review that the Chancellor will lead.

T6. [903632] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): People in fishing communities will have been interested to hear the Paymaster General assert earlier that we are taking back control of our territorial waters. May I invite him to clarify that? When he says territorial waters, does he mean water up to the 6-mile, 12-mile or 200-mile limit?

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): I think the right hon. Gentleman knows full well what is meant by British territorial waters, and I invite him to accept that it is this Government who do everything they need to do, and they will continue to protect our territorial waters.

T8. [903634] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Minister agree to meet me and my constituent Thomas Leigh, a veteran who was seriously injured during his service in the armed forces, to discuss Mr Leigh’s very serious concerns about the inadequacy of the compensation available for long-term back injuries sustained by servicemen?

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): I thank my right hon. Friend for what she does for veterans in her community, and I would be delighted to hold such a meeting.

T9. [903635] **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): I listened with interest to the non-answers given to my hon. Friends earlier, and I wonder whether any more light could be shed on why this Government are so intent on applying a pre-crime approach, on thinking that people might try to commit voter identity fraud, and on suppressing millions, yet ignoring the actual evidence of dark money and large donations to political parties. Can more light be shed on exactly why they are taking that approach?

Michael Ellis: I invite the hon. Gentleman to read the court’s judgement in the 2015 Tower Hamlets case, and he will find out exactly the nature of the problem that the Government are seeking to redress. We will redress other problems as and when they become necessary.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): May I commend the Government on their plans to move civil service jobs out of London? In welcoming my right hon. Friend to his position, may I invite him to visit Darlington and see the progress that has been made with the delivery of jobs in the Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and other Departments, which is real evidence of our levelling-up agenda?

Steve Barclay: I always look forward to an opportunity to visit Darlington, and I share my hon. Friend's passion for moving more jobs. When I was Chief Secretary to the Treasury, one key thing I did was seek to front-load our previous commitment to moving 22,000 jobs by 2030 and bring that forward. We now have a commitment for 15,000 of those jobs to be moved by 2024-25. It is not just the value of the jobs themselves that moves, with the welcome diversity that brings in the civil service; it also drives further jobs in the private market.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): I have been contacted by bereaved constituents who have lost their loved ones to covid-19, and I would like to pay tribute to all those families in Liverpool, West Derby today in this Chamber. My constituents want answers, and they should not have had to battle with the Government at every stage to secure the covid-19 inquiry. In his new role, will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster make a commitment, here and now, to prioritising the bereaved families, meeting Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice as a matter of urgency to discuss the terms of reference of the inquiry, and ensuring that the families get the truth and justice they deserve?

Michael Ellis: Every death from this virus is a tragedy, and our deepest sympathies are with everyone who has lost loved ones. The Government remain steadfast in our commitment to ensuring that the families of whom the hon. Gentleman has spoken have the scrutiny of the Government's response to managing the pandemic that they deserve. The Prime Minister made it very clear in his statement to this House on 12 May that bereaved families and others will be consulted on the inquiry's terms of reference before they are finalised. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to write to me for more information, I will be happy to respond.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): In 2014, the no campaign warned that, if Scotland voted for independence, it would lead to higher energy prices, an end to freedom of movement and empty supermarket shelves. Can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster tell us what the result of the 2014 independence referendum was?

Steve Barclay: In a session that has involved a new ministerial team looking forward, we see the SNP, as ever, constantly wanting to look backwards, yet when it comes to their own independence referendum, they seem to want to forget the past and the result of that vote. We have a plan for jobs that is working across the United Kingdom to get more people into work and upskill them. It is very appropriate, with the Business Secretary here, that we have a plan for jobs that is working, and that is what the Scottish Government and the SNP should be focused on.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Last week, a High Court judge refused the Cabinet Office permission to appeal against a first-tier tribunal decision that it should release information to me, under freedom of information legislation, in relation to the work it had been doing on opinion research in Scotland with regard to attitudes to the Union. Will the Cabinet Office now comply with that ruling and finally release the information that it has paid for with taxpayers' money?

The Minister without Portfolio (Nigel Adams): The Government regularly commission research in different parts of the UK to understand public attitudes and behaviours, to inform our campaigns and policies in development. The Scottish Government conduct similar research, for the same reasons. We will set out our response to the court's decision in due course.

Gas Prices and Energy Suppliers

10.32 am

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on rising gas prices and the collapse of energy suppliers.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): I came before the House on Monday to update colleagues on the action we are taking, and I appeared before the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee yesterday to discuss the matter in greater depth. The Government have been clear that protecting consumers is our primary focus and shapes our entire approach to this issue. We will continue to protect consumers with the energy price cap.

The global gas situation has had an impact on some energy suppliers, and I have been in touch daily with Ofgem. As it set out yesterday, there are more than 50 suppliers in the domestic market, and we may, unfortunately, see more suppliers exit the market in the coming weeks. However, it is not unusual for energy suppliers to leave the market, for various reasons, particularly when wholesale global prices are rising. Ofgem and the Government have clear, well-rehearsed processes in place to make sure that all customers are supplied with energy.

Our approach will be informed by the following principles: protecting customers, especially vulnerable ones, from price spikes. The solution to this crisis will be found from the industry and the market, as is already happening, and I repeat that the Government will not be bailing out failed energy companies. We would like to see a competitive energy market that can deliver choice and lower prices. The energy price cap, which continues to protect millions of customers, will remain in place. Consumers come first, and that has always been the centrepiece of our approach.

Edward Miliband: On Monday, I said to the Secretary of State that he was being far too complacent about the situation we are facing. Events since have, unfortunately, borne that out: complacent about the crisis in the market; complacent about the impact on families; and complacent about the cost of living crisis. He pretended on Monday and again today that it was normal for a number of suppliers to go down each winter, but what we are dealing with is far from normal: 800,000 customers losing their suppliers yesterday alone and 1.5 million in the last six weeks. So will he now answer the question he has so far failed to answer: does he believe taxpayers' money will be necessary to stabilise the market? If so, how will he ensure value for money and that we do not simply end up with greater concentration of the big six suppliers?

Next, I have a letter here that Ofgem wrote to the Secretary of State when he was the Energy Minister 18 months ago during covid, warning about "systemic risk to the energy supply sector as a whole".

It said the usual Ofgem mechanism, the supplier of last resort, may not be possible. It went on:

"The failure of medium and large suppliers would need to be handled via a special administration regime placing significant burden and costs on government."

So will he answer the question of what planning was done for this eventuality following that letter? Surely the Government should be in a position now to know exactly what needs to be done where there is systemic risk to suppliers. Have they not left the country dangerously exposed, with them scrabbling around for solutions?

Finally, we are seven days from the cut to universal credit. This is the last time a Government Minister will be in the House explaining to millions of families why they are plunging them further into fuel poverty. Instead of warm words or platitudes, can the Secretary of State now tell the British people how he can possibly justify this attack on their living standards? Is it not the truth that there can be no defence of it, and that the only right, proper and fair thing to do is to cancel the cut?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Obviously, as usual, the right hon. Gentleman raises a number of issues. We have not been complacent. The whole point about the supplier of last resort process, which was interrogated last year, is that it is an organised, well-established process that can allow existing strong companies to absorb customers and failure. [*Interruption.*] If he would desist from chuntering from a sedentary position, he might actually hear my answer.

I remember the letter last year. We interrogated, all through the covid process, the systems we had in place. During that period, the supplier of last resort was found to work. So far this year, it has been found to work, so I am not going to try to talk ourselves into exacerbating the crisis.

With regard to the special administration regime, that is something that is in place. Thankfully, we have not had to use that, but the right hon. Gentleman knows as well as many people in this House that it is there should the case arise.

With respect to universal credit, I will say what I said earlier in the week. That is a matter across Government in terms of budgetary responsibility. There will be a Budget at the end of October and there will be plenty of time to discuss that then.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I press the Business Secretary a little on the Government assumptions on pricing? In his evidence to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee yesterday, the head of Ofgem appeared to suggest that he expected these high prices to continue for some time. I accept that the Government do not have a crystal ball, but in making policy choices the Government must be making some assumptions about what they think is the most likely path for prices. Can the Business Secretary set those out for the House please?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I have said repeatedly, I do not have a crystal ball, as my right hon. Friend has suggested, and I do not make predictions about the price but clearly, we prepare for every eventuality. The biggest help for consumers and customers at this current time is the energy price cap, which I have repeatedly stated is staying in place.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): This is not market failure; it is Government and regulator failure. Ofgem all along had the financial and hedging information to know which companies were at risk, so why are we now in crisis management phase?

The Tories promised us cheaper energy bills post Brexit, but right now electricity wholesale prices in the UK are the highest in the whole of Europe. Meanwhile, as gas prices increase, the Treasury gets extra VAT receipts and increased oil and gas revenues. Surely, there must be a redistribution of that increased Treasury income to help hard-pressed bill payers. At the moment, it is those bill payers who cover the additional cost of transferring customers to other energy suppliers. They cover the credit of customers with failed companies and then have to pay increased tariffs when transferred. The cap might stay but the cap does not stop energy bills going up, so why should bill payers pay even more money when the Treasury is getting increased revenue out of this? What is the additional estimated cost for bill payers?

A quarter of our electricity bills consist of levies, so as we move away from our reliance on fossil fuels, we need a fundamental shift in how that concession is paid for. That is something that the Treasury needs to address. It means ending the grid charging regime so that Scotland does not have the highest charges in Europe, and it means giving the go-ahead to pumped hydro storage in wave and tidal.

Finally, is the Secretary of State happy to sit by while the cost of living crisis is ongoing? Is he happy to plunge 500,000 extra people into fuel poverty, or will he fight the Treasury to end the universal credit cut and release extra money to help hard-pressed bill payers?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Clearly there was a lot in that question and statement. I will deal with a couple of issues, if I may.

With respect to universal credit and wider budgetary considerations, I have repeatedly said that they are matters for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. We will have ample opportunity to discuss these things in the House. With respect to the move away from fossil fuels, the hon. Gentleman and I are in agreement: I think that we need a diverse supply of decarbonised sources of energy.

Finally, I dispute the idea that we are ill-prepared. We have the SOLR and SAR processes in place and we stress-tested them throughout the whole covid period, when I was in constant contact with the industry. I feel that so far we have managed to accommodate such supplier failure as we have seen with existing structures.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the cold weather payment scheme will remain in place?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Again, there are further budgetary issues, but I have always said that we are absolutely focused on customers, particularly the most vulnerable customers. The warm home discount is staying and we are looking to protect the most vulnerable customers, particularly prepaid customers, from the worst effects of the energy price spike.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): On Monday, the Secretary of State dismissed our lack of gas storage as “not...relevant”. It has clearly left us vulnerable, so will he now admit that the closure of the Rough storage facility was a mistake?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I do not think that it is relevant, because there is no way that any storage in the world will mitigate the effect of a quadrupling of the gas price in four months, as we have seen. The answer is actually getting more diverse sources of supply and electricity through non-carbon sources—through nuclear, on which I am still very unclear as to the Opposition’s view, and through other sources of decarbonised energy.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Why do we not reduce VAT on fuel as a temporary measure? We did it for the hospitality industry, which was badly affected by covid-19. Why do we not abolish VAT for consumers on fuel now?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend is quite right: we did a whole range of interventions to alleviate the burden on consumers and on businesses. Those were fiscal interventions that the Chancellor pursued last year, and I am sure that he is looking at a range of things this year, but that is a matter for him to decide ahead of the Budget.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What are the implications of the situation for the exploitation and extraction of gas within the UK continental shelf?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The right hon. Member will know that, in 2020, 48% of our natural gas came from the UK continental shelf, so that is clearly a strong, sustainable source of gas to this country. However, I suggest to him that gas is a transition fuel: in our pursuit of net zero by 2050, we want to transition away from it. That is why we are developing carbon capture and hydrogen, as he knows very well.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Further to the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) asked, surely the Conservative answer—I raised this the other day—is to reduce VAT on energy bills, as was pledged by those who supported Brexit in the EU referendum. I know that the Secretary of State will say that it is up to the Treasury to decide, but he is very persuasive. He is a tax-cutting Conservative—he believes in tax cuts—and I know that, if he went to see the Chancellor, he would ensure that we got a VAT cut on energy bills.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I see the Chancellor on a regular basis, as my right hon. Friend knows, and I am delighted to inform him that those conversations tend to be confidential.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The UK suffers from higher costs both for consumers and for our businesses and industries. Why then, to follow the point of my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), is the UK’s storage capacity just 2% of annual demand versus an average of 25% in Europe? Is that part of the reason why we do not have energy price resilience?

Kwasi Kwarteng: A conference of EU Energy Ministers took place only yesterday to discuss that very problem. Mitigating a quadrupling of the gas price is not a function of storage—that is a complete red herring. One reason why we have less storage is that we have a greater diversity of energy supply, and that is a strength, not a weakness.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): The Secretary of State is absolutely right to focus on consumers and not to bail out energy firms that got things wrong or are too fragile. However, will he explain how he is dealing with customers currently on capped tariffs with suppliers that have gone bust? Is he encountering any resistance from the firms being asked to take on those customers, who may be arriving as a loss to the acquiring firm?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I have said, we have a supplier of last resort process that has worked well in the past couple of years. It is not my job to state the terms on which customers are absorbed by other companies—

Edward Miliband: It kind of is.

Kwasi Kwarteng: No, not ahead of the process. However, most of these prices are at or just below the price cap, and that is fundamentally what will protect consumers in this period.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): This Government are responsible for families facing a cost of living crisis due to the triple whammy of rising gas prices, looming tax rises, and cuts to universal credit. Will the Secretary of State finally acknowledge and accept that it is completely and utterly immoral to cut universal credit?

Kwasi Kwarteng: What I do acknowledge is that there has been a quadrupling of the gas price, and that we have an energy price cap that will protect customers from such spikes. Schemes such as the warm home discount will also protect the most vulnerable customers. That is what I acknowledge.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of this country's structural dependency on gas, which was created by the last Labour Government's sidelining of green technologies, such as nuclear and even hydrogen?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. For example, the last Labour Government did absolutely nothing to drive nuclear power, which is a fundamental ingredient of security of energy supply.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The figure of £139 a year has been floated in the press as the increase in the energy price cap this year, but that refers only to the variable rate and does not take into account the changes in bills that people will face if they move from one tariff to another—often against their will in the current circumstances. Will the Secretary of State consider asking the regulator to direct energy suppliers to limit the price increase to any individual customer to a reasonable amount over the coming year?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I have said, we have a supplier of last resort process, and it would be wrong of me here at the Dispatch Box to interfere in how it works. It has worked effectively over the past two years. As I have

said repeatedly to the House, the energy price cap does give some succour, because consumers prices could be exorbitant without the cap. The price cap gives support, and we continue to support the warm home discount for the vulnerable end of the market.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Customers in Kettering and across the country will be worried that their gas and electricity could be cut off if their energy supplier goes bust. To put customers minds at rest, will the Secretary of State explain in straightforward understandable terms how the supplier of last resort process works?

Kwasi Kwarteng: What happens—and it is happening at the moment—is that there is a process of bidding for the customers of the exiting, failing companies, and the cost of absorbing those customers is taken on by the company that wins the bid and also by the industry at large; so the costs are mutualised, but generally it has been seen that there is always continuity of supply. That is a key element of the system.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The Secretary of State clearly believes that the invisible hand of the market will solve all this without his doing anything—but when he talks about customers, does he mean only domestic consumers, or will he ensure that supply continues to keep industry going and jobs secure? In that context, does he think it acceptable that Germany has some 90 days of gas storage while we have only nine days' worth? Will he also commit himself to ensuring that there are adequate supplies under our control for the future by licensing new gasfields?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We protect domestic consumers in the way I have outlined, but it is fair for the right hon. Gentleman to raise the issue of industrial users of energy in business. He will know that we have schemes that which protect industrial users of energy: we have the energy industry incentive scheme, and yesterday we launched a new tranche of the industrial energy transformation fund with up to £220 million, which enables businesses to bid in for further support.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his tireless work over the last few weeks, not just on the gas price crisis but on the carbon dioxide shortage that followed. I also pay tribute to CF Fertilisers, which has come back online in Stockton, and to Ensus in Redcar for offering to help and come online too. For the benefit of people across Redcar and Cleveland, however, can the Secretary of State outline how we are supporting people and protecting them from these high prices?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend has made an excellent point. The carbon dioxide crisis—or question in hand—we dealt with immediately. I spoke to the CEO of CF Fertilisers twice, on Sunday and Monday, and we had a solution on Tuesday. I am very pleased that, as a consequence of that solution, the company has managed to get production up and running, and to get people back to work at its plant. My hon. Friend will know, after my many visits to Teesside speaking to Ben Houchen, that the Government are resolutely focused on helping his constituents to level up and get well-paid, secure jobs.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): These skyrocketing gas prices will have a devastating impact, not just on the public but on businesses, which will eventually have to pass those rises back on to the public. Does the Secretary of State understand that that double whammy for the public will see even more families being pushed into fuel poverty and consequently into food poverty as well? Apart from cutting universal credit very soon, making it even worse for many of these families, what is he doing? What is he doing to support them?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman will have seen reports that energy companies want the Government to lift the energy price cap. I have repeatedly resisted that. I have said explicitly, on the Floor of the House and in other places, that the price cap must stay, while also reaffirming our commitment to the warm home discount scheme and the winter fuel payment. We are absolutely focused on keeping consumer prices as low as possible in the energy market.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): We are all hearing about the number of businesses in this market that are going bust at the moment, but can my right hon. Friend assure me, and my constituents, that this is expected to be a short-term shock and we will come out of it with a robust market and plenty of diversity of supply?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend knows that competition is the key to this market. We had a world that was oligopolistic in this respect, but we have introduced the price cap, and there are plenty of small, nimble entrants driving innovation and a dynamic system. I am absolutely committed to a competitive market, and I am sure that after this process we will still have a vibrant and dynamic energy system.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Too many people nowadays have to watch every single penny, and have to worry about where all the money to pay the bills will come from. Will the Secretary of State have a look at the amount of time that it takes a supplier of last resort to provide people with an accurate forecast for their energy costs, and, if possible, try to reduce the period during which they experience that uncertainty?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I would be very happy look at that, as the hon. Lady suggests. I have said many times, I am in contact with Mr Brearley, the chief executive officer of Ofgem, on practically a daily basis now, and this is something that I can raise with him at our next meeting.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I own shares in companies that invest in renewable energy. As the House will know, consumer energy bills are enhanced by climate change levy charges, which are used to support renewable energy producers. Is my right hon. Friend aware, however, that a large number of those renewable energy producers use special purpose vehicle companies to receive those subsidies, and that many of those SPVs are based offshore for tax purposes? Will he meet me to discuss how the Government are going to close that very clear tax loophole?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As my hon. Friend knows, I am always prepared to meet him at any time to discuss any matter he chooses to discuss with me.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Would the Minister still advise consumers to change their energy supplier, or would they just be better off changing their Government?

Kwasi Kwarteng: They had a chance to change their Government and, as I recall, that did not end so well for the Labour party, although maybe my memory fails me. We have a dynamic, vibrant and competitive market, and consumers should have a choice in order to keep their costs low.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Obviously these are disturbing times for our constituents and I welcome the actions that the Government are taking. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that, whatever happens in the markets, no one in Basildon and Thurrock need fear supply failure or sudden hikes in prices this winter?

Kwasi Kwarteng: No one in Basildon and Thurrock, or anywhere else in this country, need fear the eventuality that my hon. Friend describes. As I have said, the supplier of last resort process is absolutely focused on ensuring that customers have continuity of supply. That is a top priority.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Better insulation of homes is essential for cutting rising fuel bills and emissions. Does the Secretary of State agree that it was a mistake to cut the green homes grant earlier this year, and will he commit to reforming it and bringing it back?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I have said a number of times, in this role and in my previous one, the green homes grant attempted to do three things. The first was to decarbonise public sector buildings, and that worked very effectively through Salix, the bank that disbursed those funds. The second element, which was disbursed by local authorities, has also worked very well. The third element is the one that we closed, and we want to get a renewed version of it.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): In the final days of the last Labour Government, the UK was near the bottom of the G20 league tables for green investment and renewable energy. I therefore congratulate my right hon. Friend on his Department's achievements on offshore and floating wind energy. Can he confirm that his Department will continue to invest in this area, particularly close to my North Devon constituency and the Celtic sea?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Absolutely. My hon. Friend will know that we have some really exciting floating offshore wind projects in the Celtic sea that I am very pleased to see being developed. She is also right to observe that during the last Labour Government, we did absolutely nothing whatsoever to ensure security of energy supply or its diversity.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): An Erdington care worker with two children was close to tears when she said to me:

“I worked so hard throughout the covid crisis. Now I am facing my universal credit being cut, a tax increase and soaring energy bills. Jack, why are they going ahead with the cut to universal credit? Do they even begin to understand how difficult life is for people like me?”

Is she wrong?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The massive increase in energy prices is a global effect. I completely understand that people are facing issues this winter that were not foreseen maybe six months ago, but this Government have rigorously focused on protecting the most vulnerable customers in the energy market and we are absolutely focused on getting Britain back to work. That is why our unemployment rate is one of the lowest in the G7 at 4.7%. In France, it is 8%. We are creating jobs and we are keeping the economy going.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will know, I have been something of a doughty champion in North Norfolk for the offshore energy grid—*[Interruption.]* He is smiling; he knows what I am going to say next. Will he work at speed to ensure that the offshore network grid will be implemented as soon as possible to ensure that we stop the dereliction of the countryside with the offshore cable corridors?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Nobody in this House has been as consistent and as focused on this issue as my hon. Friend. He knows that, as Energy Minister, I commissioned the offshore transmission network review, on which we have accelerated work. I would be happy to speak to him and other colleagues about the review’s progress.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State describes small energy companies such as Green in Newcastle upon Tyne Central as “failures,” but he says nothing of his own failure in structuring, regulating and shaping the energy market. Will he confirm that large energy companies, such as Green, will not receive a penny of taxpayers’ money? What support will he offer to the employees of Green, apart from slashing universal credit?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I said, it has been a consistent feature over the past few years that energy companies have failed and left the market. We have a process to deal with that, the supplier of last resort. I categorically say to the House that we will not be giving any grants or subsidies to larger companies.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): I welcome the Government’s market-led approach. The CBI has been clear in saying that Labour’s plans to renationalise our UK energy network would result in higher household bills. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it could also threaten UK energy supplies?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Any Labour plan to nationalise the industry would be a step back into the dark ages and would be a disaster for this country’s reputation as a hub of international capital and investment.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Rising energy prices will disproportionately affect people living in the north, where it is colder during the winter. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of regional disparities, and how will he mitigate against them?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Lady raises a fair point, and clearly the single most important determinant of gas prices is the weather. That is why we have schemes such as the warm home discount, and it is why we are focused on protecting the most vulnerable customers wherever they are in the UK.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Half a million more people are likely to fall into fuel poverty as a result of this gas crisis. With record increases in inflation, plans to cut universal credit that will hit 37% of Scottish families, supermarket shelves that grow emptier by the day and a regressive national insurance tax hike hitting those on the lowest pay hardest, what has gone so wrong as we face a winter of discontent? Why should anyone have confidence in this Government?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I will tell the hon. Lady why people should have confidence in this Government: we have a vaccine roll-out that is the envy of the world; we have got the economy back up and running; we have 4.7% unemployment, which is among the lowest in the G7; and we have navigated the storms of covid-19 pretty effectively.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): A number of my constituents were victims of the green deal mis-selling scandal and have been left saddled with tens of thousands of pounds of debt for a scheme they thought was publicly funded and Government backed. The scheme was supposed to lower their energy bills, but now, on top of having to repay that debt, their bills are set to skyrocket.

In supporting my constituent who discovered that she is a victim only when she recently tried to sell her home, I was informed that the Secretary of State has no obligation to investigate cases more than six years old. Many victims of this scam will not have been aware immediately, so will he explain what recourse exists for victims who come forward later?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We have been dealing with green deal cases on a case-by-case basis. I have not been informed of the specific details that the hon. Lady describes but, with my officials, I would be happy to meet her to discuss the particulars of this individual case.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This is almost a perfect storm: gas prices that have risen due to the maintenance projects that were rescheduled for 2021 because of the pandemic; lower-than-usual gas supply from Russia; and less liquefied natural gas reaching Europe because of increased deliveries to Asia. How can the Government assist when most of these factors are beyond our control? Is it realistic to hope that consumers will see a reduction in their bills within the next year?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman has given a pithy summary of the various causes of the energy price spike, one that is very realistic; it is a global phenomenon. What I have said repeatedly is that what the Government can do is ensure two things: that customers have continuity of supply, through the well-established SOLR process; and that we are resolutely focused on keeping the energy price cap, so that consumers—our constituents—are protected from those exorbitant price spikes.

Coronavirus: Education Setting Attendance and Support for Pupils

11.5 am

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Education if he will make a statement on the impact of coronavirus on attendance in education settings and support for pupils to catch-up on lost learning.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Alex Burghart): Mr Speaker, I am terribly grateful to you for granting this urgent question during my first week in the job. We would all like to thank school staff for their ongoing dedication to pupils at what has obviously been an extremely difficult time.

Regular school attendance is vital for children's education, wellbeing and long-term development. I am pleased to report that attendance last week was higher than at the same time last year, with 91.9% of students attending and 99.9% of all state-funded schools open. We know that the impact of coronavirus has been felt strongly in schools. The evidence is clear that being out of education causes significant harm to attainment, life chances, mental health and physical health. Data from the autumn 2020 school census showed that 60% of pupils had some period when they did not attend school in circumstances relating to covid-19 during the autumn term. That represents 33 million days missed, and analysis shows that every day of education missed matters.

That is why this Government are rightly focused on reducing the disruption to education: we have put an end to the self-isolation of whole bubbles; under-18s no longer need to self-isolate after contact with a positive case; secondary pupils were tested on their return, to help limit transmission, and will continue to test this term; and just last week this Government announced the roll-out of vaccinations for all 12 to 15-year-olds. Our communications programme has promoted the importance of attendance and we continue to monitor the data closely.

We are also fully committed to helping pupils to catch up. Our £3 billion investment in recovery includes more than £950 million for schools to best support the most affected children. That will have a material impact in closing gaps that have emerged. We continue to work closely with local authorities and schools to help them re-engage pupils. The Government's Supporting Families programme continues to work with families where attendance is a significant concern, and we are providing support to tackle mental health issues, which will improve attendance further. That includes £7 million for local authorities to deliver the wellbeing for education recovery programme, and £9.5 million to train senior mental health leads in up to 7,800 schools and colleges. We are also recruiting a team of expert attendance advisers to work with local authorities to help them improve their services and the consistency and quality of their attendance interventions.

The next stage includes a review of time spent in school and 16 to 19 education, and the impact that this could have on helping children and young people to catch up. To support and re-engage the most at-risk pupils, we are investing £45 million in the new safe and alternative provision taskforces, bringing together specialist support in schools and AP settings in serious violence

hotspots. We are also joining up support by expanding the role of virtual school heads, which is a wonderful initiative, to cover all children, with a social worker to provide additional support on attendance and attainment for many of the most vulnerable pupils.

The impact of the pandemic has been significant, and this Government continue to act tirelessly to help our children recover their education and wellbeing, with the help of our excellent teaching profession.

Kate Green: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. Although I am sorry that the Secretary of State is not in his place, I warmly congratulate the Minister on his appointment. I know he will agree with me that nothing is more important than our children's futures. But during the pandemic the Government have treated children and young people as an afterthought, failing to take the action that teachers, parents, pupils and the Labour party have been calling for to keep children in school. Some 122,000 children were out of school last week. Yesterday, the chief medical officer warned that covid is spreading fastest among secondary-age pupils. When will the Government act to improve ventilation in schools, colleges and universities? Will the Minister explain the Government's rationale on masks, which saw them required in schools in March but not now, when covid rates are more than 400 times higher?

We welcome the advice of the chief medical officers to roll out the vaccine to 12 to 15-year-olds, but already there are reports of pressure on school nursing services. Will the Minister guarantee that all first doses will have been administered by October half-term?

Shockingly, there are reports that some schools are experiencing anti-vaccination protests. What action is being taken to ensure that no school faces threats and intimidation?

In Education questions on 6 September, the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson), hinted that the Government may cease recommending twice-weekly home testing at the end of this month, even though covid continues to spread. Will the Minister reconfirm the plans on testing? How will he ensure that testing at home is carried out, after the drop-off we saw last year?

Even before the latest surge in absences, children had missed an average of 115 days of school. The Conservatives' paltry recovery plan comes nowhere close to tackling what is needed. Labour's plan commits to extending the school day to give time for breakfast clubs and new activities, small-group tutoring, expert mental health support, and training for our world-class school staff. Will the Minister commit today to matching Labour's ambition?

Alex Burghart: I thank the hon. Lady for tabling the urgent question and for her opening remarks. I am sure we will not always see eye-to-eye, but we both have a great concern for children in this country and I look forward to working with her on that score. Nevertheless, I do not want to take too many lectures from the Labour party on this subject. We all clearly remember how last year Labour consistently refused to say that schools were safe for children to go back.

The challenges that we currently face are obviously substantial, but great improvements have been made. At the end of the previous term, attendance in school

was at 75%; as of Thursday last week, attendance was at 91.9%, with 99.9% of all schools open.¹ That is a tribute to the very hard work done by our health service and the very hard work that is currently being done in schools. I am sure the whole House pays tribute to that work.

Our Department has an absolute determination to be led by the best evidence, and that determination is shared across Government. Probably no one in the Government understands data and evidence bases better than my new boss, the Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi). When the evidence changes and the situation changes, so we change our policy.

The hon. Lady asked about face masks; at some stages in the pandemic we have had face masks in corridors, strict social distancing and bubbles, but the evidence now says that we can move away from that.² That is much to the good, because anyone who has ever worked in schools, as I have, will know that it is difficult to conduct proper education when children have their faces covered. I strongly welcome the fact that we have been able to make a change on that score.

Over the course of the pandemic, we have put £3 billion into helping schools and the education recovery. That includes £1.5 billion for evidence-based tutoring programmes that are going to help children, including the most vulnerable, to catch up. I am delighted to have discovered that £220 million is being spent so that vulnerable children can attend holiday activities and food programmes in all local authorities. We have £79 million to support those children who have been suffering with the worst mental health problems—mental health is a dreadful problem that I know many Members will have heard about in their constituency surgeries—and £17 million for mental health and wellbeing training in schools.

The hon. Lady rightly asked about the dreadful anti-vaccination protests we have seen. They are totally unacceptable. The level of intimidation of schools and teachers is abhorrent. I make it absolutely clear to any headteacher or teacher who is watching this that, contrary to some of the things they have been told, legal liability rests not with schools, but with the health service and those providing vaccinations. I thank schools very much for the spaces they have created and the consent forms they have provided, but they should rest assured that it is the health service that is providing these jabs and offering the support. Any school facing intimidation should let the Department know about it so that we can follow it up.

This is a difficult time for education, but things are getting better. They are getting better because of the actions that this Government have taken to roll out one of the best vaccine programmes in the world and to support children and their teachers in school.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Education Committee.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I am pleased to see the Minister, my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour, in his place.

As I understand it from our discussions with the chief medical officer at the Education Committee yesterday and from the Government, the key purpose of the vaccination programme is to keep our children in school.

1. [Official Report, 19 October 2021, Vol. 701, c. 4MC.]

2. [Official Report, 19 October 2021, Vol. 701, c. 4MC.]

However, I have been sent a letter by parents about the Teddington School in Middlesex, run by Bourne Education Trust, that shows that all students will be sent home on Friday 24 September, after a day of vaccinations today. Therefore, despite Government guidance, there are examples of schools doing this, or of whole year groups being grounded at home or even closed down completely. Will my hon. Friend make sure that schools follow Government guidance to the letter and do not send children home? He should ring the headteachers himself to make sure that we keep our children learning. Will he also ensure that the catch-up fund reaches the poorest and most disadvantaged students, because we know that 44% of students receiving the pupil premium are being missed, and that there are huge regional disparities as well?

Alex Burghart: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question, and I look forward to working with him in his role as Chair of the Education Committee and as a venerable defender of the needs of children and of the voters who follow.

It is extremely important that schools follow departmental guidance. I am sure that my officials will have heard the example that my right hon. Friend has just given. The message is clear: the best place for children is in schools and there are very clear criteria that tell us when children should be there.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister rightly recognises the toll on the mental health of children in this country over the past year. In Waltham Forest, many schools dug deep and paid for external counselling services for the children and are now facing big gaps in their budgets. Having said how important it is that no school in this country should be out of pocket, will the Minister commit today to fully reimburse those schools for the cost of counselling over the past 18 months to help our children get through the pandemic?

Alex Burghart: I thank both the hon. Lady for her question and the school in her constituency for the work that it has done to look after its pupils; it sounds as though it has gone above and beyond. As I said in answer to the shadow Secretary of State a few moments ago, the Department has invested considerable amounts of money in supporting children's mental health. There has been £79 million across the piece, and £17 million for training for mental health and wellbeing in schools. We are fully aware that this is one of the lasting consequences of the pandemic, and we will step in to support schools every inch of the way.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I find the irony of this urgent question being called by those on the Labour Front Bench somewhat mystifying, because they went missing throughout the pandemic, and there was silence on the issue of schools. It is not just me who thinks this. Let me quote:

“Labour's silence on closing schools is completely ridiculous.”

That was Corbynista Owen Jones saying that, so it is not just we on the Conservative Benches who think it. The NEU—or the “not education union” as we should refer to it—continually wanting to shut schools, and Labour keeping silent despite the donations running into its party coffers tell us everything that we need to know. Can my hon. Friend confirm to me that, no

[Jonathan Gullis]

matter what happens this winter, schools will be kept open, pupils will be learning face to face and, in that way, they will catch up exactly as they need to.

Alex Burghart: I thank my hon. Friend for his passionate question. He has first-hand experience of working in schools, and I look forward to leaning on his expertise while I am in this job. It is absolutely the Government's intention to keep schools open. We are clear that schools are the right place for children. The cost of children not being in school is extremely serious, so it is very much our hope that schools will be open from this point on.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Erdington is one of England's poorest constituencies, but it is rich in talent. I pay tribute to the headteachers, who do an outstanding job in the most difficult circumstances. In a survey I conducted of schools in my area, I found that 60% expect to set a deficit budget next financial year, and 100% said that they do not have sufficient support for their pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. Of the schools that applied for exceptional costs funding, 75% received funding amounting to less than half the costs. Is it not the simple reality that school spending by the Government is still lower than in 2009-10, and that after tearing up the catch-up recommendations made by their own adviser, they have allocated to schools a fifth of what was asked for? Is it not the simple truth that a whole generation of children and young people are growing up without the support that they deserve from their Government?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman is a doughty defender of pupils on his patch. The Government have already spent £3 billion on helping schools to get through the pandemic. As I have said, we have invested £1.5 billion in evidence-led programmes, and we have a high degree of confidence that they will help children to catch up some of the time that they have lost in school. Since the Prime Minister took over two and a half years ago, he has been clear about his ambition to return per pupil spending to what it was in 2010. Obviously there is also an imminent spending review, in which other things are being considered.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that keeping children in school and educational settings is an absolute priority? Does he agree that children with special educational needs and those on education, health and care plans should be given the bespoke support that they need to maximise attendance and thrive in the school environment—a shining example being Hoyle Nursery School in my constituency?

Alex Burghart: My hon. Friend is right that we have to help the most vulnerable children to overcome the problems of the pandemic. Children with special educational needs are very much on our radar. We have consistently prioritised children who attend specialist settings by providing additional uplifts in the 2020 catch-up premium and the 2021 recovery premium. Specialist settings will receive an uplift to deliver summer schools and will have the flexibility to deliver provision based on pupils' needs. I understand my hon. Friend's concerns; for about eight years, I was the vice-chair of

governors at a special school in west London, so I have seen the remarkable work that such schools can do to change children's lives. We absolutely have our mind on this agenda.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): We know how important good ventilation is to protect staff and students from the spread of covid, and to keep schools safe and open. The Welsh Government are funding better ventilation in schools. Why are this Government not doing the same?

Alex Burghart: I am delighted to hear that the Welsh Government are improving ventilation in schools. The Government in Westminster are doing precisely the same. We have spent £25 million on installing CO₂ monitors, with 300,000 monitors going out right now. We are starting with special schools and then rolling them out across the estate.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): I recently met the impressive young people from Milton Keynes Youth Cabinet, who highlighted to me the difficulties with mental health that children suffered during the pandemic, and of course we discussed catch-up. It is great that the Department have announced the consultation on discipline and behaviour in schools. Does the Minister agree that discipline, behaviour and structure are key to good mental health, and to catching up on what we have lost over the last few months and years?

Alex Burghart: I could not agree more strongly. We need schools to be calm, well-ordered places of learning. These are the environments in which children flourish most. That is why, since 2010, this Government have prioritised behaviour.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his place and look forward to him appearing in front of the Education Committee later in the autumn. I declare an interest in that I am the chair of governors of a primary school and a member of an academy trust board.

Disruption is still occurring because even vaccinated people and children can contract and transmit the infection. Headteachers and their staff, as the Minister has outlined, are continuing to work above and beyond but are struggling in many places to keep their schools going as they would want to. What more can he do to give schools the support they so desperately need so that they can effectively educate the children while also safeguarding those children and the staff? I am afraid that in many places the measures that he has outlined are proving to be far from adequate.

Alex Burghart: My heart stopped for a moment because I thought the hon. Gentleman said that he looked forward to my appearing in front of the Education Committee this afternoon, but the autumn is fine—probably. He raises a very important point, because obviously we do want to see children back in school. As he will have heard me say, we have substantial improvement on where we were at the end of last term. Ordinarily of a September, pre-pandemic, we would expect about 95% of children to be in school. Last Thursday, the figure was 91.9%. We are very keen to make up that gap and we are working tirelessly to do so. One of the things

I have not mentioned is that the DFE has REACT—regional education and children’s teams—working across the country with local authorities, regional schools commissioners and schools themselves to clamp down on outbreaks where they take place and to help children to get back into school as quickly as possible.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is great to see my hon. Friend in his place at the Dispatch Box. I welcome the work this Government have done to make it a priority to keep schools open for face-to-face learning. In contrast, Labour equivocated over whether they were even safe to reopen. Does he agree that if Labour were in power, our schools would probably be closed for face-to-face learning and our children left behind?

Alex Burghart: I thank my hon. Friend for his thoughtful question. We have been very clear throughout that we wanted to get schools open as soon as it was safe to do so. We have done that. We have managed to increase attendance from 75% at the end of last term to 91.1% at the start of this term.¹ There is a lot further to go. However, it is the roll-out of our vaccination programme across the country, with the high uptake and the hard work of our health service, that has enabled us to get to this point. Children are better off in education and they are able to be in education because of the steps this Government have taken.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The roll-out of the national tutoring programme has been shambolic, as has been evidenced right across the country, including in my constituency. Will the Minister consider allocating the money to local authorities, which already have the relationships with local providers, in order to ensure that additional support for young people can be provided expeditiously?

Alex Burghart: I am afraid that I do not recognise the hon. Lady’s description of the national tutoring programme as such. It is based on the very best evidence, it has a very large sum of public money behind it, and we are highly confident that it is going to help children to recover and get back.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): It is indeed a great pleasure to see my hon. Friend at the Dispatch Box. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving him the chance to strut his stuff in his first week in the job. He will make a fine addition to the Department for Education.

May I press my hon. Friend on keeping children in school? I completely agree with him that that is the priority, so will he look again with a fresh set of eyes at routinely testing children who have no symptoms and are not ill? The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health thinks that routine testing of asymptomatic children should stop, because that is what is keeping them out of school, and I agree. Will he look at that, get rid of routine testing, test only children who have symptoms and send home only children who are unwell?

Alex Burghart: My right hon. Friend is extremely learned in these matters. We have a testing programme in place to ensure that we limit the number of pupils in

schools who have coronavirus. That was obviously the case as schools went back. I am sure that the relevant Minister will have heard his remarks.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Hull is one of the most disadvantaged parts of the country, and there will be no levelling up without catching up. Will the Minister commit to the necessary catching-up budget proposed by his adviser, Sir Kevan Collins?

Alex Burghart: As I have said a number of times, we have put in £3 billion, with £1.5 billion on tutoring for 6 million tutoring programmes—100 million hours of tutoring—and an additional 2 million tutoring programmes in 16 to 19 education.¹ That is evidence-based, and we have a high degree of confidence that it will help children recover and get over the worst of the pandemic. The right hon. Lady will have also heard me say that a spending review is coming up.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend to his position; I am sure he will do an excellent job. He rightly points out that the vaccination programme for young people is a public health matter. However, what support is being given to schools, teachers, parents and young people to combat the anti-vaxxers who are obviously misleading people on the benefits of ensuring that young people are vaccinated and therefore safe to be in school?

Alex Burghart: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point. It is totally unacceptable that any teacher or headteacher is being placed under that pressure. The lies spread by certain groups are outrageous and have unquestionably made life uncomfortable for some people working in schools. I reiterate that schools following the guidelines are doing exactly the right thing. They are not legally liable for what happens. I understand that, so far, all participating schools are doing so in a highly professional manner.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): As the Minister rightly acknowledged, the need for mental health support for young people has risen significantly during the pandemic, yet providers of that support such as the fantastic charity TADS in Barnsley are struggling to access funding. I acknowledge his commitment to funding, but how will he ensure that it gets to the frontline? What can he do to help charities such as the one that I represent?

Alex Burghart: I have heard of TADS on my travels—it is an excellent charity. If she would like to send the details to the Department, I am happy to look into that for her.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): We all know that the best place for young people is in school, learning in a classroom. Will my hon. Friend therefore confirm that when the Opposition next make a call for schools to close, he and the Secretary of State will do all they can to resist those siren calls and keep our kids in school?

Alex Burghart: Be in no doubt that we want children to be in school and learning in school. It is the best place for them to be for their education, their mental health and their futures. We will do all that we can to keep them where they are.

1. [Official Report, 19 October 2021, Vol. 701, c. 4MC.]

1. [Official Report, 19 October 2021, Vol. 701, c. 6MC.]

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Minister has spoken about catch-up funding, and I got to see at first hand some of the great work being done at Denton Community College with its summer school over the summer holidays. However, no amount of summer schools will enable children to fully catch up on the work they have missed out on, so what more is he going to do to help the covid cohort properly catch up and be able to excel, as we would all hope they will be able to do?

Alex Burghart: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and it is very good to hear about what he saw going on in Denton in his constituency during the summer. The tutoring programme is at the very heart of our response in helping children catch up, in so far as it is possible to do so. We know from the very best international and national data that when children have one-to-one or one-to-two tuition, it can be revolutionary for their learning, and that is why this Department is channelling money and effort into it.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend on his thoroughly well deserved appointment.

Schools in Kettering are doing their very best, but are facing a very challenging time at the moment with some rapidly rising covid rates, especially in secondary settings. Could we have some specialised support and enhanced efforts from Public Health England and the Department to help them to get on top of this?

Alex Burghart: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his remarks. As I mentioned a moment ago, there are DFE REACT teams working around the country, and their role is to work with schools, local authorities and regional schools commissioners to tackle precisely this problem. I am sure that, if he were to get in touch with the Department, it would be able to fill him in more on what is happening in his area.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister to his place, and I wish him well in his new role.

In Northern Ireland, the Education Minister has given schools funding grants for catch-up learning, which many high schools have taken advantage of. This has become even more necessary due to the coronavirus, which is the thrust of this urgent question. Does the Minister not agree that we cannot lose focus on the early years intervention for P3 classes with a reading age a full year behind, and how does he intend to stop that lag-behind following those children through their whole academic life?

Alex Burghart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Since I was a Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Northern Ireland Office, I have long believed there is a great deal we can learn from Northern Ireland in this place, and we often learn it from the hon. Gentleman. It is absolutely essential that we support early years, but also children at every stage in their education, to overcome the worst of this pandemic, and I have no doubt that that is what this Department will be doing in the months ahead.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend to his place. I commend his Department for its successful efforts to eliminate the barrier of digital exclusion by providing 1.3 million laptops and tablets to disadvantaged students during the pandemic. Can he confirm that that investment will continue for those pupils?

Alex Burghart: Yes, all of the 1.35 million laptops that my hon. Friend refers to are still in use and are still out in the community. It was a major offer that the Government made to children who were digitally disadvantaged and it came, as he will recall, with a wi-fi offer, which made sure they had the connectivity they needed. This was a very important initiative by the DFE, and we are sticking by it.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): Last week, I had the pleasure of visiting Greenfield school in Newton Aycliffe in the Sedgefield constituency, and it was great to see so many children and teachers back where they belong. With the advent of being able to get vaccines for 12 to 15-year-olds, can I ask the Minister to make sure that both the parents and their children are getting the proper information about the validity of vaccines for both groups, not listening to the nonsense on some aspects of social media?

Alex Burghart: Absolutely. The best source of information on vaccines is, remains, and will always be the NHS. Hon. Members can rest assured that the Government are following the Gillick competencies, which have been in place since the mid-80s.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): This year Wales High School in Rother Valley is celebrating its 50th year, and it was a pleasure to join it in its celebrations a few weeks ago. Will my hon. Friend celebrate not only that great achievement, but people's hard work in keeping the school open during the covid crisis, including putting in measures and guidelines that go above Government recommendations?

Alex Burghart: Absolutely, and I thank not only my hon. Friend's school but all schools across the country that have gone above and beyond at this very difficult time. We have asked a great deal of our teachers and school leaders, and they have risen to the challenge.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I am delighted to see my hon. Friend in his place. Will he join me in congratulating schools across Wiltshire, and particularly in my constituency, on getting back to work so effectively and educating all their children once again? Now that 12 to 15-year-olds are eligible for the vaccine, does he agree it is important that all children, and their parents, get the proper information, so that they can make the right decision for themselves and their community?

Alex Burghart: It sounds like Devizes is doing a cracking job in meeting the challenges of covid, and I say again to all parents, teachers and pupils who are looking for advice that the NHS is the place to go, and we are in safe hands when we take its advice.

Business of the House

11.41 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 Monday 18 October will include:

MONDAY 18 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the Judicial Review and Courts Bill.

TUESDAY 19 OCTOBER—Motion under the Coronavirus Act 2020 relating to the renewal of temporary provisions, followed by Opposition day (7th allotted day—first part). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 20 OCTOBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Environment Bill.

THURSDAY 21 OCTOBER—General debate on COP26 and limiting global temperature rises to 1.5° C, followed by a general debate on World Menopause Month. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 22 OCTOBER—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 25 October will include: MONDAY 25 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill.

Mr Speaker, I wonder whether I might add a tribute to Mark Kelly. I am sure the House will want to join me in paying tribute to Mark for his 37-year service to the Government, which saw him spend 23 of those years providing outstanding service to the Government and this House as senior private secretary to the Government Chief Whip. He was really the man who made things happen in this place. Mark will shortly be moving away from London with his family. During his time in post he has been an exemplary provider of support and advice to successive Chief Whips, Leaders of the House, and countless Members from all parts of the House. As a loyal and skilful deputy to Sir Roy Stone, Mark's parliamentary expertise and calm and friendly style has been an essential fixture of the parliamentary landscape. He will be greatly missed.

Mark has always been very proud of his Welsh heritage. He is a staunch Wrexham supporter and has been a mentor and guide to many civil servants, and others, who have had the privilege of working with him and learning from him. As he leaves his post we wish him and his family well, and send him the combined thanks of the House for his essential contribution to our constitution. I have a particular reason for regretting his departure, because he is being replaced by my outgoing private secretary and head of office, Robert Foot, who has been a terrific and steadfast worker and supporter of the business managers going back to 2007. We are very lucky to be surrounded by dedicated individuals such as Mark and Robert, who have dedicated their careers to supporting the work of this House in so many different ways. We are grateful to them all.

Mr Speaker: I would like to reiterate the loyal service that Mark Kelly has given to this House. I have to say that he will be missed. We thank him, we wish him well, and of course we wish Rob Foot well in his new place.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the business, and I join him in his fulsome tributes to Mark Kelly and Robert Foot. Congratulations to both of them on the new stages in their lives. We thank them, of course, for their loyal and dedicated public service.

I am very pleased to see a debate on COP26 after the recess. I have asked for that at previous business questions, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for that.

Today marks the 2,000th day of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's detention in Iran. A demonstration is taking place outside to raise awareness of her case, that of Anoosheh Ashoori, and those of countless others imprisoned there. When will the Government bring them home?

This week, the Government showed us again just how out of touch they are. Last week, I raised the soaring cost of living and I was told to use an Opposition day to debate it, so that is what we did. We raised energy prices, childcare, rents, taxes, fuel, rail fares and food prices, all of which are going up, before we even get to the empty shelves. The shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), questioned the Government on that and more, but still no answers.

Last week, the Leader of the House attempted to boast about his Government's record on child poverty, but they are pushing 200,000 more children into poverty by cutting universal credit. It is not too late to cancel that cut, and it is certainly not something to boast about. The Prime Minister had no trouble being Scrooge last year, so it is no surprise that this cut comes 11 weeks before Christmas this year.

If the Leader of the House wishes to trade numbers, I can remind him that the last Labour Government took nearly 1 million children out of poverty. That is what good Governments do when they choose to prioritise what matters for our children. Instead, this Government are deliberately choosing to make working families bear the brunt of their failures.

The increase to the energy price cap means that from next month, half a million more families will be plunged into fuel poverty. I know that the Leader of the House will say that the current energy crisis is global. That is true, but it is also true that it has been made far worse by choices that this Government have made and continue to make. Ministers are not denying that people will face the impossible non-choice between heating and eating this winter. We already pay the highest energy bills in Europe—something the Prime Minister promised his Brexit deal would fix—but here we are, with bills set to get even bigger.

Just yesterday, over 800,000 customers saw their energy supplier go bust, but this morning the Business Secretary refused to admit the scale and severity of the crisis and the economic hardship facing working people. The shadow Chancellor, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), when she was Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee back in 2019, warned of the fuel crisis we are now in. A Minister replied that

“the UK's gas system is secure and well placed to respond effectively to unexpected changes in supply and demand”.

[Thangam Debbonaire]

Well goodness me, Mr Speaker. I am not sure what the Government consider to be a “secure and well placed” system, but what we have is the opposite.

Government decisions over the last decade have undermined our energy security and resilience, with domestic gas storage capacity eradicated, new nuclear stalling, the Swansea bay tidal lagoon rejected, renewables subsidies scrapped, and no long-term reform of the broken energy market, which Ofgem warned the Government about just months ago. So I ask the Leader of the House: why did the Government choose to ignore those warnings?

Carbon emissions from buildings are now higher than in 2015. Some 14% of carbon emissions come from poorly insulated homes that are too expensive to heat, yet the Government cut £1 billion from the green homes grant before scrapping it altogether, they have a missing heat and buildings strategy, which has been delayed month after month—year after year, actually—and people up and down the country are forced to choose between overpriced heating and overpriced eating. Will the Leader of the House ask the new Housing Secretary to come to the Commons with a proper retrofit plan?

I would like to place on the record my thanks to the Leader of the House and the members of his office, some of whom are in the Under-Gallery, for being incredibly helpful to me and my team over the past few weeks. They have helped us solve a problem that I cannot describe at the moment, but I just wish to place that on the official record, because we are very grateful to him and his team for the trouble they have taken.

Although the Home Secretary finally appeared in the House this week, quite rightly, to update us on the incident in Salisbury and the further charging to come, we still have no update on the delayed Afghanistan resettlement scheme. I wonder whether the Leader of the House could ask the Home Secretary to come back after the recess and explain why there has been such an unacceptable delay, but really to present the scheme and implement it in full as soon as possible.

Before I close, I would like to congratulate Anika Tahrim, who was on your Speaker’s intern scheme, Mr Speaker, and was based in the Leader of the Opposition’s office, and thank her for her hard work. Finally, I would like to thank all the staff in this place who have ensured our safe return after summer. I hope everyone gets to have a peaceful and productive conference season, and I look forward to seeing everyone in October.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady in giving thanks to the staff of the House, who have made sure our September return has gone so smoothly, as we head off for the conference recess. As I was saying about Mark Kelly, we are incredibly well served in this House by the teams who support us and make sure that we are able to get on with our key democratic responsibilities.

I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her thanks in relation to the work my office has done in helping her with a particularly knotty problem. I remind all Members of the House that if ever they are finding difficulties in getting answers from Departments, I view it as the role

of the Leader of the House to try to facilitate answers as far as I possibly can. That applies to all Benches, Front and Back, and all parties.

On the Afghanistan resettlement scheme, the Government have committed to 5,000 this year and up to 20,000 in future years. The numbers that have been dealt with so far are very large—200,000 emails have come in—so this is, as everybody knows, a work in progress, but one that is very important.

As is seeking the release, on the 2000th day, of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I hope the hon. Lady is reassured to note that the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), raised the issue and said that it was quite inexcusable for Nazanin to still be detained by the Iranian authorities, as one of the first things she said as Foreign Secretary. I think it is extremely reassuring that the Government are publicly saying that this must happen, but there are limits to the power of the Government in enforcing rogue regimes into doing what we want. That has been the case for too long, but it is inexcusable that Nazanin is still held. The Government will push the Iranian authorities as far as we can.

Coming on to the litany of complaints about what the Government have been doing, I notice there was indeed an Opposition day. I am glad that my suggestions for Opposition days are being taken up by the Opposition. We could make this a formalised system and perhaps I could always choose Opposition day topics of debate. However, I noticed there was not an enormous number of speakers. There was more in length than there was in number, which is interesting in showing the enthusiasm that the Opposition had for debating this money, but let us go through the Government’s record.

There are 100,000 fewer children in absolute poverty than in 2010. In total, there are 700,000 fewer in absolute poverty than in 2010. In 2019-20, there was a 3% chance of children being in absolute poverty if both parents worked full time, which is why it is so important to ensure that work is available. Since 2010, we have seen 650,000 fewer children in workless households. We have also increased the universal credit work allowances, giving parents and disabled people an extra £630 a year in their take-home pay. Great steps have been taken in particular to help children: the £220 million holiday activities fund; the 30% increase to the healthy start vouchers, providing £4.25 a week to eligible parents with children under four; and more money being invested in breakfast clubs. So great steps are being taken and are being successful in reducing poverty, as the absolute numbers show.

The hon. Lady then went on about the energy issue. Well, we know that energy prices fluctuate; that is part of a market system. They are fluctuating across the world. We do have a robust energy system. We have a system that ensures that supplies continue. There is a certain irony, is there not, when half the time the socialists have wanted us to close everything down? They do not much like energy, because they think we should have hairshirt greenery, whereas the Government are in favour of technological greenery. What does that mean? It means economic growth, so what have we had? We have had 78% economic growth since 1990 with a 44% reduction in emissions. It is getting that balance right. People need to be able to afford to heat their

homes, but we also need to green the environment and the economy, and that is what is being done. There has been £9 billion of taxpayers' money to support the efficiency of our buildings, while creating hundreds of thousands of skilled green jobs. Over 70,000 green home grant vouchers, worth over £297 million, have already been issued.

This is a story of success and I am very grateful, although the hon. Lady does not raise it as I would like, for the amazing support we receive from her in highlighting how we have reduced child poverty, ensured there is an energy supply and ensured a greener economy. It is a success of this Government and I am delighted it has been recognised by the socialists.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I join others in praising Mark Kelly, who really does know where the bodies are buried.

Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the subject of World Animal Day? Unfortunately it falls on 4 October during the recess, but if we have a later debate it will give the House an opportunity to talk about animal welfare generally, cruelty to animals and the welfare of farmyard animals, which my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) so ably mentioned yesterday?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Mr Speaker,

“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you”.

I have done what my hon. Friend asks before he asked for it—before he rose to his feet—because on Monday 25 October there will be the Second Reading of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, which will be an opportunity for him to raise those important points. We also have the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill, which is in their lordships' House and will come back to us in due course. The Government are very committed to following many of the policies that my hon. Friend has suggested.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I join in the tributes to Mark Kelly. When I was Chief Whip of our group and the representative of all the minority parties, Mark Kelly gave us nothing but kindness and great advice. I am sure that he will be sorely missed. I congratulate Rob Foot, who I know will be missed in the Office of the Leader of the House.

Here we are, barely back, and we are just about to take another break so that we can participate in the proceedings of voluntary organisations of which we just so happen to be a member. We will be taking a month off when the UK is facing an autumn of discontent and when hard-pressed families are facing one of the biggest assaults on their weekly income. As this House abandons its station to go to the conference hall and seaside resorts, there are universal credit cuts, energy prices going through the roof, a carbon dioxide crisis, driver shortages, farming chaos, fishing chaos, export prices, the ending of furlough and a Brexit killing a nation. This nonsense of a conference recess has surely run its course and must now come to an end.

We also face an environment crisis, but hey, we have the Prime Minister telling us all to grow up as he quotes Kermit the Frog. Maybe he should have got Kermit the Frog to negotiate a trade deal with the Americans while

he was there—maybe we could even get Fozzie Bear to solve the energy crisis. How dare anybody even start to refer to them as a bunch of Muppets?

I know now that there is absolutely nothing that will encourage Conservative Members to take the safety of their colleagues seriously in this House. Their pathetic defiance in refusing to wear a face mask is almost like a pathological childishness. When we come back, will the Leader of the House agree to a meeting with all parties and your good self, Mr Speaker, so that we can agree a joint approach to safety in this workplace and so that at least we do not have the ridiculous spectacle of a House divided by face masks, where Conservative Members defiantly do not wear one but everybody on our side of the House does?

Lastly, may I wish you a good conference recess, Mr Speaker? I do not know whether there is a UK Speakers' party in which you might be the Chair. I also want to say to the Leader of the House as he goes off that I just hope Sir Toffalot here will manage to find a face mask on his way to Manchester.

Mr Rees-Mogg: There was a Speakers conference: an enormously successful conference of the G7, which was held in your constituency of Chorley, Mr Speaker, and included very significant Speakers, including Nancy Pelosi from the United States. I think that the hon. Gentleman was intending to congratulate you on a successful conference there. Otherwise I am slightly puzzled by his geography, because I was unaware that Manchester was a seaside resort, but perhaps he knows something that I do not.

As is now becoming traditional, I thought that I would give the hon. Gentleman a date that I discovered from *The Times* this morning: it is the anniversary of the battle of Salamis in 480 BC, when the Athenians beat the Persians and Xerxes was defeated. I am sure that that will be of interest to the hon. Gentleman, although it is quite hard to see how it relates to Scottish independence.

As regards the question of wearing masks, I do not know whether you are a reader of tabloid newspapers, Mr Speaker, but a certain very senior figure in the socialist party was photographed travelling on a train without a face mask. I do wonder whether there is one rule when the cameras are on and everybody is under vision, and another when people are on railway trains not expecting to be snapped.

Mr Speaker: I presume the Leader of the House meant the Labour party. That aside, before I call Rehman Chishti, I want to thank all the staff who have worked hard and made this House safe. They are due to have a break and, as much as the SNP spokesperson might like to cut it, they deserve it and need it. I also offer a big thank you to my team, the security team and all those who came up to help ensure that we had a great Speakers' G7 in Chorley. It involved solid business, with real resolutions coming out of it.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): On that point, Mr Speaker, may I thank you for all that you have done to ensure that our House can operate? To you and your team, from all of us, thank you.

I am reluctant to raise this sensitive but important matter with the Leader of the House. Both of us are men of faith, and it is important to give credit where it

[*Rehman Chishti*]

is deserved. A certain event took place at Edgbaston cricket ground on Saturday 18 September when, as my right hon. Friend will know, Kent beat Somerset to be crowned champions of the T20 cricket competition. Will he join me in congratulating Kent on their well-deserved win against Somerset? Will he also allow a debate on the Floor of the House to support grassroots cricket across the country?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Fortunately it was T20, and therefore my heart did not grieve too much, but I am of course delighted to congratulate Kent on their victory. My earnest hope and desire is that I shall live to see the day when Somerset win the county championship. We are one of the few counties never to do so in all our history, and I hope that my hon. Friend will join me in thinking that it would not be unreasonable to let Somerset do it at least once.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business. I reiterate my appeal of last week to right hon. and hon. Members across the House to look at their calendars and check whether they want to submit an application to the Backbench Business Committee for a debate to commemorate a specific anniversary or campaign day, and that they do so well in advance. That helps the Committee to manage the business and gives notice to the Leader of the House that date-specific debate applications are in.

I truly and with all my heart wish that food banks did not need to exist, but they do, and therefore they need to be supported, as they are by communities across the whole country. However, food banks in my constituency and across the north-east are already struggling with demand. Can we have a statement on what the Government will do to support food banks given the anticipated huge spike in demand as we approach winter once the £20 universal credit uplift is withdrawn and fuel bills go up again?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point about the calendar, and I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will take that to heart, because it does make the scheduling of business between the Backbench Business Committee and the Government easier and smoother.

The Government have done a great deal during the course of the pandemic and continue to do a great deal to support families in difficulty. The welfare system received an extra £8 billion in the financial year 2020-21. When schools were closed, over £450 million of supermarket vouchers were provided so that families could feed their children, and things of that kind are continuing. As I mentioned earlier, there is the 30% increase to Healthy Start vouchers and further money for breakfast clubs. The people who donate to food banks and act in a charitable way are to be commended, and the support is there through the welfare system to ensure that people have the money they need to feed their families.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend seen my early-day motion 415 highlighting the serious concerns of thousands of Harlow residents

about the Stort crossing proposals, which could have a devastating impact on the beautiful environment and wildlife of the Stort valley in Harlow?

[*That this House understands concerns that the Stort crossing proposals will have on the beautiful environment of the Stort Valley in Harlow constituency; further understands the threat that those proposals pose to local wildlife and ecosystems; recognises the concerns on those proposals raised by hundreds of local residents; further recognises that the plans for that problematic development have been inherited from the previous Labour Council who agreed to the proposals in the 2020 Local Plan; notes that Harlow Conservative Councillors voted against the 2020 Local Plan; further notes the upcoming Planning Committee meetings of both East Herts Council and Harlow District Council at which this planning application will be considered; and calls on the Government to put pressure onto the developers to reassess those plans and go back to the drawing board.*]

Unfortunately the problem was inherited following a decision made by a previous Labour council. Will my right hon. Friend praise the constructive “Save Our Stort” campaigners who, rather than block the M25 and harm commuters, have campaigned and demonstrated passionately to cherish a beautiful part of our town? We call upon the developers to go back to the drawing board on the proposals.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do of course praise my right hon. Friend’s constituents—they are some of the most civilised constituents in the country, and are brilliantly represented by my right hon. Friend, who always ensures that their concerns are highlighted—and I also compare them with what we must now call the hippie-crites: the people who have been blocking the M25, and who turn out not to be insulating their own homes while lying down in the road to inconvenience and cause danger to others. We know that a lady did not recover from a stroke as well as she would otherwise have done because of the delays caused, and of the risk caused to the police. I commend my right hon. Friend’s constituents for campaigning peacefully, respectfully and in a civilised manner. As he knows, planning decisions are a matter for the local council and are rightly made at a local level, but I am sure that what he has said in the House will be heard by the developer, who will want to maintain community support.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): We know that the Leader of the House is keen to see MPs return to the Chambers of Parliament; and, indeed, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority refused to fund appropriate maternity cover for me on the basis that people needed to be able to speak in the Chamber. In order to speak today, I have had to abandon my baby leave proxy vote—or else be reprimanded by the House authorities for speaking in the Chamber, which makes Parliament one of the few workplaces in the country where, when a new mother comes in for a “keep in touch” day, she is rebuked rather than supported.

I know that some in this place are not fans of mothers, in the “mother of all Parliaments”, but I am sure that the Leader of the House is not among them. Will he meet a cross-party delegation of MPs to discuss how we can ensure that everyone in this Parliament upholds the law on maternity cover and leave?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I say what a pleasure it is to see the hon. Lady in the Chamber, and may I congratulate her on the impeccable behaviour of her infant? Mine are of course perfect in every possible way, but I am not sure that they would have been quiet for the whole time during a parliamentary debate. I congratulate the hon. Lady most warmly; there is no greater joy than a new baby.

The rules provide for maternity and paternity leave, and for proxy voting for people who want to take that opportunity, but if people want to be present in the Chamber, they are of course welcome. I would be the last person to deter Members from coming in, but I do not want to put pressure on them to come in. I think it is for them to decide for themselves, as the hon. Lady has done, and I think that the rules as they are currently constructed are perfectly reasonable and entirely in line with the law.

We have to remember—this is very important—that Members of Parliament are office-holders; they are not employees. As office-holders, we have different rights and different privileges from employees because ours is a different role, and therefore employment law applies to us in a different way. We have, in fact, many more privileges than most employed people, not because of who we are individually, but because of our collective responsibility to represent the people of this nation.

As regards a meeting, I am always open to meeting all Members of the House: I think that that is the proper role of the Leader of the House.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): A constituent came to me recently, very distressed. Her young son was attacked at a community event about two years ago. The perpetrator was arrested and charged by the Crown Prosecution Service. He then reportedly failed to appear in court twice, was arrested a second time, and appeared in court for the third hearing. However, the Crown Prosecution Service erroneously, and wrongly, said that the case had been timed out—which it has admitted in writing was a mistake—and the perpetrator therefore got away with not being fully pursued. Because this was not publicly known, he went on to be selected as a candidate and subsequently elected to Crawley Borough Council in last May's local elections. May we have a debate on why this perpetrator, Atif Nawaz, was able to do that, on why the victim was failed by the Crown Prosecution Service, and on the efficiency of the CPS?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We need to have brisker questions, otherwise we will not get through everybody.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am obviously not aware of the full details of that case, but I understand that the CPS has accepted that it made an error in the handling of the case and apologised to my hon. Friend's constituent. I recognise, however, that an apology in these circumstances does not go very far. The CPS is ensuring that advocates in the south-east area receive training to prevent a similar error from happening again, but I would urge my hon. Friend to write to the Attorney General about this case if he has not already done so, as she oversees the work of the Crown Prosecution Service. Equally, I would be happy to take it up with the Attorney General on his behalf.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): A constituent contacted me again this week desperately worried about his only brother, aged just 19, and his brother's fiancée, who is 22. Their lives are in immediate danger in Afghanistan. They are both on the run and living in hiding following Taliban threats. I have had more than 70 constituents get in touch on behalf of hundreds of terrified friends and family members in Afghanistan. We are clearly not going to get a statement for several weeks, so having acknowledged the importance of this, will the right hon. Gentleman urge his colleagues in the Home Office to use this time to set out the referral process and clear guidance about how those still in Afghanistan can access the resettlement scheme?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As I said earlier, this is important, and it is worth reiterating what is being done. Under Operation Warm Welcome, we are ensuring that Afghans arriving in the UK are able to rebuild their lives, find work, pursue education and integrate. There is additional support, with extra funding for housing as well as immediate medical and mental health support. We have made it clear that all those who arrive through this safe and legal route will be granted indefinite leave to remain. I reiterate that more than 200,000 emails have come in, so the volume is very large, but we are committed to relocating an additional 5,000 vulnerable Afghans in the first year, with this potentially rising to 20,000. As I said to the shadow Leader of the House, if there are any specific cases to which the hon. Lady is not getting replies, she should please come via my office and we will do whatever we can to facilitate answers.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): All three of Derby's MPs are supporting Derby's bid to become the UK city of culture in 2025. Derbyshire's industrial heritage as the home of the world's first factory is well known. Formerly known as the Silk Mill, it will be reopening officially tomorrow as the Museum of Making. Derby is also home to the arts and culture, with a 52-week festival in 2023-24 providing an ideal opportunity to promote the city of culture programme. Does the Leader of the House agree that Derby's history and future growth in industry, sport and the arts make it a true UK cultural landmark?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend and I were going to go to a nightclub once the ban was lifted, and I think that that would have been a true cultural landmark. Beyond that, I would say that I heartily encourage Derby's bid to become the UK city of culture. It is a wonderful city, and its record in the arts and manufacturing is enormously impressive. This is, however, an independent process chaired by Sir Phil Redmond, who is assessing the initial bids. He will announce the long list of eight places very soon, and the winner will be announced in May 2022. I wish my hon. Friend good luck.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): My constituent Jack Barnett was furloughed by his former employer under the coronavirus job retention scheme between April and mid-September 2020, and was made redundant thereafter. Mr Barnett received CJRS payments in April, May and June, but with July, August and two weeks of September 2020 outstanding, he is still awaiting almost £3,000. Most recently, the employer advised that he was waiting for the funds from HMRC, although HMRC is unable

[*Dave Doogan*]

to either confirm or deny this because of the general data protection regulation. This case in Angus cannot be the only such case in the UK, so can we have a statement from the Government on what recourse former employees can pursue to recover moneys owed through the CJRS?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The furlough scheme has been enormously helpful and one of the key things that has maintained employment in this country. In Scotland, it has protected more than 910,000 jobs. However, I would be happy to take up the case of Mr Barnett with HMRC and with other Ministers. I have always thought business questions were a good opportunity to raise constituency issues that have not been solved by other means, and I will try to get a proper answer for the hon. Gentleman's constituent.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Leader of the House rightly talks about greening the environment. This week, a company has put in an application for a solar farm around Gainsborough that would be the size of 4,000 football pitches. It says that this is a nationally significant infrastructure project, and therefore, under a law passed by the last Labour Government, no local planning is allowed at all. There is no say for West Lindsey District Council, the county council, myself or anybody else. Can we have a debate on this matter? I was going to ask about a levelling-up grant for Gainsborough, but perhaps we could have a bit more levelling up for local democracy too.

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is obviously important that planning decisions are taken efficiently and that matters of national importance come to a national level. I have to say that 4,000 football pitches sounds like a very large area. I do not know very much about football, but I know that a football pitch is not an entirely small space. It cannot be that dissimilar to 4,000 cricket pitches. I note my right hon. Friend's concern, and he is right to raise it in this House. The opportunity to discuss it will probably be best provided through an Adjournment debate to ensure that this specific issue can be raised and that a Minister of the Crown can be held to account.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Earlier this year, I sky-dived for Florence, a beautiful seven-year-old girl from Dukinfield who sadly has a life-limiting degenerative condition called GM1. This Sunday, I will be zip-wiring for her at the same place that the right hon. Gentleman visited in north Wales recently. Can we have a debate on GM1, and can I have some tips for Sunday?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I sincerely congratulate the hon. Gentleman on what he is doing. I think all of us in this House find the greatest pride when we campaign on issues such as these for people like Florence and try to help them when they have a terrible disease. I am probably not allowed to say this, but I wish him every success in his campaign to get a treatment for GM1 and to get the appropriate support from the Department of Health and Social Care. As regards going down a zip wire, it is enormously exciting. It really is the most exhilarating thing to do. I would say to him: just lie back and enjoy it. They run it extraordinarily well and it is very safe.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): Last week, I had the privilege of meeting Thomas Gill and his parents. Thomas suffered major injuries requiring significant reconstructive surgery, and he and his parents and I would like to compliment his surgeons on their skills. The injuries were the result of Thomas being hit by a car driven by a young female driver who was under the influence of drink and drugs. The sentence handed down at the magistrates court was incomprehensibly lenient: a two-year driving ban and a fine of £439. Will the Leader of the House help me and Thomas to enable the Crown Prosecution Service, which chose not to proceed with one of the charges, to understand how it has let him down so badly, and tell us whether the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill will help to prevent similar occurrences?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is a deeply troubling case, and I am sorry to learn of the injuries suffered by Thomas. I wish him well with his recovery. Charging decisions are a matter for the Crown Prosecution Service, and sentencing in individual cases is entirely a matter for our independent courts. The sentencing framework and sentencing guidelines apply equally to all offenders. I understand that the CPS is seeking a meeting with my hon. Friend's constituent to explain the decision making in this case. I am able to reassure my hon. Friend that there are provisions in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill currently before Parliament—which I note is being opposed by the Opposition—that will increase the maximum penalty from 14 years imprisonment to life for the offences of causing death by dangerous driving and causing death by careless driving when under the influence of drink or drugs. The Bill also creates a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving, so the issue is being addressed in the Bill before the House.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am grateful to the Leader of the House for confirming that we will have the Second Reading of the Judicial Review and Courts Bill on Monday 18 October. Between now and then, will the Government reflect on the fact that the United Kingdom has today been added to the Civicus Monitor watchlist? Civicus has stated:

“Civic space is in decline in the UK, with the right to freedom of peaceful assembly repeatedly targeted”.

It also states that the

“Judicial Review and Courts Bill threatens fundamental rights and democratic checks and balances which aim to hold the government accountable”.

The other countries added to the watchlist today are Afghanistan, Belarus and Nicaragua. Surely we should be better than that.

Mr Rees-Mogg: That says more about this silly organisation than it does about Her Majesty's Government. We have a wonderful tradition of freedom of speech, and it is protected in this House under article 9 of the Bill of Rights, which has provided us with freedom of speech since the reign of William and Mary. This is fundamental to our constitution.

Peaceful protest does not mean running in front of cars and risking the lives of police officers, meaning that people who need stroke treatment may be much more seriously debilitated than they would otherwise have been. It does not mean people saying we should insulate our homes while not insulating their own homes.

They are frightful old humbugs causing trouble, distress and inconvenience, and nearly causing people to die. This depth of irresponsibility does not begin to be freedom of speech or expression, and I am afraid the organisation to which the right hon. Gentleman refers is clearly very silly.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Can we have a debate in Government time on the progress that has been made in improving the probation service since it was brought back into public ownership? Will the Leader of the House take this opportunity to admit that privatisation was a mistake?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is important that we have an effective probation service, and I was privileged to visit Birmingham prison recently and to speak to prisoners who are keen to get back on the straight and narrow when they leave prison. They need help and support to do that, and it should be provided as effectively and efficiently as possible, which is what this Government are trying to do.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Experts in the field estimate that the energy requirements of High Speed 2 trains will be five times that of conventional rail. Given that HS2 was sold to us as a green project, and given that the level of interest in the House is such that contributions to last week's 90-minute Westminster Hall debate were limited to two or three minutes—many hon. and right hon. Members who wished to participate, including me, were not even called—can we have an extended debate on the impact of HS2 on Government energy policy and the level of annual subsidy with which this loss-making project will have to be supported, if it is ever built? Can we have that debate before 2041, when, my whistleblower at the very top of HS2 tells me, phase 1 will actually be able to carry passengers between London and Birmingham?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thought whistleblowing was more for steam engines than for fast, high-speed trains, but never mind.

Obviously, the energy needed to run a train that is 440 yards long—that is two furlongs, which is an extraordinary length for a train—and going at 225 mph is more than the energy required to run Ivor the Engine. That has to be built into this country's overall energy plans, but the cost of energy to operate the HS2 network has been accounted for within the project's overall business case. This energy will be procured on the open market at the right time to start operations and achieve value for money for the taxpayer.

Once operational, HS2 will be delivering significantly lower overall carbon journeys than other modes, offering journeys at roughly half the carbon impact of intercity rail per passenger mile. The delivery into service date for phase 1 of HS2 remains 2029 to 2033, so I am interested in my hon. Friend's whistleblower and I will, of course, pass the whistle on to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Having previously called two consecutive Opposition Members, I will now call a second Conservative Member.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on special educational needs provision for young people up to the age of 25? It is crucial that we ensure young people with SEN have the support they need at school and college to maximise their life chances and job opportunities. Will he therefore join me in supporting the establishment of SEN hubs throughout the country to provide bespoke commissioning services linking health, education, care and employment support in one location?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an issue about which many in this House will be concerned. Children and young people with special educational needs should be supported to prepare for adulthood, including employment, and local authorities must include provision in their local offer. The support needs to start early and should centre on the child or young person's hopes, interests and needs. Through the special educational needs and disability review, we are committed to improving the SEND system to improve outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs and to focus on preparing them for later life and adulthood.

In terms of a debate, I see that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), is still here and he will have heard the appeal.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I take the Leader of the House back to the far off days of his childhood, watching his favourite shows "Thunderbirds", "Captain Scarlet", "Joe 90" and "Fireball XL5". As Thunderbirds Day fast approaches, will he join me in paying tribute to the late Sylvia Anderson, television and film producer, writer, voice actress and costume designer, without whom these childhood-enhancing shows would never have made it to our television screens and whose immense contribution, in common with so many iconic women in the arts, is still largely unrecognised? In the presence of Sylvia's daughter, Dee Anderson, will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on putting matters right by recognising the contribution of women to our great creative industries?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First, I apologise for thinking that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee is here, as he is not. That was my mistake.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) is right to recognise Sylvia Anderson and the happiness that she brought to countless children through her work, which ought to be recognised. I cannot promise a debate in Government time, but I would have thought an Adjournment debate to praise her work would be very well attended and would be enjoyed by children across the land.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We need to speed up a little, in both questions and answers, if we are to get everybody in, as I would like.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I know the Leader of the House is an avid reader of the *Workshop Guardian*, so he will have been astounded to find out that South Yorkshire police underspent their budget by £2 million. Does he agree that the Labour police and crime commissioner has no excuse not to reopen

[Alexander Stafford]

Dinnington police station, which was closed to save £14,000 a year? Can we have a debate in Government time to ensure that happens?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend knows that locally elected police and crime commissioners are responsible for their allocated budget. I am afraid that I am rather austere when it comes to public spending, and I think it is a good thing if people underspend rather than overspend, so I might not give him the most helpful answer. I would encourage him to campaign locally with the police and crime commissioner on the important issue of keeping police stations open.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, would support upholding the law, as I hope the Leader of the House does, particularly section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996 and the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. I remind the House that, at the height of the pandemic, 560 employees of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency centre in Swansea contracted covid and one sadly died because they were working on site, at management's request, despite Government advice that people should work from home. Can we have a statement on the background to the dispute at the DVLA in Swansea, not just the backlog but the robust allegations that political interference by Transport Ministers led to the industrial dispute with members of the Public and Commercial Services Union being prolonged?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is important to recognise that some people had to go into work to do their job properly, for security reasons or to ensure the integrity of systems, and the DVLA was one of those organisations. We are now getting back to work and people are going back to their offices, which is a thoroughly good thing.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Can we have an early debate on the role of the Committee on Standards in delivering natural justice for those against whom complaints are made? Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that, in its second report, at paragraph 53, the Committee decided that my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) did not accept that he had breached the rules of the House and that this was treated as an aggravating factor? That is in complete contrast to the rules of the Sentencing Council, which say that pleading guilty can be a mitigating factor but that contesting a case cannot be regarded as an aggravating factor. Does that not show that natural justice seems to have been thrown to the wind by the Committee on Standards?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an important point: people must be entitled, in all circumstances, to defend themselves, and it would be unfair to penalise somebody who believed they had acted in good faith for that belief. The assumption must very often be that Members do act in good faith. That is not to say that we do not make mistakes, but to defend oneself must be a natural right of Members of Parliament.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The Leader of the House may be aware that last week a High Court judge refused the Cabinet Office leave to appeal against

a first-tier tribunal decision that it should release information to me that I had requested under the Freedom of Information Act concerning public opinion research in Scotland. Sadly, earlier this morning the Cabinet Office's Minister without Portfolio, the right hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) declined to confirm that the Department would comply with that ruling. May we have a debate in Government time on why the Cabinet Office is acting as a rogue Department within government and refusing to comply both with the law of the land and with the courts?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I remind the hon. Gentleman that the guidance given to Ministers is that answers given in this House should be at least as full as those given to Freedom of Information requests. So he may wish to table a written question, because that ought to have exactly the same effect and would use the procedures of this House. However, Her Majesty's Government obey the rule of law.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Tomorrow, is the grand reopening of the Salvatorian College, a Catholic academy for boys aged 11 to 16 in Wealdstone, in my constituency. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the diocese, the Department, the staff, the governors and the children on achieving this tremendous new facility? Does he agree that it is good to have first-rate buildings for an excellent faith-based education?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I congratulate the Salvatorian College on its reopening and all those involved with it? It may not surprise my hon. Friend to know that I think there are huge advantages in Catholic education and it should be widely encouraged. Having good and suitable buildings is very important; there is the great line of Churchill's that we all know so well that I will not repeat it.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Sue is a single mum and a former nurse. She wrote to me saying,

"The 20-pound a week Universal Credit uplift was a relief...but now it's being taken away and I don't know what to do... I can barely exist and I am terrified."

My inbox is filled by accounts such as that. The papers tell me that the Leader of the House has just been paid £600,000 from share dividends. I ask him for a debate, so that he and the other Conservative Members can explain how they sleep at night knowing that they are robbing people such as Sue and plunging 800,000 more into poverty.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The answer I gave earlier was that we have reduced the number of people in absolute poverty by 700,000 since 2010. An extra £8 billion was provided for the welfare system during the pandemic. Other systems are still in place: there has been the increase in the living wage, and an increase in the tax allowance. All of these have combined to make people better off. That is fundamentally important. It is the right way for the Government to be going. The £20 a week extra on universal credit was a temporary measure during the height of the pandemic, and to pay for this would cost the equivalent of 13.5p on a gallon of a petrol. These things have to be paid for and there are limited resources.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): There are several contentious development proposals in my constituency, including the redevelopment of South Ken tube station

and the sale by the Mayor of London of Notting Hill police station. Does my right hon. Friend agree that residents' voices need to be heard in deciding how their local communities develop and that they need to be at the heart of the planning process? Will he contemplate a debate on this topic?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We will be bringing forward the planning Bill and publishing a response to the White Paper consultation in due course. It is important that local people have a say in how planning takes place. It is amazing how few people take part in it now, under the current system. There are opportunities for them to do so, but they are not always taken. I would say to my hon. Friend that Kensington is extremely fortunate to have her as its representative, because she is always a voice for her constituents, and for their interests and thoughts on planning, and long may that remain so.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The Leader of the House was very helpful in June when he passed my request for a focus on childhood cancer research to the Department of Health and Social Care. I am sure he knows that it is Childhood Cancer Awareness Month, and perhaps he will encourage hon. Members to sign my early-day motion 428 on that topic.

[That this House acknowledges that September is Childhood Cancer Awareness Month; notes that blood cancers are the most common cancers affecting children and young people and that acute lymphoblastic leukaemia (ALL), a type of leukaemia where cancerous cells build up in the bone marrow, is the most common cancer diagnosed in children, further notes that ALL is an acute leukaemia, which means it develops quickly and needs treatment straight away; recognises there are around 790 diagnoses of ALL in the UK each year, including over 500 in people aged under 25; welcomes signs that improvements in outcomes for children and young people with ALL have been driven by improvements in treatment related to clinical trials, including the use of CAR-T therapy, which has been effective in curing some patients with advanced cancers where other treatments have failed; expresses its appreciation for the work of groups such as the Teenage Cancer Trust and Children's Cancer and Leukaemia Group who are working to provide and improve the care and treatment of young people with ALL, supporting them and their families through the aftermath of a diagnosis and the extended period of treatment, which may last for two or more years; and calls on the Government to provide additional funding and support for research into promising treatments, such as CAR-T therapy, and effective means of recognising the signs and symptoms of ALL and other childhood cancers to ensure early diagnosis, which plays such an important role in ensuring survival from these distressing diseases.]

I think there is a bit of a logjam in correspondence, so I wonder whether he would also help me by giving his colleagues a nudge and by facilitating a debate on childhood cancer research in Government time. These children and families really need to know that this research is an absolute priority, one that the Government understand.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, of course I will provide a nudge if any specific correspondence is outstanding. I think it would break all possible convention if a Minister encouraged Members to sign an early-day motion, but

may I say that I think the hon. Lady's early-day motion sounds extremely worthy, if that is a good enough hint for her? As for a debate on childhood cancer research and awareness, I think that is very important, but I suggest it is a matter for the Backbench Business Committee.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Knife crime is a problem in Northamptonshire and it is not being helped by lenient sentencing. Ministry of Justice data show that last year in Northamptonshire there were 39 cases where an offender was convicted or cautioned for a second time or more over the possession of a knife or offensive weapon. In 20 cases the culprit was given an immediate jail sentence, but in 15 cases the repeat offender was not sent straight to prison. The Leader of the House will know that the law says that adults already convicted of the crime should face a minimum six-month jail term under the "two strikes and you are out" system brought in six years ago. Across the country, one third of repeat knife possession cases did not result in an immediate jail sentence. May we have an urgent statement from the MOJ about the courts issuing the sentences that the law demands?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The punishment must fit the crime, and the Government are taking urgent action to tackle knife crime and keep people safe, in addition to hiring 20,000 additional police officers. We are spending £40 million this financial year to tackle drugs supply and county lines, building on the successful results of our £25 million county lines programme, and £130.5 million to tackle serious violence and homicide this financial year, including funding for targeted police interventions and the introduction of serious violence reduction orders, which will make it easier for officers to stop and search those convicted of a knife crime. In addition, my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General can apply for unduly lenient sentences to be increased. So there are things in place, but it is fundamental to our constitution that Parliament passes the law, which the judges must then implement as we have passed it.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I was really pleased that in the Queen's Speech the Government announced that they were going to make the armed forces covenant statutory and that they were going to introduce a covenant for the police as well. Between 9 March 2020 and 7 May 2021, 1,561 NHS and social care workers died from covid-19, on the frontline of the pandemic. May we have a debate, in Government time, about why we need to have a covenant for the NHS and social care workers, to ensure that they are protected just as we want to make sure that the armed forces and the police are protected?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The right hon. Lady always raises points of great importance in this House, and the work done by people on the frontline during covid was of fundamental importance. I think that this is initially a subject for a Backbench Business debate to raise this issue and whether covenants may be appropriate in other areas beyond the armed forces and the police, but I will certainly take it up with the Department concerned.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): Since a fire at the Bilsdale mast on 13 August, many of my constituents have been left without access to terrestrial TV services. Many of my constituents have contacted me about this

[Peter Gibson]

issue and especially about the impact it has had on elderly loved ones who rely on these services for company. With no concrete date by which these services will be restored, will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the Bilsdale mast fire and the impact it has had on communities, such as mine in the north-east?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important issue, which my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) raised with me last week. I understand that my hon. Friends attended a meeting with the Minister responsible at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Arqiva, which is responsible for the mast. The point that my hon. Friend made is spot on: terrestrial television channels such as ITV are important in the lives of many people, especially the elderly and vulnerable, who are often alone for extended periods and find such channels an important form of comfort and company. As I understand it, the Bilsdale mast is in a particularly remote location, which has provided certain challenges, but I hear that a temporary mast may be constructed before 8 October, so I think some good news is in the pipeline.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Today is Loss and Damage Awareness Day. For COP26 to be counted as a success, rich nations must commit to a fund of at least \$100 billion for developing countries to adapt to the climate crisis. The Government have announced that they will contribute \$2.3 billion to the fund—except that money is to be taken from the slashed foreign aid budget. Is robbing Peter to pay Paul the way that the UK, as the host of COP26, should lead by example? Will the Leader of the House ask the COP26 President, the right hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma) to come to the Chamber to explain the position?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That \$2.3 billion is not an amount of money to be sniffed at. There is a limited budget for funds, so it is right that that money comes from the overseas development budget because that is what it is.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has committed to four targets for COP26 in Glasgow this year: first, to secure global net zero by mid-century and keep the 2.7 °F target within reach; secondly, to adapt to protect communities and natural habitats; thirdly, to mobilise finance—developed countries must make good on their promise to mobilise at least \$100 billion in climate finance by 2020; and fourthly, to work together to deliver and finalise the Paris rulebook, which comprises the detailed rules that make the Paris agreement operational, and accelerate action to tackle the climate crisis through collaboration among Governments, businesses and civil society. The Government's policy is very much in line with what the hon. Lady asks for.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I have previously raised in the House my concerns and those of my constituents about the decision by Warrington Borough Council to borrow £1.6 billion to invest in business around the UK. One of those businesses is a domestic energy supplier, Together Energy. The total exposure for taxpayers in Warrington is £41 million, and we are seeing what is happening in the energy sector. Will the Leader of the House schedule a debate in Government

time on the decisions that councils are taking, so that we can have absolutely clear transparency? Does he agree that action of this type is absolutely irresponsible?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We must have shorter questions.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises a point of concern. When I served on the Treasury Committee some years ago, I tried to encourage its then Chairman, my noble Friend Lord Tyrie, to hold an inquiry into the borrowing by councils of money for speculative investments, which is obviously a risk. I am glad to tell my hon. Friend that on 28 July the Government published plans to strengthen the capital framework to prevent councils from taking on excessive risk. That must be the right thing to do.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Two weeks ago today, I attended Mr Speaker's state apartments to meet members of the Climate Assembly who a year ago produced an excellent report on climate change and the actions we need to take. The assembly was a great example of how to bring people together to discuss such important issues. The Government have said that they plan to set out their wider public engagement strategy "shortly", but the clock is ticking and time is running out, so will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in Government time on the Government's strategy? I thank the Backbench Business Committee for scheduling a general debate on the issue when we return after the recess.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady has, in a way, answered her own question, because there will be a debate on this important issue. I have just set out the four targets for COP26, and there will be questions to the President-elect of COP26 on 20 October, shortly after the House has returned from recess.

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): On Monday, an unauthorised Travellers' camp was set up on Torr Top car park in the centre of New Mills, blocking the car park, including the disabled bays, for all other users. This has caused concern, particularly among local businesses on the high street that are worried about the impact of the loss of the car park on their customers and footfall. May we have a debate on the laws relating to trespass and look at whether we need to give the police more powers so that they can take action on such cases in future?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this matter. The Government's overarching aim is to ensure fair and equal treatment for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in a way that facilitates their traditional nomadic way of life. However, we are equally clear that we will not tolerate law-breaking and are determined to ensure that police have the powers they need to support and serve their communities. I will take up my hon. Friend's concerns with the Home Secretary, because it is important that the law should apply equally to all.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): In a debate yesterday, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said as an aside that Northern Ireland would no longer be subject to the EU state aid regime and that changes to the Northern Ireland protocol

had been sought to ensure that would happen. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a ministerial statement on proposed changes to the Northern Ireland protocol and the process that the Government will undertake to attempt to make them?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is right to raise the Northern Ireland protocol, which is a matter of discussion between Her Majesty's Government and the European Union. It is clearly not working properly at the moment, and we cannot allow our country to be divided by the actions of the European Union and their interpretation of the agreement that we came to. Last week, my right hon. and noble Friend Lord Frost made a statement to their lordships that was reported in this House by my right hon. and learned Friend the Paymaster General, so these things are being brought to the attention of the House and will, I am sure, be brought to the House's attention in future.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): My right hon. Friend will have seen the chaos caused on the M25 this week by Insulate Britain. I am pleased that a number of protesters have been arrested and that an injunction has been served. My concern is that they might simply go to another strategically important road somewhere else in the country. Will my right hon. Friend find Government time for us to debate how the law may need to change so that we can instantly and robustly deal with and move on these troublemakers?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. A lot of these people are being exposed as the most ridiculous humbugs. I think it is *The Sun* that has discovered that they pretend to want insulation but do not insulate not only the houses that they live in but the houses that they let out to other people. One of them stormed off some television programme in a great huff when it was revealed that he was a frightful old humbug. We should know these people for what they are: silly, dangerous and hippie-crites.

I am glad to tell my hon. Friend that the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which is under consideration in the Lords, contains proportionate measures to enable the police to deal better with disruptive protests. By putting public nuisance on a statutory footing, as recommended by the independent Law Commission, it will increase the powers available to the police for dealing with protests of that sort. Proper, peaceful protest and freedom of speech are fundamental, but causing risk to life and liberty is not.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the York Medical Group, which enabled me to spend last Friday with the group to see the capacity challenges that our GPs face. On our return from recess, may we have a statement on the crisis faced by primary care and its inability to cope with the demand it has to deal with?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, we should have a clear statement that people ought to be able to get face-to-face appointments. This is fundamental and really important. I have had complaints from my own constituents, one of whose cases was reported in detail in *The Telegraph* because they almost died because of the inability to get a face-to-face appointment. Another of my constituents

was told off and told to go to A&E instead of going to her GP. It is not satisfactory. GP appointments need to go back to being face-to-face and the Government have been clear on that. I urge GPs to reopen their surgeries and see people.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Leader of the House consider providing time for a debate on the need to uplift the child-benefit threshold to allow single-parent working families to ask for the increase needed to address inflation? Gas prices in Northern Ireland have jumped by 30% due to the Northern Ireland protocol, among other issues, and further rises are upcoming. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is right and proper for the House to consider an uplift to the threshold in line with inflation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is a rare occasion when I do not see eye-to-eye with the hon. Gentleman. As always, I am grateful for his diligent attendance in the House and representation of his constituents. The Government's approach charges the high-income child benefit charge on those who are on higher incomes, while leaving the majority of child-benefit claimants unaffected. This ensures that everyone makes a fair contribution while those with the lowest incomes continue to be supported. The Government are committed to managing the public finances in a disciplined and responsible way by targeting support where it is most needed. The £50,000 threshold affects only a small minority of those with comparatively high incomes. The Government believe that the current threshold for the high-income child benefit charge remains the best option. As always, it is of course about a balance, in these difficult financial times, between the support the Government can provide with taxpayers' money and the need to ensure that we live within our means.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I am very concerned about a British citizen, Michael Brian Smith, who continues to be detained in the United Arab Emirates despite having received a pardon and having subsequently completed his original sentence, particularly as his health is deteriorating as a result of AIDS and kidney cancer. May I ask that the UK Government do all they can, including making further urgent representations to the relevant UAE authorities, to help secure his release soon on humanitarian grounds? I fear that time is running out for Mr Smith and it would be tragic if he were to die in prison in the UAE. Can we have a debate more widely in Government time on human rights in the UAE?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I cannot promise the debate, though I may guide the hon. Lady towards an Adjournment debate in relation to Mr Smith. I will take up the case that she has brought to my attention with the Foreign Office immediately after this session.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Leader of the House for the Business statement.

We come now to the Backbench Business debates, the first of which is on Baby Loss Awareness Week. As colleagues will see, the two debates are well subscribed. I hope that they will bear that in mind when considering how long they will speak for.

Backbench Business

Baby Loss Awareness Week

12.51 pm

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of Baby Loss Awareness Week.

Ahead of Baby Loss Awareness Week 2021, which falls in recess this year, between 9 and 15 October, it was important to bring this debate to the House to highlight the fantastic strides that are being made in this area, to underline where more needs to be achieved, and for Members to reflect not only on their own personal experiences, but on those of our constituents.

Considering that one in 14 babies dies before, during or soon after birth, Baby Loss Awareness Week continues to be an essential focal point for bereaved families. I thank hon. and right hon. Members across the House—those who are here today and those who are unable to be here—for their solid and unwavering support for this most difficult of issues. I am grateful to those who have spared the time to speak and I pay particular thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for enabling this consideration to return to the Chamber, illustrating to bereaved families across the country how important their experiences are to representatives in this place.

On the run-up to this debate, I have been struck by the number of colleagues from all parts of the House who have spoken to me privately about their losses. Many are still simply unable to speak in public about their own experience, as it is still too difficult, even after many years.

As co-chair of the all-party group on baby loss, I have received wonderful support from: my co-chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), who has utilised his knowledge and expertise to advance the cause; the many bereavement charities; and Ministers from the Department of Health and Social Care, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), who, as Minister, totally comprehended the issues and championed much progress in this area.

In that vein, I warmly welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), to her place and look forward to continuing the excellent work already begun. In addition, I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Saqib Bhatti) would have been here to speak had he not been promoted to the Health and Social Care Front-Bench team. He was marshalling the Balsall Common Fun Run and, on his behalf, I pay tribute to the Lily Mae Foundation for organising nearly 1,000 runners.

Last year was my first such experience in this role. I told the story of my loss—the diagnosis of severe spina bifida at the 20-week scan, and the choice, which is actually no choice at all, to terminate. I talked about the termination itself, the delivery, the cuddles and the kisses for my tiny daughter, Lily, and, finally, letting her go—you never really let them go, though, do you? I talked about how difficult it was to leave the hospital without my baby, about how it physically aches, and about how a part of my heart and soul had been left behind.

I wish to put on record my thanks again to the wonderful bereavement midwifery team at the Royal Cornwall Hospital in Truro. The kindness and compassion that they showed us in our darkest hours will never be forgotten. My work in this place, on this very subject, has given me a focus to channel my energy, but I will not lie that it is difficult at times. My grieving is now done quietly at home in stolen moments with her photograph—

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is an amazing achievement for her to bring this debate today and that she will get cross-party support from all of us?

Cherilyn Mackrory *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): If the hon. Lady wants to take a break, we can take another speaker and come back to her if that is what she would like.

Cherilyn Mackrory: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your words and my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) for intervening.

Today, I wish to extend my sincere condolences to anyone who has experienced the loss of a baby. To anyone to whom this has happened, despite what they may see, I say that the sun will shine again. It does not feel like it now, but one day it just does. For me, the dark clouds of shock, anger, guilt and dreadful, dreadful sadness do eventually dissipate—

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I pay huge tribute to my hon. Friend for her courage in coming to this place to share her views. I know that she is speaking for so many people who have such a tough time, whether through miscarriage or stillbirth. This was her terrible experience of a child who was not going to make it, but all of us here have her back. We all agree with her, and there are so many people here who would like nothing more than to see much more done in that critical period of maternity. All our thanks go to her for her bravery today.

Cherilyn Mackrory: I thank my right hon. Friend for her intervention and kind words.

I entered Parliament and suddenly had the opportunity to speak with many people who had experienced the loss of a baby. Unlike me, many have no idea why their baby had died. As well as prevention of baby loss, which I will come to later, my focus in this place is on the care for bereaved families. The all-party group was instrumental in the creation of the Government-backed national bereavement care pathway, which seeks to improve the quality and consistency of bereavement care received by parents in NHS trusts in England after pregnancy or baby loss.

There are different experiences from place to place. While the Department of Health and Social Care strongly urges the trusts to take part in the pathway, mandating it and its nine standards would lead to greater time, funding and resources being made available to healthcare professionals to deliver this. Poor bereavement care, from the moment of diagnosis and the breaking of bad news, exacerbates the profound pain felt by parents. Although approaches to bereavement care in

the UK have greatly improved in recent years, inconsistency still remains, often resulting in a postcode lottery for parents.

As of last month, all NHS trusts in England have either expressed interest in, or formally committed to, implementing the pathway within their hospitals and their services. Trusts require additional funding, however, to fully implement the standards, especially to ensure that every hospital has an appropriate bereavement suite, specialist staff and training.

As I mentioned earlier, the care that we received in Cornwall on the weekend that we lost Lily was second to none. However, while I was able to access bereavement counselling through my work, my husband has never been offered anything. It is my opinion that supporting partners and the wider family are not being looked after in the way that we would hope. Because the mother births the child, dads and supporting partners often feel the need to be “strong”—to be there for them. People often ask how mum is, but may not ask how dad is. That is not healthy. What about the wider family? Grandparents are grieving for their lost grandchild and wondering how best to support. Siblings are wondering what has happened.

My daughter was only four when we lost Lily. She knew I was pregnant and we tried to explain what had happened in an age-appropriate way. She seemed to accept this as children do and did not mention it again—until a couple of weeks ago. Completely out of the blue and without warning, she said, “Mummy, when I was four, you were going to have a baby but then didn’t.” Crikey! Wham! What do you do? On the hoof, I needed to explain calmly to my now almost seven-year-old what had happened. I do not know whether I explained it in the right way, but she knows now that, if there are questions, we are always here. I do not want it to be a spectre on her childhood to wonder what happened to her mystery sister. It reminded me that a child’s mind can often make up what they do not know, and we need to make sure that siblings and the wider bereaved family are cared for long after the event.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for her bravery in speaking about such a personal and intimate matter. She speaks about partners and the wider family. There has never been a more important point about ensuring that both affected parents are able to take leave. Does she support my Miscarriage Leave Bill, which will ensure that both parents can take paid leave during this traumatic time?

Cherilyn Mackrory: The hon. Member and I have spoken about this issue. Since that conversation, I have taken her Bill to the Employment Minister, so I hope that we will hear more about it later in the year.

Despite our making good progress, more needs to be done if the Government’s ambition to halve baby deaths by 2025 is to be met. If the current trajectory of reducing stillbirths is maintained, England may be off meeting that 2025 ambition. The Health and Social Care Committee report noted:

“The improvements in rates of stillbirths and neonatal deaths are good but are not shared equally among all women and babies. Babies from minority ethnic or socioeconomically deprived backgrounds continue to be at significantly greater risk of perinatal death than their white or less deprived peers.”

Babies should not be at higher risk simply because of their parents’ postcode, ethnicity or income. I will let my APPG co-chair and Chair of the Select Committee speak to the findings of the report. However, it appears that health inequalities in maternity outcomes have been known about for more than 70 years, yet there are still no evidence-based interventions taking place to reduce the risks.

Continuity of carer could significantly improve outcomes for women from ethnic minorities and those living in deprived areas. Way back in 2010, the Marmot review proposed a strategy to address the social determinants of health through six policy objectives, with the highest priority objective being to give every child the best start in life. Marmot noted that in utero environments affect adult health. Maternal health—including stress, diet, drug and alcohol abuse, and tobacco use during pregnancy—has a significant influence on foetal and early brain development. Midwives have a key role in promoting public health. Individual needs and concerns can be better addressed when midwives know the woman and her family, and continuity of carer is a key enabler of that. This public health work is of most benefit to vulnerable and at-risk families, who may require more time and tailored resources. Additional work is required to address the needs of these groups, because they are simply more at risk.

As well as improving clinical outcomes for mothers and babies, continuity of carer models can also result in cost savings compared with traditional models of care, because there are fewer premature babies, so fewer neonatal cot days are required; the incremental cost per pre-term child surviving to 18 years compared with a term survivor is estimated at nearly £23,000, and most of the additional costs are likely to occur in the early years of a child’s life; there are fewer obstetric interventions, with women 10% less likely to have an instrumental birth; and there are fewer epidurals and so on.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): Does the hon. Member share a concern that has been raised with me by midwives—that the term “continuity of carer” has been misinterpreted by some trusts, with multiple midwives seeing people in their early appointments to increase the chance that that person will see the same midwife in hospital?

Cherilyn Mackrory: Although it would be fantastic to have just one midwife, continuity of carer is actually more likely to mean two midwives or a very small team of midwives. The idea is that the patient can trust that small team, open up to them more and work with them for their own health and the health of their baby.

A continuity of carer model can assist with outside issues affecting a pregnancy, including by picking up on signs of domestic abuse. Sands, the bereavement charity, is calling for an additional Government-funded confidential inquiry into tackling inequalities in this area. Confidential inquiries have been crucial in driving down maternal and perinatal death rates in some groups. These in-depth reviews of all case notes conclude within a finite period and with solid recommendations. Previous confidential inquiries—for example, into term stillbirths and deaths in labour—have transformed our understanding of the changes needed to make care safer, and have contributed significantly to reducing deaths in some groups.

[Cherilyn Mackrory]

The additional risks faced by women from black and minority ethnic groups have been exacerbated by covid, and this highlights the urgent need to improve equity in maternity. The UK Obstetric Surveillance System study found that more than half of pregnant women admitted to hospital during the pandemic with a covid infection in pregnancy were from an ethnic background.

In June 2020, the chief midwifery officer, Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent, wrote to all NHS midwifery services highlighting the impact of covid-19, and the additional risks faced by women and babies from ethnic minorities. The letter called on the services to take four specific actions to minimise this additional risk: increase support of at-risk pregnant women, including by ensuring that clinicians have a lower threshold to review, admit and consider women from ethnic backgrounds; reach out and reassure women from ethnic backgrounds, with tailored communications; ensure that hospitals discuss vitamin supplements and nutrition in pregnancy, particularly vitamin D; and ensure that all providers record on maternity information systems the ethnicity of every woman, as well as other risk factors, such as living in a deprived postcode area, co-morbidities and so on.

The national maternity review's 2016 report "Better Births" highlighted the increased risk of twins and multiple births. Tamba—now known as the Twins Trust—and the National Childbirth Trust told the report that there needs to be greater recognition of high-risk groups, such as those who have multiple births. Some 10% to 15% of such babies have an unexpected admission to a neonatal unit. The Multiple Births Foundation has said that risks and complications associated with multiple births are still poorly understood by the public and are underestimated by professionals. Multiple births have gone up and the mortality rate is higher among people who have those pregnancies. Again, more research is needed to understand better the risks posed by multiple births. Owing to the increase in fertility treatment and the increased maternal age, twins and multiple births are on the increase, so we must do better to ensure better outcomes.

I again thank colleagues who are here today, and those who have worked so hard in this sector to ensure that babies and their families have the very best outcomes. There is a lot of work still to do. I look forward to my engagement with the new Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who I know will share our passion and use her vast experience to advance these causes.

We approach this year's Baby Loss Awareness Week with events being held around the country and reflection in our hearts. The annual wave of light gives those of us who have suffered a loss the opportunity to light a candle in memory of our babies at the same time. It is a powerful signal, with thousands of people sharing messages and photos of their candles, showing just how many families are suffering with their own grief. This issue matters to every single Member of Parliament; it affects us all.

Let us use this opportunity to speak openly about our children, and to ensure that fewer and fewer families have to suffer this experience in the future. I am proud to lead a debate in this place that shows Parliament and parliamentarians at their very best. This important

issue rises above party divisions, and, as we have seen today, the compassion of Members towards one another shines through.

1.8 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I did not expect to be called to speak so early in the debate; thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I again thank my friend, the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory), for her bravery and for sharing her experience on the Floor of the House. It matters to the people at home to know that we politicians are also human beings, and that we also feel grief and loss.

Whether a pregnancy was planned or a surprise, that moment of seeing two lines on a pregnancy test stick will stay with many parents for a lifetime. Equally, for many who are trying to conceive, a faint one line or "not pregnant" will stay with them also, each and every time they receive it. Pregnancy can be a joyous, happy celebration for many. Perhaps that is why we often choose not to speak of the sadness and heartbreak when a pregnancy loss happens. Tragically, one in four pregnancies will end in miscarriage. The experience of miscarriage, along with the grief and loss associated with the miscarriage or stillbirth, will resonate for one too many parents. Every pregnancy loss is different, and there is no right or wrong way to feel about it. Sadly, many patients feel stigma. They feel a sense of shame or a failure that they could not conceive or, even when they can, that the pregnancy does not result in a happy birth.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech that resonates with so many of us who have suffered baby loss. Will she commend, with me, the campaign run by my constituent Louise Caldwell? She is campaigning for a dedicated miscarriage unit after having to give birth to her child who was sadly lost, not in a miscarriage way, and suffering real compounded trauma from having to be in the maternity wing of the hospital while other parents were celebrating and she was bereaved and her whole family were devastated? Will she also congratulate the Scottish Government on taking forward an initiative to have dedicated miscarriage wings?

Angela Crawley: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that very valid point. I commend Louise for her bravery and for making sure that the Scottish Government will adopt a new policy to prevent people in future from having to undergo that experience of happiness in among the sadness at that very tragic moment.

Many partners will blame themselves and often feel helpless in this situation. Thanks to the work of my hon. Friends the Members for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and for Glasgow East (David Linden), only last year bereavement legislation was introduced that entitles parents who lose a baby after 24 weeks to two weeks' paid bereavement leave. However, there is currently no provision in place for parents who lose a baby before 24 weeks. Too many parents—mothers, fathers, partners and any parents who are facing this tragic incident—are forced to take sick leave or unpaid leave. Understandably, many do not wish to disclose these private and intimate details to their employer, especially in the early stages of pregnancy.

Grief is not an illness. In and of itself, it is a process that parents must go through. There is simply no timeline for grief. Every parent, regardless of whether the loss happens after 24 weeks or before, should be given the time to grieve that loss without a financial penalty. That is why I have introduced a private Member's Bill that would allow parents who experience a miscarriage before 24 weeks to seek a minimum of three days' paid leave. Some companies have already gone further, offering leave for seven to 14 days—an example that I hope many more employers will replicate and that I absolutely welcome. This compassion and recognition of the loss and the grief that comes with a miscarriage, whether in policy or in statute, would allow parents to approach their employer and seek a legal right to paid leave.

This traumatic life event will inevitably affect both parents differently. There is a cost associated with such a loss, as many parents opt to take unpaid or sick leave, so there is already a financial penalty for people up and down the country. Often an employer has no idea what the nature of their employee's sickness is, or the ramifications for their business. Therefore, having a policy on this issue, or the right to take paid leave in statute, should not add any further burden to them. Rather, it would allow the conversation to take place where both employee and employer can understand the situation and hopefully seek to support their employee in the best way that they can. Many parents have spoken of feeling isolated and alone, without the opportunity to share their loss with colleagues for fear of the shame and stigma that have been associated with such a loss. Introducing a minimum of three days' paid leave would not only give parents a chance to grieve and process their loss but show everyone that miscarriage is no one's fault and help to break that stigma.

1.13 pm

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): It really is an honour to follow two such extremely powerful and persuasive speeches. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) for her courage in bringing Lily's story to this House. It is actually a rather wonderful thing that she is giving such meaning to Lily's life by talking about what happened so openly. The grief that she expressed so eloquently is shared by 1,700 families in our country every single year, so she is speaking for a lot of families up and down the country. Her words will resonate, so I thank her. It was not easy to do. But like many families who are bereaved, she has taken the decision to relive that grief over and over again to try to stop that tragedy being repeated, and I think we all salute her courage in doing so.

My hon. Friend said something that resonated particularly with me when she talked about the grief of fathers. I cannot claim to have experienced anything like the grief that she and her husband have experienced, but my father did, because my sister Sarah died when she was just six months old. I was there at the time. I was only two so I had no memory of it. During my father's entire life—he died eight years ago—my mother used to tell us never to mention Sarah because he found it so hard. That reflects the comment of the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) that there is no timeline for grief.

Angela Crawley: Does the right hon. Gentleman believe, as I do, that fathers, like mothers and like any parent, have the right to have a grieving process and should have the right to paid leave in order to do so?

Jeremy Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me a moment to recover. She makes a very powerful argument. Without committing to supporting her proposal, I would hope that all employers would listen to her speech and offer that leave voluntarily on compassionate grounds, because that is the responsible and kind thing to do.

I want, in my brief comments, to talk about another group of people less often talked about who also feel this grief—the doctors, nurses and midwives responsible for a child's care. Some people have used the phrase "second victim" to describe the agonising sadness people feel when they are responsible for a child's care and that child dies. When I was Health Secretary, many times I asked people working in hospitals what the biggest tragedy and professional shock they had ever had was, and they would often say that it related to the death of a child. Even more acute is when that death was caused by an error. Those doctors, nurses, midwives and frontline professionals, who go into their profession with the highest and noblest of motives, have to live with the fact that perhaps because of an ordinary human mistake—the kind of mistake that all of us can make—something really terrible happened.

We as politicians, and those in nearly every other profession, make mistakes the whole time—a media appearance goes wrong, a speech goes down badly, we lose an election, or whatever it is—but the consequence is not someone dying. Frontline health professionals have the courage to go into a profession where they are taking that risk every day. When those tragedies happen, those frontline professionals want nothing more than to be completely open, transparent and honest about what happened so that we can learn from the mistake and put in place processes and systems so that it never happens again. But, in truth, we make it practically impossible for them to do that. They are terrified about losing their job, about the Care Quality Commission, about being struck off the medical or nursing register, about the reputation of their unit, about the reputation of their hospital, and about lawyers, who get involved very quickly.

When I was Health Secretary—I do not think this has changed even now—every week I signed off a multimillion-pound payment to a family whose child was disabled for life because of medical error that the NHS accepted. Most weeks it happened twice. Overall, the cost of that compensation for medical error in the NHS is £2.4 billion a year. Just under half of that relates to maternity. We have got to the obscene situation where we pay more in compensation to families when something has gone wrong than on the entire cost of every doctor and every nurse working in maternity units up and down the country. Why is that? It is because of a simple problem that the Health and Social Care Committee—I am delighted to see members of the Committee in their places on both sides of the House—is urgently asking the Government to address.

If, because of a mistake, a child is born disabled, the parents quite understandably want financial support to deal with the unexpected costs that the family will face for the whole of that child's life. However, under the law,

[Jeremy Hunt]

the only way to get that compensation is if a court agrees that there was clinical negligence. Quite understandably, parents will fight to get that compensation and, also understandably, the doctors, nurses and midwives become defensive if they are accused of clinical negligence. It does not have to be that way. We need a system where people are entitled to compensation as soon as it is accepted that a mistake was made without the necessity to prove clinical negligence.

The country with the highest safety standards and the lowest number of baby deaths in Europe is Sweden, which has about half our level of baby deaths. In Sweden, compensation is given more quickly just on the basis of a mistake being made, with the result not that they pay more but that they pay massively less, because they have half the number of tragedies that we have. Surely those of us who are passionate about patient safety will support that, and those who are—as we all are—worried about baby deaths will support that. Even people in the Treasury should understand that the way to reduce the obscene compensation bill is to make it easier for families in those terrible situations to claim compensation. If we had the same maternity safety levels as Sweden, 1,000 more babies would survive every single year. Just think of the heartache and the transformation in the lives of families up and down the country were we to do that.

I turn briefly to the other recommendations in the Select Committee's report, published in July. One of the most important recommendations relates to staffing. When it comes to medical error, if there are not enough staff on a ward, the likelihood of mistakes will self-evidently be higher. Eight out of 10 midwives say that there are not enough midwives on their shifts, and Health Education England—the Government's own body—says that there is a shortage of just over 1,900 midwives across the system. NHS Providers thinks that there is a shortage of about 500 doctors in maternity units and the Royal College of Anaesthetists says that there is a shortage across the system of about 1,000 anaesthetists. The cost of putting that right is between £200 million and £350 million a year. That is a significant amount. The Government deserve credit for already agreeing to put in £95 million a year, but that additional cost is as nothing compared to the £2.4 billion that we are paying in compensation every year. I hope that the Government will agree to put right that staffing shortfall. They have said this week that they are considering that.

Training is another vital issue. It is so important for doctors, nurses and midwives to have the time to learn from things that go wrong and to improve systems, but they can do that only if there is protected time for training in their busy schedules. I commend Baby Lifeline for the fantastic, proven training that it does, which has saved many lives. It is led by the inspirational Judy Ledger, who was inspired to do what she does by her tragedies. The report also talks about more screening and health inequalities, both of which were mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth.

I finish with two brief points. First, it would be wrong to say that this is an NHS problem. It is a tragedy that happens in all countries all over the world, and this year the World Health Organisation has made maternal and newborn loss the theme of World Patient Safety

Day. The WHO says that, every day across the world, 7,000 babies die and the majority of those deaths are preventable.

Finally, we should remember the tremendous progress that has been made. In the last decade, the number of neonatal deaths is down by 25% and the number of stillbirths is down 30%. I commend Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent and Matthew Jolly in NHS England, who are leading the maternity safety transformation programme, and the many doctors, nurses and midwives who are supporting them. I also commend charities such as Sands and the Lullaby Trust as well as many others. Most of all, I commend the families who have campaigned through thick and thin, including James Titcombe, remembering his son Joshua; Derek Richford, remembering his grandson Harry; Carl Hendrickson, remembering his son Chester and his wife Nittaya; and Richard Stanton and Rhiannon Davies, remembering their daughter Kate. There are many others. Five babies die every single day. This is our moment to put it right.

1.25 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in the debate and to follow the incredibly moving and personal contributions of so many hon. Members. I thank in particular the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) for her bravery and strength. By speaking out and helping to remove the stigma around these conversations, she will have helped thousands of families in all our constituencies. That is Lily's legacy.

I have previously spoken in this place about the loss that I felt not having a child because of infertility. There was the pain that I felt whenever I saw a woman pushing a pram, the guilt of jealousy at every celebratory pregnancy announcement on social media, and my declining every baby shower invite I received. There was the shame of knowing that my body had failed me, but I also know how incredibly privileged I am because I did get my happy ending.

My husband and I always knew that the road to pregnancy would be difficult. After a miracle round of privately funded IVF—we were denied NHS funding because I was a stepmum—we were delighted to be pregnant with our first child. I was, hand on heart, absolutely ecstatic about the prospect of motherhood. I always knew that I was desperate to be a mother and, despite our difficulties, I loved every moment of being pregnant. However, as is often the case, life was more than ready to cause chaos.

When my son arrived two weeks early after an emergency caesarean, he stopped breathing. My beautiful child, my longed-for child, was whisked away to a neonatal intensive care unit where he spent two weeks fighting for survival while my husband and I were utterly beside ourselves with anxiety. Both of us were completely broken at the thought of losing our little one. I know that feeling is shared by so many parents across the country. Indeed, it is a common interest shared by members of the all-party parliamentary group on premature and sick babies, of which I am a proud vice-chair. I encourage colleagues speaking in the debate to sign up. We are a small group led by my friend the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), with a focused interest in how to support parents of babies who pass away or who are born premature or sick.

With that in mind, I must thank the many charities who support families such as ours who have been campaigning to change things for the better for many years. Bliss and the Baby Loss Awareness Week Alliance are just two of the fantastic groups doing brilliant work. I am grateful for their support in preparing for the debate.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I very much welcome my hon. Friend's speech. Will she join me in congratulating baby loss charity Forever Stars, based in Nottinghamshire, which successfully fundraised to provide improved facilities to support bereaved parents at both Nottingham's hospitals, supports families with emotional support and practical advice and information, and this summer opened a remembrance garden at Highfields park?

Alex Davies-Jones: I congratulate my hon. Friend's local charity on its fantastic work.

Research from Bliss suggests that every year more than 100,000 babies in this country are born needing neonatal care. Many of them will be like mine and will spend many weeks—even months—in neonatal care. As we all know, some will sadly never go home at all. Shockingly, the statistics are particularly bad for women who live in deprived areas: such cases have an 80% higher risk of stillbirth and neonatal death compared with women living in the least deprived areas. That is a devastating figure, made worse by not having significantly reduced between 2016 and 2018. We should be making progress, but instead, parents are still faced with little support when going through what can only be described as one of the most difficult experiences that a human can ever face.

Of course, we all recognise that, sadly, the coronavirus pandemic has only made this situation even bleaker for bereaved parents. Neonatal units across the country have been impacted, and pandemic restrictions that see parents and babies even more separated than usual are still in place, sadly, in many units. Indeed, Bliss's recent report from May this year showed that only 30% of NHS trusts that took part in its study were allowing full access for both parents to ensure they could be with their baby together whenever they wanted, sometimes in the final moments of their short lives. The picture has slightly improved since then, in that only about 10% of neonatal units now do not offer parents full access. But some parents are still routinely locked out of their baby's care, and for those who do not make it, the current system is utterly failing them.

I would like to say that the situation is better for those whose babies do survive, but, sadly, that is not the case either. When my own child was fighting for his life, I was still recovering from an emergency C-section, and I really had to rely on my husband in every way possible. This was only possible because my husband had a flexible employer, who allowed him to pool his annual leave to secure more paid time off work. It should not be this way. While I was pleased to see the Government recently announce plans to introduce neonatal leave that will cover up to 12 weeks when a baby is receiving neonatal care, this policy simply does not go far enough. The changes are unlikely to come into force until 2023 at the earliest, leaving about 300,000 families with babies who will be spending time in neonatal care alone in the next three years forgotten about once again.

I will say, however, that I raise these points not to be political—I know that is a rarity in this place—but instead because these barriers are ones that really do impact people across the country. We are all here today to raise awareness of baby loss, and awareness is important, but what is more important is action. While I recognise that health is an issue devolved to our Welsh Labour Government, it is fair to say that the UK Government need to lead the way in introducing a statutory leave entitlement for those impacted by premature births, infant loss and infertility.

To conclude, I urge the Minister to work with her colleagues across Government Departments and the devolved nations to take bold action to support future generations and tomorrow's parents. I look forward to hearing from her an update on what steps the Government are taking to support parents across the UK who experience the unimaginable loss of losing their baby.

1.32 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I thank my dear friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory), for having the bravery we have seen here today, but also for how, throughout her time in this place, she has fought and campaigned very bravely for those who have experienced the loss that she has experienced. I think we see this place at its very best when we come together, put politics aside and discuss the issues that are so important and affect so many thousands of families across our country. I also pay tribute to the former Minister for patient safety, suicide prevention and mental health, my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), who has certainly put campaigning for women's health at the front of her Government's priorities.

I, too, have experienced baby loss, and I remember it as if it was yesterday. It was my first pregnancy with my husband and, sadly, at eight weeks it did not continue. It is something that stays with me even today; this is the first time I have actually spoken about it publicly. However, I was very fortunate in that, within five months, I was pregnant again and I had my rainbow baby. Until Mrs Johnson, the Prime Minister's wife, used that term I had never heard of a rainbow baby, but it is a fantastic term because it is about the positiveness that can come after the dreadful experience of losing a baby. My rainbow baby is now 17 years of age, in her last year of school and about to begin her life adventure.

It was not until I had my miscarriage that I realised that one in four pregnancies can be lost in this country, usually early—before 12 weeks. More than this, estimates from St Mary's Hospital in Paddington in my constituency suggest that there are about a quarter of a million miscarriages every year in the UK, and about 11,000 emergency admissions for ectopic pregnancies, which always, sadly, result in pregnancy loss.

I think the theme of wellbeing for the forthcoming Baby Loss Awareness Week this year is so important. On this, I am very proud to highlight the work of the brilliant maternity wards at St Mary's Hospital, which were the first in London to receive an outstanding rating from the Care Quality Commission. I invite the Minister to join me on a future visit to see their work at first hand, with, I hope, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth.

[*Nickie Aiken*]

I note that patients from St Mary's, which is part of the Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, have been taking part in a new study showing that one in six women experience long-term post-traumatic stress following baby loss.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on having a rainbow baby, as I do myself. We know that the road to pregnancy is not always smooth, and the numbers she has just highlighted show how frequently this happens. Is it not now time that we reviewed the cruel requirement for three miscarriages or baby losses before medical intervention is offered to families?

Nickie Aiken: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention, and I think it is clear from the debate today that there needs to be more support for women and their partners when they experience miscarriage. I will never forget, when I became pregnant with my daughter, how terrified I was of going for the 12-week scan, because my first experience had been one of baby loss and I had been told at that scan that the baby was not viable. I think I would have benefited from some counselling and some support when I was going for that scan for the second baby.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady for the very powerful speech she is making. I appreciate the very personal nature of what she is sharing, and it brings so much to this House that everyone is doing that. Would she join me in commending local organisations, such as Held In Our Hearts in my Livingston constituency, which has been operating for 40 years, that provide support with counselling services for those who have experienced baby loss, and does she agree that they are absolutely vital in supporting those who have suffered such loss?

Nickie Aiken: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention, and she is absolutely right. We are blessed in this country with having so many outstanding charities and organisations that support women and their partners when they are experiencing baby loss.

The Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust study has revealed some incredible findings. For example, after one month following a pregnancy loss, nearly a third of women suffer post-traumatic stress, while nearly one in four experiences moderate to severe anxiety and one in ten has moderate to severe depression. These women are going through such pain, and it is clear that they need more support. The scale is truly astonishing. Here I think due consideration should be paid not just to the women, but to the bereaved families. As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), this does affect the fathers involved. I remember, from my own experience, my husband going through such loss.

When I was researching for this debate, I reached out to an outstanding woman called Jane Scott, who is the senior bereavement midwife at the Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust. She is here today I believe—I think in the Gallery above me—with her colleague Lauren Petrie. Midwives up and down this country do amazing work, but Jane in particular gave me powerful testimony before this debate. She explained that, before 2013,

there was little or no provision in the labour ward she worked on at St Mary's for parents who had experienced the death of a baby. Due to her tenacity, and to her basically battling the NHS trust, she was able to secure specialist services for bereaved parents. She told me that at the time she was battling,

“parental complaints were rife... Babies were going missing, funerals were going ahead without the parent's knowledge, communication was poor which added longevity to the grieving process for parents... There was no provision for psychological support/counselling for parents.”

I was completely shocked when I read that, because to lose a baby, no matter how early in the pregnancy, and not to be able to have a funeral, is absolutely unacceptable.

With Jane's hard work, and her setting up of bereavement services at St Mary's, complaints from parents dropped by 90%. She said that the ward became almost unrecognisable, and much more of a positive place to be. Jane is a member of the all-party group on baby loss, and she continues to campaign to highlight the importance of understanding the effects of baby loss. She has now set up the national Bereavement Midwife Forum, which compares services, exchanges best practice, and provides support for midwives. There are now 250 members of the Bereavement Midwife Forum across the UK, and I pay tribute to Jane Scott and her fellow midwives for the outstanding work they provide.

From speaking to Jane, and others, I know that the Bereavement Midwife Forum firmly believes in, and is calling for, consideration for there to be one full-time bereavement midwife for every 3,000 deliveries in each trust. That is a reasonable request, and I would welcome any support that the Minister can provide to ensure that NHS trusts consider it. The forum is also calling for a standardisation of trauma counselling for bereavement midwives and bereaved parents. We must also ensure that there are band 8 regional bereavement midwives to oversee such services in each trust. Those are all sensible measures.

I wish to ensure that there is more support for midwives, particularly those who experience the dreadful death of a baby when looking after a mother—I cannot imagine how it must feel to be in that profession and experience that, and to work with a mother and a father who are going through such trauma. We must do more to support midwives, and doctors, who have that dreadful experience. Again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth for securing this debate. I am in awe of her. I also again pay tribute to all those midwives and doctors who work tirelessly day in, day out. To anyone who has experienced the bereavement of a lost baby I say this: you are not alone.

1.44 pm

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). She spoke about her own personal experience and her rainbow baby. I do not think the term existed when I was born, but I am my mum's rainbow baby, and it was lovely to hear my hon. Friend's speech. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) on her powerful and courageous speech, and on all the work she has been doing since she was elected.

Baby Loss Awareness Week gives us all an opportunity to think about families that have suffered that tragedy and what can be done to help. We have heard a number

of very moving stories in this debate, and I cannot begin to imagine how painful that experience must be for bereaved parents. I appreciate how difficult it is for people to be open in public about the loss of a baby or a pregnancy. According to the Baby Loss Awareness Week alliance, one in four pregnancies ends in miscarriage, and 14 babies are stillborn or die shortly after birth every day. One of the most powerful things to help those who have experienced that loss is to do everything possible to stop the same thing from happening to other parents.

My constituency of High Peak is home to some inspiring and hardworking maternity teams and bereavement organisations, and I wish in particular to talk about one organisation, and about my constituent, Ciara Curran, who asked me to share her story. Ciara lost her baby daughter Sinead 11 years ago in April 2010 due to pre-term pre-labour rupture of the membranes, also known as PPRM. That condition is when the waters break before 37 weeks of pregnancy, and it puts mother and baby at risk of infection. After such a devastating loss, Ciara went on to set up an organisation called Little Heartbeats to help women who have lost a baby to PPRM, and to ensure that pregnant mothers receive the best possible care if diagnosed with that condition.

Little Heartbeats has worked with the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists to produce clinical guidelines and patient information leaflets to help prevent the loss of babies from PPRM. It has also launched studies into the impact of PPRM, as well as possible treatments such as stem cell patches. In recognition of the work done by Ciara and her team, Little Heartbeats received the Butterfly Award for best support organisation in 2017, and it was shortlisted for *The Sun's* NHS Who Cares Wins health awards this year. It is amazing to see someone who has dealt with such loss respond with tremendous courage and compassion.

However, we still need greater awareness and a clearer understanding of PPRM, helping us to better identify and treat it. I sincerely hope that the Health and Social Care Committee will look into how the condition can be better managed, and learn from the stories of women such as Ciara who have lost babies to PPRM. I have written to the Chair of that Committee, who is in his place today, on that point. He gave a remarkably powerful speech, and I sincerely hope the Minister listened carefully to it.

We need to make improvements to antenatal and maternity care more widely. That is why I am campaigning for an improved maternity unit and antenatal clinic for Tameside General Hospital, which serves my constituents in places such as Glossop, Hadfield, Charlesworth, Gamesley and Tintwistle. The Charlesworth building at Tameside Hospital houses the current maternity unit and antenatal clinic. Originally built in 1971, it has poor insulation and problems with overheating that affect sensitive clinical equipment, including incubators for new-born babies, and impact on the wellbeing of patients and staff alike. Capital investment is badly needed to improve the comfort of patients and staff by improving insulation and providing new welfare stations and waiting areas. That will also deliver better care for mothers and babies by ensuring that clinical equipment is not overworked. I very much hope that Ministers will carefully consider Tameside Hospital's bid for that crucial project

as part of the health infrastructure plan, which alongside the planned new urgent care centre at Tameside, the proposed emergency care campus at Stepping Hill Hospital, and the long-planned new health centre for Buxton, would make a significant difference to healthcare provision locally.

I thank all the doctors, nurses, midwives, researchers, and organisers who do so much to address this challenge. Ultimately, the NHS cannot deliver world-class care without the dedication and perseverance of its amazing staff. They deserve our thanks, but they also need our support. The Royal College of Midwives has said that maternity services are experiencing a shortage of 2,000 midwives. In a 2020 survey, seven out of 10 midwives said that they were considering leaving the profession. The pandemic has put huge amounts of pressure on NHS staff, and it is vital that midwifery benefits from the Government's £36 billion package of support for the health and social care system. It is also important that bereaved parents can get specific support and better access to counselling. The Baby Loss Awareness Week alliance carried out a 2019 survey, revealing that 60% of parents who have experienced baby loss said that they needed specialist psychological support but could not get it with the NHS. We need to improve access to counselling and invest more in prenatal nurses, giving them the right training to help parents who experience baby loss. If we are going to meet the Government's national maternity safety ambition to see baby deaths fall by 50% by 2025, then action is clearly needed.

Olivia Blake: I thank the hon. Member for highlighting counselling, which is such an important issue. Does he accept that the quadrupled risk of suicide among people who experience miscarriage should be taken into consideration in suicide prevention work?

Robert Largan: I am grateful to my constituency neighbour for her intervention, and I absolutely take that point. That definitely needs to be taken fully into consideration.

The House has been grappling with lots of lots of big, difficult issues these past months. We often have heated debates, and I am sure that we will have many more, for the foreseeable future. But there are times, like this, when parliamentarians can come together to try to find solutions to our shared challenges. Let us work together to help those who are going through the darkest of times and give them hope that things will get better.

1.50 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I will admit to being in two minds about speaking in this important debate. As a biological male, I cannot, of course, get pregnant. What do I know, really? Can I feel it? Do I have a right to be here? Do my experiences carry any legitimacy against the amazing stories that we have heard today? Of course the answer is yes, but there is a conflict. This is difficult territory for all of us, but not least for men. We need to destigmatise this conundrum. The fact that something is difficult does not mean that we should not do it or talk about it, so I really hope that I hold it together for the next five minutes or so.

For me, baby loss is about many things. It is about bereavement at the loss of any child, big or small. It is about the devastation that is left behind. It is about the

[James Sunderland]

hopes that are dashed, and the misery. It is about love. It is about the agony of miscarriage, however that child is conceived. It is about those trying for children—those who desperately want children. And it is about those going through in vitro fertilisation or intrauterine insemination, with the physical and emotional nightmare that that brings; people mortgage their house and their hopes, take out loans and bankrupt themselves, against the mirage of science. It is great when it works, but the agony of infertility is very real for so many people. This debate is also about those who might never have children and those who do not have children.

Back in April 2018, my young niece succumbed to a very serious illness. It was not long before her second birthday, and she would have been five today. I have not spoken about that publicly, and I do not really want to do so now, but I can tell the House that bereavement at the loss of a child is devastating, and I was not the parent. Grief works in so many ways; it is so difficult. Aside from the inherent loss of a beautiful and innocent child, it is about what is left behind. It is about birthdays, Christmases, the friends and boyfriends that never materialise, grandchildren and children, and it is also about the parents who grieve—and it lasts forever. Politically, this is actually very easy to deal with: we need to throw the kitchen sink at it. I note that the Minister is in her place. Money should be no object when it comes to this kind of thing.

My niece died just across the river in the fantastic Evelina Hospital. It is a brilliant facility, and I commend the staff who work there. What an amazing machine. It is so state of the art that it looks like a spaceship, and the people are just brilliant. I thank them and all the staff across the country doing that very difficult job. However, we must invest in more of these facilities. We have to give all our children the best possible care. It is only money, at the end of the day. There can be no greater prize than bringing a child into the world, or saving a life, or prolonging life, so let us give all our children the best possible chance.

We need to talk about this issue, as we are now, however difficult that might be. Of course, baby loss is also about losing a baby through miscarriage. These are not just embryos; they are people. They are lives. They are the embodiment of hopes and dreams for so many people. They are actually little versions of ourselves. Yes, nature can have a way of taking its own decisions, and that is fine, but miscarriage is devastating for all parents, grandparents, families and so many people who have direct involvement in it. I can only imagine the horror. My heart goes out in particular to women who have to give birth to a baby that once had a heartbeat. I cannot imagine how difficult that must be. We need to empathise and sympathise and just be there, to love and to feel for them.

For women who cannot get pregnant and who do not get pregnant, it is about the pain, the loss, the endless cycle of hope each month, and the devastation as her period starts all over again. This is tricky, tricky stuff. It is also about the sister who churns out children like rounds from a machine gun with complete impunity—with no effort at all. Perhaps even worse, it is about the sanctimonious friend or sister-in-law who can do the same. It is about the doubt and the worry. It is about the

compounded misery, month on month. Again, our hearts must go out to the people who are so badly affected. It is about the hours crouched over toilets in cubicles, with negative pregnancy tests, bereft at yet again coming on. The list goes on, and it is real and it is happening today in this country to so many of us.

It is also about the agony of putting on a brave face afterwards. It is about going back into the world—going back into the office—as if nothing has happened. It is tough stuff. Then there are the tests, the invasion, the prodding, the poking and the examinations for those who want to find out why they cannot conceive—being on a slab, feeling like a total failure.

And what about men? Well, here we go. I was that man in the day, doing unnatural things in cubicles in clinics across London. I was that man carrying precious cargo on the tube in odd-shaped containers. I could deal with the alcohol bans for three months at a time, although that was difficult, but the loss of caffeine was really tough.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for having the courage to tell his story. I, too, have been through the experience of IVF. Does he agree that one of the worst things about going through that battle of fertility is people innocently asking, “When are you and your partner going to start a family? When are you going to have children? You don’t want to leave it too late.” A risk in all this is the lack of awareness that infertility is very common.

James Sunderland: I thank my good friend for his intervention. He is absolutely right. You often do not want to say anything, but you feel as though you should. You ask why you have not got children, and why others are having children and you are not. There is the expectation of one’s grandparents. It is a difficult business.

On one occasion, I was eating a piece of white toast in the kitchen and this mad, deranged woman grabbed it from me and said, “Don’t.” On another occasion, I was on exercises with my regiment, with the whole unit on parade—I was there with the brigadier on a big visit—and my phone rang. It was my wife, and she said, “Come home, honey; I’m ovulating.” Those words would put the fear of God into any man. But the worst thing of all is the Brazil nuts, chopped up with breakfast—absolutely horrible things. To this day, I have post-traumatic stress disorder from that.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for his absolute and utter honesty. Having gone through these kinds of experiences, I know the desperation of wanting to have children and then the absolute terror, as a woman and a partner, when you are going through pregnancy, about whether you are going to be able to hear a heartbeat, feel that movement and know that everything is all right. Does he agree that the best thing we can do is to talk about this issue openly—I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) for bringing it to the House—because that is the way we will all get through it together?

James Sunderland: I thank my good friend from Grimsby. I could not agree more. There is not much I can really add to that; she is absolutely right. From

personal experience, seeing the heartbeat on the screen is worth all the effort and I would commend everyone just to keep going because dreams do come true.

Very briefly, as time is marching on, for couples going through IVF, please have respect for what they are doing. They are mortgaging themselves. It is about the money. It is about the anxiety—endless cycles in many cases. It is also about the heavy drugs, the mood swings, the overestimation of the ovaries and the injections in the stomach. It is pretty grim. So feel. Please support and be there for your friends and family who are going through it. There is devastation when it goes wrong and it does go wrong. Spare a thought for the heartache, for the hopes, the preparations, the fears and the tests. It rests, ultimately, on a drop of urine. It is absolutely brutal.

Having debated the horrible reality of baby loss today, what can we do? I am going to rattle through this very quickly. We need to support our loved ones, as I have said. As men or partners, we need to hug, to hold, to reassure and to listen.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): I thank all hon. Members for their courageous speeches. The point my hon. Friend is raising, and my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) is raising, is that this does not just affect women. We are not just the ones who go through the grief, bereavement and pain. Men do too and we need to talk more about that. Both men and women suffer bereavement through baby loss.

James Sunderland: Absolutely—I thank my hon. Friend. This is about two people. It takes two to tango. People go through this collectively as a couple, but also individually. We should recognise the fact that it is difficult for both parties, whoever they might be.

As I said earlier, we need to invest in hospitals an awful lot more: in better baby units, better midwives and consultants who read their notes. We need to make sure that we take some risks politically on this issue and spend more money. As I said, it is only money. Employers, please get a grip. If you have a woman in your employ going through IVF, please just empathise and sympathise. Give her some space.

Before I finish, I want to stick my neck out on a couple of very personal issues—please forgive me. For those who want to have children, go for it is my advice. Stay strong and keep going. My humble advice is not to leave it too late: you cannot turn the clock back and careers are, ultimately, not that important. For those considering IVF, just go for it. It does work. It is successful and it is getting better all the time. For those who might need extra support, I commend the organisation Foresight, otherwise known as the Association for the Promotion of Preconceptional Care, which is absolutely fantastic. Finally, for those for whom it does not work and suffer the loss of never conceiving, we can never do enough for you. In this place, as politicians, we will keep focusing on this very important issue. Please keep lobbying us, too. These are life and death issues that are ultimately more important than anything else.

Lastly, and most importantly of all, please do spare a thought for those poor men eating Brazil nuts for breakfast.

2.3 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): What an honour it is to follow my good friend, the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland). I pay tribute to him for his openness and honesty today. I think we need more of that in this House. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) for securing the debate and bravely sharing again her story about Lily, and for her tireless work on the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss. Sometimes we end up in these things, but it is what we make of them that counts. In her speech, and in her answers to interventions, it was clear that she really knows her stuff. So I commend her. I also thank my constituents who wrote to me last year after my contribution to the debate and this year asking me to be here today.

This is an opportunity for us to talk about our shared humanity and our shared stories right across the whole Chamber. It is something that affects us all. I have always found that being open in discussing a sensitive subject is a good thing. It encourages others to open up and talk about things. However, as I was preparing for the debate today, I knew why I do not talk about these things sometimes. There is a real physical reaction to bringing those memories back to the forefront of your mind. Your eyes prick with tears, it becomes difficult to swallow and you wonder if you are going to be able to get the words out and speak. We have seen, in contributions across the Chamber, that we are all in that position. Even as I was writing my speech today and writing notes, I could feel that physical reaction to things that happened a long, long time ago.

As I was looking up statistics, as we do in this place, I realised that I am a statistic on a piece of paper—quite an awkward thing to be sometimes. I want to focus my comments on the mental health side of baby loss. On stillbirth and mental health, Tommy's, a great charity and resource, has stated that women who have suffered stillbirth or neonatal death are more likely to have anxiety and depression afterwards. One study in the US of 800 women showed that women who had stillbirth were twice as likely to have depression, compared with those who had live births. That effect had actually increased when they were studied again two years later, showing that stillbirth has a long-term effect on mental health. Another study of 609 women who had experienced stillbirth or neonatal death showed that women who had loss were four times more likely to have depression and seven times more likely to have post-traumatic stress disorder. In my speech last year, I talked about flashbacks. They catch you by surprise and come at the most unexpected times. Something will trigger one, bringing those physical sensations right to the forefront.

I wanted to talk a little about my story. I have schoolfriends who had to give birth to babies who no longer had a heartbeat and, on the anniversary each year, watch the photos go up on Facebook. It is wonderful that they are able to celebrate—that is probably the wrong word—to recognise that child and that their friends share that with them, even though it is very difficult to look at those photos. I had a very good schoolfriend who, like my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth, at 20 weeks found out in a scan that the amniotic fluid was disappearing and that her baby was being crushed slowly in the womb. She had to

[Angela Richardson]

make the decision to terminate the pregnancy because the baby would never have survived. Because she was such a good friend, I lived that with her.

Last year, I talked about the three miscarriages I had in a row. Life was wonderful and fine and we managed to have our first child. I am one of those people who is very lucky in that I am incredibly fertile—I am sure my husband wishes I was not quite so fertile—and we were able to fall pregnant very easily. I talked about the fact that we had contracted a horrible SARS-like illness back in 2003 and that, in the following year, I had three back-to-back miscarriages. I think it says something about my character that I was so driven to have another baby that I would have a miscarriage and then two weeks later in the cycle I would ovulate and fall pregnant. That happened three times in a row, so I suffered the loss of a baby and then was pregnant again two weeks later. That happened three times. When we fell pregnant with our second child—he was my rainbow baby—I had been pregnant for 18 months. I think there were a lot of missed opportunities to pick up on the fact that I was having mental health problems, both perinatal and postnatal. Towards the latter stages of my pregnancy with him, I was absolutely desperate to give birth. I almost could not cope with being pregnant any more. It was very difficult looking after a toddler as well.

After I gave birth the second time, the same thing happened to me as the first time: I had retained placenta, I haemorrhaged and I had to be returned to hospital to have blood transfusions and IV antibiotics. The first time, I had my baby with me; the second time I didn't have my baby with me, because I couldn't—I just had to get better, and I needed to leave him to be looked after by my mum. As many in this House know, my second baby is on the autism spectrum.

Nickie Aiken: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is so important to understand the mental health issues that can surround pregnancies and can occur soon after birth? We need a better understanding of that.

Angela Richardson: I could not agree more. By the time I had got to my third baby, they realised that they needed to do more to make sure that postnatally I was in a much better position. In the debate last year, I talked about one of the babies I lost, in the second trimester; I asked for a test to be done, but the hospital did not do it. They just sent the foetus to the incinerator, and they had to apologise for it. I was left wondering for a long time what I had done wrong.

With my son, who is on the autism spectrum, I had post-natal depression and I did not take him to hospital with me. I spent years feeling guilty, because that is what happens to us as mums: we feel guilty for everything and we spend years making things up to our children. That is one of the things that I think we really need to address in looking after the mental health of mums, because it impacts not just on our children, but on their siblings, on our husbands and on family members who are not even in the same country as us.

Lia Nici: I commend my hon. Friend for talking so openly about her experiences. We talk about statistics and about how one in four pregnancies do not end in the way that we would like, but when we talk and when

we look at items in the media, there is constant pressure on women—specifically women, although there is pressure on men as well. We are expected to be superwomen, we are expected to be super-mums and we are expected to be perfect, when actually we are all fallible human beings and we all need help.

We need to make sure that we talk about it. When I told friends that I had lost babies, I was shocked that it had affected virtually everybody—I would be surprised if it is not well over 90% of people who have experienced this. We need to talk openly with each other, make sure that we look after parents as well as children, before pregnancy but also after pregnancy, and make sure that it is not something that is shameful. Quite often, women will not talk about trying for babies, because they are worried about what their employer will do or say and it is a very private thing anyway.

It is also about the time afterwards. This is probably the one taboo left that we really do not talk about, because we feel like failures. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to continue to fight for this and make sure that people do not feel that they are a failure when things do not always go right?

Angela Richardson: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and for giving me a bit of time to compose myself. I agree with her.

My hon. Friend commented about our having to be superwomen and have everything together. I did not get the help that I needed because I spent so long trying to be tough. It was months and months after I had given birth to my second baby before I even went to see a doctor, but I know that the midwife who was visiting me after I had given birth was concerned because she had been with me after my first delivery as well. I think she knew that I was not quite right. That is what I mean about missed opportunities: there were lots of points where people could have picked things up and I would not have got to quite the state that I was in.

What I want to do is encourage people who are watching today. Sands is a wonderful stillbirth and neonatal death charity. Its website has such a host of information that people can use to get the support that they need.

Last year, I said to those who have suffered baby loss: please be patient with yourself and be kind to yourself. It is really hard to do—if you are driven, like I am, with the relentless desire to have a family, it is really difficult to stop. I was given very good advice to give my body and mind time to rest and recover, and I did not listen. I say to anybody out there who is listening today: please listen to my story. I hope that it will give you some insight and some food for thought.

I thank everybody who has participated today. I do hope that the Minister will take away those thoughts and comments about how we can better support women and their families with mental health.

2.15 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I have very much appreciated being able to listen to this debate and hear very moving speeches from Members on both sides of the House. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) for her leadership on the issue, and to the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, my right hon.

Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), for his work. I join him in commending the work that has taken place in recent years to improve maternity services and reduce baby loss in our NHS, but I note his comparison with Sweden, the fact that we could do so much better, and the need for changes to services and to the culture of how we support babies and mothers in the NHS.

I was born in the old Westminster Hospital, which looked over the Houses of Parliament, so it could be said that my path was set. My children were born in Queen Charlotte's Hospital, looking over Wormwood Scrubs prison; I hope that their path is not set, but my wife and I have done a lot of work in prisons. In the context of this debate, I would like to draw attention to yesterday's report on the very tragic and scandalous events at HMP Bronzefield in 2019.

A young woman, a girl aged 18, was left alone in her prison cell to give birth. The baby died, and nobody found out until the next day that the woman had given birth. There have been a series of reports on and investigations of the tragedy; they conclude that a litany of mistakes were made, with a confusion of services and staff. There was obviously no malice anywhere along the line, but there was a lot of misunderstanding and dysfunction in the system.

I wonder—it would be good to get an indication of the Minister's views on this—whether it is appropriate for pregnant women to be in prison at all. In recent decades, there has been a significant reduction in the incarceration of women, and indeed of pregnant women. That is very positive, but we still have women's prisons, although their numbers are reducing. I remember going many years ago to the women and babies unit at HMP Holloway, which was actually a very impressive and wonderful place. That prison has now closed because we do not lock up so many women.

Nickie Aiken: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the report. Does he agree that questions have to be asked about why an 18-year-old who was on remand and pregnant should be in prison?

Danny Kruger: That is the point that I am making: there is a big question about the incarceration of women and the appropriate punishment for women, but I think that it is absolutely the right question for us to consider. I know that in their sentencing, judges take into account whether women are pregnant, but I suspect that something went wrong in this case. From what I read, it sounds as if the girl was very troubled; in my uninformed view, she should not have been in prison at all for the time that she was pregnant.

Given the sophistication of modern electronic tagging, which is increasing all the time—the Government are investing significantly in it, and I commend them for that—I wonder whether consideration should be given to changing the rules around the incarceration of pregnant women.

2.19 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted once again to participate in the baby loss awareness debate, which has become such an important feature of the parliamentary calendar. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn

Mackrory) and all those who have shared their experiences today. We have come a long way since I secured my first debate on the issue of stillbirth in 2016. In those few short years, this Parliament has, in so many ways, matured into one in which stillbirth and baby loss, as in the rest of society, has gone from being barely mentioned save for in hushed tones to something that, on a yearly basis at least, has a light shined upon it—shining a light on the worst thing that can happen.

To move from the joy and anticipation of expectation to the depths of utter despair and unspeakable grief, often in no more than a few moments, has far-reaching and devastating consequences. Only last night I was speaking to a colleague about how my baby Kenneth was lost on the very day he was due to be born. This healthy 8 lb 5 oz baby died because three nurses, one midwife and two consultants did not investigate the inexplicable pain I was suffering, and no one considered that I may have had pre-eclampsia, which did not only kill my baby but almost killed me.

After seven years of fighting for an official explanation, which was never given even though lawyers were reluctantly involved, I, my husband and my wider family were left to pick up the pieces with no proper closure or explanation. When that process was ongoing, I was afraid of it coming to an end because I did not know what I was going to do after—seeking the answers was keeping me going. What was I to do at the end of this with all this pain? What about the sense of betrayal—that was how it felt—by the very people who were supposed to be looking after me and my baby after five years of fertility treatment? How could I fill the gaping hole of grief that was left?

The only answer, of course, is to keep talking and campaigning for the other women, couples and families who go through this terrible experience, so that they know that they are not alone. I remember when my baby died how people I knew would cross the street because they were so terrified of saying the wrong thing, and I do not blame them for that, because in their position I may well have done exactly the same. The kind of grief that follows an event that defies nature—burying your own child—is compounded by the isolation, and debates in this House on this issue have reached out to those who believe they are alone, giving them the encouragement that they too can share and talk about their pain.

That is why I remember how emotional it was when we finally passed the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018—a groundbreaking piece of legislation under which parents who lose a child up to the age of 18 or through stillbirth have two weeks' paid leave enshrined in law. I remember at the time feeling like the Act did not go far enough, but I was also mindful of how carefully we all handled it; like a piece of crystal, terrified that it would break on the hard-headed reality of Treasury spending decisions. We all protected it like the precious thing it was.

The 2018 Act is hugely significant because it established an important principle. For the very first time the law recognised the magnitude of the loss of a child and provided a small bit of breathing space—a moment or two to try to find your feet again when your world has been turned upside down. The fact that the Act included stillbirth was really important too. It is because of that Act that we are now allowed to call for more

[Patricia Gibson]

to be done around loss and bereavement when a child is involved. It provided a vital starting point upon which all other work in this area will be built.

Baby loss can happen to anyone, but we know that health inequalities matter too, so we must ensure that addressing baby loss takes place in the context of an all-inclusive plan that reaches out to all women, whatever their background. For example, pre-eclampsia leads to 1,000 stillborn babies each year. Women who suffer pre-eclampsia have a fourfold risk of heart failure later in life. Studies have shown that women with pre-eclampsia are twice as likely to develop heart disease and twice as likely to have a stroke or die from a cardiovascular incident. Who is monitoring these women in the longer term? What work is being done to mitigate the risks? Where is the long-term follow-up? We need to do more because wellbeing—this year's theme for baby loss remembrance—matters. We need to think about wellbeing not just when someone is going through the traumatic experience of baby loss, but during the aftermath in the years that follow.

Fourteen babies die every day through stillbirth—5,110 babies have died since our last debate. I express my thanks to everyone who participated in this debate today. It is always a little cathartic, and it is important for those Members who have experienced the rawness of baby loss to share their views with the House and with those listening outside the Chamber. Baby Loss Awareness Week has a particular poignancy for me because it culminates in Baby Loss Awareness Day on 15 October, which is the same day that my baby was stillborn in 2009. He would have been 12 years old this year, and it is hard to believe that so many years have passed. I think of him as the beautiful baby that he was, and I imagine him as the curious little boy that he would have been now.

In conclusion, this baby loss awareness debate is not only for all the little Kenneths out there who did not get the chance to live their lives and fulfil their potential, but for all the babies yet to be born. We must continue to campaign for them and for better maternal health and neonatal care.

2.26 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): There is nothing that fills me with more pride than having the honour of following all the incredible speeches that have been made from both sides of the House today. There are so many things that divide us in this place, but is it not wonderful that this is not one of them? I thank everyone who has spoken today for their courage.

This annual debate is about having voices heard, and all who have spoken today have said incredibly moving things, but I want to pay tribute to a few people. I thank the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) for moving this debate. In you, Lily lives on, and she will always continue to do so.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) did Kenneth proud, and I know that 15 October will prove incredibly difficult for you, as I am sure it does every single year, but you hold him in your heart and we hold him in all our hearts. We will be thinking of him on that day. In bringing your

passion to this debate, you are ensuring that the other mothers, fathers and partners who go through this do not feel alone.

The right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), with his honesty, reminded us that grief is a lifelong process. The honesty in the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) truly highlighted that the journey to parenthood can be fraught with challenges. It is often not easy to admit some of our dark thoughts about other people's happiness or about the failures we may see in ourselves if we feel that we do not fall into the social construct that society has created for women.

I am going to answer the rhetorical question that the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) posed about the validity of his being here and speaking today: yes, you should be speaking. It is important to represent everybody who has gone through the same lived experiences, and you brought them to the Floor of the House.

Turning to the hon. Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson)—my goodness—the guilt surrounding parenthood is so rife, and we must be kinder to each other in society. There is nothing worse than sitting in an NCT group full of people who delivered their wonderful babies in a water bath when you went through a crash C-section and feel like a failure, crying into your cake as you wonder what is wrong with your body that meant that you could not give birth in a bath with some whale music. What you highlighted today shows us the importance of understanding that the journey through the birth process does not end once you have given birth. We have to look after each other and keep an eye on people's mental health.

It is so important that we talk about stigma. I know about this from my work as a doctor in the emergency department over the last 16 years. I have seen countless parents come into that department. I have seen a mother, bleeding, pleading with me to tell her whether she is losing her baby, and I have known the heartbreak of performing the examination and either confirming her very worst fears or sometimes, even worse, saying, "I do not know—and I am really sorry, but it is Friday afternoon and you will have to wait for your scan on Monday morning to find out." I see mothers who ask, "Did I eat the wrong cheese? Did I exercise too much? Should I have given up work and just stayed at home? Have I done this, doctor, have I done this?" No, you have not.

I say to every mother who is watching the debate today and asking herself if she has done something wrong, "You have not done anything wrong. Your baby was loved; your baby was wanted; you did everything right." It is so important that we support mothers on this journey—mothers who are living with the guilt, living with the stigma, wondering if people are thinking to themselves, "Well, she clearly did not read the rules properly. We seem to have managed just fine." To every mother who worries about that, I say, "You are not alone." I thank all the charities that are out there doing such incredible work to eradicate the stigma, but there is still so much more to do.

To all the partners—supportive partners—who are told not to share their emotions, and told that their emotions are not as valid because they were not carrying the child, I say, "That is rubbish." They are told not to acknowledge their grief, and are encouraged just to go

back to work. It is a case of “Stiff upper lip—these things happen.” I say to them, “You are entitled to grieve. You are entitled to feel every single emotion that is due to you, because these are your emotions and that is your right.” Everyone does it differently: there is no one-size-fits-all model. We have to understand, and our health services have to be built to have a capacity that understands the nature of grief and understands that it is different for everyone. However, when we are doing this together here today, we are already going some way towards breaking down that stigma, and we are breaking it down every year when we have this debate.

It has been an incredibly difficult 18 months, and people’s experiences of baby loss during this time have been incredibly heartbreaking. During the pandemic there has been reduced access to face-to-face appointments, and when appointments have taken place in person, partners have been excluded, leaving women to receive the very worst of news on their own. Expectant fathers pace the car park, wondering when they will be allowed in to hear that very worst of news. Women are often forced to take decisions alone. I want to thank the NHS staff who have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic, and have had to go above and beyond when visitors were not allowed into hospitals following a loss. However, I also want to highlight the important fact that there are babies that are lost when the loss could have been avoided. In the House we discuss many cases in which loss cannot be avoided, but this is not one of them.

That leads me on to the importance of inequalities in this debate. It is the saddest fact of all that where a family live and how socioeconomically well off they are can determine the likelihood of their baby’s surviving or not. Black and ethnic minority women are more likely to deliver by emergency caesarean section and less likely to have pain relief during labour, and receive fewer home visits from midwives. Stillbirth rates for black babies, including black British babies, were over twice those for white babies, while neonatal death rates were 45% higher. Black women are still four times more likely than white women to die in pregnancy or childbirth in the UK. With an ongoing inquiry into systemic racism in NHS maternity services, we must ensure that action is taken to eradicate these gross disparities. We need change now: women cannot and should not wait any longer. It is not acceptable, and these families deserve better. Many of us will have heard stories of women who were told that they needed an extra scan between the 20-week scan and giving birth, but professionals were concerned that because they were Muslim they might want to sex-select, and they were therefore denied the scan. That is atrocious. Preventable deaths have occurred because of such practices, and they must be eradicated.

Research published last week found persistent inequalities for ethnic minority women accessing mental health care after giving birth. It found that 98% of women were willing to be treated for their mental health, but one third had not received any treatment, including talking therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy or counselling. About one third of the women surveyed felt that

“receiving treatment for emotional or mental problems carries social stigma.”

We have to understand, in our multicultural society, that everyone deals differently with mental health matters,

particularly in relation to having children. We must have services that are able to handle the differences in our communities.

The major treatment stigma-related barriers to accessing services were found to be women’s concerns that they might be seen as “a bad parent”; not wanting mental health problems to be on medical records; concern that their children might be taken into care; and concern that they might be seen as “weak”. Those are the voices that we need to recognise today. We are in a place of privilege. We can stand here and talk about our experiences, people can learn from them, and we can feel that we are doing our bit to deal with our grief, but what about all those thousands of women’s voices across the country that are not heard? Today we are speaking for all of them as well.

Post-natal depression or anxiety in black, Asian and ethnic minority mothers is 13% higher than in white mothers. A 2011 study found that black women are the group least likely to initiate treatment for post-natal mental illness, and the least likely to receive follow-up treatment. We must do better, we can do better, and I truly believe that there is a collective will across the House to do better.

Let me ask a few questions of the Minister, whom I welcome to her place. Will bereavement support after the loss of a baby be standardised to avoid the postcode lottery that too many families experience? No one should have to lose three babies to receive miscarriage support; what are the Government doing to ensure that people have the support they need when they need it, not after miscarriages? Has data begun to be collected on miscarriage, stillbirth and pre-term rates, and if not, will the Government commit themselves to that? What is the current progress on the women’s health strategy, and who from the Government will be taking this forward following the reshuffle?

By talking about these issues so openly and honestly, we work to remove the stigma surrounding them. The pandemic has undoubtedly brought additional barriers that make the experience of losing a baby even more isolating, but it is stigma and the lack of understanding that can make people feel most alone. I will finish, as the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) did, by saying to anyone watching today: you are not alone.

2.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I thank all Members of the House who have taken part in the debate this afternoon. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), is right to say that this is an issue that unites us all and puts politics aside. The loss of a baby is never easy to discuss, whether it is the loss of your own baby or a baby known to you, or the experience of a constituent, it is a hugely emotional and sensitive area, and time is often not the great healer it is made out to be. This debate has raised some difficult but important issues.

I also thank the co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss: my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory), who spoke extremely bravely about her experience of losing baby Lily; and my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), who also helped to secure

[*Maria Caulfield*]

this debate. The response and strength of feeling shows how many lives have been affected and touched by this issue. There have been so many moving contributions, and I cannot name them all, but they included those from the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who talked about baby Kenneth.

This is the sixth year that a debate has been held to mark Baby Loss Awareness Week, and I am honoured to take part as the new Minister for primary care and patient safety and to work with all hon. and right hon. Members across the House to make a difference in an area as vital and important as maternal and neonatal safety. It is perhaps fitting that the debate is happening so soon after I have taken on this role, as it has sharply focused my mind on the huge amount of work there is to do in improving the outcomes for families and babies.

The Government's maternity ambition is to halve the 2010 rates of stillbirth, neonatal and maternal deaths and brain injuries in babies occurring during or soon after birth by 2025. The ambition also includes reducing the rate of pre-term births from 8% to 6%, and we are making progress on that. Since 2010, there has been a reduction of 25% in stillbirth rates and a 29% reduction in neonatal mortality rates for babies born after 24 weeks gestation. There is, however, progress to be made on reducing maternal mortality rates, brain injury rates and pre-term birth rates, because progress has been slower than any of us would have hoped. There are pilot schemes in place, however, including those introduced under the brain injury reduction programme, which saw £9.4 million-worth of investment during the spending review last year going towards reducing the incidence of birth-related brain injuries. The pilots will produce cutting-edge training and expert guidance, and I hope to report back to the House on their impact.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth raised some incredibly important points, and I want to touch on a few of them. Financial investment can of course make a difference in improving maternity services. NHS England announced earlier this year an additional £95 million of recurrent funding for maternity services to support the recruitment of 1,200 midwives and 100 consultant obstetricians and the implementation of the actions arising from the Ockenden report. NHS England and NHS Improvement are also providing an additional £52 million to fast-track a long-term plan commitment for all women to be able to access their maternity notes and information via a smartphone or other device by 2024.

Money is not the only solution, however. One key way to improve outcomes is to look at what has gone wrong in the past, and the perinatal mortality review tool is important in that regard. The Health Departments in England, Wales and Scotland collectively fund the perinatal mortality review tool so that the deaths of all babies between 22 weeks gestation and four weeks old are reviewed to provide answers to bereaved parents about how their baby died and so that the NHS can learn lessons and improve care. All bereaved parents now have the option to be involved in a high-quality review of the death of their baby and, according to the

last perinatal mortality review tool annual report last year, 84% of review cases in England, 86% of cases in Wales and 87% of cases in Scotland included parents in their final reports. It is by learning from parents and listening to their concerns that we will ultimately improve services for families and save lives.

The shadow Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth raised the issue of tackling inequalities in perinatal outcomes for women from black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups. There are huge disparities in outcome across different communities. Earlier this month, NHS England and NHS Improvement published an equity and equality strategy, supported by a £6.8 million investment, to address the causes of inequalities in health outcomes, experience and access. It provides guidance for local maternity systems and focuses on black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, who currently experience poor maternal health outcomes. This is a priority area for me, and I take the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth about the importance of continuity of care.

In helping to support bereaved families following the tragic loss of a baby, I am delighted to hear that we have now reached the milestone of every NHS trust in England having expressed an interest with Sands in joining the national bereavement care pathway programme, and 65% of trusts are now members. We will continue to take a cross-Government approach to assessing what more needs to be done to support bereaved families.

I will discuss with my ministerial colleagues the point raised by the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), in particular, on leave for those who have experienced a miscarriage before 24 weeks.

Important points have been made about mandating a pathway and funding to ensure that every hospital has an appropriate bereavement suite and specialist staff and training. I will feed back to the House on our progress on that, as I recognise that we need to move swiftly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth, like many other hon. Members, commented on mental health support for bereaved fathers, parents, families and siblings. We heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey about the impact that the loss of baby Sarah had on his whole family. Losing a baby can have a massive impact on the whole family, and this Government are committed to expanding and transforming mental health services in England so that people, including those affected by the loss of a baby, get the help and support they need. My hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson) could not have been more eloquent about the experience of not getting it right.

We have a long-term commitment that a further 24,000 women will be able to access specialist perinatal mental healthcare by 2023, building on the additional 30,000 women who can access such services this year.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: Does my hon. Friend agree that, along with all the things she is talking about, we need a joined-up set of start of life services, such as the Government are already working so hard to implement in their "Best start for life" work? If we could provide continuity of care and wraparound support for families, so many of the health disparities and terrible outcomes would be avoided.

Maria Caulfield: My right hon. Friend is right that there has to be a whole family, cross-departmental approach, which I hope we can take forward.

The partners of expectant new mothers also face the stigma that many hon. Members have mentioned this afternoon, and I hope we can improve the situation by offering a range of help, such as peer support, behavioural couples therapy sessions and other family and parental interventions. I will focus on that.

This year, unlike in our previous debates on Baby Loss Awareness Week, we have to consider covid. This year, more than most, has been particularly difficult for those facing the loss of a baby. The covid pandemic means measures have been put in place to protect healthcare workers, patients and the general public, and it has been particularly difficult for those who have suffered baby loss during this period.

Specifically on preventing maternal death and morbidity due to covid, recent findings from a national perinatal study show that of 742 women admitted to hospital since vaccination data has been collected, four had received a single vaccine dose and none had received both doses. This means that more than 99% of pregnant women admitted to hospital with symptomatic covid-19 are unvaccinated, and one message I want to get across today is that it is hugely important that mothers and their families are vaccinated to improve their safety.

Sarah Owen: We have been pushing the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation to make sure that pregnant women are a priority group. Will the Minister give a commitment today that pregnant women will be a priority group in any booster programme?

Maria Caulfield: I take the hon. Lady's point. There was a lot of misinformation earlier in the year that made pregnant women reluctant to come forward, and there is a lot of work we can do to improve that communication.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I wish to raise a specific point about covid that I learned of from an obstetric consultant: the number of preemie births dramatically dropped during covid because women were at home. It was a doctor from Reading who told me this. He had to be dispatched somewhere else in the NHS because his services in dealing with premature babies were no longer needed as the number had dropped so greatly because women were at home. Will that form part of the strategy, to make sure that in terms of baby loss we are looking after women throughout their pregnancies?

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. We need to be guided by clinical evidence and practice, and we will look back and reflect on some of the lessons that can be learned from the period of covid.

Many hon. Members mentioned the staff who look after women and families who have lost a baby. It is incredibly important that we support those staff, because the impact is huge. May I put on the record my thanks to every one of those maternity staff who look after women and families, because the toll on them is sometimes greatly underestimated? It is assumed that because they go into that speciality they can cope with this, but it is extremely difficult for them. Like my hon. Friend the

Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), may I too welcome Jane Scott and her colleague, one of the midwives from St Mary's Hospital, who have set up the UK National Bereavement Midwife Forum? I would be delighted to visit them and learn from their experience, because we are committed to supporting staff and making sure that they are able to undertake the special work that they do.

In conclusion, there are multiple and complex issues associated with baby loss and we need to do more not only to support families through such a difficult experience, but to reduce the numbers of people experiencing baby loss in the first place. Crucially, as I said in my opening remarks, we have made some good progress on our national maternity safety plans. We have seen a 25% reduction in the stillbirth rate since 2010 and a 29% reduction in the neonatal mortality rate for babies over 24 weeks' gestation. That means hundreds more mothers and families are going home with a live and healthy baby each year, but, as this debate has ably demonstrated, there is still much more to be done. I hope to return to the Chamber next year during Baby Loss Awareness Week to be able to show the further progress we have made on this important issue.

2.52 pm

Cherilyn Mackrory: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken today for the support that we have given to one other and for the timely interventions. I will not go through all the speeches because I have only a short time to sum up, but I would like to extend my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) and accept her invitation to meet the team at St Mary's Hospital in Paddington. I give special thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) for his candid testimony, which is both personal and full of bags of experience. I could not be more grateful for being able to co-chair the all-party group with him. With our new Minister on the Front Bench, this all-party group can continue to do great things and I very much hope we will be able to do so.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who religiously attends the all-party group and carries baby Kenneth in her heart. She spoke powerfully about the isolation of grief, and I can completely relate to that. I hope that events such as today's debate bust that stigma and that people start talking to each other. Year after year, this is the toughest debate in Parliament to participate in, but it is oh so very important.

Pregnancy and baby loss has often been seen as a women's issue, and it is a very powerful women's issue—we have heard about the mental health side of things and we need to not let women down on that. More than that, however, it is a family issue and a community issue. We need to be looking out for each other and to make sure that families are looking out for each other, and that we all talk about these things. You name the children, you talk about that baby; it is not something that should be shied away from because we do not know what to say. Anything we say will be the right thing to say simply because we are talking about it.

I conclude by thanking all colleagues once again for their powerful testimony, and I look forward to continuing the very important work of the all-party group.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): This has been a very moving and, indeed, important debate not just because of the subject matter itself but because it reflects the progress that we have made as a modern legislature, in that the matters we now deal with in this House, on the Floor of this Chamber, truly reflect the concerns and experiences of all the people we represent.

I hardly need to put the Question, but I am obliged to do so.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Baby Loss Awareness Week.

Human Rights: Kashmir

2.55 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House notes with grave concern the escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan, two nuclear powers, following the revocation of Articles 370 and 35A from the Indian Constitution in August 2019; further notes the United Nations reports of 14 June 2018 and 8 July 2019 on human rights violations in Indian-administered Kashmir and Pakistan-administered Kashmir; and calls on the Government to work with the United Nations, Commonwealth and wider international community to help ensure that international law is upheld and human rights are protected throughout India, Kashmir and Pakistan.

It is an honour to lead this debate on human rights in Kashmir, as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Kashmir. I extend my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. Given that my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and I applied for this debate back in March 2020, I wonder whether we might have reached a record for the time between something being approved and being debated. None the less, I am grateful that we can now debate an issue that is so important to many of our constituents.

The partition of India into India and Pakistan in 1947 and the cavalier manner in which the governance of Kashmiris was determined without them has led to 74 years of unrest, dozens of UN resolutions, and violence across the line of control and within Indian-administered Kashmir, or IAK, and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, or PAK.

Since I was elected chair of the APPG back in November 2018, its focus has been on the promotion of human rights in all parts of Kashmir. This followed the first ever report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on human rights in Kashmir in July 2018. The report documented human rights abuses in both IAK and PAK, and concentrated in particular on the period between 2016 and 2018, following the unprecedented protests and violence that erupted after the killing of Burhan Wani, the leader of Hizbul Mujahideen, by Indian security forces in 2016—*[Interruption.]* I do hope that my voice will last till the end of my speech!

The abuses that the United Nations reported in the then Jammu and Kashmir state of Indian-administered Kashmir, and what it noted as the “root causes” that were fuelling local dissent, included the reported killings of civilians by off-duty police and army personnel with impunity; the failure to independently investigate and prosecute widespread reports of sexual violence committed by security services personnel; people reported disappeared with impunity; the detention of thousands of people, including children, under the Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act 1978, which, for the uninitiated, allowed the state to take a person into preventive detention without trial for up to two years; the obstruction of access to justice, through not just the 1979 Act but the Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act 1990, which gives security personnel powers to investigate and arrest without warrants, as well as protecting those personnel under law; and, finally, the obstruction of access to basic medical care for civilians.

The UN report concluded:

“In responding to demonstrations that started in July 2016, Indian security forces used excessive force that led to unlawful killings and a very high number of injuries...Civil society estimates are that 130 to 145 civilians were killed by security forces between mid-July 2016 and end of March 2018, and 16 to 20 civilians killed by armed groups in the same period. One of most dangerous weapons used against protesters during the unrest in 2016 was the pellet-firing shotgun, which is a 12-gauge pump-action shotgun that fires metal pellets.”

For PAK, the UN reported that

“the human rights violations in this area are of a different calibre or magnitude and of a more structural nature.”

For example, it identified that the Pakistan Government had control over the affairs of Azad Jammu and Kashmir and of Gilgit Baltistan. It identified that the interim constitution of AJK prevents anyone criticising AJK’s accession to Pakistan in contravention of international standards on the rights to freedom of expression, opinion, assembly and association.

Local people in Gilgit Baltistan have been forcibly displaced to make way for the China-Pakistan economic corridor.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Unfortunately, that pattern of abuse will be all too familiar not only to our constituents of Kashmiri heritage, but to those from the Punjab, where similar abuses are taking place. In Kashmir, in particular, it is a matter not only of enormous abuse of human rights but, given the security situation, of international concern because of the tensions. Should the international community not therefore intervene to try to resolve this issue?

Debbie Abrahams: We cannot say—this has been said on too many occasions—that this is just a bilateral issue. I will come to that point in a moment.

The last point that was raised is around the discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities. The UN report also noted that the number of armed groups that have been operating across IAK and which were also held responsible for human rights abuses, including kidnappings, killings and sexual violence. The report stated that, despite the Pakistan Government’s denial,

“experts believe that Pakistan’s military continues to support their operations across the Line of Control in Indian-Administered Kashmir.”

The human rights high commissioner made a series of recommendations to both the Indian and Pakistani Governments, and the primary one that covers both is that the rule of law and international human rights must be upheld. Both of these countries are signatories to the universal declaration and they must be upheld.

Specifically, the high commissioner recommended that India repeal the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 and ensure that the 1978 public safety Act was compliant with international law. It was recommended that Pakistan amend the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997, bringing it in line with international human rights standards and safeguards as well as amend the interim constitution of AJK and other legislation that limits the rights of freedom of expression and opinion.

Let us fast forward to July 2019 when a second UN report was published. This was meant to be a progress report, but the high commissioner expressed real concerns that very little progress had been made. It noted that the political and military tensions between them, particularly

as a result of the Pulwama attack in February, was having an impact on the human rights of Kashmiris on both sides of the line of control.

On 5 August 2019, as Members will know, after the Bharatiya Janata party’s general election win in India, Prime Minister Modi announced the revocation of article 370 in India’s constitution. The effect was to remove the special status afforded to Jammu and Kashmir since partition. A Bill was rapidly approved by both Houses of Parliament, splitting the state of Jammu and Kashmir into two federal territories, Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, with direct rule from Delhi. The revocation of article 370 was also extended to article 35A, which removes the rights of indigenous Kashmiris, and has the potential to alter the distinct demographic character of IAK—a direct contravention of the 2007 UN declaration on the rights of indigenous people.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for bringing this debate to the House. This week, Narendra Modi will be addressing the United Nations General Assembly. Does she agree that it is high time that Narendra Modi is challenged on the breaking of the UN conventions and on the reports of human rights abuses in Kashmir?

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that whenever and wherever there are human rights abuses—in whichever country, including our own—we should hold that country to account. That still needs to happen.

Accompanying the changes to India’s constitution, the Indian Government sent tens of thousands of Indian troops to the Kashmir valley, imposed a strict curfew and blocked all communications. In addition, initially hundreds and then thousands of people, including politicians, were detained. The National Federation of Indian Women claims that 13,000 teenage boys, some as young as 14, were imprisoned for up to 45 days, far away from their families.

During the weeks and months that followed, it was difficult to get accurate information about what was happening in IAK. There was an imposed media blackout and the Indian Government refused to allow independent observers to IAK, other than through those carefully choreographed visits. Despite that, there were reports of food and medicines shortages, and ongoing communication issues, especially for non-business purposes. Concerns were also being raised about the restrictions on access to essential healthcare as a result of the lockdown measures. Children’s education was severely disrupted, with parents afraid to let their children out of their sight. Although some of those detained have been released, thousands still remain in prison. In some cases, their families do not know where they are. On top of this, there are very concerning allegations of torture.

It is in this context that in early 2020 the all-party parliamentary Kashmir group decided that a delegation should try to visit IAK and PAK as early as possible in that year. The Kashmiri diaspora in the UK had raised concerns about family members still in Kashmir, and this is still a real concern for our constituents. Unfortunately, the Indian Government did not respond to the APPG’s request to visit. However, through the Pakistani high commissioner in London, to whom I express my sincere thanks, the Pakistani Government agreed to allow the

[Debbie Abrahams]

APPG unfettered access to PAK in February 2020. We said who we wanted to meet and where we wanted to go, and that was followed.

During our delegation's visit, we met Prime Minister Khan and Foreign Minister Qureshi in Islamabad, the Prime Minister and President of Azad Kashmir in Muzaffarabad, and the Pakistan parliamentary committee on Kashmir. We used those meetings to ask pointed questions—and they were pointed—about the reports in the UN human rights report. At the time of our visit, Prime Minister Khan had just brokered a peace deal with Afghanistan, and that was his focus. He said, "This will allow us a bit more freedom also to look at what is happening on the east of our border." If only we had known then what we know now.

It is fair to say that the pressure that Pakistan now faces along the Durand line has significantly escalated since our visit. As I said last month when we were recalled, the international community must step up and offer support to Pakistan and other third countries as this new wave of Afghan refugees migrates across the border. I sincerely hope, given that Pakistan has been such a strong advocate for human rights in IAK, that when it is engaging with the Taliban, it also speaks about the human rights of all Afghans.

As much as the APPG delegates enjoyed meeting parliamentarians, I think we would probably say that we were particularly moved by our visit to a refugee camp in Gulpur, where we heard at first hand about the experience of people who had fled from IAK. The visit to the line of control at Chakoti, where we were briefed by the Pakistan military, made us acutely aware of the tensions at the border, and we were shown video footage of civilians apparently being shot at by the Indian military.

I found the briefings from the British high commission and the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan particularly revealing. UNMOGIP confirmed an extensive military presence in Srinagar and especially in IAK, with armed forces personnel every 30 metres or so contributing to the feelings of harassment and being under siege reported by civilians in IAK—and this was pre-covid. With the advent of the covid pandemic, civic society stakeholders reported a double lockdown with further detentions of large numbers of young IAK men in the spring of 2020, when we were all grappling with our first experience of lockdown. The use of other legislation, including the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Order and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act were further examples of infringements by the Indian Government of international and human rights law.

The attack on human rights organisations such as Amnesty International India is another area of grave concern.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I met members of Amnesty just earlier today, and they spoke about their concerns and their inability to do the vital work that they do in supporting human rights around the world because their offices and operations have been shut down by the Indian Government. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to condemn that and support Amnesty to be able to do its very vital work?

Debbie Abrahams: Indeed. The APPG met Amnesty last autumn once we heard about that. If anybody is not familiar with it, please google what has happened; it is quite disturbing.

Amnesty International's 2020 annual report cites how covid has been used by some countries to quell peaceful dissent, including in IAK and PAK. In IAK, journalists and human rights defenders were questioned for allegedly anti-national activities. The Indian police attacked or summoned 18 journalists for their reporting, and the offices of the *Kashmir Times* were sealed when its editor sued the Government after their shutdown of internet and telephone services in the region. In PAK last July, doctors peacefully protesting about the lack of security in the region were arrested.

In addition to the human rights issues, the stakeholders whom the APPG met or interviewed raised concern at the escalating tensions between India and Pakistan, and, latterly, India and China—all nuclear powers, making Kashmir a very significant security concern in the world.

The APPG discussed a number of recommendations for the international community, the Indian and Pakistani Governments, the British Government, and the APPG itself. The ones that we drafted in relation to the Government are as follows, and I would be very grateful if the Minister could respond to them: to provide Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office funding to support track 2 diplomacy measures in Kashmir, as well as practical support for Kashmiri refugees; to offer support via the Commonwealth to facilitate crisis talks and peacebuilding in Kashmir; to make the commitment to and delivery of human rights explicit in all UK trade deals, including with India and Pakistan; and to make an annual statement to the House—it is about four years since the last debate on Kashmir on the Floor of the House—on the Government's contribution to conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Kashmir. Fundamentally, Kashmir must be at the heart of a trilateral peacebuilding process with India and Pakistan.

The APPG has members of Kashmiri, Pakistani, Indian and other heritages. We are passionate about human rights for all our brothers and sisters, at home and abroad. I have tried to be even-handed and to base my remarks on evidence. This is not pro or anti any country; it is definitely pro human rights. The plight of Kashmir is barely in our country's consciousness, let alone in our media's. I hope the media who are listening to this debate will notice the passion that we all bring to this subject, and I hope that this debate will change things.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to hon. Members that a great many people wish to catch my eye and that we do not have very much time left this afternoon, so we have to begin with an immediate time limit on Back-Bench speeches of four minutes, which is likely to reduce soon.

3.14 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The dispute over Jammu and Kashmir is clearly one for India and Pakistan to resolve. That has been the position of successive UK Governments of different political stripes and it is the right one. We should also keep in mind that

the whole of Kashmir acceded to India when the country gained its independence in 1947, even if part of the area was subsequently seized and occupied by Pakistan.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) raised a number of cases related to the part of Kashmir that is administered by India. As India is a democracy where religious minorities have full constitutional protections and one that places great value on respect for the rule of law, its courts and institutions are well capable of properly investigating alleged human rights abuses. It is right that they do so. In a previous debate in the House, the Minister responding for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office welcomed assurances from the Indian Government that their army was committed to compliance with the law and that disciplinary action would be taken in accordance with the law when necessary.

We should welcome the successful conduct of local elections in October 2019, in which more than 3 million voters in Jammu and Kashmir took part, including minorities such as Valmikis who were enfranchised for the first time. Further elections took place in December last year, despite covid adversity.

We must also recognise the suffering caused in Jammu and Kashmir as a result of terrorism and fundamentalism. An infamous example occurred in January 1990, when 65,000 Hindus were expelled from the Kashmir valley by Islamist jihadists, whose slogan was “Die, convert or leave”. In 1947, a quarter of a million Pandits lived in the Kashmir valley, but few remain after systematic attempts by extremists to force out people who question Pakistan’s involvement in the region. Today’s terrorist groups continue to threaten the security of people in Kashmir. They include Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad and Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, which the Indian Government believe all have clear links with Pakistan. There is evidence of arms and equipment from the Pakistan military finding their way into terrorist hands. In June last year, Indian border security forces shot down a China-made drone flying in from the Pakistan side containing armaments.

I appreciate that the repeal of article 370 has provoked controversy, but it has been accompanied by a concerted push to improve prosperity and economic opportunity for people living in the region. Extensive investment is under way to improve water supplies, roads, bridges, technology, agriculture, tourism and industrial development. Rules that denied certain property rights to women who married men from other parts of India have been scrapped because article 370 has gone and better protection for minorities such as the Paharis has also been introduced.

Last but not least, we must welcome the efforts by the Indian Government to grapple with the covid crisis, which has seen testing and vaccination rates in Jammu and Kashmir among the best in the country. While no doubt this issue will divide the House as it has in the past, I hope that we can all agree on the importance of all sides engaging positively together to build a better, brighter and more stable future for all the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

3.18 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) [R]: I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for setting

out the issues at the heart of the debate. The truth is, the Kashmir struggle has gone on a long while, spanning many decades, and tens and thousands of people have died. Many hon. Members will be familiar with the history, so I will concentrate on what happened just two years ago.

On 4 August 2019, phone lines in Kashmir went dead and internet connections were cut. A day later, 7 million people were locked in their homes in a strict and brutal military curfew. Almost 10,000 people, from young people to former politicians, were arrested and indefinitely detained. Some are still in detention. A day later, a Bill was passed in the Indian Parliament stripping Kashmir of its autonomy and special status. It was stripped of its statehood and identity, to be governed directly by New Delhi.

In the last two years, human rights groups have documented the everyday reality of that governance for Kashmiris: mass arrests and raids, torture, the suppression of free assembly, the crushing of the Kashmiri press, the decimation of the local economy, the crippling of the education system, the incarceration of thousands of people, the conversion of hotels and guesthouses into detention centres and the gagging of Kashmiri civil society. Censorship has been institutionalized and journalism has been criminalised.

Until recently, Kashmir had the longest internet shutdown ever imposed by a democracy. The curfew and communication siege also meant no access to doctors or hospitals, no work, no businesses, no schools and no contact with loved ones lasting for many months. We experienced the covid lockdown here, except that ours was without a military curfew and without a communication siege, and still it brought our world to its knees, testing our endurance and sanity. Think of Kashmir and what people have to put up with under a dense military deployment and surrounded by a maze of barbed wire on their street. Imagine soldiers breaking into your home. It is incomparable suffering.

Only a few weeks ago, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres expressed concern over “grave violations” in Kashmir, urging the Indian Government to end the use of shotgun pellets against children. Yes, that’s right—the use of shotgun pellets on children. But the use of these pellets is not new in Indian-administered Kashmir. In 2016, there was a report that more than 1,100 people were partially blinded in what was considered by some to be the world’s first mass blindings. There were reports that some victims were children, some as young as 19 months old.

On top of this is the domicile law, which opened the floodgates to land grabs by allowing Indians from the other parts of India to reside in Kashmir. That means that the state subject certificates of Kashmiris are legally void, unless they are used as evidence for their application to the Indian Government for domiciled status in their own country. Those whose applications are rejected could be denied residency in their own country and deported. Kashmiris are facing a cultural erasure.

Let me be clear: we are not against India—it is a beautiful country—but that does not mean that we should not hold the Indian Government, and particularly this BJP Government, to account for their abusive behaviour. We in this Parliament talk about girls’ rights

[Yasmin Qureshi]

in Afghanistan, but what about girls' rights in Indian-occupied Kashmir? They just as much have rights as well.

India most allow the UN observers free and unfettered access to visit Kashmir and assess the situation. I know some Members will stand up and say none of what I have said is correct. In that case, I would say: why doesn't the Indian Government allow in outside independent observers?

3.22 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. The situation in Kashmir is of so much importance to people right across the United Kingdom. Of course, this is no different in Keighley, which is home to many British Pakistani Kashmiris, many of whom have loved ones in the region. I must take this opportunity to thank all of my constituents who have contacted me—be it through face-to-face meetings, on social media, through letter or email—expressing their deep concern about the abhorrent human rights issues that are happening in Kashmir. I hear their concerns, which is why at the beginning of this year I took the opportunity to speak on this very topic, expressing my ongoing concerns to Government Ministers in this place.

Kashmir has been living under heavy lockdown restrictions since August 2019, following the special status of Jammu and Kashmir being revoked by India. We should be clear about what this actually means: no foreign journalists being allowed into Jammu and Kashmir by the Indian Government; and thousands of people being arrested without any due cause and facing harassment and imprisonment—lawyers, small business owners, journalists, students and, of course, human rights activists. Phone lines have been blocked and internet access taken away. Although some communication has been restored, it is still very patchy and heavily controlled by the Government. Education has been severely disrupted. Legal reforms have been made so that residents' property rights can be revoked. Properties have been destroyed and innocent people are losing their lives.

Yesterday, I received a letter from the High Commissioner of Pakistan in which His Excellency wished to bring me up to speed on the continuing violations of human rights and human dignity perpetrated by India in Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir. It is reported that 3,431 cases of war crimes have been perpetrated by the Indian forces in this disputed territory. I have been informed that more than 1,000 houses have been destroyed since special status was revoked. All that, quite rightly, is causing a huge amount of concern for many of my constituents across Keighley. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi), who cannot be here today, shares my concerns.

There are reports of brutalism of Kashmiri society being made possible through draconian laws, the sole aim of which is to perpetrate the occupation and facilitate violence with impunity. As elected politicians in the United Kingdom, we cannot decide on domestic policy in another country, but we can use our influence to ensure that this terrible situation is investigated, and that our Government use their weight and influence to put on pressure to seek a solution.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case; this will give him a little more time in a moment. Does he agree that we need to say to those people in India, and indeed in Pakistan, who would prefer us not to debate these matters, that we have no choice because so many of our constituents have friends and family in the area, and perhaps even their own homes there?

Robbie Moore: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We are here to represent our constituents, who have loved ones in Kashmir and are deeply concerned about the horrific situation that is continuing.

The UK's fundamental values are freedom and democracy. That applies not only to the situation in Kashmir, but right across the world, and of course we are seeing a terrible situation in China with the Uyghur Muslims. I would like UN human rights officials to get access to both sides of the lines of control to find out the facts. India and Pakistan are both long-standing friends of our country and that is strengthened by large Indian and Pakistani communities across the UK. But a solution to the situation in Kashmir must be sought. After all, both countries are nuclear powers. The solution must be sought at speed.

3.26 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Let me set this out clearly. For more than 70 years, the sons and daughters of Kashmir have been subjected to persecution, oppression and injustice in the most brutal manner. For more than 70 years, they have been butchered, maimed and killed at the hands of an occupying Indian military, operating under the draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act. For more than 70 years, they have had their rights eroded, their freedoms stripped away and their self-determination denied. But what we saw two years ago, with the right-wing Modi Government unilaterally revoking articles 370 and 35A of the constitution, in direct contravention of United Nations resolutions and of international law, and a war crime under the fourth Geneva convention, is the biggest assault that we have seen on the right to self-determination for Kashmiris and a clear attempt by the right-wing Modi Government to quash the Kashmiri cause.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does he agree that, after decades of oppression and the denial of human rights and of self-determination, the illegal revocation of articles 370 and 35A by the Government of India not only breaches international law, but is a deliberate attempt to quash the Kashmiri people? Furthermore, it is deeply disturbing that the United Nations Security Council meeting shortly after those revocations could not even agree a statement of condemnation.

Imran Hussain: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a critical juncture for the future of Kashmir. Today's debate, sadly, will be another debate where we list a raft of grave human rights abuses that are taking place in Indian-occupied Kashmir. It will be another debate where we call for action against those perpetrating these grave crimes, and demand that numerous UN resolutions finally be upheld, only to be told by Ministers that this is a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan. Madam Deputy Speaker, human rights are never a

bilateral issue. The right to self-determination is never a bilateral issue. The right of a people to determine their own destiny is never a bilateral issue. It is always an international issue. What message do we in this House send to the Kashmiris? Does a Kashmiri child not feel the same pain as any other child? Does a Kashmiri child not bleed in the same way as any other child? Is a Kashmiri child's life not worth the same as any other child's?

We raise these issues time and again, but Kashmiris are still subjected to appalling human rights abuses at the hands of a brutal occupying military force. If the UK and the rest of the international community continue to remain silent and continue to refuse to uphold UN resolutions, and the right-wing Modi Government continue to actively ignore them to unilaterally quash the Kashmiri struggle, what is the point of us talking here? And what is the point of the United Nations when it cannot even enforce and implement its own resolutions? We have to start asking these very serious questions. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) makes the fine point that soon after the revocation of articles 370 and 35A, the United Nations Security Council met and could not even agree a statement of condemnation. That is shameful.

We are at a critical point that will decide the future of Kashmir forever. Just talking about Kashmir will no longer suffice, because while we talk and debate, innocent Kashmiri men, women and children continue to be cut down in the streets, and their right to self-determination is eroded further by the day. Instead, we must start demanding and forcing real action by our Government and the international community.

As a proud British Kashmiri, I cannot do justice to this debate in four minutes; those who have seen me in this Chamber know that I have spoken in, instigated and led debates time and again. But my final comment, as a proud British Kashmiri, will be this, and let me be absolutely crystal clear about it. The Kashmiris are not begging the international community. The Kashmiris do not bow before the international community. The Kashmiris around the world unite to demand our birth right to self-determination and to determine our own destiny.

3.32 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I will endeavour not to be so passionate as the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain). I declare my interest as the co-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for India and, I believe, the last serving Member of this House to visit Srinagar and interact with the people of Jammu and Kashmir directly.

I begin with the simple premise that in 1947, the late Maharaja ceded the entirety of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir to India, so the illegal occupation by Pakistan of part of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir should cease, its military operation should go home, the line of control should be removed, and all the terrorist bases that exist on the Pakistani line of control should be ceased and dismantled.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Can the hon. Gentleman please tell me who it was that went to the United Nations to ask for a resolution on the plebiscite for Kashmir?

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I agree that all the United Nations resolutions that date back from 1947 should be implemented, the first being that the illegal occupation by Pakistan of Jammu and Kashmir should cease. When that is done, we can talk about the other United Nations resolutions.

Before the abrogation of article 370, the citizens of Jammu and Kashmir existed under different laws from the rest of India. It is important that we look—particularly those opposed to the abrogation of article 370—at the civil liberties that have been restored to the citizens as a result of the abrogation. India has changed its constitution over the years, as a developing country with a progressive view, but of course the laws in Jammu and Kashmir were frozen because of article 370, which was always envisaged as a temporary measure. What happened? I think we should review this, because all those who complain about civil rights should remember what happened.

Under the law, prior to the abrogation of article 370, Kashmiri women were not entitled to ownership of property. If they married someone from out of the state, they lost their property rights. How is that acceptable? Indian women are protected against domestic violence under a comprehensive Act of the Indian Parliament. Until the abrogation of article 370, no such protection was provided to women in Kashmir. Under Indian law, Muslim women are protected against the triple talaq—a man saying, “I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you” and that is the end of it, with no protection for women. Of course, now that article 370 has been abrogated, they now have that protection. Under Indian law, it is illegal for children under the age of 14 to be married. Prior to the abrogation of article 370, children under the age of 14 could be married. Under article 35A, the Hindu Kashmiri Pandit population was expelled at the point of a gun by Islamist forces. Now, they have the potential to return. Equally, local government has been restored to Jammu Kashmir under the revocation of article 370.

Kashmir Valley is a beautiful place to see. There is the opportunity for tourism, culture, trade, hydro-electric power and many other aspects. However, it has been tainted by multiple mass exoduses, terrorist attacks, killings, child marriages and forced conversions by radical Islamist terrorists. We should remember that while the Kashmir Valley may be predominantly Muslim, Jammu is predominantly Hindu and Ladakh predominantly Buddhist. The fact is that the historically persecuted religious minorities—Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, women and children—have, unfortunately, suffered in the valley.

The heavy military presence in civilian settlements is definitely a threat to a democratic ethos, but just imagine—we saw what happened in Afghanistan—if the troops were withdrawn and the protections were not there. The plight of Jammu Kashmir would be the same as Afghanistan, with Islamist forces coming in and eliminating democracy in the area. It is only the Indian army and the sound footing of the Indian military and democracy that has stopped the region of Jammu and Kashmir from resembling Taliban-occupied Afghanistan. It only makes sense for them to do so because the region is legally and rightfully an integral part of the Republic of India. The world must come to that, and colleagues must recognise that reality.

3.37 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for ensuring that this debate has been granted time in the Chamber, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for the excellent way she opened, in such an even-handed manner, the debate on human rights abuses in Kashmir.

I came to have an interest in the situation in Kashmir when I was visited by a small delegation of British Kashmiri constituents at my surgery in Stockport Labour club several years ago. I have a very small minority ethnic community in my constituency, and of that small minority ethnic community the Kashmiri population is a fragment. However, I was taken by the passion and commitment of my Kashmiri community to their cause and concerns; a very similar kind of passion to that we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain). That led me to look a bit further into the situation in Kashmir, and quite frankly I was shocked by what I found out. Many of the issues have already been raised in this debate; I will not repeat them, because they are already on the record and time is short.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the reports of crackdowns on freedoms of expression in Kashmir should concern us all across the House? One thing that would help to bring light, not heat, to these debates is making sure that everybody can be heard freely, especially those on the ground, and that Kashmiris can speak their mind about what is happening, because we know that at the moment that is not happening.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The most basic and fundamental human rights, which each and every one of us in the House and each and every one of our constituents enjoys and takes for granted, are denied to too many people living in Kashmir. That is wrong. As parliamentarians, as democrats and as believers in human rights, we should call out and condemn those abuses, not just in Kashmir but wherever they occur across the world.

I am particularly concerned about this seven-decade injustice because the most basic and most fundamental human right, from which all other rights derive, is people's right to choose by whom they are governed and how they are governed. That is the crux of it. That is the right that the people of Kashmir have been denied.

I will make no particular biased remarks about who should govern the Kashmiris. I do not care whether it is India, Pakistan or the Kashmiri people themselves—that is for the people of Kashmir to decide. That is what they have been denied, and it is what they have been promised in a United Nations resolution.

I implore the Minister, who is new in post and whom I welcome to her position in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, to do all she can to use what influence the United Kingdom has to bring all interested parties to the table from the United Nations, the Commonwealth, India, Pakistan and—most importantly of all—Kashmir itself, to start talks and try to find a successful resolution.

What is clear from all the reports that my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth outlined is that two wrongs do not make a right. The fact of the matter is that there are people on both sides of the line of control whose human rights, to some extent or another, are being affected and withdrawn. We should ensure that their rights are protected and upheld and that their most basic and fundamental human right—to decide by whom they are governed and how they are governed—is finally put to the people. That is why I am proud to stand here today as the chair of Labour Friends of Kashmir.

3.43 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I congratulate the chair of the all-party parliamentary Kashmir group, the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), on her work. I am grateful for the opportunity to be one of her vice-chairs.

In the limited time available, I want to focus on one specific issue: the alleged use of cluster munitions by India along the line of control. I received a letter from the high commission for Pakistan on 21 May 2020, which explains:

“India struck the habitation of civilians along LoC on 30th July 2019, with cluster bombs;

9 villages were hit in the District Neelum of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, namely: Jabri; Chilliana; Rajgan; Pahallan; Patti Jageer; Nausadda; Nauseri; Garhi Dupatta; & Qaiser Kot”.

Seventeen cluster bombs—I will come back to this point—were used by the Indian army. Three of them exploded, resulting in 18 casualties—four people killed and 14 injured—while the remaining 14 bombs were defused. The high commission writes:

“On 5th August 2019, Military attaches from 5 countries, including the UK, were taken to the site. Delegation also interacted with victims of cluster bombs;

Evidence collected...has been preserved”.

I have received a rather upsetting dossier from Pakistan and have written to the Government with the allegations and with the dossier. In particular, the dossier shows the remnants of what appear to be cluster munitions having been used.

If the British Government had one of our military attachés on site, it is extremely important that we should know whether cluster munitions were used. If India did not use cluster munitions, then a great nation such as India should not stand accused, but if it did use cluster munitions, I would consider that a crime against humanity, and I will explain why.

I was a Royal Air Force officer 25 years ago, and I will never forget watching cluster bombs being dropped. I invite Members to consider two aircraft coming through at 450 knots and 300 feet, each dropping a pair of weapons which, when they come off the aircraft, spin fast and throw about 174 bomblets. They will scatter across an area 1,000 feet by 500 feet per pair, and not all of them will explode. That area will be covered with fire, smoke, shrapnel and death—a very effective weapon against columns of tanks and mixed infantry in the Soviet era, perhaps, but a totally unacceptable weapon to use against civilians and villages. I consider it a crime against humanity that such a thing should have been used. The Government replied that they were “aware of reports of the use of cluster munitions” but otherwise there was a degree, if I may say, of equivocation.

As India develops and emerges and becomes an ever-greater power, I am aware of the importance to the whole world that it turns towards the maritime, liberal, market democracies, such as us, the United States and the countries of the trans-Pacific partnership, and becomes a country that promotes peace and prosperity, not towards China or Russia or authoritarianism. However, around one in six of my constituents is a British Kashmiri, and some people will have property in Kashmir like others have property in France. When a man shows me an image of his house on the line of control burning because it has been shelled and tells me that his family were in that house not long before, what is going to happen if British people and their children get killed and maimed because they happen to be in their homes on the line of control when India uses cluster bombs? The situation must be established and dealt with, and the Government have a duty.

3.47 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I start by thanking my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this important debate on human rights in Kashmir. As a Bradford MP, I am proud to represent a city with such close links to Kashmir. I share many of my constituents' deep concerns for the situation unfolding in the region. We need a solution that protects the human rights of the Kashmiri people and establishes the democratic right of self-determination. I strongly believe that this Government have not done enough and must redouble their efforts and take a more active role in securing a safe and peaceful future for Kashmir. The issue is of international concern and demands an international solution.

The United Kingdom must stand firmly against human rights abuses wherever they occur in the world and must be vocal in support for those suffering from such abuses. It is our humanity that unites us, and human rights abuses should not and cannot be ignored. That means that we need more than just words of reassurance. With so many allegations of serious human rights, this is not just some faraway foreign policy, because an abuse of human rights is an abuse of humanity. An abuse of human rights anywhere is an abuse to human rights everywhere. It is what binds us, and it must not be what divides us.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and many colleagues for so clearly setting out the case. Does she share the frustration and, frankly, the anger of my constituents that not only has this issue remained unresolved for so long, but it seems to be deteriorating? Justice and peace seem further away than ever, and Government action seems so limited and slow.

Judith Cummins: I absolutely agree, and I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue.

The unilateral revocation of article 370 of the Indian constitution, which granted special status to Kashmir, was an outrageous act which has undermined long-term efforts towards peace in the region. Following that revocation, in February last year, I visited Kashmir as part of a cross-party delegation of the Kashmir all-party parliamentary group to see for myself what was going on in the region. We had wanted to travel to India as well,

but our chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth, was famously denied entry and promptly deported, so we visited Kashmir and Pakistan, where we were granted unfettered access. We met many people, including the then President of Kashmir, Mr Masood Khan, and visited the line of control. I also visited the Gulpur refugee camp to hear directly from displaced people. There I saw at first hand the direct impact of the situation on those people—ordinary people, who told me of the injustices and abuses that they had endured. They wanted nothing more than for their children and loved ones to grow up safely.

The continuing injustices experienced by the people of Kashmir are unacceptable. They face oppression, threats of violence and imprisonment, and rape is routinely used as a weapon of war. The human rights that are considered a certainty in this country are still beyond the grasp of the ordinary people of Kashmir. I condemn these injustices, and I will continue to press the Government, and international partners, for action until the human rights that we enjoy are restored for the people of Kashmir, and until dignity and justice are secured for those people.

3.51 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I am an officer of the Kashmir all-party parliamentary group, and, along with the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and the chair, went to Kashmir. This was within two or three months of my election, and I thought it important to go to Kashmir and the line of control, and to ask people in Kashmir about their everyday experiences of being in this appalling situation. I visited the refugee camp to which the hon. Member for Bradford South referred, and we saw the injuries and obtained at first hand testimony from people who had been victims of torture. We are not getting this information from newspaper articles; it is first-hand evidence from people to whom we spoke, and who had been treated in the most appalling manner.

We could all engage in a lengthy historical analysis of the geopolitical issues affecting Kashmir, but this debate is entitled "Human Rights in Kashmir", and the 2018 United Nations report on the situation of human rights in Kashmir is my starting point. Paragraph 22 states:

"There remains an urgent need to address past and ongoing human rights violations"—

it is not India or Pakistan that is saying this; it is the United Nations—

"and to deliver justice for all people in Kashmir who have been suffering seven decades of conflict."

How on earth could anyone disagree with that?

The United Nations should have it as its central mission to support a peace process that will give justice to the people of Kashmir, and in my view that is about self-determination—about the right of people to choose how they want to be governed. We can go back to revolutions from 1947 onwards, and place on them any historical interpretation that we choose, but the basic, underlying principle is that the people of Kashmir should have the right to decide their own futures. How is it possible that we can ever advance an argument to suggest that the freedoms that we enjoy in this country should not be enjoyed elsewhere? How can we possibly put forward an argument that skirts around the issue, and say that we can tolerate clear human rights abuses, whether for political reasons or for any other reason?

[James Daly]

I agree with the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain). I think that the United Nations needs to step up to the plate, at the very least. I think that it has let this region down. Resolutions are tabled for a reason. If they are not enforced—if they are not enacted—what is the point of them? If the United Nations cannot enforce or enact its own resolutions, why should we trust it in the future in respect of these issues?

I am proud to represent thousands of constituents of Kashmiri heritage. Before my election I was a councillor in Bury for a long time. I did not know about this issue. I have learned from my friends; I have learned from people on the ground; I have learned and learned and learned about the human rights abuses that happen on a daily basis. I am a lawyer, and I have heard at first hand of people being detained without trial for two years and, the day before the two years are up, they get detained for another two years. It is absolutely appalling. Rape, torture and mass killings are not being investigated. The Indian Army treats Kashmiris in any way it chooses with impunity, and we as an international community tolerate that. Can we look ourselves in the mirror if we continue to do that?

The realistic outcome is that the United Kingdom Government cannot act alone. We can, however, use our influence in the United Nations and other international bodies to support all those who wish to be part of the movement to protect universal human rights and the rule of law and to give justice to the Kashmiri people, which the United Nations says should be our central mission. We must do that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I would like to make sure that everyone who wishes to catch my eye has an opportunity to speak. Therefore, after the next speaker, I will reduce the time limit to three minutes—[*Interruption.*] There is no point in people sighing. The debate must finish at 5 o'clock and the only way to get everyone in is to reduce the time limit to three minutes.

3.55 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I want to begin by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for arranging this important debate today. Our country has a proud history of standing up for human rights globally, but the Government seem to be burying their head in the sand when it comes to Kashmir. The Foreign Office's 80-page long 2020 human rights and democracy report does not even mention Kashmir once. Is that because there were no human rights violations in the region in the last year? No. As we have heard today, all the evidence suggests otherwise. The charity Human Rights Watch's 2020 human rights report paints a very different picture. For example, it found that the Indian security forces have continued to use shotguns firing metal pellets to disperse crowds, despite the indiscriminate and life-changing injuries they inflict. I raised the Indian Government's use of these pellet guns in the House more than four years ago, and still things have not changed.

Throughout my time in this place, I have raised the plight of Kashmiris many times. In 2017, I spoke of the shocking human rights abuses going on there and called on the Government to use their diplomatic powers and

membership of the UN Security Council to secure lasting peace in the region. However, four years later peace seems as far away as ever, and Kashmiris are still being denied their basic human rights.

It has been over two years since the Indian Government of Narendra Modi revoked article 370, stripping Jammu and Kashmir of their autonomy. In that time, we have seen countless examples of brutal actions by the security forces to quash the democratic freedoms of Kashmiris; the reality is that we simply do not know the scale of the human rights abuses in Kashmir. Why? Because ever since the revocation of article 370 in 2019 the Indian Government have tightly controlled the circulation of information in the region. Opposition politicians, foreign diplomats and international journalists have been barred from entering. Local journalists have been routinely harassed and threatened by security forces, and internet access has been tightly restricted.

Over the last 18 months, we have all experienced lockdowns and limitations on where we can go and who we can see, but just imagine having to go through all that without a phone or internet services. That has been the grim reality for millions of Kashmiris since 2019. Services were blocked altogether for months, and even when basic 2G broadband was restored in some areas in 2020, social media websites and communication platforms were blocked. Many Kashmiris living in my constituency of Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough went months without being able to speak to loved ones in Kashmir due to the blackout. Only in February this year has 4G been restored throughout the region.

Sadly, stories such as these are far from uncommon. Given the ban on foreign journalists, we rely on local reporters for information on the situation in the region. The global community must stand by them against attacks on their human rights. Two years on from the revocation of article 370, Kashmiris' human rights continue to be abused. The international community must come together to put an end to these injustices. Diplomats and UN officials must be able to enter the region and fully assess the human rights situation. For too long, the UK Government have ignored the plight of Kashmiris, and now is the time for us to play our part in building lasting peace for all those whose lives and livelihoods depend on it.

3.59 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this important debate.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) rightly said that awareness of this issue is not widespread in this country, but lots of people and Kashmiri human rights organisations in my city and in communities across the country are working hard to spread awareness. This debate is, in part, down to them and their hard work. I thank Friends of Kashmir in Peterborough, Abdul Choudhuri, Mohammad Choudhary, Ghafarat Shahid, Mohammad Ikram and Mohammad Yousaf for all their work in highlighting this issue.

What happens in Kashmir matters in Peterborough, not just because we have a 20,000 Kashmiri diaspora population in my city but because if we care about human rights, we care about Kashmir. I suggest that all hon. Members care about human rights and, if they do, they

should reflect on the murder, torture, rape and all the other atrocities happening in Indian-occupied Kashmir. My hon. Friends the Members for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood), for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) and for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), who cannot be here today, care deeply about these issues, too.

In another world, I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims, and it is incumbent on British Muslims to be aware that this Government and all hon. Members in the Chamber today care about atrocities and human rights abuses carried out against their fellow Muslims across the world. I ask the Minister to think about it carefully. Just as we care about injustice against the Rohingya and the Uyghur, we also care about injustice against the Kashmiris.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman mentions persecution against many peoples, and there is anti-Christian violence in Kashmir, too. Christians have their churches burned and there is forced conversion of Christians by brutal force, physical and sexual violence, rape and murder. Christians need equality in Kashmir, too.

Paul Bristow: The hon. Gentleman must have read my mind, because I was going to come on to that next. Just as we care about atrocities against the Rohingya and the Uyghur and about persecuted Christians around the world, we must make sure that we stand up for persecuted Muslim communities, too.

I completely reject the argument that, somehow, to care about human rights in Kashmir is anti-Indian. India is the seventh largest country in the world by land area and it has the second largest population, at 1.2 billion. India's list of economic and other achievements is impressive, but the ongoing human rights situation in Kashmir does not benefit India at all. If India wants to take its place as one of the great world powers, surely the human rights abuses in Kashmir hold it back and make people feel differently about India.

I stand with the hundreds of millions of Indians across the world and with the Indian diaspora in this country who care about human rights. This is not just a Muslim issue. Ordinary people in this country care about human rights, and that includes our Indian diaspora population.

This is a bilateral issue for India and Pakistan, and we face our own territorial arguments on the Falkland Islands and Gibraltar. We will never negotiate the sovereignty of Gibraltar or the Falkland Islands without consulting the Gibraltarians or the Falkland islanders themselves. We say that self-determination for these people is important, and if it is good enough for the people of the Falkland Islands and Gibraltar, it is good enough for the people of Kashmir.

4.4 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I thank the all-party group and its brilliant chair for bringing us a brilliant and balanced debate today, but without the brilliant persistence of the Kashmiri diaspora in this country we would not be here today. If the abuses happening in Kashmir were happening here and I were watching from afar, I would hope that I had the resilience and persistence that British Kashmiris have shown.

I want to raise some specific cases of the thousands of Kashmiris detained without charge, an issue that has already been raised by some hon. Members. I want to draw attention to two particular cases, the first being that of Syed Ali Shah Geelani, a man regarded as one of the top leaders in Kashmir. Mr Geelani dedicated most of his life to spearheading the resistance movement, pushing for a movement that worked to educate people and mobilising them to organise a peaceful struggle. Mr Geelani had spent the last 11 years under house arrest and, sadly, he passed away at the age of 92. His last wishes were to be buried at the martyrs' graveyard in Srinagar, but he was denied this opportunity. His family reported that the police raided their family home in the middle of the night, thrashing family members in the process and dragged his body from his home.

The second case is that of Ashraf Sehrai, another man who dedicated his life to the Kashmiri cause and suffered as a result. Mr Sehrai, a 77-year-old man, was in "preventive detention"—for which read "without charge"—since July 2020, with his family unable to see him for five months as meetings were barred, perhaps because of covid-19. Mr Sehrai had complained of poor health and a lack of medical treatment while in prison. He sadly passed away, alone in hospital, from respiratory distress and was only granted a quick burial in the middle of the night. These acts of brute force and the treatment of political prisoners leave one more scar on the memories of the Kashmiri people.

As always when an international conflict is happening, I ask myself: where are the women? Where are the women of Kashmir, who have been carrying the heaviest burden in the ongoing three-decade conflict? Not surprisingly, although it is still dismaying, the reporting and information collated about abuse against Kashmiri women is slim at best. When my office was looking into this, we came across some amazing young women graffiti artists in Srinagar who are using their voices bravely, against huge threat and opposition, to fight against the patriarchy—go on girls!—and against the human rights abuses happening to their families. If a young girl with so much to lose by speaking out against the human rights abuses in Kashmir can find a way, why are we not speaking with such passionately strong voices, with the power that the British Government have?

4.7 pm

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): This debate, for me, is about our ideals as a nation—the values we hold of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and how we propel them on to the world stage. It is also about the Kashmiri people. They did not ask for people to pick a side between India and Pakistan, but what they do ask of the UK, as a global force for good, is that we stand true to our values. We have one of the largest diplomatic networks of any country and a history that embeds us in Kashmir, and we have an obligation to use both of those things to make a difference. Indian-administered Kashmir, Pakistan-administered Kashmir and Aksai Chin are three areas controlled by three very big players, all armed with nuclear weapons. If there is any reason to try to fix this issue, that is it, because individual people and families are paying the price for that contest.

As many right hon. and hon. Members have said, in August 2019 India revoked article 370 of its constitution. That article provided for significant autonomy. If we

[Antony Higginbotham]

had done something like that in this country, it would be like ripping up the entire devolution settlement. No one in this House would stay silent on that. We have a significant diaspora across this country who care. There are those who say we should not take an interest and should not debate and discuss in this House, but I certainly will not ever stop speaking up for my constituents, and there are thousands of them who care deeply about this issue. Human rights concern us all: they are not negotiable and they do not change based on location; they unite us here and around the world. We must stand tall and stand firm.

In the few seconds I have remaining, I want to make a point about communications in Kashmir, because that is what my constituents care most about. They have family members and friends in Kashmir whom they were unable to speak to for months. If we can make one plea to the Indian Government, it is that they should never again not allow our constituents to speak to the friends and family they care so deeply about.

4.10 pm

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): I begin by paying tribute to Syed Ali Shah Geelani, who passed away on 1 September. He dedicated his life to Kashmir and the freedom of Kashmiris. I deplore the actions of the Indian Government in not allowing a proper funeral to take place and his burial without the funeral happening.

Imran Hussain: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention the undignified way in which Syed Ali Shah Geelani was buried. Does he share my concern that Syed Ali Shah Geelani's family continue to be persecuted at the hands of the Indian Government?

Tahir Ali: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend's point.

In south Asia, the long-drawn-out dispute over the state of Jammu and Kashmir remains a hanging fireball between two hostile nuclear neighbours, India and Pakistan. It has brought human misery in the form of wars and human rights violations, and continues to threaten regional and global peace. My role is not to take sides, such as being pro-Pakistan or anti-India; I believe that as a Kashmiri it is my duty to highlight the abuses and human rights violation to this House.

Even after seven decades, the people of the former Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir are waiting for their right of self-determination, as promised by the United Nations. Notwithstanding more than 25 UN resolutions calling for solutions to the dispute, India is reluctant to grant Kashmiris their right to self-determination. The Scottish people were rightly afforded a referendum to express their desire for independence, and the UK had a referendum on remaining in or leaving the EU. Kashmiris are not begging for their freedom, and nor will they beg; it is their birthright and, eventually, it will be achieved.

The Indian occupation of Kashmir is not something that can be or should be left to India and Pakistan. Let me be absolutely clear: this is not a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan; the international community needs to take responsibility. The British Government have a responsibility: this is another example of the mess left by the British Government in 1947. We cannot

turn our backs to the people of Kashmir and say it is absolutely nothing to do with us. This is an issue of international significance on which the UK should take a leading role, given its historical involvement in the situation.

In February of 2020, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), who is well known for her activism and support for the Kashmiri people, was denied entry to India and essentially deported without any suitable explanation given by the Indian Government. In essence, entry was denied because of her high-profile work supporting the self-determination of the Kashmiri people. British parliamentarians, Indian politicians sympathetic to the Kashmiris and international observers are all denied access to Indian-occupied Kashmir.

Earlier this month, China's ambassador to the UK was prevented from entering Parliament to attend a meeting with the all-party parliamentary group on China. The initiative came about because of protests by the Speaker and Lord Speaker in response to China imposing travel bans on five MPs and two peers. I ask, with the same justification, that measures be taken against the Indian high commissioner, who is still allowed on the parliamentary estate. It seems that we are prepared to take action against China but not India. This is clearly a case of double standards, and it is why I demand that the Indian high commissioner be barred from the parliamentary estate, pending an end to the military occupation of Kashmir.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The wind-ups will begin no later than 4.38 pm.

4.14 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this Backbench Business debate.

As a son of Kashmir, with parental heritage from Kashmir, I should have been really happy that my hon. Friends had secured this debate, but when I looked at what we would achieve, I was not at all pleased. The reason I am not pleased is this: we are here for this debate on a Thursday afternoon for a couple of hours; we have just three minutes to speak because of the time that is available; and then there is the interest that is being shown on this very issue by other parliamentarians. I am not pleased because, today, there is no Whip. When there is no Whip, there is no vote. When there is no vote, we have a discussion between ourselves. The discussion has no real meaning in our proceedings. When we get up to speak on important issues such as this, it is important for us that we actually have a purposeful debate. We need to put a vote before the Government to show the strength of feeling from all of parts of this House and to show what the issue of Kashmir means to us.

I intervened on the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and asked him who took the issue of Kashmir to the United Nations. It was Pandit Nehru, the Indian Prime Minister. He did so because he knew that when Maharaja Hari Singh had to abdicate from the post, he had not acceded to either one of the countries. [Interruption.] My hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) might laugh, but that is accurate.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene on him. Does he not accept that the Kashmiri Pandits, in any type of vote or plebiscite, should have the right to be considered as part of Kashmir and, therefore, those refugees who live in Jammu and the rest of the world should also have that right? Who then determines who would participate in a plebiscite?

Mr Mahmood: The plebiscite would be determined by the United Nations. Every Kashmiri, whether a Pandit, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian member of the heritage of Kashmir, has a right to vote in that plebiscite. Every Kashmiri of any religion, faith or creed is a Kashmiri by nature. It is important for all of us to recognise that, which is why I wanted to make that point. That is why it was important to keep article 370 and 35A, because that is what the United Nations had pushed for. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned tourism in his speech. Fantastic! Can I go to Kashmir as a person of Kashmiri heritage? My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth tried but was not allowed.

Following the suggestion of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali), I think all of us should apply to the Indian High Commission for a visa to go to Kashmir. When all of us do not get a visa to do that, we should then put forward a motion to Mr Speaker and to the Lord Speaker to ensure that the Indian high commissioner is not allowed in this place at all. This is about people who continue to be subjugated by an armed force—more than half a million armoured people—in their land. Those forces subjugate the rights of women, using rape as a form of collective torture. That is not acceptable in any form of society and we should not accede to that.

4.19 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): After the events of the last century, by now we should all know what a fascist party of Government looks like, speaks like and acts like. By extension, we should also know what illegal occupation and ethnic cleansing looks like. However, despite knowing this, we fail in our duty to act. Knowing the BJP's projected journey towards genocide, we are not doing what we should do. Members should not just take it from me. Genocide Watch exists

“to predict, prevent, stop, and punish genocide”, and its “ten stages of genocide” model has been used by the US State Department and the UN. Genocide Watch has said that all 10 stages of the genocidal process in Jammu and Kashmir are far advanced while Kashmir is under military rule. Yet still, despite all the cautions and the signs, our Government maintain a bilateral position in Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir, while they apply Magnitsky-style sanctions against China and make a determination of genocide in relation to Uyghur Muslims.

Why the double standards? Is it not the case that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere? Why do we apply a different standard to our friends and trading partners than to our foes? Is it not easier to be critical of our foes, but bolder and braver to be critical of our friends? It is common knowledge that Kashmir is deemed the unfinished business of partition. The question on the minds of millions of Kashmiris worldwide and in the region is simply this: how will the butcher of Gujarat settle this unfinished business of partition? If the assessment made by Genocide Watch and others is anything to go by, we can draw the conclusions.

There are those who ask, “Why Kashmir? Why should we care?” To them, I say that aside from the barefaced violations of international human rights and our colonial legacy, the answer is that Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir is the world's largest militarised zone, and India and Pakistan are two nuclear-armed states that will be on the brink of war if India continues its war-mongering. That should be enough to keep everyone up at night. The list of serious human rights violations by security forces in Kashmir—and the deliberate erosion of civil liberties by the ideological bed buddy of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the BJP Government—is endless.

While Pakistan made a gesture towards peace by safely returning an Indian fighter pilot in 2019, the BJP has been accused of alleged torture and the custodial killing of the leader Mohammad Ashraf Khan, and the kidnapping, desecration and forced burial of Syed Ali Geelani's body against his final wishes. Make no mistake: India is setting the stage for Kashmir, and it is not for a Bollywood blockbuster. The BJP's journey towards enacting genocide in Jammu and Kashmir must be stopped. While the people of Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir look to the world to act, will this Government make urgent representations?

I will not stop speaking: not until every mother in Kashmir is reunited with her son, until every woman in Kashmir is free from the threat of being raped by Indian forces—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We have to move on. I call Barry Gardiner.

4.22 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): At this critical time in the region, with the US and UK withdrawal from Afghanistan, it is right that people understand the connections between democracy, pluralism and human rights, and the equally strong connections between fundamentalism, terrorism, insurgency and the loss of human rights.

Over the years, Pakistan has harboured Taliban leaders, and the ISI—their security service—has provided other forms of support to them and to other terrorist organisations. As Secretary of State Blinken said in a recent congressional hearing, Pakistan has “harboured” members of the Taliban, including the Haqqanis.

Mr Mahmood: Are we talking about the Kashmiri people or about Pakistan? This debate is about the Kashmiri people and the abuse of their human rights.

Barry Gardiner: Indeed, it is. I will try to ensure that the connections are apparent.

Of course, it is no coincidence that the last hideout of Osama bin Laden was in Abbottabad, scarcely a mile away from—and, some would say, under the protective shield of—the Pakistan Military Academy in Kakul. Abbottabad is just 20 miles as the crow flies from Muzaffarabad, the capital city of Azad Kashmir. As a constitutional entity—constitutional self-determination has been mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali) and for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne)—the so-called Azad Kashmir, which is better known to the world as Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, is not just strange, but unique. It has been given the trappings of a country, with a President,

[Barry Gardiner]

Prime Minister and even a legislative assembly, but it is neither a country with its own sovereignty nor a province with its own clearly-defined devolved authority from the national Government.

Under section 56 of the Azad Jammu and Kashmir interim constitution of 1974, the Pakistan Government can dismiss any elected Government in AJK, irrespective of the support they might have in the legislative assembly. Strangely enough for an entity that purports to be a country, the constitution bars anyone from public office and prohibits them from participating in politics unless they publicly support the principle of Kashmir acceding to Pakistan. Imagine that: a country all of whose politicians can be politicians only if they say they do not want to be a country. It will therefore come as no surprise to colleagues when I say that the major civil and police administrators' positions in AJK are held by Pakistani civil and military officers. It may also come as no surprise to them to find that the putative country has no representation in the Parliament of Pakistan. The territory's local representatives are excluded not just from the Pakistan Parliament but from even those Pakistani bodies that negotiate intra-provincial resource allocation and federal taxes. So much for "No taxation without representation".

Bob Blackman: Is it not worse than that, because the minority religions are also excluded from that Government?

Barry Gardiner: Indeed; I was about to come on to that.

That there is no taxation without representation is not a principle observed in AJK. It is not a country; it is not a province; it is not a state: it is a satrapy. Were I not a British MP conscious of the fact that much of this mess is a legacy of our colonial past in the region, I might almost describe it as a prize of war—but then, of course, that is precisely what Pakistan-occupied Kashmir is. It was gained by the illegal invasion by Pakistan troops in 1947.

Stringent blasphemy laws mean that many religious groups face the death penalty if they are even accused of denigrating the Prophet. Sadly, the infamous case of Asia Bibi is not unique. The rights of women are governed by the Offence of Zina (Enforcement of Hudood) Ordinance 1979 penal provisions, which prevent women from exercising their marriage choices. The South Asia Terrorism Portal records that of the 42 identified terrorist training camps located in Pakistan, 21 were located in Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. Those camps belong to three main terrorist groups: Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Hizbul Mujahideen. One of the key areas around which the camps are located is Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

According to Human Rights Watch, the Pakistani Government repress democratic freedoms, muzzle the press and practise routine torture within Azad Jammu and Kashmir. According to the world press freedom index prepared by Reporters Without Borders, Pakistan ranks 145th out of the world's countries, below India. The 2019 Foreign and Commonwealth Office report, "Human Rights and Democracy", noted that the human rights situation continues to worsen and pointed out that freedom of expression—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I am sorry, Barry—we have to leave it there because of the time pressure.

4.27 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for scheduling this debate and I am grateful to the all-party parliamentary group on Kashmir for its work.

I want to make three very quick points, but the bottom line is this: if this Government are serious about the rules-based order—you never know, they might be—then it is time for them to step up the fight for justice for Kashmir. There are three ways in which this can be done. First, we must say what we mean and mean what we say. All of us will have seen in *Hansard* that there is now a new trope, cliché, turn of phrase or diplomatic nicety: "We are aware of human rights concerns." Well, firing pellets indiscriminately at children is not a concern: it is an abuse. Detaining thousands of people without trial for up to two years, including former chief Ministers, is not a concern: it is an abuse. Detaining people without trial for years on end, as we have heard today, is not a concern: it is an abuse. Beatings and torture: that is not a concern; it is an abuse. Troops who shoot dead labourers without trial or suspicion: that is not a concern; it is an outrage, and we should be angry in this House. Abuse after abuse; outrage after outrage; offence after offence: it is about time we started telling the truth in this House about what is going on in Kashmir.

Secondly, the Government can make it clear to both India and Pakistan that there will be no trade deals unless human rights are observed. We know that the prize for an India-UK deal is significant, at up to \$15 billion over the next nine years. That is quite a treasure, but are we seriously saying here, in this House, that for \$15 billion we will look the other way on human rights abuses? The world of trade is built on trust, and we cannot trust countries that break their agreements, break international agreements and perpetrate the human rights abuses we see in Kashmir.

Finally, how can we pretend that this is a bilateral issue? This is no longer a bilateral issue. The changing of the facts on the ground broke the Simla agreement. Human rights is always a multilateral issue. There have been nearly 300 international conflicts since 1945 and nearly 200 of them were settled through international brokering—think of Holbrooke in Yugoslavia and President Carter in Israel and Egypt. We need a trilateral solution.

The economies of the new silk road will be two and a half times the size of the Atlantic by 2050. Our interest and our duty is in getting involved and delivering justice for Kashmir now.

4.30 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The human rights situation in Indian-administered Kashmir has long been a cause of international concern. Spanning 73 years, the Kashmir conflict is the longest unresolved dispute on the UN's agenda. In June 2018, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights published a report that focused on allegations of serious human rights violations, notably excessive use of force by Indian security forces that led to civilian casualties; arbitrary

detention; and impunity for human rights violations. It made a wide range of recommendations, including an independent investigation into allegations of human rights violations in the region. However, not only have the recommendations not been implemented but the situation facing Kashmiris has become even more dire, and it has worsened during the pandemic. With increased military deployment and a communications blackout, the people of Kashmir face an uncertain and bleak future.

The concerns point towards a wider problem in India. The rise of populism has resulted in a lack of checks and balances, a power-hungry Executive and a crackdown on dissent. The suffocation of minority rights and a lack of freedom of expression is illustrated in the ongoing farmers' protests and the persecution of minorities, including Christians and Dalits. The closure of reputable human rights organisation Amnesty International's operations in India also paints a depressing picture.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Surely it is time for India to join the Pakistani and Kashmiri people in meaningful dialogue to sort out this issue. They could take all the money they are spending on weapons and nuclear weapons and spend it on poverty in their countries and let the Kashmiris decide their own future.

Afzal Khan: I agree wholeheartedly. The whole of south Asia is suffering as a result of how these two big countries are behaving and the money they are spending on arms. China, Pakistan and India are nuclear powers, so they are putting the safety of the whole world at risk. The sooner they get around the table, the better.

The concerns point towards a wider problem in India. Discrimination has become embedded in law, with the Disturbed Areas Act in Gujarat used as a tool to discriminate against Muslims. Protests in Indian-administered Kashmir are also prohibited. Kashmir is the only state in India where a crowd control gun is used that has caused more than 700 Kashmiris, including infants, to go blind. The list of issues is long. As the all-party human rights group puts it, India is a "diminishing democracy".

The Government like to talk about the close relationship and friendship between the UK and India, but true friendship requires honesty and accountability. Successive UK Governments have adopted the position that it is for India and Pakistan to resolve Kashmir's future and that the UK should not interfere in or mediate the process. However, we must go beyond that and recognise the role that Britain has played in the Kashmir conflict. Its roots lie in the countries' shared colonial past, which facilitated the violent partition process between India and Pakistan and left the fate of Kashmiris undecided.

So will the Minister meet me, Kashmiri groups and members of the diaspora to hear their concerns at first hand? This week, the UN General Assembly also met. Will the Minister also outline whether the issue of Kashmir was on the agenda, and what steps are being taken to ensure that the UN resolutions are upheld? The reality is that the Indian Government have utter contempt for international law and human rights—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am terribly sorry, but we will have to leave it there, Afzal.

I am grateful to Debbie Abrahams for offering to give up her wind-up in order that the last speaker, Zarah Sultana, will have the full three minutes.

4.35 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams).

Today's debate on rights abuses in Kashmir is one close to my heart. It is very personal for me. In the 1960s, my grandfather came to the west midlands to work in the foundries, having left his home in Kashmir. I still have family in the region, and that is what makes what is happening in Kashmir all the more painful.

It is now more than two years since the BJP Modi Government unilaterally revoked articles 370 and 35A of the constitution, robbing Indian-occupied Kashmir of autonomy, reflective of its status as an occupied territory, violating UN resolution 47 and initiating a brutal lockdown. This has intensified human rights violations in the region, with widespread reports of torture, rape, extrajudicial execution and illegal detention. In what is now the largest military occupation in the world, the internet connection was cut off, and political leaders, activists and journalists were arrested.

In 2020, following its reports of widespread state abuses, human rights organisation Amnesty International faced reprisals from the Modi Government and was forced to halt its operations in the region. These repressive actions have been mirrored in how the Indian Government have cracked down on the largest protests in world history, led by tens of thousands of farmers; in how they have unlawfully detained British Sikhs in India, such as Jagtar Singh Johal; and in how they attempted to have three British Sikhs from the west midlands extradited, only for Westminster magistrates court yesterday to rule that there was not evidence to justify it. I send my solidarity to the families of these men, who have faced months of agonising uncertainty and fear, and to the Sikh community in Coventry and across the UK.

Human rights abuses in Kashmir are not simply some issue of foreign policy of which Britain can wash its hands of responsibility, nor are they a bilateral issue for India and Pakistan to resolve. This House has a special responsibility for the plight of the Kashmiri people. In 1947, as the colonial power, the British Government oversaw partition of the Indian subcontinent and rejected calls for Kashmiri independence. That decision laid the groundwork for the oppression we see in Kashmir today. But far from standing up to the Indian Government for their violations of human rights and international law, this Conservative Government would rather cosy up to Prime Minister Modi, and would rather refuse to speak out and, once again, demonstrate moral cowardice that shames this House.

Britain has a special responsibility to the Kashmiri people, and it is long past time that we spoke up for their inalienable rights and pursued diplomatic channels to secure UN resolution 47, securing their right to self-determination.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Apologies to Jim Shannon, who has been here throughout, but, sadly, we have run out of time. Wind-ups—I call Hannah Bardell.

4.38 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Mr Deputy Speaker, I will do my very best, in the limited time I have, to pay tribute to and to sum up the many incredible, impassionate speeches we have heard today across the House. I thank the Backbench Business Committee, and the hon. Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who applied for this debate and secured it.

I share the sentiments of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), who was, as many of us are, really disappointed that we are not voting on this issue today. But we hope that the people of Kashmir, those who have relatives there and those, as many do, with Kashmiri backgrounds and heritage hear the calls from across the Benches for the UK Government to do more to secure their human rights. As we have heard from hon. Members, the human rights situation in Kashmir is utterly horrific. It is one of the most militarised zones in the world, yet garners little media attention or, indeed, action and attention from this Government relative to the severity of the situation, not least because of the censorship, suppression and abuse of journalists, as we have heard, and human rights defenders and activists—something that should worry us all.

As was said earlier, Amnesty International has had its operations shut down by the Indian Government, and India's abuses of power in the region are incredibly worrying. That is having a devastating impact on daily life, and on the rights and freedoms of people in Kashmir. SNP Members call for India's Government to respect the administrative autonomy of Kashmir, and to respect human and constitutional rights in the region, including, as many have said, the right to a safe and legal vote on self-determination. That is crucial. We also call on this Government to do more to hold India to account over its human rights abuses, and to assist the people of Kashmir. As many Members have said with incredible passion, the Government should not and cannot in the name of Members of this House put trade deals before human rights.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth spoke about the casual dismissing of the people of Kashmir during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, and many Members spoke about the legacy of imperial Britain in that area, and about the duty and responsibility that this Government and this House have to do all we can to ensure the human rights of those in Kashmir. She highlighted how vital it is to engage with the people of any nation, but particularly Kashmir. The UN report found that the human rights of Kashmiris were being routinely violated and the 2019 report showed that, sadly, not very much had changed.

I have huge affection for the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and do a great amount of work with her. Indeed, we went on a trip together to Pakistan a number of years ago, where these issues were discussed robustly. She spoke about the brutal military lockdown and blackout, the abhorrent treatment of Kashmiris, and of how during lockdown, when so many people were desperate to reach out to families, Kashmir had the largest internet shutdown of any democratic Government. She also spoke about the recent concerns raised by the UN about grave human rights abuses.

The hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) raised the roof when he spoke about the butchering of Kashmiris by Indian forces. I could not help but be deeply moved by what he, and many Labour Members, spoke about. He spoke passionately and powerfully on behalf of his people, and said that the right to basic human rights and self-determination is never a bilateral issue; it is always an international issue. I could not agree more. He also robustly challenged the role of the United Nations, which he called on, as do we, to do much more. He spoke as a proud British Kashmiri, and said that he and his people do not bow down, but that they demand human rights and the right to self-determination, as they should.

The hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) is a former air force officer. He spoke about the potential use of cluster munitions by the Indian Government and said that, if that was the case, he considered it a crime against humanity. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) spoke of the profound impact on her Kashmiri constituents who could not contact family during the blackout—many other Members also spoke about that. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who always speaks so passionately, asked where the women were and spoke about the precious little attention that she felt women are getting in Kashmir. Many hon. Members have spoken about brutal human rights violations, particularly of women and girls, and about the sexual violence that we so often see in conflicts. The hon. Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham) spoke about the UK's diplomatic influence and why that should be used to help Kashmir. I could not agree with him more. It beggars belief that his Government are not using more power and influence.

Mohammad Yasin: Does the hon. Lady agree that the UK can and should play a greater role? We must stand up, given the roots of our responsibility and our shared colonial past, for the people of Jammu and Kashmir. We must do more, and we should help the Kashmiri people on both sides of the Line of Control.

Hannah Bardell: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman, and I am glad he got that point on the record. I will conclude by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana), whose family came to the UK to work and live. As a result, she is in this House and able to speak so passionately. Are we not at our best when we are agreeing and working together on these issues? I know she will continue to champion them. The Government must listen to Members of the House and do more to help the people of Kashmir. Human rights abuses, wherever they happen, should concern us all. I hope we will hear something of substance from the Minister today, as there is clearly cross-party effort and feeling on this important matter.

4.44 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), and the Backbench Business Committee, for the opportunity to have this important debate. I also thank all Members on both sides of the House who made such passionate and eloquent contributions, and I welcome the Minister to her place and congratulate her on her appointment.

The conflict in Jammu and Kashmir has been going on for 72 years; it is the world's longest unresolved conflict. It dates back to 1947, and it is defined by a long and tragic history of political and military conflict. In that year, the British state was, as the departing colonial power, a signatory to the instrument of accession, which gave Kashmir a high degree of autonomy—

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way on that really important point. Many of my constituents in Luton South say that the UK has a vital role to play in this international issue, and that it should not just be left as a bilateral issue. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Stephen Kinnock: Absolutely. It is not just about an historical responsibility; it is also about the fact that we have so many ties that bind us now, in 2021, so there is an opportunity to work with our friends and partners in India and Pakistan, and with the Kashmiri people, to find a peaceful solution.

At the same time, in 1947, India was granted control over Kashmir's foreign affairs, defence and communications. Since then, we have seen countless UN resolutions, plus many other diplomatic interventions, each attempting to resolve the Kashmir conflict. Perhaps the most significant was the Simla agreement, which was concluded following the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971. The Labour party strongly supports the conclusions of the Simla agreement, in particular its conclusion that issues involving India, Pakistan and Kashmir should be negotiated between the parties and that no state should deploy force or act unilaterally.

Imran Hussain: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Stephen Kinnock: I apologise to my hon. Friend, but I am going to run out of time.

Imran Hussain: It is on that point.

Stephen Kinnock: If my hon. Friend can make his intervention extremely short, I will give way.

Imran Hussain: I thank my hon. Friend; it is on a very important point. Does he agree that the Simla agreement, as important as it is, does not take precedence over United Nations resolutions?

Stephen Kinnock: I think it is important to see Simla and the UN resolutions as a framework for peace. What is very important in all those resolutions is that the agreements and peace negotiations have to be between all the parties. That is the key point about not taking unilateral action, which I will come to.

The Labour party does not interfere with the internal affairs of other nations, but we do seek to uphold what we see as universal values; namely, respect for the rule of law, support for democracy and the promotion of universal rights and freedoms. Where we see those principles being violated, we will comment, and we will urge other Governments to take action and change course.

Fifty years after Simla, we recognise that the situation on the ground is deeply troubling. By some accounts, as many as 95,000 people have been killed in the last 30 years alone, and Kashmir is recognised as the most heavily militarised place in the world. It is deeply distressing that Kashmir has become a political football in a sordid

game of great power competition between India, China and Pakistan. What a dangerous game that is, given that each of those nations holds nuclear capabilities.

Mr Steve Baker: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Kinnock: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman, but I am going to have to push on.

On 5 August 2019, the Indian Government's Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act unilaterally revoked article 370 and replaced the autonomous state of Jammu and Kashmir with two new union territories governed directly by New Delhi: Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh. What followed was an Indian army-imposed lockdown in Jammu and Kashmir, lasting until February 2021, in tandem with a communications blackout. The lockdown and the internet ban had a far-reaching impact on every aspect of life for the Kashmiri people; education, health services and media freedom were all undermined. The Indian Government maintain that their decision to unilaterally revoke article 370 is an internal matter, claiming that such actions do not interfere with the boundaries of the territory or the line of control, and citing security concerns based on attacks by what New Delhi believes to be Pakistan-backed militant groups. Indeed, we all recall with great sadness the tragic suicide-bomb attack on 14 February 2019, which targeted Indian soldiers in Kashmir.

However, the Labour Party recognises that those who are opposed to the revocation of article 370, and the subsequent lockdown, are understandably angered by what they see as a unilateral act of aggression on the part of the Indian Government. There can be no doubt that that unilateral action was counterproductive in terms of trying to achieve a peaceful and just long-term settlement. Furthermore, in line with Labour's commitments to universal rights and the rule of law, we urge the Indian Government to consider carefully the impact on the individual rights and freedoms of innocent Kashmiri citizens when taking such significant action.

I also make clear that the Labour party will always speak up vociferously in defence of the human rights of the people of Kashmir. On that note, we recognise the hardship faced by those living in Pakistan-administered Azad Kashmir, where the Azad Jammu and Kashmir Elections Act 2020 clearly contravened universal freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly. In a letter to the Muslim Council of Britain on 8 May, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the Leader of the Opposition, made it clear that all sides must play their part in ending the conflict. He wrote:

"Our position on Kashmir has not changed. We support and recognise previous UN resolutions on the rights of the Kashmiri people but maintain that if we are to find a lasting settlement...that can only be achieved"

by

"India and Pakistan working together, with the people of Kashmir".

It is with that in mind that I have the following questions for the Minister.

First, since taking up her new role, has she yet sought to impress on her Indian and Pakistani counterparts the need for a plan to demilitarise the larger Kashmiri region? On that note, has she met yet with the high

[Stephen Kinlock]

commissioner for India? Did she make clear the need for the Indian Government to uphold human rights in Jammu and Kashmir?

Secondly, what meetings has the Minister had with human rights organisations about the situation in Jammu and Kashmir? Does she give support to the work of the International People's Tribunal on Human Rights and Justice in Kashmir, which seeks to address the human rights situation?

Thirdly, do the Government have any plans to send a delegation to Jammu and Kashmir to assess the human rights situation and to report back to Parliament? Her predecessor said that the Government were looking to do that once the pandemic allowed.

Finally, will the UK Government commit to doing all they can to support and work with representatives from India, Pakistan and Jammu and Kashmir, including all five regions, to deliver justice, peace and resolution to that terrible conflict? I welcome her again to her place, and I look forward to hearing her answers.

4.52 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Amanda Milling): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Kashmir, and the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing this debate. I am grateful to Members across the House for their insightful, passionate and very personal contributions. The sheer number of speakers we have had is incredible. It shows how much interest there is in Kashmir. I will try, as far as possible, to cover some of the points that have been raised, but time is pretty limited. I also thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth for giving up her time so that Back Benchers and I could have a bit more time.

The Prime Minister has made it clear that the Indo-Pacific region is a priority for the UK, as global Britain tilts towards growth opportunities of the future. Our integrated review provides a strategic framework for us to deliver our ambitions. We are working with our partners in the region to strengthen mutual prosperity and support regional stability. The UK Government also committed in the integrated review to be a force for good in the world, and to drive global efforts to increase people's freedoms, security, and living standards. As a force for good, we promote open societies, the rule of law and respect for human rights and media freedoms.

Jim Shannon: I commend the Minister and look forward to working with her. The citizens of Kashmir are denied access to local civilian courts to prosecute security forces for their involvement in human rights abuses. It would not happen in the United Kingdom; it should not happen in Kashmir. What can she do to make it right?

Amanda Milling: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; no debate, particularly on human rights, would be the same without his comments. I am sorry that he did not get to make a speech this afternoon. I will come on to specific points about human rights in Kashmir shortly.

We fund and promote girls' education and humanitarian responses in places in need around the world. India and Pakistan are long-standing and important friends of the UK. We have significant links, particularly through the diaspora communities on both continents; hon. Members across the House have mentioned the communities in their constituencies. We are lucky to have approximately 1.6 million British citizens of Indian heritage living here in the UK, and a similar number with Pakistani heritage.

We have a strong and growing relationship with India. In May, our Prime Ministers launched the 2030 road map for India-UK future relations. The road map sets out our joint vision to re-energise trade and investment and the technological links between our people, improving their lives and livelihoods. It demonstrates our commitment to enhance regional defence and security co-operation across the Indo-Pacific region and highlights how we bring our strength to bear to advance clean energy and health.

Through the ambitious road map, we have elevated the India-UK relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership. In June, at the G7 summit, our Prime Ministers highlighted our countries' shared belief in the importance of human rights, freedom of expression and the rule of law.

James Daly: Will the Minister give way?

Amanda Milling: I am afraid that I will struggle for time, but if I get time I will come back to my hon. Friend.

I assure hon. Members that the India-UK relationship allows for candid exchanges on important issues, including human rights. The number of Members who participated in the debate demonstrates that Kashmir is a top issue that is close to the heart of so many hon. Members and their constituents; many have ties to the area, including friends and relatives living on both sides of the line of control.

The Government take the situation in Kashmir very seriously, but it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting political solution, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for the UK to prescribe a solution or to act as a mediator.

Mr Steve Baker: Will the Minister give way?

Amanda Milling: I am sorry, but I do not have time.

The position has remained the same across successive British Governments. It would be for India and Pakistan to agree if they desired external mediation from any third parties. We welcomed the renewal in February of the ceasefire along the line of control and we encourage both sides to find lasting diplomatic solutions to maintain regional stability.

Afzal Khan: Will the Minister give way?

Amanda Milling: I simply do not have time: I have two and a half minutes.

We recognise that there are human rights concerns both in India-administered Kashmir and in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights documented some of those concerns in reports in 2018 and 2019; UN special rapporteurs set out others in letters sent to the Government of India earlier this year.

Hon. Members have rightly raised a number of concerns today. We encourage all states to ensure that their domestic laws are in line with international standards, and we have raised our concerns with the Governments of India and Pakistan. Any allegation of human rights violations or abuses must be investigated thoroughly, promptly and transparently.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Amanda Milling: I want to make a couple of points, but I might come back to hon. Members if I have time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham) made a point about the diplomatic network. We regularly raise our concerns about human rights and about the situation in Kashmir at a senior level within the Governments of Pakistan and India. This is done at ministerial level and through officials from our high commissions in Islamabad and New Delhi. Officials from the British high commission in Islamabad visited Pakistan-administered Kashmir earlier this year. Their counterparts in New Delhi are discussing the possibility of their own visit to India-administered Kashmir and are in regular touch with contacts there.

Let me make a couple of points about some other issues that have been raised. We voiced our concern when the Indian Government introduced restrictions on assembly and communications in India-administered Kashmir in August 2019, and we are pleased that the vast majority have since been relaxed. We welcomed reports that many of those who were detained have been released, but we understand that a number of political detainees remain. We call on the Government of India to ensure that they are released as soon as possible.

Let me be clear: freedom of expression and media are essential qualities of a functioning democracy. Just as with India, ties between our people underpin our strong relationship with Pakistan. We continue to urge the Government of Pakistan to guarantee the rights of all citizens as laid down in the constitution of Pakistan and in accordance with international standards—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am afraid that we have to leave it there. I thank everybody who took part in the debate.

5 pm

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

Business Without Debate

INDEPENDENT EXPERT PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SANCTIONS AND THE RECALL OF MPS ACT 2015

Motion made,

That—

(1) the following Standing Order be made:

“IEP recommendations for sanctions and the Recall of MPs Act 2015

(1) The Chair of the IEP shall send to the Chair and Members of the Committee on Standards and to the Clerk of that Committee any report from a sub-panel of the IEP which he has referred to the Clerk of the House under subparagraph (5) (d) of Standing

Order No. 150A (Independent Expert Panel) and which contains a determination for a sanction that would, if made by the Committee on Standards, engage the provisions of the Recall of MPs Act 2015.

(2) Where a report has been sent to the Committee on Standards in accordance with paragraph (1) of this Order the Committee of Standards shall make a report to the House in relation to the Member named in that report, setting out a recommendation for a suspension equal to that recommended by the sub-panel to run concurrently with any sanction imposed as a result of the sub-panel's determination.

(3) Reports under paragraph (2) must be made no later than on the third sitting day after the report of the IEP sub-panel is sent to members of the Committee on Standards, save that the day on which the report is sent shall not be counted in calculating this period.

(4) If the Committee on Standards is unable to meet within 3 sitting days, the Chair shall, if satisfied that the report from the IEP sub-panel has been sent to all members of the Committee, make the report to the House from the Committee required under paragraph (2).”

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

(a) In Standing Order No. 149 (Committee on Standards), paragraph (1), at the end insert

“(c) in accordance with Standing Order No. (IEP recommendations for sanctions and the Recall of MPs Act 2015) to report to the House recommendations for sanctions to run concurrently with sanctions determined by a sub-panel of the IEP and implemented by the House.”

(b) In Standing Order No. 150D (Motions consequent on the ICGS), paragraph (1), at the end, insert

“() a motion under paragraph (1) of this Order includes a motion to implement a sanction recommended by the Committee on Standards under Standing Order No. (IEP recommendations for sanctions and the Recall of MPs Act 2015), or a motion to implement both such a sanction and a sanction determined by a sub-panel of the IEP”. —(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I should inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. I know that the Leader of the Opposition wishes to move his amendment, and I understand that that would be contested. This constitutes an objection, and I am therefore not able to put the main Question, so the objection is taken.

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE (VIRTUAL PARTICIPATION)

Ordered,

That, on 13 October 2021, members of the Environmental Audit Committee may participate in meetings of that Committee through such electronic means of communication as have been approved by the Speaker, providing a quorum of the Committee is physically present at any such meeting.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish everybody a fruitful conference recess. I thank all the staff, from cleaners to Clerks, from the security to MPs' teams, for their hard work during this three-week sitting.

Horse Racing

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

5.1 pm

Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con): I thank Mr Speaker for granting this debate at what is a critical time for the British horse racing industry. Racing is a sport that means so much to me, not only because I love riding out, but because I have seen the positive impact of horse racing on communities across my West Suffolk constituency and across the country. I am grateful for all the support I have received from racing over the years, and I want to put that on the record. I am also grateful that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has fielded not one but two Ministers for this important debate, which shows how seriously the Government take this vital industry.

Racing is the sport of kings, and it reaches all parts and is loved across the land. In fact, racing is the second biggest sport in the UK on any measure—by attendance, by revenue, by employment. Only football surpasses racing on the numbers, but not by grace or beauty. In 2019, before the curse of covid struck, over 5 million people attended racecourses in Great Britain, and experienced the thrill of the turf. From flat cap to top hat, Chepstow to Cheltenham, and Perth to Pontefract, people are working, riding and enjoying racing and all that the sport brings.

Racing is also one of the biggest employers in Britain. The breadth of skill and craft is extraordinary. Think of farriers, vets, stud staff, feed suppliers, saddlers, sales companies, bookmakers, transportation, equine schools, breeders, owners, trainers, jockeys; racing employs directly or indirectly around 80,000 people.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am pleased to see the right hon. Gentleman participating from the Back Benches—it is always better on the Back Benches. He is right that racing attracts people across the whole United Kingdom. It is also a major contributor to the economy in Northern Ireland. We all know that racing is important in Northern Ireland and, indeed, in Ireland, and this is not just about the jobs. When it comes to the benefits of this wonderful sport, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the implications of gambling should not be overlooked?

Matt Hancock: I do, and I will come on to that point, because it is at the nub of how we ensure that we have a flourishing industry while taking into account the impact of gambling-related harm, which the hon. Gentleman knows is a matter close to my heart. However, it is possible to have policy that leads to a flourishing horse racing industry and the sport doing well that is symbiotic with that. That is what we need to achieve, and I have some suggestions for how we get there.

Newmarket, of course, is the centre of flat racing not just in this country but in the world, and is home to more than 3,500 horses in training. The number of horses in training there grew by 10% before the pandemic, despite falling numbers across the UK. One in three local jobs in Newmarket is related to racing, and 28% of all flat-race or dual-purpose horses in training under licence in the country are trained there. In fact, the success of the racing industry is providing jobs and

improving livelihoods throughout West Suffolk, and I know from other Members who have significant parts of the racing industry in their constituencies—my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), who represents the Cheltenham racecourse, is present—that the livelihoods and the jobs, as well as the joy, that come from the sport are paramount.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Let me first draw the House's attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Does my right hon. Friend recognise that it is important to allow racecourses to recover from the pandemic, and that any talk of vaccine passports would hit the sport very hard indeed?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend has made his point very clearly. Thanks to the vaccine, we have been able to reopen racing after more than a year in which there were no crowds—and for 11 weeks in 2020, it was closed altogether. It is thanks to the vaccine that the crowds are back, and long may they remain so. I will avoid the particular issue of the passports question; I know that my hon. Friend feels very strongly about it, and perhaps it can be the subject of the next Adjournment debate.

Let me pick up the economic point that my hon. Friend has raised. Nationally, aside from its contribution of about £4 billion a year to the UK economy, racing as an industry has acted as a bridgehead for significant trade with and investment in the UK. I really want to land this point. Examples include massive investment in business, property and universities by investors who come to the UK because of our racing. As we work to build an outward-looking, international, free-trading global Britain, that investment is vital. In this mission, soft power is incredibly important, and when it comes to soft power, there is little more powerful than horse racing. Through the sport's historic connection to what could be described as our oldest and most important soft power asset, the monarchy, countries and investors around the world are eager to see and invest in horse racing here in the UK. Our horses compete around the world, are watched on television around the world, and are loved around the world. For instance, Royal Ascot and the Grand National are broadcast to nearly 600 million people in 200 countries annually. We must safeguard and cherish this national treasure. We must not allow horse racing to fall behind in Britain.

Like many industries, racing has been hit significantly by the pandemic. We know that the lockdowns saved lives, and that without them we would have suffered much more, but we also know—and I know—that forcing businesses to close had a significant impact on our economy and on many industries. As I said earlier, in 2020 racing was closed for more than 10 weeks. Thanks to the vaccine, it has been able to reopen, but it is estimated that it lost between £400 and £450 million in revenues. I pay tribute to the Minister's Department, to the policy officials, to Mark Hicks, the private secretary—he was my private secretary, and an excellent one at that—and to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, for implementing one of the most generous and successful support packages in the world. From speaking to my constituents, I know that without the furlough scheme and the £21 million of funding in the sport winter survival package, the racing industry, and all the jobs of those who work in racing, would have been wiped sideways.

In spite of that great work, however, we still have a significant problem as we come out of the pandemic. Prize money—which is the lifeblood of the industry, enabling owners to generate a return on their investment—has fallen by 20% from 2019 levels. Sales of horses have fallen by over 20%, and more than 60% of major breeding operations are reporting declines in turnover. If we do not take action now, we will be overtaken by countries around the world as the global hub of racing, and we must not let that happen.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate for his constituency. Is it not the case that much of the prize money comes from the betting industry, and that that is an important part of the ecosystem? Although we may need to deal with problem gambling, we should recognise that for many gambling is an innocent source of pleasure. He also mentioned the effect of the lockdown. Would it not be much better for the industry to have vaccine passes rather than another lockdown, which would be disastrous?

Matt Hancock: I certainly do not want to see another lockdown, and I know that the right hon. Gentleman does not, because he was unenthusiastic about the ones that we had in the past. I do not want to get into the vaccine passport issue, but I agree strongly with what he said at the start, which is that we must tackle problem gambling. I bow to no one in my desire to tackle problem gambling, which I addressed when I was in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. At the same time, however, many people enjoy a flutter, and a day at the races is an enjoyable experience that is enhanced for many people by gambling in a completely responsible and controlled way. The symbiosis between horse racing and gambling is important, and I would argue that gambling—especially gambling in person at a racecourse—is a much safer proposition than some of the modern electronic and online offers.

I want to come back to the point about the risk, because we are at a moment of peril—

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene, and I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. He will be aware of the recent increase in the number of drone pilots that have been spotted at horse race meetings. This practice creates opportunities to bet via the black market during live races. Indeed, recent reports have suggested that the amount betted online via the black market has doubled in recent years to £2.6 billion. This is a practice that the horse racing authorities are working to address. Will my right hon. Friend urge the Government to assist them in trying to stamp out the use of drones at horse race meetings?

Matt Hancock: Yes I will, and I can see the Ministers discussing exactly that question right now on the Front Bench. This is another issue that needs to be resolved. It is another loophole in how the sport operates.

Races are put on to allow people to bet on them—they are not only put on for that reason, but it is one of them—and it is therefore important that some of the

funding should come back from the gambling to the racing, without which we could not have the gambling in the first place. It is a symbiotic relationship, and that is why there is a place for the Government in ensuring that it is all arranged properly. The problem at the moment is that while gambling revenues have increased during the pandemic, particularly from online gambling, the amount that is going into horse-racing is not sustainable. The risk is that horse racing will increasingly move overseas and that we will lose all these great benefits. That is why we must act.

This is not just about the statistics. This is real. The decisions of only a few significant investors to relocate their investment to other jurisdictions would significantly and permanently damage British racing's leadership position. We have seen countries around the world, including Ireland, France and Australia, stepping up to back their racing industries more, and if we do not follow suit we will be overtaken as the home of racing. We must not let this happen. Just recently, Shadwell, a major multi-million pound racing and breeding operation, announced that it would be undertaking a review of its activities, with operations in the UK, Ireland and the USA to contract. The extent of any contraction in the UK would have serious implications for jobs, for the economy and, I believe, for our place in the world. This is not just about statistics. It is real. There is an urgency for action, and I know the new Minister is a man of action and ready to act.

In this country, we are in the fortunate position that our recovery is the strongest in the G7. I come not to ask for public funds—although I do not rule that out for the future—but to ask for policy, to ensure that racing gets its fair share from the industries it supports, notably through fixing loopholes in the horse race betting levy. So the Government have a decision to make: step up, save the horse racing industry and reap the rewards of prosperity, jobs, prestige and trade, or step back and lock the stable door after the horse has bolted. Racing is of course part-funded by the levy, which represents the value of horse racing to the gambling industry. The levy provides for the infrastructure of racing and, in part, for the prize money that attracts investors who are crucial to the sport. We must ensure that the levy meets the costs of the racing industry in providing a competitive, compelling betting product from which the bookies benefit. It is failing to do that now. At the time of the last review in 2017, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport confirmed that the levy would be reviewed by 2024, but earlier if necessary, in order to be “responsive to future changes in the market”

and to ensure that the yield is meeting the levy's statutory purposes.

It is clear that the levy's yield has never met the level of costs envisaged in 2017. There will be an estimated £160 million shortfall in industry revenues between now and 2024. Given the pandemic, an early review is required to ensure the levy is providing an appropriate return both to meet its statutory objectives and to support an internationally competitive British racing industry.

Two changes are needed, and this is what I am asking for. First, the levy should be based on a percentage of turnover, not a percentage of profit. This would result in less volatile yields and remove unhealthy perverse incentives in the sport.

Secondly, and most urgently, the levy should apply to all horse racing globally that is bet on by British customers. Betting customers in Britain can safely enjoy and benefit from horse racing in a wide variety of countries, and British participants often compete in these international events, driving interest and UK betting turnover. However, British racing does not receive a return from betting activity on these races.

An extension of the levy to cover racing overseas would see the levy apply to all thoroughbred races held worldwide, rather than solely races run in Great Britain. This is how it works elsewhere, such as in France and Ireland. This second reform can be quickly and easily enacted and would generate around £20 million annually for British racing. Closing this overseas levy loophole is fair, right, good economics and based on historical and international precedent.

I close by inviting the Under-Secretaries of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friends the Members for Croydon South (Chris Philp) and for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), to Newmarket to see racing in action, from behind the scenes and from the grandstand, so they can see for themselves the huge value of this remarkable sport. I invite them to meet the British Horseracing Authority so that we can work together on the detailed evidence and proposals that have been developed.

I pay tribute to the Government for their support for racing throughout the pandemic. I know the Minister has heard this heartfelt plea on behalf of a sport that so many love, and I will not be letting this drop, so I look forward very much to working with him to ensure British racing can thrive in the years ahead.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): I thank the hon. Members who have joined this evening's Adjournment debate.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) for securing and initiating this debate and, indeed, for advocating on behalf of his local industry with such passion and evident tenacity, which I look forward to experiencing again. I am informed by the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), that not only is he willing to accept that invitation to Newmarket but he has already scheduled a trip to Newmarket next week, when he will be meeting members of the horse racing fraternity and, I hope, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk. Diary permitting, I would be delighted to follow in his footsteps at a later time.

My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the vital contribution of racing to the economy not just in his constituency, where Newmarket and its supporting infrastructure is such a significant employer, but throughout the United Kingdom. As he rightly says, horse racing is the second largest sport in the UK by attendance, employment and annual revenue. According to its governing body, the British Horseracing Authority, racing is worth over £4 billion per annum to the economy in direct, indirect and associated expenditure, much of which is focused on rural areas.

More than 20,000 people are directly employed across 59 licensed racecourses, hundreds of training yards and thousands of breeding operations. As my right hon. Friend said, tens of thousands of additional jobs are supported in the wider rural economy through the supply chain and all the sectors he outlined during his excellent speech. I also agree entirely with the points he made about horse racing's contribution to the UK's soft power. Clearly, people from around the world come to the UK to participate and watch our fantastic horse racing meets, and to invest here in stud farms and horse racing yards directly as well. So racing significantly adds to the UK's international prestige and our global leadership in this industry is something we should cherish and certainly be preserving.

The horse-race betting levy, the topic of my right hon. Friend's speech, was of course introduced more than 50 years ago, in the 1960s, when the betting industry was somewhat deregulated and placing bets away from racecourses was permitted. At the time, there were fears that people would leave the racecourses and bet on the high street, and the levy was introduced to try to mitigate that risk. Thankfully, over those past 50 or 60 years racing has proved enduringly popular, despite the concerns articulated back in the 1960s. Nothing better illustrates its enduring popularity than the vibrancy of its recovery as we have returned to normal after covid and restrictions on flagship meetings were removed. I understand that attendance at the recent Qatar Goodwood festival this year was close to the figures in 2019, which is fantastic news. Racing was the first sport to return, behind closed doors, after the first national lockdown—I wonder whether my right hon. Friend's hand may have been behind that move, in some way, in June last year. I am pleased that horse racing has continued without interruption since then. The fact that it has been able to return so swiftly is thanks in no small part to the British Horseracing Authority to incorporate covid measures into the already meticulous protocols.

John Spellar: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. He referred to the outdated view that the interests of bookmakers on the high street, regulated and onshore, were somehow in conflict with those of the racecourses. Should we not, as the right hon. Member for West Suffolk indicated, actually see them in a symbiotic relationship, as part of the same ecosystem, supporting each other?

Chris Philp: I was referring to the fears articulated during the 1960s, which of course have subsequently proven not to have come to pass, as the right hon. Gentleman has just said. The horse racing levy is a direct expression of the symbiosis that he refers to: the support that that two industries give one another. The one would certainly be weaker without the other, so I entirely agree with what he just said.

I also wish to reflect on the support that has been provided to racing during the pandemic, which my right hon. Friend referred to. Of course, horse racing has benefited from the economy-wide support that all businesses have received—the rates relief and the support on jobs, through things such as the furlough scheme, which have been provided by the taxpayer. In addition, the horse racing industry, by way of the Horserace Betting Levy Board and The Racing Foundation has also received £28 million in terms of cash flow and hardship support,

and £20 million of levy funds were aimed at supporting racecourses, with £8 million from the foundation supporting individuals in the sector. So the sector has received substantial support not only generally, but specifically. Since then, the HBLB has agreed to make additional contributions to prize money until the end of December, which will help to mitigate the lower amounts made available by courses due to covid—this partly addresses the concern that my right hon. Friend raised a little earlier.

As my right hon. Friend said, racecourses are also accessing support through the sports survival package, organised by the sport Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire, where a £21.5 million loan has been made to the HBLB to enable it to provide extra. The HBLB has earmarked £15 million of that to be distributed via prize money this year, 2021, keeping a further £6.5 million in reserve for 2022. Of course, it has not been a one-way street, because horse racing has given back. It has donated £2.6 million to NHS charities from betting on the grand national, and a great deal of voluntary work has been done as well. I pay tribute to the horse racing industry's contribution to our country during this time of crisis.

Given that time is pressing, let me address directly some of the requests my right hon. Friend made in his excellent speech. On a review of the horserace betting levy, it was of course reviewed relatively recently in 2017, when my right hon. Friend was a Minister in the Department, albeit not directly responsible for this policy area. In that review, the Government fixed the levy at 10% of bookmakers' gross profits, to avoid annual negotiations, and based the levy on gross gambling yield—in effect, the gross profit—rather than turnover, so that there was a certain amount of risk-sharing between the gambling industry and the horse racing industry. One could conceive of circumstances in which, for some reason—unexpected events—the gambling yield might go down. That would clearly affect both parts of the sector, which are symbiotic, rather than falling wholly on the shoulders of the gambling industry, which is why the levy was originally constructed in that way.

A review is due to take place in three years' time, in 2024. I am of course willing to listen to detailed representations if there is a case for looking at it again sooner. I think that the measures that I have set out addressed the issues in respect of covid, but if there are particular reasons why a review ought to be considered sooner, I would be happy to look at detailed representations from either my right hon. Friend or the industry, and I would consider them carefully. Having been appointed only a week ago, almost to the hour, I do not want to race to make any commitments in this policy area, but I will of course listen carefully.

Mr Laurence Robertson: I welcome the Minister to his new role. On the wider gambling review, will he confirm that it will remain the Government's policy to ensure that it is evidence-based and evidence-led?

Chris Philp: I like to think that all the Government's policy making is evidence-led and evidence-based. The review will be conducted in a thoughtful way, with full engagement and consultation with Members who have an interest, some of whom I see in the Chamber, as well as with the industry and other stakeholders.

It is worth saying that the 2017 reforms exceeded expectations and doubled the amount of levy collected, up to £95 million in 2018. Even during the difficult year we had last year—the year running to March 2021—the levy still collected £80 million, which was substantially in excess of the amount collected before the reforms. The levy has not only exceeded expectations but proved remarkably resilient even during the difficult circumstances of the past year.

My right hon. Friend raised an interesting question about international horse racing. It is worth recalling that the original rationale for the construction of the levy as it is dates back to those 1960s concerns, which it turns out were largely unfounded, that high street betting would in some way detract from on-course betting. The levy was therefore constructed in relation to UK-based horse racing because people were worried about horse racing on UK courses. There is, then, a rationale for why the levy has developed in the way it has. To make the change my right hon. Friend proposed would be outside the originally constructed purpose. We are, though, always willing—and as a new Minister, I am particularly willing—to listen and to consider new evidence as it arises. I would be happy to study any detailed submissions that make the case advanced by my right hon. Friend and give them careful consideration, because this is a Government who listen and who consider evidence, as alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) a few moments ago.

I can see that the hour of the final Adjournment prior to the conference recess is almost upon us, so let me conclude by saying how strongly this Government support the horse racing industry and everything that it does: the jobs that it creates; and the addition that it makes to our national prestige. We will always engage constructively and in detail on topics such as this in a way that it is not really possible to do in a half-hour debate, but there is a lot of detail that I am sure we can discuss later. It serves our national interests and the interests of all our constituents to have a vibrant and successful horse racing industry. My colleagues and I look forward to working with Members across the House to ensure that that remains case for many, many decades to come.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 23 September 2021

[RUSHANARA ALI *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Violence against Christians: Central African Countries

1.30 pm

Rushanara Ali (in the Chair): Before we begin, I encourage Members to wear masks when not speaking, in line with Government guidelines and those of the House of Commons Commission.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of violence against Christians in central African countries.

This issue concerns us greatly. I applied for this debate with the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and others. We have a deep personal interest in the violence against Christians in particular across the world. Those who intend to speak and intervene understand that the issue is close to our hearts. I declare an interest: I am chair of the all-party parliamentary groups on international freedom of religion or belief and on the Pakistani minorities.

In the Chamber today there is a selection of right hon. and hon. Members who also have deep interest in these issues. I am very pleased to see a goodly turnout, especially as it is the last day before we go home. I often call this the graveyard slot because it is the end of the time before recess. It is important that we are all here to discuss this issue.

Across vast and growing swathes of the globe, Christians are no longer free to peacefully practise their faith. For many, threats of abduction, sexual violence and even killing have become a daily reality, and entire communities live under a constant and pressing fear. We hear the stories; I know others will tell them, and I find them quite hard to deal with. They involve my brothers and sisters in the Lord, so they are close to my heart. Those are things I feel deeply, which is why this debate is so important.

In its 2021 report, the charity Open Doors estimated that just in the 50 countries in the world watch list, 309 million Christians face very high or extreme levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith—an increase of a fifth in just one year. It is not getting better; it is actually getting worse. That is the issue.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman mentioned the charity Open Doors. Does he agree that its work is absolutely vital in continuing to shine a light on the situation that many Christians around the world face? It must be commended for that.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I thank her for that intervention, because her words are salient to this debate and underline the issue.

Events in sub-Saharan Africa have accounted for much of that persecution and discrimination. There has been a significant increase in the number of violent attacks against Christians perpetrated by Islamic extremists. In Niger, Mali, the Central African Republic, Sudan and Nigeria—I will focus on Nigeria, as others probably will—the situation has become increasingly worrying. Many of us in this House—everyone who is here today—try to highlight the shocking and rapidly deteriorating situation in Nigeria, where the number of Christians killed last year rose by 60% on the year before. That illustrates the issue that the hon. Lady referred to. Open Doors states that things are getting worse, not better, because the number of people being murdered because of their faith has increased greatly. The stories of what is happening on the ground are horrifying. More Christians are being killed in Nigeria than anywhere else in the world. That is worrying for us all.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Sudan recently abolished the death penalty for apostasy—a step forward in the region, which I hope we will see in more countries in the near future. Although there has been resistance to such huge changes, it has been considerably less in recent years. Does the hon. Gentleman have any thoughts about how tolerance of religion can be built upon?

Jim Shannon: Over the last few days, the hon. Lady and I seem to have followed each other in each debate. I thank her for coming along and for her intervention. The APPG that I am very privileged to chair speaks up for those with Christian faith, those with other faiths and those with no faith. That is what we try to promote. It is about tolerance and understanding people of other faiths, but it is also about accepting other faiths and people of different religious viewpoints. That is something that we all need to take on board.

The hon. Lady referred to Sudan. There have certainly been some stories in the press recently about an attempted coup that was thwarted. I welcome the steps that Sudan took, but what they have done needs to be replicated elsewhere in the region.

Violence is increasingly bleeding—and I use the word intentionally—over the borders into an already destabilised central Africa. This region, in the shadow of its more powerful neighbours, has all too often been overlooked, both by—I say it respectfully—the UK Parliament and by the wider international community. We must not let the displacement and killing of hundreds of thousands of Christians go almost unchallenged by parliamentarians. That is why we are having this debate, and I am very grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for it.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman mentioned Nigeria, and I wanted to raise the plight of people there, which is extreme. This week, speaking to some of the agencies that work there, I heard that it is now commonplace for gunmen to go into schools, abduct young children—particularly those who have Christian beliefs—and hold them captive. Given that the Bring Back Our Girls campaign had such cross-party support, does he think that we should be doing more in this House? We could ask the Minister to think about what more we could do to bring back those children.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I remember the abduction of the children. I think of Leah Sharibu. She is still missing—a young Christian girl who had never converted and was therefore kidnapped and imprisoned. Her mum, Rebecca, would love to see her back. A day does not pass that I do not pray for the return of Leah Sharibu back to her mum. Perhaps the Minister could give some indication—this is one of the questions that I wanted to ask, so I thank the hon. Lady for it—of what we can do in conjunction with the Nigerian Government to ensure that young boys and girls are not abducted from school.

Some countries in central Africa are in the unenviable position of being among the poorest in the world. I understand those issues: poverty often becomes violence, because there are people prepared to take advantage of it. Several of these states have spent much of the past decade trapped in violent conflict, governed by people who exert little or no control over vast swathes of their countries.

Increasingly, Islamic groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State's west African arm are expanding their terrorist campaigns against Christians eastwards, even into areas that have in the past been considered peaceful. Analysts warn that the region's widespread poverty greatly increases the risk of the radicalisation—Islamist or otherwise—of these youthful and rapidly expanding populations. The region is an example of the fact that it is not only minority religious and belief groups that face persecution for their peacefully held beliefs; those belonging to dominant faith groups can also become the victims.

To return to the matter raised by the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire, more than 95% of people living in the Democratic Republic of Congo are Christian, yet Open Doors warns of soaring violence against Christians in that country, with DRC rising 17 places up the charity's world watch list this year. That is the one league table that one does not want to rise up—one wants to be at the bottom of it. The Christian population in the DRC and their churches are said to be at huge risk of violence in the east of the country, where the Islamic extremist rebel group that calls itself the Allied Democratic Forces operates—its name itself is wrong.

Violence has left more than 1 million people internally displaced and has seen countless Christians become the victims of killings, kidnappings, forced labour and torture. Christian men are forcibly recruited into militia groups, while women often face rape and sexual slavery. It causes me great angst to recall that my brothers and sisters are subjected to this. Sometimes we become desensitised to the horror of rape and sexual slavery until we hear a story such as that of the young woman raped at the age of 13, passed on to be married to bring her into a “true faith”, according to her abductor, or passed on to be used—these are the words used by her family—as a pair of shoes to be tried on by whoever wants to try them on. These are not simply words: words are the way in which we try to explain such experiences, experiences that children suffer through, and while words in this Chamber cannot change those experiences, perhaps they can lead to change that will prevent them from happening again. That is what I would like to see.

Over the northern border lies the Central African Republic, which has been occupied by various armed militia groups since 2013. Many of those militias specifically

target Christians, leading to mass displacement of people. There was a shocking surge in sectarian violence in the run-up to parliamentary and presidential elections last December, which led to a further 120,000 people fleeing home. Armed groups are responsible for the vast majority of human rights violations being perpetrated in the Central African Republic, including violating people's right to freedom of religion or belief. Those groups continue to operate across the country without any restraint whatever, so we need a concerted plan by the Governments of all these countries for how we can help Christians in these areas, but also a plan from our Government and our Minister, to whom we look for support and leadership. I am quite sure that that will be forthcoming.

Margaret Ferrier: Lockdown saw an increase in domestic violence rates across the world, even here in the UK, but for vulnerable Christian women in central African countries, the danger has intensified, with increased reports of kidnappings and forced marriages—a devastating removal of any autonomy. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there need to be aid efforts focused specifically on women and girls?

Jim Shannon: I absolutely agree. I know that the Government intend to address the issue of violence against women and children, and if domestic abuse has risen in this country throughout the coronavirus pandemic, that is even more the case in countries such as the Central African Republic, Nigeria, Niger, Mali and Sudan.

Christian converts in the Central African Republic are ostracised by their local community and even face persecution from their immediate family members, who often force them to renounce their Christian faith through violence. They are not just asked to renounce their Christian faith: they are physically abused to make it happen. Christian leaders who have publicly denounced the violence have been threatened, and churches have been repeatedly attacked, ransacked and burned down.

Across Nigeria, there has been a significant number of attacks on church buildings and others. Aid to the Church in Need has said that displaced people are sheltering in monasteries and mission stations, where priests and religious leaders risk their own lives to try to protect others from persecution. I commend all the aid charities that are helping out, including Open Doors—to which the shadow spokesperson for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire, referred—and many others such as Release International, the Barnabas Fund, and Aid to the Church in Need.

It is important to stress that Muslims and other faith groups also suffer greatly as a result of this violence, and in some regions are even the primary victims. A significant percentage of the Central African Republic's minority Muslim population has also fled across the borders: more than a quarter of a million refugees have fled to neighbouring Cameroon, for example. The problem starts in the Central African Republic, but it rapidly spreads, and Cameroon now becomes part of it. Cameroon itself faces an increased threat from Boko Haram, which is active in the north of the country, killing and kidnapping Christians for their faith with remarkable ease.

Security injunctions in the region have set heavy restrictions on churches that have already seen much of their congregations flee. Female converts from Islam

are often forced into marriage with non-Christians there, and Christian women are threatened with abduction by Boko Haram. Religious leaders in the anglophone regions, some of whom are accused of supporting separatists, repeatedly accuse security forces of burning churches and desecrating religious spaces.

I believe there are actions to be taken; there are questions to be asked, and answers to be given by some of those security forces, who seem to be using their positions to enforce those illegal and criminal activities against Christians—all this despite Cameroon's constitution, which prohibits religious harassment and guarantees freedom of religion and worship. That is a question for Cameroon to answer.

The international community must work to end the culture of impunity surrounding such attacks. People in the region have grown weary of the near-continuous conflict and the lack of law and order. They often have no trust in the institutions that claim to govern them. Those failing states then become the breeding grounds for further radicalisation.

I implore my Minister and my Government to provide support to the region's Governments to fully investigate reports of kidnapping, violence and killings, and to bring those responsible to justice. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) referred to the groups already there. The non-governmental organisations, Christian churches and charities, those who stand up for persecuted Christians and those involved in human rights issues are all there, and they would be able to provide an evidential base that would fully justify actions taken against those responsible.

Those administering UK aid in the region face stark choices. In central Africa, we see the intersection of great need, staggering volumes of people displaced by violence and severe cuts to official development assistance. My position on aid—like that of many others in this Chamber, I suspect—is clear: we did not want to see the aid being cut, because we felt it would have a detrimental effect on those who need it most, but none the less we need to make that point very clearly.

Dr Cameron: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the aid budget should not have been cut at this critical time, but, given that it has, does he agree that it is important that it is channelled towards those most in need, and that much of the aid money could be focused not only on ensuring equality of access to education for young girls and those with disabilities as well as boys, but on community safety, particularly supporting Governments to ensure community safety and equality for minority groups?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is right. If the money is going to be cut, and it is, the question is how we perhaps use it more wisely. She is correct to say that we must face the reality of where we are, so how do we use that money better and ensure that that happens? Again, when the Minister has a chance to reply, perhaps she can tell us what can be done to ensure that that happens.

It is also important to understand the great diversity of experiences in the region. According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the Central African Republic had almost no previous history at all of sectarian violence prior to 2012, when fighting broke out between the Bozizé Government and the Séléka rebel alliance. It

was during the ensuing violence that human rights began to be violated on such a vast scale, and the Christian population then became targets.

It is important to remember that these conflicts are neither perpetual nor inevitable. Despite having been a target of many attacks, for example, Chad's diverse religious communities are said to remain relatively free of significant conflict, both between groups and from extremist movements. As the Lake Chad region is under significant threat from Islamic terrorist groups, we should look to further our support for countries' efforts to maintain peace. Where a country is trying hard and hopefully succeeding in containing the violence, what are we doing to ensure that that violence does not boil over into adjoining countries and have an impact on them?

The Lake Chad regional stabilisation facility, which the UK—our Government and our Minister—currently helps to fund is a great example of how the UK can help to strengthen community security, provide basic services and support livelihoods in the region. Perhaps that example of proactivity ties in with what the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow referred to. If we can do it there, we can do it elsewhere. Do Her Majesty's Government support similar programmes elsewhere in the region? We should embrace this depth of experience and champion much of Chad's cross-border efforts.

The scale of religious-based violence in central Africa is truly overwhelming, but I am greatly encouraged by the commitment of Her Majesty's Government to making international freedom of religion or belief a priority for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Government as a whole. We are thankful for that and want to welcome it. In accepting all 22 of the Bishop of Truro's thorough recommendations from his independent review of the persecution of Christians across the globe, the UK Government—our Government—have demonstrated commitment to becoming a world leader in defending our values on the global stage.

The hon. Member for Congleton will refer to next year's conference and how we MPs will check that the bishop's recommendations are all delivered. We have set a target and I look forward to hearing the hon. Lady refer to that. Ahead of that independent review next year, I urge the UK Government to encourage our allies to carry out their own evaluations of their practices in defending freedom of religion or belief, both at home and abroad. The staggering scale of the displacement caused by religious-based violence in the region speaks to the urgency of the intervention needed now to halt the rapidly rising persecution of Christians—and, indeed, people of all faith groups—in central Africa.

Other global powers may have closer ties to parts of the region than the United Kingdom. What are other countries doing to help? We need to develop a partnership or team effort. We cannot afford to take a back seat on this issue. As aid groups have warned, extremism thrives on such conflict. As we watch the horror of the violence in central Africa, we recognise that the longer the international community continues to turn a blind eye to the suffering in the region, the greater the risk that the millions of refugees will never be able to return safely home. Many wish to, but they need the security, knowledge and confidence to do so.

[Jim Shannon]

In conclusion, I am thankful for the steps that the Government take to work in partnership with the NGOs and the Churches to provide support. I understand that there is not an unlimited supply of funding, but we are surely able to do more and do better. That is what I seek today. We recognise that the Government have a project and strategy for Chad, which they are helping to fund; perhaps we can emulate that in all the other countries concerned as well.

We talk a lot about what needs to be done, but we must also follow that with action. As the hon. Member for Congleton knows, I always have a scriptural quotation for these debates because it is important that people recognise that we as Christians are speaking up for Christians in other parts of the world—we are speaking up for our brothers and sisters who, unlike us, do not have the liberty to go to church and cannot socialise spiritually. They have not the right to prayer, their churches are burned and they are attacked. They do not have the job opportunities, education or healthcare because they happen to be Christians. Then they are directly targeted by Islamic terrorists and other groups, and sometimes by Government.

I love this verse, from 1 John 3:18, which reminds us: “let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”

The issue is quite simple. It is time to make sure that we are walking the walk—taking action and not just speaking words. That is my final word. I look forward to what the Minister and other Members have to say. We are looking for positive action.

1.55 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak as vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief. I thank our chairman, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) not only for securing this debate and for an excellent, passionate speech but for his enduring commitment to freedom of religion or belief.

I, too, want to focus on Nigeria. There are multiple drivers of the deeply concerning and increasing causes of violence there, including issues that are specific to a local area’s history, politics and ethno-linguistic make-up, and resource competition. However, we must call out the reality that, today, is this: extremist Islamist ideology is the key driver of violence across Nigeria. The victims are Christians, Muslims and those of other faiths or of no faith at all. I visited Nigeria in 2016 and took the then head of the Christian Association of Nigeria to meet UK Department for International Development representatives to convey to them that the root of so much violence then was religious tensions. As the Prime Minister’s special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, I am mandated to lead on the full implementation of the recommendations of the Bishop of Truro’s 2019 review by July 2022. That review describes perpetrators of atrocities in Nigeria as “militant Fulani Islamist herdsmen” and concludes:

“Fulani attacks have repeatedly demonstrated a clear intent to target Christians, and potent symbols of Christian identity.”

In June 2020, the all-party parliamentary group published its report, “Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?” That two-year in-depth inquiry described in detail violations of freedom of religion or belief. The report was taken extremely seriously by the US State Department. I have been told

that it contributed to the US designating Nigeria as a country of particular concern. I know from meetings that I held earlier this year, from elected parliamentarians in Nigeria, from a governor there and from NGOs how much that report was appreciated by them in Nigeria. It is cited it as shining a light on the grievous violations of FORB in that country.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for drawing out the point about ideology because that was the question that was forming in my mind after the speech of the hon. Member for Strangford as to what was driving this. My particular interest is in the report and the impact that she describes. Could she elaborate on whether anything is said about the impact of this terrible state of affairs on children?

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend raises a very pertinent point. The impact of this violence on the young and the upcoming generation is acute. Indeed, a recent UNICEF report stated that 1 million Nigerian children are missing school due to mass kidnappings. Their parents are now too frightened to send them to school. The knock-on effects of that on their loss of education and their ability to earn a livelihood are acute.

I welcome the new Minister to her post. I have had the pleasure of working with her and seeing how effectively she worked in her previous role. When she responds to this debate, I hope that she will agree to meet me, the hon. Member for Strangford and other officers of the APPG about our 2020 report and subsequent concerns. Since that report, those concerns have been exacerbated and are even more pressing. Dr Obadiah Mailafia, a former Nigerian presidential candidate and former deputy governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, who provided oral and written submissions to our all-party parliamentary group inquiry, sadly died on 19 September 2021 after allegedly receiving poor treatment. In a speech that he delivered just a few days before he died, at a symposium entitled “The role of the Church in nation-building”, Dr Mailafia had warned that the country was

“certainly exhibiting the features of a failing state in terms of the kind of violence we are seeing, widespread insecurity, terrorism, the abuse of humanity, criminality, rape, killing, maiming and destruction. We are a failing state.”

He goes on:

“Rival groups control territory. Boko Haram is in control over half of Niger State and if they successfully take over Niger, Abuja will be a walkover. Government cannot provide security for the people. Nowhere is safe in the country. The forests have been taken over by foreign invaders. The economy is collapsing. There is the collapse of the institution. Police, university’s standards are low. Corruption has taken over in the country.”

On 4 August 2021, Intersociety-Nigeria released figures compiled from documented cases of violence that are deeply disturbing. The statistics reveal that in the past 12 years, 43,000 Christians have been killed by Islamist Fulani militia, 18,500 have disappeared—many, I have no doubt, also killed—and 17,500 churches have been attacked. Ten million people uprooted in the north, 6 million forced to flee, 4 million displaced and 2,000 Christian schools have been lost. Within that timeframe, 29,000 Muslims were also killed. The report states that moderate Muslims are targeted for several reasons,

“as collateral mistakes or punishment for those collaborating with the ‘unbelievers’ or in revenge for state actor attacks against their targets, or for purpose of enforcement”

of extreme interpretations of Islamic sharia law.

Earlier this year, I read a well-evidenced report on the impact of covid from testimonies on the ground in Plateau state and Kaduna state. I will pass details of that well-evidenced, authoritative and lengthy report onto the Minister. I quote briefly from it:

“In Nigeria, the attacks on Christian villages during the pandemic were religiously motivated. Local politicians are perceived to deploy security forces and distribute aid along ethno-religious lines. Participants reported”—

that is, participants of the research for the report—

“that soldiers appear indifferent to their communities and fail to pre-empt or repel attacks.

In Nigeria, the lack of protection and security for Christian villages in Kaduna and Plateau exacerbates the impact of covid-19.” It goes on to say:

“The loss of access to schooling for children is universal, across all the groups. It is exacerbated in Nigeria by the attacks on Christian villages, where schools and churches have been burnt down, and teachers have fled.”

Looking at the Christians, even in their facial outlook, the research team talks of them being

“emotionally broken, psychologically demoralised”.

They were

“representing anxiety of an ambiguous future caused by the loss of husbands, children, wives, relatives and their sources of livelihood.”

Christian men in Plateau state spoke of attacks, which in Kujeni took place during Sunday mass. They felt the response from the Government was inadequate and that the attacks were religiously motivated, as they targeted Christian villages, not neighbouring Muslim villages. One said:

“Yes, yes because I know this has everything to do with my faith, why burning my church, why burning my church?”

The critical deficit of governance is evident in the lack of security services provided by the state.

This morning, I had the privilege of speaking with an individual who has direct knowledge of what is happening in Nigeria now. He is an authority on the issue. I want to quote his words. They are lengthy. Just a few hours ago, he told me this:

“The violence is getting worse by the day. It is affecting the whole country. ISWAP”—

that is, Islamic State West Africa—

“has taken over the command of Boko Haram and have joined forces with the Fulani militants. The Governor of Niger State has declared that Boko Haram and ISWAP have planted a flag just 2 hours from Abuja. Just 2 weeks ago they have new headquarters set up in Southern Kaduna. With the developments in Afghanistan they have become emboldened. If Nigeria collapses it’s a fragile area surrounding it—there is an impending implosion—Chad, Niger, Cameroon, Mali, Ghana, Central African Republic.

In the NWest there is Muslim on Muslim violence—Sokoto, Kebbi and Katsina. The Governor of Katsina has said that people doing the violence are Muslims, Fulani and some foreigners. People cannot send their children to school for fear of violence and abductions. No reasonable parent can send their child to school... People dare not farm their land. The situation of Christians is pathetic.

Recently, a bus carrying Muslims was attacked, and there was anger across the country. This does not happen when Christians die.

Muslims are dying at the hands of fellow Muslims, however, the attacks are incessantly on the Christian communities, whilst the federal government remains silent.”

He continued:

“If only the British Government would regularly call out this violence against Christians, and ask the Nigerian Government to do something.”

I asked him what he wanted the Nigerian Government to do. He said:

“I want them to guarantee security. When schools and villages are attacked. The army and police don’t take action. I want them to take action.”

He added:

“People are being attacked with AK47s and machetes and more recently the Islamic jihadists showed they have the capacity to shoot down an aircraft—they did so. Two weeks ago, they attacked the Nigerian Defence Academy in Kaduna and killed two officers and took one captive, released three days ago. What they want is to take over Africa.”

I will close with this: we need to acknowledge the scale of ethno-religious violence, and to urge the Nigerian Government to hold those responsible to account. Security and stability need to be ensured for all communities, especially in the north and middle belt regions, and the Yoruba and Igbo people urgently need to be provided with the help and protection that they are crying out for.

As fellow parliamentarians in our all-party group, such as the noble Baroness Cox and Lord Alton, have said previously, for the sake of all the people in Nigeria, and for the sake of security across the continent and beyond, we urge the UK Government to press the Nigerian Government swiftly to address this violence, and to ensure protection, justice and recompense for victims of all ethnicities, without bias.

2.8 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the second time this week, Ms Ali. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for speaking on this incredibly important issue. It is so important that we keep giving the issue the attention that it deserves. I do not think it is nearly widely enough reported on, and consequently, it is not taken as seriously as it should be by the British people.

In Somalia, we know that Christians are referred to as high-value targets. Indeed, all minority religions in that country are heavily persecuted. The tiny populations of Christians in the country are also in danger from al-Shabaab, who have often murdered believers on the spot—especially if they are from a Muslim background. In the Central African Republic, in the year up until 30 September 2020, there were at least 56 attacks on churches, with at least 35 Christians killed for faith-related reasons. Open Doors reports that the destruction of churches has become common, something that is hard for us to understand here in the United Kingdom.

There is a urgent need for reconciliation between Christians and Muslims. The Archbishop of Canterbury is right to call for a much greater focus on the need for reconciliation globally, and for the United Kingdom to be at the forefront of promoting that, which I am sure we all agree with.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the most serious threat to Christians is that the eastern part of the country has become a safe haven for the Islamist group, the Allied Democratic Forces. That group seeks to create an Islamic state in Uganda and has been targeting churches and Christians in the north-east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo for several years, since its attempt to overthrow the Ugandan Government failed.

[Andrew Selous]

These issues are current, as less than a month ago, on 29 August, suspected ADF militants killed 19 civilians in North Kivu using machetes and firearms, and 13 houses were set on fire. On 1 September, four people were killed in the same area, when a convoy was ambushed and dozens of people were abducted. The Government blamed the ADF for the incident. In July 2020, a United Nations report suggested that the crimes committed by the ADF might amount to war crimes.

In Cameroon, 53 Christians were killed for faith-related reasons in the year to 30 September 2020, including on 6 November 2019, when suspected Boko Haram fighters killed retired pastor David Mokoni. The following month, Boko Haram began a series of attacks on Cameroon's Christians, including opening fire on a funeral, something that is almost impossible for us to understand, and there were homes looted, with seven Christians killed. In South Sudan, the dean of St Luke's Cathedral and 32 worshippers were shot in September 2020.

The Church of England continues to support reconciliation efforts and to work with its international partners to end the protracted conflict. Tragically, on 16 August this year, two Catholic nuns were among those murdered on a bus, and no perpetrators have yet been held to account.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton said, Nigeria faces the greatest challenges in this part of Africa. The number of Christians killed is truly shocking. Open Doors estimates that in the year to 30 September 2020, at least 3,530 Christians and 1,020 Muslims were killed. Practitioners of African traditional religions have also been violated. The United Kingdom and Nigeria have particularly close relations, and Nigeria is an important member of the Commonwealth. Many Nigerians in the United Kingdom view the atrocities in their homeland with horror.

The murder of George Floyd last year was truly shocking and the global outrage that followed was entirely justified. However, I have sympathy for the headline I saw recently, referring to the thousands of Nigerians killed for their faith this year, which asked:

“Do these black lives matter?”

I am grateful for the opportunity of today's debate, to put these matters on the record and to express my concern about the seriousness of these issues. There is an ongoing need for reconciliation and the acceptance of diverse minorities, and their right to practise their religion or belief without fear in Africa, and around the world. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, there are 300 million Christians being persecuted globally, which is a very large number.

Looking back at Nigeria, I am shocked that in the last decade it is estimated that 37,500 Christians have been killed; my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton used a slightly higher figure. That is the equivalent of the population of a fair-sized British market town, such as Dunstable in my constituency. Where is the press? Where is the media focus on this issue? It needs to be there, and it is not always.

As the hon. Member for Strangford said, we have become desensitised. All these numbers and figures sometimes get a bit numbing, which is why it is important to mention some individual names. Leah Sharibu was

mentioned earlier, and she is one of the 276 Nigerian schoolgirls abducted on 14 April 2014. She is still in captivity and her mother does not know what has happened to her: we continue to hope and pray for her release.

I commend the Government for taking this issue seriously; I have no doubt that they do. I am pleased that they are committed to implementing all 22 of the Bishop of Truro's recommendations, and that they will host an international ministerial conference next year on freedom of religion or belief. That is absolutely right, but as the Minister has heard today, this issue has never been more important. Never has there been a greater need for the United Kingdom to take a lead in this area.

2.16 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for once again ensuring we have a debate on these matters. I have been taking part in these debates for the best part of two decades. At first, the position of our Government was studiously neutral, but I am glad to say that progress has been made.

This debate is part of a process of drawing attention to what is happening and trying to shine a spotlight on these matters. I will go through a few cases. We have heard about the situation in South Sudan. In April, there was a violent attack against the then Father—now Bishop—Christian Carlassare, the Italian missionary appointed as Catholic bishop of Rumbek in South Sudan. The Government invaded his residence and fired 13 bullets, injuring the bishop-elect, who had to be airlifted to hospital in Nairobi. South Sudan is, of course, a majority Christian country but is still plagued with violence, as groups have been jockeying for power for the 10 years since independence.

In 2021, an Anglican priest, Rev. Daniel Garang Ayuen, was murdered. In 2018, a Jesuit priest, Father Victor Luka Odhiambo, was murdered. In 2017, the Pentecostal leader, Joel Mwendwa, was murdered.

I hope the United Kingdom Government have been quietly proactive—I am afraid it probably is only quietly—in trying to bring peace and security to South Sudan. I recently met our former ambassador to South Sudan, Chris Trott, in the context of his becoming the ambassador to the Holy See. He assured me that our Government took the situation in South Sudan seriously, and that he was trying to work with Church leaders of all denominations to resolve it. It seems to me that working with the Churches is key to all this and to understanding what is happening on the ground.

In South Sudan, Auxiliary Bishop Daniel Adwok of Khartoum told Aid to the Church in Need, which is a Catholic charity I work with closely, that

“Terror reigns in South Sudan, with warriors, government and politicians grappling for power, positions and not minding the fate of the ordinary Southern Sudanese. The fact that until today no one knows—the government itself does not know—how many people died in South Sudan since the start of the war in December 2013 is indicative of how the value of the human person has become of no worth in South Sudan.”

One of the reasons for this sort of debate—my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) rightly articulated the point of view that black lives matter—is that there is precious little interest in this in the media and among the general population in

Europe. These places are considered to be faraway places of which we know little. Perhaps the general view is that life there is not of such importance, as it is in Europe. Although we will mention a whole series of cases, names, figures and facts, as my hon. Friend said, the fact is that every one of these murders is a human life. All these children have mothers and fathers, and all these mothers and fathers have children. It does not matter that it is happening in a very poor, remote and faraway place. Every single one of these massacres and incidents of horrible violence is tearing a family apart. It is cruel and horrible. Once again, the hon. Member for Strangford is to be congratulated on trying to draw attention to this, even if only here and not in the main Chamber.

Let us look at other countries we have heard about. The so-called Allied Democratic Forces—the ADF—is a Ugandan violent Islamist group that is being forced slowly out of Uganda, we hope. It now operates in the North Kivu province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and beyond. In December last year, 17 people in the village of Mwenda were killed in a machete attack. Weeks later, on 4 January, 22 more were killed in the same village. Simultaneously, 25 were murdered in the village of Tingwe. This is all in the past 12 months.

Members will have noticed that I started speeding up when I read those out—22 murdered here, 25 here, 35 there. These are all individual human beings. Imagine if it was going on in Europe or America. In 2016 the United Nations estimated that ADF had killed 645 people since 2014. Five years later, that number has hugely increased. The ADF is hardly the only group involved, either. There is a group calling itself the Islamic State Central Africa Province, affiliated to ISIL in Iraq and Syria. It has been operating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and infiltrating neighbouring states. In June this year it claimed responsibility for an attack on a Catholic church in Beni in the Democratic Republic of the Congo as well as a suicide attack at an intersection at the same time.

In Mozambique, Islamic State militants have linked up with a pre-existing local group, Ansar al-Sunna, to expand the insurgency in the Cabo Delgado province. Illia Djadi from the charity Open Doors has said,

“These predominantly Christian communities are attacked by an Islamic extremist group with a clear Islamic expansionist agenda”.

He pointed out that, while different groups with different origins are involved, there is a common agenda. Militants want to create an extreme Islamic state, stretching from the Sahel, where French soldiers have been hugely successful in fighting rebels, all the way through central Africa, Kenya and Somalia.

Fiona Bruce: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, as he always does. He talks about a common agenda. Does he share my concern that not only do these individual groups have a common agenda, but they are now linking up? That is what is really concerning, because there is serious danger across a wide range of countries in a continent.

Sir Edward Leigh: I think we should take that extremely seriously, in terms of western geopolitical interest. We are not talking about uncoordinated local attacks, terrible as they might be in terms of human lives. We are talking

about whole provinces in danger of being lost by the central state. We have seen what has happened in Afghanistan. If anybody thinks this will not come back to bite us in terms of terrorism being exported, that may be a rather sanguine point of view.

Let me finish with a comment from Bishop Paluku Sikuli Melchisédech of Butembo-Beni in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He has given a harrowing account to Aid to the Church in Need of the Islamist insurgency in the country, saying that

“The number of incidents is particularly high in the northern part of our diocese. Armed groups are destroying schools and hospitals. Teachers and pupils are being killed. They are even killing the sick as they lie in their hospital beds. Not a day goes by without people being killed.”

He added:

“We need centres where people can go for therapy. Many people are traumatised. Many have watched as their parents were killed. There are many orphans and widows. Villages have been burned to the ground. We are in a state of utter misery.”

The bishop implied that the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo are complicit in the violence. He said that

“The state as such does not exist.”

I have been to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and it is a failed state. There is no doubt about it. The Bishop said:

“The reach of the government does not extend into the east, be it out of weakness or complicity.”

Responding to the growing threat of extremist Islamisation, the Bishop said:

“Islam is being forced on us. Mosques are being built everywhere, even though no one needs them. The mosques do not look like the traditional ones we are familiar with.”

He added that

“anyone who has been kidnapped by these terrorist groups and managed to escape from them alive has told the same story. They were given the choice between death and converting to Islam.”

What about the UK response? We have the Minister here. What can we do? The evidence is overwhelming and appalling in terms of human dignity, rights and peace, and also a danger to us. I have said the Government, and the previous Government, were too reticent in these matters, but we have had progress. We welcome the changes we have seen in recent years, particularly the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office’s review chaired by the Bishop of Truro into Government support for persecuted Christians. The review issued its report in July 2019 and we received a solid commitment from Ministers to implement its recommendations.

The situation in central Africa shows the Government need to do more. In particular, the Prime Minister’s special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, needs to have—I say this directly to the Minister—a properly dedicated civil service resource. She cannot say this herself; she is an absolutely committed lady, but she has not been given the support she needs from our Government in terms of support from senior Ministers, such as the Foreign Secretary, or in terms of resources given to her. Too often in Government, hon. Members are appointed as envoys to keep them quiet, but this lady is not going to be quiet. All right, Minister?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford)
indicated assent.

Sir Edward Leigh: Give her proper support because she is literally working every day of the week on these issues, and she is not going to give up or go away.

Is there any frontline role for the UK to be more proactive in defeating violent extremists in central Africa? When the Minister replies, I very much hope she will not just say, “This is terrible” and all that, which we all agree with, but she will say what we can do. The French are very good in all this. I declare an interest: I am well-known for my belief in the importance of strategic co-operation with our French allies, who are our closest neighbours. We depend on them in many ways. They have been extremely effective in the use of their special forces, and one of the reasons why we want to improve our relationship with France is we want to work more closely on that.

The Minister will not be able to comment on how our special forces have been involved, but I believe special forces are crucial in dealing with terrorism. These people are bullies, and what they do not like is some Special Air Service person lying in wait for them and shooting them in the back when they are on their way to murder people. It is one thing that bullying terrorists and murderers do not like. I believe that co-operation—I accept the Minister cannot comment on this part of my speech—and special forces are crucial.

Perhaps the Minister can comment on the support she is giving to friendly Governments, such as Nigeria. There is a huge amount of belief in these areas that central Government is either weak, corrupt, complicit or totally ineffective. I went to a conference organised by the British Government last year where we had people coming from all over central Africa and relating their experiences, and the common theme was the ineffectiveness of central Government. I do not know exactly what the state of our aid programmes is, but I would have thought, given we are such a major aid donor, that we have a lot of influence, and we should not be afraid to exert that influence on Governments that are weak, corrupt, complicit or ineffective.

In conclusion, is there more that our Government can do to help national, regional and local government officials in this part of central Africa that is plagued by violence? We cannot just walk by on the other side of the road. We have a duty to protect others, prevent further catastrophes, and help to secure peace and stability in the region. The United Kingdom must do more. We must do our bit and pull our weight.

2.29 pm

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate. It has been said by others better than I can, but this is clearly an important issue that we need to give due attention to. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ali. I must confess that I had not intended to speak—I had some questions and made interventions accordingly—but I am moved by what I have heard. I think that there are some important points to add to what has been said.

I would like to make two key observations, and both draw on my own experience. I was an engineer before I came here, many years ago. I went through university and learned the ways of an engineer. As an engineer, one is taught to look at problems and seek their causes before jumping to solutions and answers. I was particularly

grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for talking about the cause of this problem: militant Islamic extremism. We have to acknowledge that. Those were not her words but the words of reports that she cited. It may be uncomfortable, but we have to look at it. If an engineer is building a bridge, they cannot say, “I would really rather this foundation sprang from a rock instead of a sandy riverbank.” They have to deal with the situation that is there to successfully deliver a solution. We have to deal with reality.

Let us face it: in a secular western society, that is uncomfortable for two reasons. First, we have lost some of the fluency of the language of faith that would allow us to apprehend these issues and understand the motives and behaviours involved in them. Secondly, that lack of fluency has flowed through into our policies, our institutions and the way in which we deliver these things. These are institutions that have built up over decades. That is the reality of the situation. If one is an engineer trying to build a bridge, one has to deal with the conditions. If the bridge is a long way from supplies of concrete and steel and from roads, one still has to get those supplies there. We have to deal with the situation as it is.

In her speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton talked very effectively about the impact and consequences. I asked about children in part because my sense from her speech was that there is a much wider impact than simply, as the title of the debate has it, “violence against Christians”. It is clear that this militant extremism is displacing people. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) listed a litany of displaced peoples and nations: refugees who have moved as a consequence of this behaviour. Again, we have lost some of that fluency—understanding what impact beliefs and ideologically driven behaviour can have. Perhaps it is because we approach things with our western, rational, secular mindset. We say, “This does not make sense,” or “I cannot understand or explain.” For other peoples in other parts of the world, this may seem like reasonable, sensible, logical and acceptable behaviour.

I was very interested in the choice of words of the hon. Member for Strangford at the end of his speech: “in deed and in truth”. I will come back to this at the end, when I address comments to the Minister. We must take action—in deed—but that action must be in truth: it must be in proper cognisance of the challenge that we face and of our capacity to deal with it. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) for making his points about the civil service and the capacity that we have to deliver these things. There are others more experienced in these matters than I am and will know better what Government have done and can do. I would only add my own name, voice and weight to that plea for the necessary resource to do this work. From what has been said this afternoon, there can be no doubt that we are of one mind and intent in seeking to alleviate and resolve this problem.

My second point might seem small and inconsequential; again, it occurred to me when I was listening to the earlier speeches in this debate. They brought to mind a report that I heard recently of the return of some of the Chibok girls who had been kidnapped by Boko Haram some while ago. I understand that recently the girls have started to be released. Again, I am not an expert in these matters, but my understanding is that the Nigerian

Government have a programme of deradicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration, which is encouraging some of Boko Haram's terrorists to put down their weapons, and to come out of the wilderness—literally—and back into civilisation.

However, the reports were talking about one or two girls who are coming with their family: with their children and husband. That concerned me, because they did not go with a husband; they did not have a family when they were kidnapped. I am concerned that in some of this reporting we are losing sight of something else that happens alongside this conflict and terror. An important part of the conflict and terror is the violence perpetuated against women in these situations; I think we all know what I am referring to.

The kind of man described in the report is not the “husband” of one of those girls, as we would understand it in a normal, consensual marriage—or even perhaps in an arranged marriage, as might be normal in a different culture. We have to be sure and somehow, in addressing this problem, to address the violence perpetuated against women, and not simply accept or allow such casual reporting of an abuser as a “husband”.

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, particularly as he had not intended to speak in this debate. Does he agree that we need to stop using the terms “forced marriage” and “forced conversion”, because they simply are not acceptable terms? Marriage should be a relationship entered into freely; when one makes a declaration of faith, or a decision about faith, that is something that one does individually from one's heart. Neither marriage nor faith should be “forced” on someone else. We need to start talking about such situations for what they are—the most dreadful abuse, often of young women, including rape.

Robin Millar: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention; she is absolutely correct.

I try to read around subjects and understand them, having entered politics—with a splash, I suppose, here in Parliament. Reading some essays about freedoms in society, one that really struck me was about exactly this point: about how freedom of thought, freedom of speech and freedom of action follow on from each other. What we have seen in this case is an obliteration of each one of those: the freedom of belief is removed through coercion; the freedom of speech, including the freedom to consent to a marriage, is also removed through coercion; and then the freedom of action is removed through rape.

I will draw my remarks to a conclusion, but I will make one further comment. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough really made a compelling argument for us to be interested in this subject. If it is not enough for us to recognise that people and groups are displaced, to recognise the damage that does to geopolitics and to recognise that such instability eventually laps against these shores as well, then it is enough to say that this is about human lives and that we are connected to them. That connection is much greater than any division by colour, race or distance. That is why we must take an interest in this issue and pay attention to it.

I will stop there, but first I thank the Minister for her interest; I know that she has a keen interest in these issues. Secondly, I thank the Government for what they

have already done, and I urge them to address the point that the hon. Member for Strangford made at the start of the debate about acting in deed and in truth. There must be full acknowledgement of this problem, including its scale.

2.39 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Ali. I commend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the others who secured this important debate on a topic that should be of deep concern to us all. Today's speeches have been particularly thoughtful.

I am fortunate to represent East Renfrewshire, which is one of the most religiously diverse areas in Scotland. The issue of freedom of religion and belief, particularly for religious minorities—including Christians in some areas of the world—is of significant concern to many of my constituents, although the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) made the very good point that the topic is not given a wider airing. I am very grateful to my constituents for their continued engagement on this issue. I know that the ability of Christians to practise their religion freely and fairly across the world is a matter of real significance, and should be of concern to people across Scotland, the UK and the world.

There is no doubt that we would be right to remain deeply concerned about the severity and scale of violations and abuses of freedom of religion and belief in central African countries. The hon. Member for Strangford spoke about Open Doors—a fantastic charity that allows us to have information about persecuted Christians around the world that we might not otherwise have access to. The Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cameroon are all mentioned in information that Open Doors has shared, highlighting the top 50 most dangerous countries in which to be a Christian. We have heard very powerfully, particularly in the speeches made by the hon. Members for Strangford and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), about the situation in Nigeria.

This year, the Democratic Republic of the Congo rose 17 spots in the Open Doors world ranking, mainly due to attacks on Christians by the Islamic extremist group Allied Democratic Forces in the east of the country, with 460 killed in the period 2019-20 and 100 churches attacked or closed down. Christians in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are at risk at all times of kidnapping, torture, murder, forced recruitment into militia groups, forced labour, and having their homes destroyed. Christian women in particular are extremely vulnerable to rape and sexual slavery, as the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) has powerfully expressed.

In the Central African Republic, there has been near-constant conflict and fighting since 2013. Much of the country is occupied by various armed militia groups that are responsible for a range of human rights abuses, and many of those groups—whether Islamic extremists or otherwise—specifically target Christians, so life is constantly uncertain for people in areas under militia control.

Prior to the coup in 2013, there had been no previous history of sectarian violence in the area, but since then, armed groups have regularly manipulated ethnic and religious divisions to realise their aims, as we have heard

[Kirsten Oswald]

today. For instance, this February, over 100 homes were destroyed and supplies damaged in an arson attack on a camp located in the Catholic Church compound of Alindao. In Bangassou, 500 Muslims are reported to be sheltering with Christians in the Catholic churches, and in Grimari, churches have also provided shelter to 1,500 Muslims and Christians.

I turn to Cameroon. Dictatorial paranoia and Islamic oppression have led to the targeting of Christian communities there. For instance, as we have already heard, the Islamic extremist group Boko Haram is very active in the north, and has kidnapped and killed Christians for their faith. Christian women also face significant danger of abduction by Boko Haram and forced marriage—the comments we heard about that earlier were absolutely on point. Again, we see that double whammy effect of Christian women and girls being doubly vulnerable, targeted for both their faith and their gender. In addition, country experts indicate that several girls have been forced to act as suicide bombers to further decimate Christian populations. While the Government have been fighting a civil war, Boko Haram has regrouped, and the pandemic has also increased opportunities for action by jihadists, who are likely to make further inroads if a sustainable peace is not achieved.

This UK Government's progress in implementing the recommendations of the Truro report, which should be a means of trying to make progress in this area, has been too slow. We in the Scottish National party welcomed the Truro report: it was a bit shorter than we would have liked, but it makes robust points, and it is important that we see a commitment to real action in a timely way. I appreciate that the UK Government did say that they would accept the 22 recommendations made by the report in full. However, as of 9 July this year, which is the latest update I can see, only 10 of the recommendations have been fully implemented. As we have heard, an independent review of progress is due to begin next year, but there is nothing that suggests to me that the 22 recommendations will be fully implemented, especially given that work on four of them has yet to start, two years on.

It was somewhat unfortunate that the role of the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief was vacant for a time, although I am very aware that the hon. Member for Congleton is very focused on these matters, which is welcome. We also need to think about the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Human Rights and Democracy Report. If that report is correct in saying that defending freedom of religion and belief for all is a priority for this Government, as I know it is for the hon. Lady, then more urgency is needed in achieving the implementation of the remaining recommendations, especially given that the number of those being targeted for their faith is certainly not reducing.

Every day 13 Christians are killed worldwide because of their faith. In 2020, 260 million people—approximately 10% of all Christians in the world—were persecuted for their religious beliefs. That is an increase from 245 million in 2019 and approximately 215 million in 2018, according to a report by Open Doors. More can and must be done to provide adequate support, particularly in relation to

aid, to persecuted Christians. However, as we know, the UK is in fact cutting bilateral aid to Africa by 66%. Frankly, that is not good enough.

International aid is vital in stemming the spread of religious intolerance, stigma and socioeconomic exclusion, all of which tie together. The UK Government have been warned time and again not to lose sight of the benefits of international aid in tackling these issues, but they are cutting that aid. They are sending no bilateral aid to Cameroon at all this year, for example, although a very small amount has been promised. It is not entirely clear if that will go towards trade purposes rather than humanitarian support.

The Bishop of Truro's report did draw positive attention to the £12 million freedom of religion or belief programme under the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development. However, it has not yet been publicly confirmed whether that programme will continue beyond its current schedule. I would welcome any clarity on that.

Last year, the Advocacy Policy Officer at Open Doors at that time, Dr Matthew Rees, said:

“Both the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office must do more to recognise the specific and hidden vulnerabilities of women from minority religious communities and provide tailored and added support through targeted programming.”

I would be keen to hear from the Minister about the commitments made in the report that detail this double vulnerability and the disproportionate impact that Christian women face in many countries because of their gender and faith.

It would also be interesting to hear what the FCDO is intending. How will it look to increase funding in areas of reconciliation mediation, religious persecution survival, trauma care—all really important points, which have been well-aided today—and also places of worship, security funding and rapid response teams globally? Will it make an assessment of the adequacy and effectiveness of aid distribution to persecuted Christians? It is vital that the UK Government's words and actions marry up, acting, as the hon. Member for Strangford said, in deed and in truth. These deeds really do matter. The Government cannot simultaneously criticise religious persecution abroad and overlook human rights abuses when they are searching for a post-Brexit trade deal with Cameroon, for example.

The UK should have followed the lead of the US and Canada in approving resolutions that call out with great force the brutal campaign of subjugation of minorities in Cameroon. The US Senate's resolution praised the fact that the US trade representative at the time terminated Cameroon's access to preferred trade rights due to persistent gross violations of internationally recognised human rights, in order to penalise the Biya Government and urge members of the international community to join the United States in a strategic, collective effort to put pressure on the Government of Cameroon, including the use of all available diplomatic and punitive tools.

On the very same day, the UK Government brought into effect their continuity trade agreement with Cameroon, which still remains unpublished and was subject to negligible parliamentary scrutiny. If it had been subject to due parliamentary consideration, we would have highlighted that it gives no concern to the persistent gross violations of international human rights taking place inside Cameroon. We are yet to see whether it contains the provisions that we would want on human

rights, but I remain somewhat sceptical. Perhaps the Minister can clarify that point. The negotiations were a missed opportunity to raise valid concerns about the persecution of Christians. Instead, the UK Government signed an agreement, apparently with no hesitation over the Government of Cameroon's human rights record and no apparent effort to strengthen human rights provisions.

The issue of freedom of religion and the protection of people's right to their religious faith should be something we all agree on. We know that Christians in central African countries are routinely persecuted for their faith. We have heard that other groups, including Muslims and those of other faiths, are similarly persecuted. We should be sending a message here, backed up by actions. I sincerely hope the Minister is going to talk us through that. It is very clear that people in these situations can wait no longer.

2.51 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Ms Ali, and to contribute to this important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his continued support for this issue in the House, as well as the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who I know well from the all-party parliamentary group on North Korea, and who shares with me a real concern about human rights across the globe. The work of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief looks so interesting. I receive the newsletter, but it is difficult to fit in all the meetings, due to my role. I know the important work that comes out of it feeds into debates like this. It is a delight to be here and to listen to the different thoughts of Members.

The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) made a very important comment on resources for the role that the Prime Minister has given the hon. Member for Congleton. The resource must be there so that effective scrutiny can take place, not just in country—there is a real need for the hon. Member to travel to, for example, Nigeria, Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of the Congo—but of the merger of DFID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and how that sits alongside the trade brief, so that one Department or Minister is not saying one thing while another is saying something else almost simultaneously.

Although the merger is still in its infancy, I do not think that Members who are interested in foreign affairs have really seen the full forcefulness that we could have, given the excellence of the civil service and so on. We cannot really feel the impact of the special envoy, because it has not all quite been brought together yet—the vision has not quite been laid out. I hope we will see more of that vision in the coming months and that the role of the hon. Member for Congleton will be underlined, because it is so important to see where minority religious groups are being persecuted.

Something I appreciate about the APPG is that it defends the rights of those who have no religious beliefs. My constituents often write to me on that issue—I have very well known humanists in my constituency. It is such an important point. In some countries in the world, it is not acceptable to not be a believer, so I am so pleased that the APPG underlines the rights of those with no religious beliefs.

Andrew Selous: Does the hon. Lady take some comfort from the fact that a good Christian friend of mine went to visit an atheist imprisoned in Indonesia to console him? Like me, she would probably like to see rather more of that sort of thing.

Catherine West: I think there is too much hatred between different groups in the world. What we need to do, as debates like this do, is to promote tolerance, understanding and respect.

That brings us back to the point made by the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald): we are all worried about cuts to the DFID programme. With a 66% cut in our aid to the poorest continent in the world, we worry that some of the very long-term, slow-burn work on developing civil society, tolerance and understanding, and education—girls' education, in particular—might be lost. I suppose the Minister will give me reassurances on that question.

Hon. Members have laid out very well the severity of the persecution, discrimination, abductions, sexual violence and killings that we have unfortunately seen in the countries we have talked about today. South Sudan is obviously a notable one. Seeing the murder of those two nuns on the bus last month was tragic, and something that I know our constituents care deeply about and want us to be talking about.

I also thank hon. Members for raising the Bring Back Our Girls campaign. It was very powerful when Michelle Obama highlighted it, but I think that we did do a lot more in the House at that point, and it would be facile to think that that problem has gone away. We know that if 1 million children were not attending school anywhere else, we would be up in arms about it, so it is important to highlight that.

From my work as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases, I know that Nigeria has a huge malaria burden. It does seem that the global health security question is often married up with conflict, violence and the persecution of minority faiths.

I put on record the excellent work of Open Doors and Christian Solidarity Worldwide, which do such important work and have fed into the Bishop of Truro's independent review. My colleague, the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire, has gone into where we are with the review in depth, so I shall not repeat that. However, I would appreciate it if the Minister said where she thinks we are with the 22 recommendations.

We all welcome next year's ministerial conference—it is important to get people around the table talking about the recommendations and how we can do more, but we need to apply more urgency to the task. As we know, the violence is getting worse. It was good that we had the example of what is happening in south Kaduna. This is not a time to withdraw mentally; we must keep up the focus, even though we have had the 66% cut to the aid budget, which, of course, some of us in this Chamber voted against. We must not lose that focus on education, civil society and the promotion of tolerance.

I commend the right hon. Member for Gainsborough on his comment about working with partners. I share with him the commitment to work with friends in France, across the Sahel and across the region, because it is only by working with all our partners that we can

[*Catherine West*]

achieve what we want. Where the French have put in a lot of resources, let us work with them, sharing the expertise that they may have in a particular area and complementing it with the UK's specialities and niche approaches, so that together we offer the most secure environment we can for those African nations.

I want briefly to highlight three other hon. Members. Back in September, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) asked the former Minister, the right hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), what assessment the FCDO had made of

“the adequacy and effectiveness of the distribution of aid to persecuted Christians.”

We heard at that time that

“the UK will be the third largest donor within the G7 as a percentage of GNI. We will spend more than £10 billion in aid” in 2020. Will the Minister before us say, in her concluding remarks, whether she feels that the posts across the FCDO network will retain their regular network reporting on local human rights situations, including in relation to the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief?

In April 2021, my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) asked the former Minister—again, not the Minister we have here today—about tackling

“religious persecution and gender based violence of Christian women in countries around the world.”

The former Minister replied that the UK was committed to that. Will the Minister before us say what shape her commitment will take to defending freedom of religion or belief for all, and recognising that women and girls from religious minorities often suffer because of both their gender and their faith?

Will the Minister lay out how she will ensure that our human rights policy work considers the intersectionality of human rights, including the importance of addressing the specific vulnerabilities experienced by women and girls in the countries we have talked about today? For example, in the DRC, a project with faith leaders and community action groups halved women's experience of intimate partner violence from 69% to 29%. These actions and our commitment can make a difference, and the DFID funding is crucial, so I look forward to the Minister's comments in that regard.

Through UK Aid Connect, will the FCDO continue to support the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development programme, managed by the Institute of Development Studies, to work with women from religious minorities in the five countries in Africa and Asia that have been pinpointed, to understand the problems that are faced and identify effective approaches to tackle these issues?

[*Mr Virendra Sharma in the Chair*]

It is a delight to speak in this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I look forward to finishing my brief remarks under your chairmanship.

We have had a good airing of the issues in this debate. We have talked about security, and specifically about violence against women and girls, and the 1 million girls who are missing from the education system in Nigeria alone. We have also heard about hotspots such as South

Sudan and the Central African Republic. We have thanked the NGOs who work tirelessly to bring these matters to the attention of the UK Government. They have high expectations, as do our constituents, that we will focus on the areas that have been outlined today, so that violence can be reduced and we can put in place the civic society model that we have here, which should be expected abroad as well, where women are respected, there is a focus on education, and basic human rights and safety are promoted.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister, who is new to her role. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford and all hon. Members who have participated in the debate on this important topic.

3.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing such an important debate. I commend him for his tireless work in defending freedom of religion and belief.

I thank my predecessor as Minister for Africa, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge). He worked tirelessly to build strong relationships across Africa and put great effort into promoting this cause during his time in the role. I am absolutely committed to continuing work on this important issue.

My own interest in bringing people together across religious divides comes from my childhood and teenage years, when I saw the work that my mother did as a volunteer English doctor in Northern Ireland, reaching out to Catholic and Protestant communities, and bringing them together to help in that long journey towards peace. It is also rooted in memories of my grandmother, a theologian, who was one of the people who worked towards and succeeded in setting up the World Council of Churches after the war.

I thank all the members of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief who have come here today. I have taken note of their annual commentary. It provides valuable insights and I would be delighted to meet the group's members.

Violence against any person because of their religion or belief, or indeed lack of belief, is completely unacceptable. I deeply agree with hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), that it is important that we continue to raise these matters in this place. Although this debate focuses on the plight of persecuted Christians, we must not forget those who have been persecuted for belonging to other religions and holding other beliefs, and those who have no religious belief at all. The Government are committed to championing freedom of religion or belief for all, which is enshrined in the universal declaration of human rights.

Earlier this afternoon, in my first week in this role, I met the African heads of mission based in London. I strongly emphasised that democracy, human rights and the rule of law are core UK values, and that they include the freedom of religion or belief. I also emphasised the UK's support for 12 years of quality education. All

boys and girls must be able to go to school safely. Our Prime Minister continues to be passionate about championing the right of all girls across the world to get those first 12 years of education, and we chaired an education summit on that in July.

When I met the heads of mission, I also took the opportunity to emphasise my interest, and that of so many Members, in the rights of women and girls. Women and girls should have the right to make the decisions about what affects their lives. That means that they need access to education, healthcare and employment opportunities, and that they must know that they can live their lives safely and securely.

Kirsten Oswald: Will the Minister give way?

Vicky Ford: I will not take too many interventions, if that is okay, because I want to cover quite a lot of content, and we have already run over the hour and a half. I may come back to the hon. Lady later.

We want everyone, everywhere to be able to live in accordance with their own conscience, to practise their own choice of faith or belief, or to hold none. They must be able to do so free from persecution, prejudice and harm.

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): I apologise for interrupting you, Minister, but the debate can last for up to three hours.

Vicky Ford: Okay; let me make a little progress, and then I will take interventions.

When countries protect and promote freedom of religion or belief, they tend to be more stable, more prosperous and safer from violent extremism. The Minister responsible for human rights, Lord Tariq Ahmad, continues to work closely with the Prime Minister's special envoy, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), whom we are honoured to have here today, in delivering those goals.

As we have heard, challenges to freedom of religion or belief sadly persist in central Africa—especially in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic—and countries such as Nigeria. We are particularly concerned about human rights in those countries. Christians make up the majority of the populations of many central and southern African countries. However, those of minority religions, such as Islam, face frequent difficulties in exercising their rights. That can include violent attacks by armed groups, and converts often face additional pressures, such as being ostracised by their communities because religion is so closely tied to culture and heritage.

As the APPG report highlights, violence in the region is often triggered by inter-communal disputes. Although victims may not be targeted specifically because of their religion, the intersection of identity rights and religion cannot be ignored.

Catherine West: Thank you, Mr Sharma, for reminding us of the length of the debate. The Minister is making a very good start to her speech by talking about the role of women and intersectionality. In her assessment of her role, which I understand is in its infancy, how does she see the envoy, the resources and the reorganisation within the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development

Office, with trade off to the side, coming together, so that we can better understand, as parliamentarians, how we can scrutinise the arrangements?

Vicky Ford: Let me deal with the first of those points, as clearly we can scrutinise arrangements in many different ways in this place, including being able to intervene in Westminster Hall debates on the newly appointed Minister for Africa on a Thursday afternoon. As we all know, there are many ways to ask questions of the Government. I also point the hon. Lady to the integrated review, which is worth reading, because it sets out in great detail how different Departments will work together not only to support British interests across the globe, but to help build partnerships with other countries.

We recognise that women and girls from religious minorities can often suffer because of both their gender and their faith. That is why our human rights policy looks at the intersectionality of human rights: for example, the importance of addressing specific interests such as gender-based violence, which may be experienced by women from religious minority communities. The Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion and belief, my fantastic hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, has spoken about that double vulnerability that many women from religious minorities face, including at an International Women's Day event organised by the UK Freedom of Religion or Belief Forum this March. I thank her for the effort that she puts into this work, because having that additional voice on those sorts of platforms really helps in continuing to reiterate these important messages.

The hon. Member for Strangford spoke very powerfully about incidents of violence and abuse in the DRC. The UK is deeply concerned about the violence against civilians in the DRC, including the recent attacks by the armed group Allied Democratic Forces. Back in April, the British embassy in Kinshasa issued a joint statement with international partners condemning the attacks perpetrated by the ADF in Beni and North Kivu, and we continue to urge the DRC Government and the UN to work together to protect civilians from ongoing violence and address the root causes of conflict. The previous Minister for Africa, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East, raised this issue with the President on multiple occasions. We are committed to ensuring that the UN peacekeeping mission MONUSCO remains focused on delivering its mandate to protect civilians, and that vulnerable communities remain central to the UN's work in the DRC.

In the Central African Republic, there are long-standing concerns about violence along religious lines. I am grateful for the APPG's explorations of the nuances of the conflict and the religious tensions in that country, which will further enrich the Government's understanding and help to inform our approach. Sadly, hate speech and inter-communal tensions remain prominent in the CAR, and disinformation can be used to drive divisions for political and economic gain, so while the current conflict is not predominantly religious in nature, the lack of formal justice and reconciliation mechanisms mean that tensions could become defined along religious and ideological lines. We will continue to monitor this issue very closely, and FCDO officials are working with researchers in the CAR to understand more about the role that disinformation is playing in fuelling this conflict.

[*Vicky Ford*]

We continue to shape the peacekeeping mission mandate in both countries to protect vulnerable communities and promote inclusive dialogue.

Turning to Nigeria, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton and many others spoke passionately about the violence and, indeed, the increase in violence in Nigeria. We are very troubled by the rising insecurity in that country, including terrorism in the north-east, where insurgents from Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province are responsible for regular attacks on both Christians and Muslims. Both groups regularly attack Nigerians of all faiths who do not subscribe to their extremist views, causing immense suffering in both Christian and Muslim communities. Separately, there is inter-communal conflict and banditry occurring across multiple states; again, that continues to blight both Christian and Muslim groups. The drivers of those conflicts are deeply complex; they can be highly localised and relate to a number of different factors.

We really welcome the APPG report on Nigeria. It analysed inter-communal violence in the middle belt, and acts of terrorism committed by Boko Haram and ISWA in the northeast. A full response was issued by my predecessor as Minister for Africa, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East, which emphasised our support for solutions that get to the root causes of the conflict—addressing the root cause is so important if the violence is to be reduced. My predecessor visited Nigeria in April, and discussed the increasing of security across the country with the Government and community leaders. During the Nigerian delegation's visit to the Global Education Summit in London in July, he also discussed the impact of insecurity, potential religious dynamics, and issues such as school kidnapping with the Nigerian Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister of State for Education.

We totally condemn the devastating impact that this violence has had, and is having, on people in Nigeria. We continue to make clear to the Nigerian authorities, at the highest levels, the importance of protecting civilians—including all ethnic and religious groups—and protecting human rights for all.

Fiona Bruce: I have been listening very carefully to the Minister, and I thank her for much of what she has said. However, when a Minister talks about the fact that they have mentioned something when visiting a country, it is often the case that that has been done quietly and in private. What many of us are now sensing is that there needs to be a clear and public calling out of what is happening in Nigeria, and a call to the Nigerian Government to tackle it in the way that I have previously spoken about. Private discussions will no longer cut it.

Vicky Ford: I know that my hon. Friend thinks about this matter very deeply, and I am looking forward to discussing it with her in more detail. What I am hearing from groups that are expert in this area is that it is really important that we look at the different things that are happening in different parts of the country, and that we try to avoid conflating the north-east conflicts with the inter-communal violence that is occurring, for example, between farmers and herders. We do not want to risk exacerbating ethnic tensions. These are incredibly complex matters, but I hear what my hon. Friend is saying. We

do not want the ideology that can be seen in the north-east extending into broader inter-communal violence. These are complicated issues, but issues that we are right to discuss and to tackle.

The hon. Member for Strangford outlined the UK's support for the Lake Chad basin regional stabilisation facility. I can confirm that the UK is committed to security and stability in the wider Sahel region. We have currently deployed 300 troops to the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, as part of a long-range reconnaissance group. We are providing further conflict, security and stability programming to support the reduction of violent conflict and promote long-term stability in the region. There is an investment of approximately £12 million a year in that programme. It includes local stabilisation projects in Mali, strengthening civilian-military co-ordination to facilitate humanitarian access, for example, and improving the participation of women from all communities in stabilisation projects and the peace process in Mali.

Jim Shannon: As I said earlier, the scheme that the UK Government have introduced is excellent. It is really proactive and positive, and I would ask whether we could roll it out in some of other areas.

Vicky Ford: I will very much look into what the hon. Gentleman says, and I thank him for his praise of the project.

I want to come back to Sudan, as it was mentioned in one of the earlier interventions. I spoke to the Prime Minister of Sudan, Abdalla Hamdok, yesterday. We totally condemn the attempted coup and strongly support the civilian-led Government in the country's transition to democracy. Standing up for democracy is a core value of our country.

In Cameroon, we engage with faith actors of all kinds and the Government. We are deeply concerned about the upsurge of Islamic State and note that it is targeting security forces—including, sadly, some security forces trained by Her Majesty's Government.

Kirsten Oswald: I am glad that the Minister mentions Cameroon, but I would not like her to move away from that subject just yet. Is she able to answer some of the questions that I posed about Cameroon and trade? It would be helpful to Members across the House to hear a bit more about what lies beneath the agreement that has been reached.

Vicky Ford: I will get back to the hon. Lady separately on that topic, if I may.

There have been some questions about the implementation of the recommendations in the Bishop of Truro's report. I am pleased to hear many colleagues draw attention to the Bishop of Truro's independent review on the persecution of Christians. I was personally delighted when I heard that he was going to do the review. It was at a time when I was the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Foreign Secretary's team and to Foreign Office Ministers, and I know how important it was to Members across the House. I was really pleased to see the report come out and the conclusions that it had reached. The Government are committed to implementing the bishop's 22 recommendations in full, to drive real improvements in the lives of those who are persecuted. Eighteen of the recommendations have already

been implemented or are in the process of being implemented, and we are on track to deliver all 22 recommendations by July 2022—so 22 by '22.

As a long-standing champion of human rights and freedoms, the UK has a duty to promote and defend our values of equality, inclusion and respect, both at home and abroad. I can assure right hon. and hon. Members that this Government will continue to do just that.

3.23 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I will start with the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is a dear friend. She referred to the psychological pressure on Christians, which is sometimes missed because we focus on the physical side. She also referred to the combination of Boko Haram and ISWAP in relation to the destabilisation of Nigeria. It is a very important issue, which we have to address.

I apologise, Mr Sharma, because I should have written down all Members' constituencies—you realise when you want it that you have not done it. If you forgive me, the hon. Gentleman to my left-hand side—

Andrew Selous: South West Bedfordshire.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous). He referred to something very appropriate: Black Lives Matter. Across the world, Black Lives Matter ran a great campaign, but here is a campaign for Black Lives Matter that does not seem to have caught the attention of the world. It should have done so, which is what the hon. Gentleman said.

The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) is someone with whom I have had many discussions. I never realised that this was a matter that he has been bringing up in this place for 20 years. I can recall very well, and the right hon. Gentleman will remember, the debate we had in 2012. I have never forgotten his contribution that day. That is the truth. I felt it swung that debate, which was on the persecution of Christians, in the main Chamber. I have always remembered that.

The hon. Gentleman across the way—

Robin Millar: Aberconwy.

Jim Shannon: Apologies. I thank the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) for his late arrival—not his late arrival, he was here from the beginning. Rather, his late arrival to speak. His contribution was really appropriate and we thank him for that.

The Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), and I are together on so many of these issues and I was pleased to see her coming down to participate and refer to the aid cuts. Also—I hope I caught this right—she said that sometimes, when Christian children are kidnapped and abducted, they are then converted and used as suicide bombers. I was not aware of that. It is incredibly worrying.

The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), as always, delivered on so many issues. She reminded us of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign, which I can recall very well. I thank her for her massive contribution on these issues.

I should have said at the beginning—it was remiss of me not to do so, but I am going to do it now—how pleased I am, and I mean it, to see the Minister in her place. She knows that she and I were born in the same town, in Omagh, County Tyrone in Northern Ireland. She is a lot younger than I am, of course, but I am very pleased to see her in her place. I am also pleased that in reply to the hon. Member for Congleton the Minister kindly agreed to have a meeting. The two of us and other officers who are also Members of Parliament will be happy to follow our engagement further.

On the rights of women and girls and the human rights of many, I see—and I thank all right hon. Members and hon. Members for their contributions—that this House is united, on behalf of our Christian brothers and sisters but also on behalf of those of other faiths across the world. We have the great privilege in this House and in Westminster Hall today of putting forward our requests on their behalf. Everyone who spoke has a burden on their heart for those people across the world, and we wish to see our Government as they do and as they have—sometimes we need to recognise the good work that our Government do and I recognise that. I thank them all and look forward to working with the Minister over the next period of time. Two people from County Tyrone—along with others—working on these issues, because they are so important.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of violence against Christians in central African countries.

3.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 23 September 2021

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Flexible Working and Carer's Leave

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): The Government have today published a consultation on flexible working and the response to our consultation on a new right to time away from work for unpaid carers. These deliver on commitments in our manifesto and are an important part of our drive to build back better after the pandemic, deliver for working families by helping people to access and stay in work, and improve business productivity.

Flexible working consultation

This consultation considers measures to increase the availability and uptake of the full range of flexible working options—whether that is a part-time or job-sharing working arrangement, flexing working hours or working remotely—freeing employers and employees alike from the default nine-to-five model.

The consultation proposes that every employee in Great Britain is given the right to request flexible working, regardless of time served, under our plans to modernise the way we work and improve business productivity.

Under the proposals—which would see around 2.2 million more people given the right to request flexible working—employees would also be able to make more than one request for flexible working each year, and the current three-month period an employer has to consider each request would be shortened.

If an employer is unable to accommodate a request, our consultation proposes that they would need to consider what alternatives they could offer. For example, if they couldn't change their employee's hours on all working days, they could consider making the change for certain days instead.

There is no “one size fits all” approach to working arrangements. While certain ways of working may suit some employers and employees, they will not suit everyone. Therefore it is important that Government do not prescribe specific arrangements in legislation. Instead, these proposals would provide a strengthened legislative framework that encourages conversations around flexible working to be more two-sided. They are designed to balance the needs of employee and employer, and encourage all parties to focus on what may be possible, rather than what is not.

Empowering workers to have more say over where and when they work makes for more productive businesses, and happier employees. Flexible working allows employees to balance their work and home life: including helping people manage childcare commitments or other caring responsibilities. It can also be key to ensuring that people who are under-represented in the workforce, such as new parents or disabled people, have access to more employment opportunities.

Alongside clear benefits to workers, there is a compelling business case for flexible working. Benefits include:

Attracting top talent—Research conducted by Timewise, a flexible working consultancy, has shown that 87% of people want to work flexibly, rising to 92% for young people.

A highly motivated, productive workforce—Research published by HSBC shows that nine in 10 employees consider flexible working to be a key motivator to their productivity at work—ranking it as more important than financial incentives. Employers have reported seeing improvements in staff motivation and employee relations.

A better business environment—the CBI employment trends survey found that 99% of all businesses surveyed believed that a flexible workforce is vital or important to competitiveness and the prospects for business investment and job creation.

For both these individual and business reasons, the Conservative party's 2019 manifesto committed to a consultation on measures to help make flexible working the default unless employers have good reasons not to. Today's publication delivers on that commitment. It also contains our response to measures in the July 2019 “Good Work Plan: proposals to support families” consultation on publishing flexible working and family-related leave and pay policies; and stating whether jobs may be open to flexible working in the advert.

While the consultation focuses on contractual flexible working arrangements, the Government recognise that people do not always need something so formal to help them balance their home and work life. The consultation therefore also sets out our future plans for a call for evidence on how to support more “ad hoc” and informal forms of flexibility, for example to attend a one-off appointment.

The territorial extent of the proposals included in this consultation extends to England, Wales, and Scotland (employment law is devolved to Northern Ireland).

The consultation runs for 10 weeks until 1 December 2021. I will place copies of the flexible working consultation in the Libraries of both Houses.

Government response to the carer's leave consultation

The Government have also today published their response to the consultation on carer's leave.

Around five million people across the UK are providing unpaid care by looking after or helping a family member, relative or friend. Nearly half do this while also working full-time or part-time. Juggling caring responsibilities and work can be challenging and can limit the participation of unpaid carers in the labour market. Women, who are often still the primary carers within families, tend to be disproportionately impacted.

The 2019 manifesto committed to introduce an entitlement to one week of leave for unpaid carers. This was followed, last year, by a consultation on carer's leave, which recognised that unpaid carers face particular challenges in balancing work and caring responsibilities that may warrant a specific new employment right to time off from work.

The response, published today, sets out key aspects of the leave entitlement, including:

Employees with caring responsibilities for a dependant with long-term care needs will be entitled to one working week of unpaid carer's leave (per employee, per year).

This new right will be available from the first day of employment. Eligibility for the new right, both in terms of who the employee is caring for and how the leave can be used, will be broadly defined.

The leave can be taken flexibly (i.e. from several half day blocks to a single block of whole week).

The entitlement has been designed to balance the needs of employers and employees, ensuring that employers are able to plan and manage the absence created by carer's leave. These include a minimum notice period and enabling employers to postpone (but not deny) the request for carer's leave where the employer considers the operation of their business would be unduly disrupted.

The territorial extent of the proposals included in this Government response to the consultation on carer's leave extends to England, Wales, and Scotland (employment law is devolved to Northern Ireland).

I will place copies of the carer's leave consultation response in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS303]

CABINET OFFICE

Infected Blood Compensation Framework Study: Terms of Reference

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): On 20 May my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), announced the appointment of Sir Robert Francis QC to carry out an independent study to look at options for a framework for compensation for victims of infected blood. The study will make recommendations for compensation, before the infected blood inquiry reports. Terms of reference of the study were to be finalised following consultation between Sir Robert and those infected and affected. The consultation period concluded in August, and Sir Robert wrote to my predecessor with his recommendations.

Sir Robert's consultation received a positive response from the infected and affected community. A total of 447 formal responses were submitted (including from many of the legal representatives of infected and affected core participants of the inquiry), along with over 150 further representations, primarily personal accounts from the infected and affected on how this tragedy has affected their lives. These accounts were of great assistance to Sir Robert in reviewing the draft terms of reference. Sir Robert wishes to express his gratitude to the many individuals who contributed to the consultation, in many cases having to relive the awful experiences they have suffered over so many years, and I would like to echo his gratitude.

Sir Robert's recommendations identify the key issues that the study should consider. They offer assurance to the infected and affected communities that the matters of most concern to them will be considered by the study. I am therefore happy to accept Sir Robert's recommendations in full, and I am today publishing the following terms of reference without amendment:

Rationale for compensation

To consider the rationale for compensation as a matter of general principle and in relation to any particular classes of compensation, recognising that it is not for the study to pre-empt the determination by the infected blood inquiry as to what, if any, rationale is supported by the evidence it has received;

Independent advice to the Government

Give independent advice to the Government regarding the design of a workable and fair framework for compensation for individuals infected and affected across

the UK to achieve parity between those eligible for compensation regardless of where in the UK the relevant treatment occurred or place of residence. While the study is to take into account differences in current practice and/or law in the devolved Administrations, it is not asked to consider whether delivery of that framework should be managed centrally or individually by the devolved Administrations;

Scope of compensation

To consider the scope of eligibility for such compensation (including the appropriateness or otherwise of any conditions such as "cut-off" dates), and whether it should be extended beyond infected individuals and their partners, to include for example affected parents and children, the wider affected family (e.g. siblings), and significant non-family carers and others affected, either because of the impact of caring responsibilities or the effects of bereavement or some other impact; to include consideration of former and new partnerships/marriages; and whether the estate of any individual who has died should be eligible for compensation;

Categories of injury and loss

To consider the injuries, loss and detriments that compensation should address, in relation to the past, present and future, including:

- (a) the physical impact and consequences of infections (including the effect of any treatment, and potential future adverse effects);
- (b) infections that cleared naturally; and the risk of any significant or long-term side effects of treatment (such as liver damage, increased risk of cancer) even if they are yet to materialise;
- (c) the mental health, social and financial impacts (including access to financial services)—both actual and in terms of loss of opportunities—suffered by both the infected and affected; and
- (d) other types of loss if appropriate;

Types of award and method of assessment

To consider:

- (a) the extent to which any framework should offer compensation on the basis of an individualised assessment and/or fixed sums or a combination of these (including consideration of the position of an individual who was both infected, and affected by another individual's infection);
- (b) whether awards should be by way of final lump sums, periodical payments or both;
- (c) whether an individual should be required to prove matters (if so what types of matters, by what means, and to what standard);
- (d) whether there should be any limitation by way of time or other bar on entitlement or claim, and whether any existing time bars should be maintained;
- (e) the extent to which compensation should be limited to matters currently recognised by the law (taking into account any differences in the law across the UK) on damages and evidence as recoverable for the purposes of compensation, or, if not, the basis on which broader matters should be taken into account;

Measures for compensation

To consider the measures for compensation, looking at other national schemes (for example, the compensation tribunal established in the Republic of Ireland) to examine their merits or otherwise, and experiences, both as to form (i.e. administration/process) and the substance of compensation;

Relationship with current schemes

To consider the relationship between a compensation framework and other receipts and payments by individuals, including: (a) the pre-existing financial support schemes; (b) legal claims; (c) welfare benefits and tax;

Options for administering the scheme

To consider options for administering the scheme (including but not limited to what bodies, organisations or tribunals might need to be established to facilitate such administration); what principles, aims or criteria etc might underpin the development of an appropriate scheme; and any ancillary matters which should be considered such as interim payments, publicity of the scheme, outreach to potential claimants, and support;

Other issues

To consider other issues that, in the course of his investigations, Sir Robert considers relevant; and

Reporting to Government by February 2022

To submit to the Government its report and recommendations as quickly as possible and no later than the end of February 2022, to provide the Government with advice on potential options for compensation framework design.

Sir Robert and his team will now begin the more detailed conversations and analysis to look into the detail of the issues raised by the infected and affected community. This will allow him to produce a set of comprehensive recommendations to the complex issues involved.

I, like my predecessor, am deeply committed to ensuring that Sir Brian Langstaff's independent public inquiry has all the resources it needs to complete its work; in Sir Brian's words, "as quickly as thoroughness permits". The infected blood scandal continues to claim the lives of infected people, and those directly affected have waited too long for answers, and for justice.

[HCWS305]

TREASURY**Agreement Between British Trade and Cultural Office and Taipei Representative Office****The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer):**

A protocol to the agreement with the Taipei Representative Office in London was signed in London on 11 August and in Taipei on 19 August. The text of the protocol is available on HM Revenue and Customs' pages of the gov.uk website and will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. The text of the protocol will be scheduled to a draft Order in Council and laid before the House of Commons in due course.

[HCWS306]

UK National Risk Assessment of Proliferation Financing**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):**

As a major global financial centre, a key component of the UK's economic strength and prosperity is our openness to investment and trade. However, this quality also makes the UK economy vulnerable to illicit finance activities, including proliferation financing. Despite robust controls in place in the UK to tackle proliferation

financing activity, actors involved in proliferation financing look to exploit the UK's position in the global economy and international financial system to raise funds to develop chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) programmes which counter UK national security objectives and threaten international peace and security.

On 23 September, the Government published the UK's first national risk assessment (NRA) of proliferation financing risks. This assessment, published by HM Treasury using views and evidence from Government, the private sector, and academic and research partners, provides a comprehensive review of the proliferation financing risks facing the UK. The UK is one of the first jurisdictions to carry out an assessment of this kind.

The key findings of the UK national risk assessment of proliferation financing are:

The UK's financial sector is at high risk from proliferation actors. It is highly likely that proliferation actors will target the UK to gain financing for CBRN proliferation despite the robust controls in place to prevent this. The UK's financial services industry, particularly the banking and insurance sectors, is especially at risk.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and Iran are the most significant proliferation financing actors at state level. The DPRK seeks to evade international sanctions regimes to obtain financing for its unlawful weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programmes, and Iran for its nuclear programme.

There is limited awareness in the private sector of proliferation financing compared to other risks, including money laundering and terrorist financing. A lack of awareness of proliferation financing in parts of the UK economy can lead to a lack of understanding of how certain industrial products, for example, may be manipulated for hostile use or for use in a CBRN programme.

Despite the above threats, the assessment highlights the robust counter-proliferation legal framework in place in the UK to protect the country from proliferation financing. The UK's autonomous financial sanctions regimes targeting CBRN proliferation, as well as UN sanctions regimes implemented in the UK, export control regimes, and other tools available to the UK Government, limit opportunities for proliferating actors to exploit the UK to obtain financing for CBRN capabilities.

The report is available on gov.uk www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-risk-assessment-of-proliferation-financing.

The national risk assessment demonstrates the UK's ongoing commitment to counter proliferation financing, set out in the integrated review of security, defence, development, and foreign policy 2021. We also committed to publishing a proliferation financing NRA in the Government's economic crime plan. Moreover, the UK is at the forefront of international efforts to counter proliferation financing, particularly at the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) where we have led progress on updating FATF recommendations focusing on proliferation financing.

This is the first NRA the UK has produced evaluating the threat posed by proliferation financing. Under proposed amendments to the Money Laundering, Terrorist Financing, and Transfer of Funds (Information on the Payer) Regulations (MLRs), HM Treasury will be required to review and update this NRA on a regular basis. This would offer opportunities to further refine the assessment and its methodology going forward and ensure that the UK is proactively seeking to address new threats and trends posed by proliferation financing. In this proposed

amendment of the MLRs, which is currently out for public consultation until October 2021, the Treasury also plans to set requirements on relevant persons to take appropriate steps to identify and assess the risks posed by proliferation financing, and to establish strategies to mitigate and manage these risks effectively. The findings of this assessment will also provide the UK with further opportunities to develop its counter-proliferation financing policy.

[HCWS307]

Making Tax Digital

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer):

The Government have set out an ambition to become one of the most digitally advanced tax authorities in the world.

Making tax digital (MTD) is the first phase of our move towards a modern, digital tax service fit for the 21st century. It supports businesses through their digitisation journey and provides a digital service that many have come to expect in their everyday lives. MTD helps businesses reduce common errors in their tax affairs and allows for better customer interaction and guidance through digital prompts and nudges.

Since the introduction of MTD for VAT in 2019, over 1.5 million businesses have joined and many are already experiencing benefits. MTD users are reporting that preparing and submitting returns is easier, and that MTD has increased their confidence in managing tax affairs and using technology. MTD also puts businesses on a path to further digitisation: integrating tax management with a range of business processes can contribute to productivity gains.

During the pandemic, UK businesses increasingly turned to digital tools to communicate remotely and work collaboratively. Businesses adapted rapidly to the challenges posed by the pandemic, using digital solutions to maintain resilience and reduce disruption.

Over the past year, HMRC has worked closely with partners in the business and tax communities on the proposed design and scope of MTD for income tax (ITSA).

Today the Government have laid regulations in Parliament to help those impacted by the changes to prepare, and for their representatives to develop their own support and guidance.

The Government recognise the challenges faced by many UK businesses and their representatives as the country emerges from the pandemic over the last year. In recognition of this and of stakeholder feedback, we will now be introducing MTD for ITSA a year later, in the tax year beginning in April 2024.

General partnerships will not be required to join MTD for ITSA until the tax year beginning in April 2025. The date at which all other types of partnerships will be required to join will be confirmed later.

In March 2021, the Government announced a new system of penalties for the late filing and late payment of tax for ITSA. This will now be introduced for those who are mandated for MTD for ITSA in the tax year beginning in April 2024, and for all other ITSA customers in the tax year beginning in April 2025.

Alongside the regulations, HMRC has also today published a tax information and impact note (TIIN) setting out the projected benefit and cost impacts of MTD for ITSA, as well as a policy paper to help different businesses understand what their transition to MTD could look like in more detail.

A later start for MTD for ITSA provides more time for those required to join to make the necessary preparations and for HMRC to deliver the most robust service possible, affording additional time for testing in the pilot.

HMRC will continue to work in close partnership with business and accountancy representative bodies and software developers to ensure taxpayers are well supported as they adopt MTD for USA.

The Government have also recently consulted on a reform of the complex basis period rules that govern how self-employed profits are allocated to tax years. Many respondents said that the reform was a sensible simplification but asked for more time to implement the changes. In recognition of these concerns, these changes will not come into effect before April 2024, with a transition year not coming into effect earlier than 2023. The Government will respond to the consultation in due course providing the next steps.

[HCWS308]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

NATO Parliamentary Assembly

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (James Cleverly):

The hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) has replaced the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) as a member of the United Kingdom delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

[HCWS304]

PRIME MINISTER

Machinery of Government: Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I am making this statement to bring to the House's attention the following machinery of government change.

Responsibility for driving forward the levelling up agenda and elections and UK governance and devolution policy is being moved to create a new Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. This change will embed levelling up commitments and policy on governance in the United Kingdom and elections within a single Department which already manages relationships with local communities, local government and the housing sector. Bringing these responsibilities together will allow the Secretary of State to embed ever closer working with the territorial offices and lead co-ordination with the devolved Administrations on my behalf.

The new Department will consist of staff previously employed by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and staff from the Union and Constitution Group in the Cabinet Office in support of cross-Whitehall efforts aimed at delivering tangible improvements in every part of the UK. A levelling up

taskforce has also been established which will report jointly to me and the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

[HCWS309]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 23 September 2021

EDUCATION School Building Conditions

The following is an extract from a Westminster Hall debate on Tuesday 21 September 2021.

Mr Robin Walker: In 2021-22, Tameside council also received an annual school condition allocation of £1.3 million to address condition issues at its schools and, over the past five years, it has received £9.1 million in total.

[Official Report, 21 September 2021, Vol. 701, c. 94WH.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Schools, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker).

An error has been identified in my response to the debate.

The correct wording should have been:

Mr Robin Walker: In 2021-22, Tameside council also received an annual school condition allocation of £1.3 million to address condition issues at its schools and, over the past **six** years, it has received £9.1 million in total.

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**not later than
Thursday 30 September 2021**

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