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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 25 November 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—
Civil Service Jobs outside London

1. **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What progress the Government have made in delivering civil service jobs outside London. [904345]

7. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What progress he is making on relocating civil service jobs from London. [904353]

14. **James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): What progress the Government have made in delivering civil service jobs outside London. [904365]

17. **Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): What progress the Government have made in delivering civil service jobs outside London. [904368]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Steve Barclay): The Government are committed to relocating 22,000 civil servants out of Greater London by 2030, with up to 15,000 by 2025. We are working with Departments and public bodies to ensure that roles are relocated at pace, and the spending review will enable Departments to now finalise those plans.

Sally-Ann Hart: According to the “Preparing for the Civil Service Verbal and Numerical tests” section of the Government website, these tests are “fair and free from bias and discrimination”, but they are based on algorithms to ensure that a “person meets the requirements of a particular job level”. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that the civil service employs individuals from a broad spectrum of political beliefs?

Steve Barclay: The tests to which my hon. Friend refers do not assess political beliefs; they are focused on reasoning ability in relation to verbal and numerical skills. However, the point she raises is addressed through the Places for Growth programme, which, by recruiting

civil servants in larger numbers from across the whole of the United Kingdom, will facilitate far greater diversity through our recruitment.

Rachael Maskell: York has been promised many jobs, including the House of Lords—remember that one?—a northern government hub, a conference centre, and now 600—or is it 200?—new Cabinet Office jobs, but nothing has materialised; it seems like chaos. Will the Minister meet me to talk about the potential of York Central and how this incredible opportunity could best be used to strategically serve the purposes and functions of government as well as my city of York?

Steve Barclay: I am a little surprised by that, because the Government are committed to York. The hon. Lady has already, along with other colleagues, made the case successfully. Not least, the Cabinet Office itself is committed to increasing its presence from about 400 to 600 in York. We are committed to York through Places for Growth, and I hope she would celebrate that.

James Daly: Does my right hon. Friend agree that Bury, Ramsbottom and Tottington, with its skilled workforce, transport links and infrastructure, would be the ideal location for civil service jobs outside London, and that this would be an example of our Government’s determination to level up across the country?

Steve Barclay: I very much do agree that Bury would be a great location, as indeed would a number of locations across the north-west. It is important that the Places for Growth programme does not solely look at inner-city locations but also looks at the opportunities that places like Bury offer to relocate jobs.

Mr Speaker: I call Richard Holden. He is not here—in which case, let us go to Barry Sheerman, who is here.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): It is on Thursday mornings, Mr Speaker, that those of us who are regulars miss David Amess—those Thursday mornings when he was so lively and showed that he was a true parliamentarian.

When the Minister talks about putting jobs in places around the country, will he lead, with all of us in our constituencies, a campaign for sustainable development in every town, city and community in this country?

Steve Barclay: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his first comments, which are widely shared across the House.

On the hon. Gentleman’s substantive point, I agree. I was recently looking, for example, at the Cabinet Office relocation plans for Peterborough, which were part of a much wider regeneration programme that will make a significant difference there. One of the key learnings from past attempts by previous Governments to relocate civil servants outside London is that one has to do it a way that builds a hub and spoke, so that there is a sustainable career and it sits within a wider regeneration, as in areas such as York. He makes an extremely important point, and it is a key part of the plans we are bringing forward.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I believe that Ministers have previously shown interest in suitable office space in my constituency to

house Cabinet Office staff. Will the Minister provide an update on any plans to open civil service offices in Rutherglen and Hamilton West or the surrounding areas? He just mentioned areas of regeneration. That is an area that is being regenerated by Clyde Gateway.

Steve Barclay: A key component of the Places for Growth programme is that it is UK-wide. That is why, to take my Department, the Cabinet Office, we are having a second headquarters in Glasgow, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is committed to East Kilbride. It is a UK-wide programme, and that shows the values of working together across the United Kingdom.

House of Lords Appointments

2. **Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): If the Government will conduct a review of the process for appointing peers to the House of Lords. [904346]

15. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): If the Government will conduct a review of the process for appointing peers to the House of Lords. [904366]

The Minister without Portfolio (Nigel Adams): The Government do not currently plan to conduct a review. The constitutional position in this country is that the Prime Minister is responsible for advising Her Majesty on appointments to the House of Lords. The House of Lords Appointments Commission offers the Prime Minister probity advice and can make Cross-Bench recommendations concerning these appointments.

Richard Thomson: About half the peers in the House of Lords have been ennobled since 2010, with most—I am being charitable—not for their sheer luminosity of talent but the generosity of their bank balance. Does the Minister not see that having a Chamber of cheque writers undermines the credibility of not just the House of Lords but the entirety of Parliament? Is it not time that we just got rid of it?

Nigel Adams: The answer to the hon. Gentleman's final point is no. Peerages reflect long-standing contributions to civic life and a willingness to further contribute to public life. In Britain, taxpayers do not have to bankroll political parties' campaigning. We must be transparent about donations, but those who oppose party fundraising need to explain how many millions they want taxpayers to pay for state funding instead.

Marion Fellows: The Minister may deny that the House of Lords is crony-stuffed, but 15 of the last 16 Tory treasurers gave £3 million to the Tory party to get a life peerage and 80% of the UK public think that corruption is fairly or very present in our politics. Does he agree that abolishing the House of Lords—this is another chance—would send out a clear anti-corruption message by ensuring that friends of a sitting Government are never again given life power over our democracy in exchange for their donations?

Nigel Adams: I have a lot of time for the hon. Lady, but we will not be abolishing the House of Lords any time soon. Peerages, as I said, reflect long-standing

contributions to civic life and give these people an opportunity to put something back and contribute to public life.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): At last week's Liaison Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) asked the Prime Minister if he would

“stop sending big-value donors to the House of Lords”.

The Prime Minister replied:

“Until you get rid of the system by which the trades union barons fund other parties...we need to continue with the system by which public-spirited people give donations.”

Mr Speaker, I believe that the Prime Minister's answer comes dangerously close to an admission of selling peerages, in direct contravention of the Honours (Prevention of Abuses) Act 1925, and is worthy of further investigation. Will the Minister undertake that investigation or does he think it is sufficiently serious to involve the Metropolitan police?

Nigel Adams: Again, the answer is no. One of the most valued aspects of the House of Lords is the experience that Members bring to their work. The idea that successful businesspeople and philanthropists who contribute to political causes should be disqualified from sitting in the legislature is nonsense. There is no link between party donations and nominations to sit in the House of Lords. [*Laughter.*] The law has been followed at all times. The police have said that there is no evidence that the law has been broken.

Brendan O'Hara: I admire the Minister's ability to say that with a straight face. It is disappointing but not surprising that he appears to believe there is absolutely nothing wrong with the system. Maybe he can take this opportunity to explain why, since 2010, no fewer than 22 of the Tories' biggest backers, who have donated a total of £54 million to their coffers, have been elevated to the House of Lords. Will he explain why he believes that stuffing the House of Lords full of wealthy donors, cronies, political allies and those unwilling or unable to be elected somehow enhances and improves our democracy?

Nigel Adams: Again, successful businesspeople should not be disqualified from sitting in the legislature. The hon. Gentleman made a point about the number of people who have been appointed since 2010. I gently point out that there are just over 800 Members of the House of Lords and 408 of them were appointed by the Opposition when they were in power between 1997 and 2010.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): It is good to have a bicameral Parliament, but is not the fundamental problem with the House of Lords simply that it is too large and not enough of them turn up? There are 800 peers compared with 650 MPs, and in the Divisions this month, the average turnout was 378, which is 47%. Will the Minister consider reducing the size of the House of Lords?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend makes a good point, but given retirements and other departures, some new Members are essential to keep the expertise and the outlook of the Lords fresh. We continue to support and

encourage the policy of Members of the House of Lords retiring. The Government's 2019 manifesto, of which he will be aware, committed to looking at the role of the Lords, but any reform needs to be considered carefully and not done on a piecemeal basis.

“Track and Trace”: Transparency International Report

3. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): If he will make an assessment of the implications for his policies of the findings of Transparency International's report, “Track and Trace”, published April 2021. [904347]

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): The Government recognise the importance of maintaining public confidence in how we manage taxpayers' money. We are taking steps to improve the processes already in place and to ensure that public spending is fair and transparent. Proposals in our December 2020 Green Paper aim to improve transparency in procurement across the public sector and include specific measures to strengthen transparency through the commercial lifecycle from planning to procurement, contract award, performance and completion. We will publish our response to the consultation shortly.

Nick Smith: Test and Trace has been muddled and expensive. Along with personal protective equipment provision, it has been a profiteers' paradise for some. After inflation, NHS workers got no pay rise, yet Deloitte's partners got 14%. We need answers: who did what and for how much? Does the Minister agree that the terms of reference for the covid public inquiry should include an analysis of the super-profits and juicy contracts for middlemen that have undoubtedly been made, so that the public can consider what opportunists have enjoyed at all our expense?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the National Audit Office noted that it

“found that the ministers had properly declared their interests, and...found no evidence of their involvement in procurement decisions or contract management.”

No PPE contracts were awarded by reason of who referred them. Clearly, in a national emergency, it is right that we as a nation can procure at speed. That ability has been critical in providing the emergency response that was needed. Those mechanisms predate the pandemic; they were not created for the pandemic. The public are right to demand that we spend our money with care—and, unlike Labour Governments, we do that. Proposals in the Green Paper on reforming public procurement aim to improve transparency, and we will continue to do that.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Transparency International's report identified 73 covid contracts that raised red flags for corruption. Last week, after 18 months of deflection and secrecy, the list of the companies awarded contracts through the VIP lane was finally revealed. We can see now why it was kept secret.

It is curious that, of the recommendations from politicians to that list, only the recommendations of Conservatives—no other political party—were successful. Of the 47 companies awarded contracts worth £4.7 billion, 18—more than a third—were referred by Tory MPs, Ministers or peers. Can the Minister confirm that anti-fraud

and conflict of interest checks really did take place for all the contracts in the VIP lane? If there were another emergency tomorrow, would the system still be jobs for mates, or is a new and better one ready?

Michael Ellis: Of course, the hon. Lady is conveniently forgetting that Labour Members of Parliament also recommended individuals and companies as far as PPE is concerned, and there is nothing wrong with that. There was a national emergency at the time, and everyone was asked to assist, and if they knew someone who might have been able to assist in supplying personal protective equipment, they were invited to say so. Not only is there nothing wrong with that, but it was a public service to do so. The National Audit Office has already looked at this, and it has said there was no evidence of involvement in procurement decisions or contract management.

I realise there is a political wish on the part of the Labour party to try to make something of this, but actually this is a matter of public service. It is right that proper due diligence is carried out on contracts, and that is why the information is available to the public and to the Opposition to have a look at Government contracts. That has always happened, and it will continue to happen. The Government take these checks extremely seriously, and we are being extremely transparent, but it is also absolutely essential that, in an emergency, we can procure at speed.

Covid-19 Public Inquiry

4. **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to consult with covid-19 bereaved families on the public inquiry into the Government's handling of the covid-19 pandemic. [904349]

12. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that all ministerial correspondence relating to the Government's response to the covid-19 pandemic will be made available to the public inquiry. [904360]

13. **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps he is taking to consult with covid-19 bereaved families on the public inquiry into the Government's handling of the covid-19 pandemic. [904362]

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): I am pleased to reiterate that the Prime Minister has already confirmed that bereaved families and others will be consulted on the covid inquiry's terms of reference before they are finalised and that the inquiry will be established on a statutory basis with full formal powers.

Kate Osamor: The University of Liverpool this week released a report on the lived experience of those who have lost a loved one to covid-19, in collaboration with Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice. The report recommends that the public inquiry be brought forward without delay, stresses the importance of transparency and asks for bereaved families to be an integral part of the inquiry. Is it not about time that the Government listen to the bereaved families of covid-19 victims and adopt the report's recommendations?

Michael Ellis: I thank the hon. Member for her question, and may I take this opportunity to express my condolences and sympathy to all of the many bereaved families who have suffered as a result of the pandemic? The Prime Minister announced in Parliament as early as May this year—on 12 May—that the inquiry into the pandemic would be established on a formal statutory basis, with all the requisite powers that go with that, under the Inquiries Act 2005. A chair of the inquiry will be announced by the end of this year, and the Prime Minister told the bereaved families group that in a meeting he had with them on 28 September. It is important that formal powers will be attached to the inquiry, and everything will be done to make sure the relevant material and oral evidence, for example, is given under oath.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: The Prime Minister refused to meet bereaved families for nearly 400 days. When he eventually deigned to meet them in September, he promised them they would have a role in setting the terms of reference for the inquiry. Yesterday, these grieving families wrote to the Prime Minister asking why, yet again, they are being ignored. Can the Minister explain to them why they are being ignored?

Michael Ellis: As I just said, the Prime Minister met Bereaved Families for Justice on 28 September. He welcomed the opportunity to hear directly from them, and of course the areas they would like the inquiry to cover were mentioned. The importance of choosing the right chair was also mentioned. All commitments made to the Bereaved Families for Justice group will be met. The chair of the inquiry will be appointed by Christmas, and bereaved families and others will be consulted on the terms of reference before they are finalised.

Catherine West: This Christmas, many constituents of Members across the House will sit where they normally are, but their loved one will not be with them. Indeed, for some people it is two years, isn't it? Could I press the Minister on announcing the chair, or having the Prime Minister announce the chair, not on Christmas eve, because that will wreck Christmas? As the end of the year is nearly here, could he speed that up, just for their sake?

Michael Ellis: I hear the hon. Lady's question and absolutely recognise the importance of the matter. It is also of course important to go through the proper processes in selecting possible chairs, appointing one and so on. I know this will be given the considerable importance it deserves, and as I said, it will be disclosed before the end of the year.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): For the covid-19 bereaved families two things matter above all: that the inquiry begins as soon as possible, with the families at its heart; and that the national covid memorial wall opposite Parliament must be preserved. The Government have indicated that they support a national memorial at St Paul's cathedral instead, but this is not an either/or choice and the families' agony must end. Both memorials deserve their place: will the Minister therefore support the bereaved families' request to preserve the memorial wall, because it is their wall, their memories, their love?

Michael Ellis: The Government recognise the need for bereaved families to have a location, or locations, where the representation will take place, and of course there is a UK commission on covid commemoration, as the hon. Gentleman knows. It will carefully consider how communities across the country can remember those who have lost their lives due to this appalling pandemic, and recognise those involved in the response as well, in a fitting and permanent way. So there is a specific UK commission on covid commemoration, and we should let it do its job.

Supply Chains

5. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps he is taking to help ensure the resilience of supply chains. [904350]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Steve Barclay): We have put in place a number of measures to deal with the extraordinary set of circumstances brought on by the pandemic and the global economy rebounding from the disruption it caused. These include increasing HGV testing capacity by 90% to help get new drivers into the sector quickly, extending cabotage rights, making available boot camps to train up to 5,000 HGV drivers, and making available temporary visas for poultry workers and butchers.

David Duguid: As well as making the best use of our wide and varied natural resources in our energy transition to net zero, it also makes sense to make the best and most effective use of our existing supply chains that serve our maritime nation. Will my right hon. Friend therefore join me and the UK Marine Energy Council in welcoming the announcement yesterday of £20 million of UK funding for the tidal energy sector, and will this Government reinforce supply chains for the wider maritime economy?

Steve Barclay: I do welcome that announcement. As the Energy Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), said, the backing for tidal steam power is opening up a new chapter for Britain's coastal communities and advancing the possibilities for Britain's marine energy sector to play a significant role in delivering the UK's green energy revolution.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): A large number of small and medium-sized enterprises play a crucial role in the UK's supply chain and many rely on imports from the European Union to keep that supply chain going. Such businesses were let down badly last year when import controls were introduced on the other side of the channel; what guarantees can the Minister give that when the UK starts to impose import controls in January the needs of small businesses will be kept in mind?

Steve Barclay: We are working in collaboration across the United Kingdom: I joined a call with the First Ministers, including the First Minister of Scotland, to discuss supply chain issues. We have also brought in expertise such as Sir Dave Lewis, former chief executive of Tesco, to work with us. How we maintain the resilience of our supply chains involves shared issues that we are working together on across the UK.

Business Bids for Contracts

6. **Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase opportunities for small businesses to bid for Government contracts. [904352]

11. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase opportunities for British businesses to bid for contracts on major infrastructure projects. [904358]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Steve Barclay): Small and medium-sized businesses are the backbone of the UK economy. We are increasing opportunities for SMEs in a variety of ways, from transparently publishing contract pipelines to simplifying the bidding process.

Jonathan Gullis: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his answer. I am always proud to see Stoke-on-Trent's world-leading ceramics across the parliamentary estate when I am busy plate turning, but sadly, the same cannot be said for every Department. Under current Government and parliamentary procurement rules, purchases of less than £10,000 do not require an open tendering process. That freezes out many local ceramics companies, such as Churchill China and Steelite in my Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke constituency. Can my right hon. Friend advise me how we will improve procurement rules to ensure that Stoke-on-Trent's world-leading ceramics have a fair crack of the whip and can be spread across Whitehall?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to be proud of those industries, and he is also right to draw a distinction between contracts above £10,000, which need to be published, and those below £10,000, albeit of course that those below £10,000 still need to deliver value for money. We are looking, through the legislation that we are bringing forward on procurement, at how we can allow greater comparability in public contracts—that £300 billion of spend—so that we drive better value for money. We are also supporting SMEs through things such as Help to Grow: Digital and Help to Grow: Management in order that they are better enabled to bid for those important contracts.

Mike Amesbury: The rows and rows of wind turbines off our shores have, historically, largely been imported from abroad. What are the Government and the Minister doing to ensure that onshore and offshore renewable technology is British made using British steel?

Steve Barclay: There are two aspects to that question. First, there is the investment we are making—for example, the £15 billion, increasing to £20 billion, in research and development so that we can make the most of innovation and technical opportunities, building on our university sector expertise. Secondly, covid has shone a light on the importance of resilience in supply chains and the benefits in certain sectors of onshoring more of our supply chains. I think that is one positive that has come out of the covid process.

Veterans' Interests

8. **James Grundy** (Leigh) (Con): What recent steps the Office for Veterans' Affairs has taken to promote the interests of veterans. [904354]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): The Government are determined to see a gold standard of care and support for our veterans. We are putting more money into bespoke mental health care and the NHS, we are putting more money into our brilliant veteran and armed forces charitable sector—it has doubled this year to more than £25 million—and we are putting in place practical improvements to the lives of veterans, such as railcards, armed forces champions in jobcentres, and tax cuts for those employing veterans.

James Grundy: Would the Minister like to congratulate the veterans of Leigh and Atherton on raising £4,000 for veterans charities at a recent event?

Leo Docherty: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in thanking veterans and the Royal British Legion in Atherton and Leigh for raising £4,000, which is a very significant sum. I know from my constituency of Aldershot the hugely important role that the Royal British Legion has in local life and, indeed, in our national life, and I thank my hon. Friend for the work that he does in his constituency to support its efforts.

Covid-19 Departmental Backlogs

9. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): What steps his Department is taking to support other Departments to tackle backlogs resulting from the covid-19 outbreak. [904356]

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): As we come out of the crisis phase of the covid response, the Government have put the recovery of public services at the heart of their building back better and levelling-up agenda, and we have already laid the foundation for recovery. Earlier this year, in the 2021-22 spending review, the Government allocated £55 billion to the public sector through key initiatives such as the £1 billion elective recovery fund, the £30 billion plan for jobs, £3 billion in education recovery, the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund, and almost half a billion pounds in criminal justice system recovery. This work continues at pace across Government, and the Cabinet Office continues to work closely with Departments as they all build the world-class public services the UK deserves.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Paymaster General for that excellent answer, and I thank the Government for all they have done for business and for every sector through the pandemic; it is much appreciated.

I want to ask specifically about education. Will the Paymaster General outline whether additional education funding, above the £3 billion that he referred to, has been considered to bring some of our children back to where they should be? I am very concerned, as all in the House are, about the education of children. How, specifically, can we ensure that the children who have lost out can still catch up and have time to do so?

Michael Ellis: As is so often the case, the hon. Gentleman is so right in his focus on education. Of course, the Government recognise the importance of education for all our young people, at primary, secondary and tertiary level. That recognition manifests itself in the extra funding that the Government have supplied, through the Department for Education, to the education sector. There is the £3 billion education recovery fund, and I will be very happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with more details about the breakdown of those sums.

Government Agencies: Transparency of Decisions

10. **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What recent assessment the Government have made of the transparency of decisions taken by Government agencies. [904357]

The Minister without Portfolio (Nigel Adams): The Cabinet Office's tailored review programme ran from 2015 to 2020. The programme considered transparency in its review of over 100 bodies. Further, the public bodies reform programme was launched earlier this year. A key output of the programme is a new series of public body reviews, which will focus on four areas of assessment: governance, accountability, efficacy and efficiency.

Huw Merriman: I look forward to perhaps participating in those reviews with the Minister, and I thank him for his response.

On a recent trip to Berlin, the Transport Committee heard from German health and transport officials how they had formed the rules on international travel restrictions, the rationale behind them, and how they had explained those rules to the industry, which seemed to be working happily alongside them. In contrast, our own decision makers were, sadly, taken to court in order for those in the UK international travel industry to better understand the rationale. With this new review approach, will it be possible for us to better find a way in which the public and private sector can understand what the rule making and decision making is really about?

Nigel Adams: I thank my hon. Friend, the Transport Committee Chairman, for his question. I know how important this issue is to him and to the sector. Ministers and officials have engaged extensively with the aviation and travel industries throughout the pandemic, including through our global travel taskforce report, which set the framework for the safe return of international travel. The Cabinet Office continues to be a friend to industry. We will keep on engaging with businesses as we undertake a further review of our international travel policy early in the new year to provide certainty for the spring and summer 2022 seasons.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): While calling for transparency from other public bodies, the UK Government need to lead from the front. It is a fact that the VIP lane allowed contracts to be given to Tory friends' small businesses out of all proportion to their size, turnover and track record. If the UK Government believe in transparency, why did they fight tooth and nail to hide the VIP lane information?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point, but the National Audit Office did not find as he believes. We are committed to transparency, as per action 24 in the "Declaration on Government Reform". A key output of the public bodies reform programme is a new series of Department-led public body reviews.

Covid-19: Emergency Procurement Powers

16. **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): When he plans to end the use of emergency procurement powers during the covid-19 outbreak. [904367]

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): Existing procurement rules, which predate covid-19, rightly allow the Government to procure at speed in times of an emergency. The rules are not new and it is for contracting authorities to make their own determinations on when to use them. At the beginning of the pandemic, we issued guidance to set out the options available to Government Departments to buy at pace, bearing in mind the legal framework for procurement. We have since built on that with further guidance on the commercial risks inherent in direct awards. Our "Transforming Public Procurement" Green Paper sets out proposals to update the rules on procuring in times of extreme emergency or crisis, learning from the experience of the pandemic. We will be publishing our response to that consultation shortly.

Helen Hayes: The use of emergency procurement powers during the covid-19 pandemic has been a murky mess. The process has delivered multiple contracts to Tory party friends and donors, and hundreds of millions of pounds of public money has been spent on equipment that could not be used. The use of such powers might have been justified at the start of the pandemic, but 20 months on there is really no excuse for the continued use of accelerated procurement powers. It is now eight months since the consultation on the Green Paper closed and the Government still have not published a response. When will they end the use of emergency measures, and when will they clean up public procurement?

Michael Ellis: I do not accept the characterisation that the hon. Lady puts on the matter, and neither does the National Audit Office—it looked at this and said, as we have rehearsed in the Chamber, that it sees no evidence of the sort of the thing that she refers to. On emergency procurement, it is crucial in any society for the Government to be able to purchase items at emergency speed, for example if lives are to be saved as a consequence, or in other types of emergency. That is nothing new. The public interest was best served by being able to act quickly and decisively.

As for the point that the hon. Lady makes about the situation now, the public sector has reduced its use of regulation 32 powers—the emergency procurement powers. Their use peaked between April and June 2020 at the height of the initial wave of the pandemic. In central Government, the use of these powers has reduced by more than two thirds over the six months from April to September 2021 compared with the same period last year. The use of emergency contracts is rapidly declining.

Mr Speaker: We come now to topical questions; we will have quite a few free hits today, as we are moving on to them rather early.

Topical Questions

T1. [904393] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): 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): With Black Friday and Cyber Monday fast approaching, I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the UK's cyber professionals, who work tirelessly behind the scenes to help to keep us safe online. That is as important as ever, as the economy recovers from the impact of covid-19. Every day, cyber criminals target online retail, from scam texts, impersonating couriers and defrauding shoppers out of their money to damaging the reputations of small businesses by stealing their customer payment details. That trend has only increased during the covid pandemic as more and more trade has moved online. Indeed, since April 2020, more than 4,000 business sites have been identified as being targeted by cyber criminals.

Organisations such as the National Cyber Security Centre and the British Retail Consortium have spearheaded that work, providing tailored advice to businesses and citizens on how they can protect their activity online. Details of further steps to be taken will be set out in the upcoming national cyber strategy, which the Government will launch in December. The strategy recognises the increasing importance of cyber in our day-to-day lives, and it will underpin our democratic values and strategic alliances and ensure that the UK will be more resilient to the future cyber threats that we will no doubt face.

Stephen Metcalfe: I was delighted to see the Prime Minister unveil plans to establish a new science and technology council—they are great plans. Does the Minister agree that that council will not only help us to realise the possibilities that research and technology have to offer and to tackle the great societal changes and challenges that we need to address, but cement our place in the world as a science superpower?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point. We are committed to being a science superpower and to putting science at the heart of our public policy making. That is why the Prime Minister set up the national science and technology council and why we have established the office for science and technology strategy, which will support those strategic decisions and ensure that the research and development uplift in funding from £15 billion to £20 billion can be targeted in the most effective way.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's comments regarding cyber-security and the measures that will be taken, because it is blight on many of our constituents across the United Kingdom.

Last week, the Government admitted that minutes of a conference call on 9 April 2020 between the former Member for North Shropshire and a Health Minister could not be located. Has this Minister been informed whether or not those minutes have now been located, and can he say when all the relevant documents will be given to the House?

Steve Barclay: As the right hon. Lady knows, the National Audit Office always has power to access all documents; it has rights of access, as any member of the Public Accounts Committee would know. As we have covered in a series of questions this morning, the National Audit Office noted that

“we found that the ministers had properly declared their interests, and we found no evidence of their involvement in procurement decisions or contract management.”

Simply repeating a point does not make it correct. The National Audit Office has access to the document, and that is the finding that it set out.

Angela Rayner: I am not sure that I got an answer to the question that I posed to the Minister. As I recall—forgive me if I am wrong—the Prime Minister even said at Prime Minister's questions that he was “very happy to publish” the documents, and Ministers today have talked about the importance of transparency. What is there to hide? Will Ministers publish all the correspondence, the WhatsApps and the messages so that there is transparency regarding the covid contracts? Will the Minister also accept all the outstanding freedom of information requests about the documents? As we have heard, £3.5 billion in contracts was awarded without tender to companies with links to the Conservative party. By contrast, not one successful bid came from any politician or adviser of any other party. Spending £1 million a week on storage for dud PPE—can the Minister explain that?

Steve Barclay: Earlier at departmental questions, we were told that the act of referral to the high-priority lane was a bad thing, until hon. Friends pointed out that Opposition Members had made the same referrals. The right hon. Lady has now shifted the attack to Radox and the timing of the contract. I simply remind her that the meeting between Radox and the then Minister for innovation was on 9 April, after the contract was signed with Radox on 30 March. Not only does the National Audit Office have rights of access to Government papers, but there is a legislative framework that applies to papers through the Freedom of Information Act. We will, of course, abide with it in the usual way.

T4. [904399] **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): COP26, hosted by the UK Government in Glasgow, was a fantastic showcase for technical expertise and capabilities in Scotland, as well as in the rest of the United Kingdom. What steps are the Government taking to continue promoting Scottish expertise and know-how on the global stage?

The Minister without Portfolio (Nigel Adams): I know that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster attended that fantastic event as well. We launched the refreshed GREAT campaign on 9 June, which showcases all four corners of our nation internationally to inspire the world and encourage people to visit, invest, study and live in the UK. The campaign, which is used across 22 Departments and arm's length bodies, has promoted the best of the United Kingdom in more than 145 countries worldwide.

T2. [904394] **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Let us return to some of the Tory treasurers who are now Lords and look at their performance. Lord Harris of Peckham has spoken just eight times in

the Chamber since being appointed in 1996. Lord Kalms has made seven spoken contributions since 2004. Lord Lupton is prolific, with 10 contributions since 2015. Is that not further proof that it was their donations and party position that got them into the Lords?

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): Perhaps the hon. Gentleman does not recognise quality over quantity. I think he ought to spend a little more time reading House of Lords *Hansard*; he would see a world-beating range of expertise on myriad issues. The House of Lords is a House of experts and he should spend more time listening to its debates.

T6. [904402] **Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): This Government have spent more taxpayers' money than any previous Government on public opinion polling. Over the past 16 months since July 2020, I have asked the Government to publish the polling carried out at the start of the covid-19 pandemic. They refused to release that information under the Freedom of Information Act, claiming that it was still being used to develop policy; the Information Commissioner struck down that defence as incorrect.

The Government then claimed that it was too costly to release, so I asked written parliamentary questions on the subject. They again refused, using the excuse that polling is still developing policy; as the Information Commissioner pointed out, that is a bogus argument. Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster change the policy on the matter today to ensure that the information is released immediately and that the Cabinet Office acts in line with both the letter and the spirit of the legislation?

Steve Barclay: Only a few weeks ago, my right hon. Friend was in the Chamber telling me that £4 billion was "a rounding error". As a fellow former member of the Brexit Secretaries club, let me now welcome him to the value for money club, as that is the subject he seems to have raised in the context of the cost of FOIs and focus groups' information.

The point of substance is that, with so many lives threatened by the pandemic, it was right that we commissioned insight into a range of factors in order to understand the impact of our messages and that of the Government's response to the pandemic. I think the commissioning of insight to enable us to understand that was absolutely right and value for money. As for the disclosure, as I said a moment ago to the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), responses to all FOI requests are handled in line with legislation, and that includes applying relevant exemptions where applicable.

Mr Davis: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It will have to come at the end of the questions session.

T3. [904397] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Let me return to the subject of York Central. When the Government are looking at strategic sites, cross-departmental work is important, but it is not happening across my constituency, and people are therefore viewing their interests in a silo rather than in a co-ordinated way. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the opportunity that

the York Central development will provide for my city as well as the Government, to ensure that the site comes forward in the most strategic way possible and provides the jobs that the city urgently needs?

Steve Barclay: I can add to what I said in my earlier answer to the hon. Lady. I agree with her about the importance of York, and I also agree with her wider point. It is not simply a case of one Department moving to York; what is key—and this is one of the lessons that we learnt from previous initiatives of Governments—is the ability to build a career in a location, and that requires a number of opportunities. For example, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is also considering placing 190 roles in York.

Now that the spending review has ended, there will be an opportunity to finalise departmental plans and see which other Departments can coalesce in York, but it is not only a question of Departments. I urge the hon. Lady to bear in mind arms' length bodies that are often responsible for operational delivery across Government and are often located predominantly in London. Both Departments and arms' length bodies will have the opportunity to consider how they might come together in areas such as York.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I realise that there is a political operation taking place on the Opposition Benches with regard to the House of Lords. It is entirely fair to look at our democratic process systems and propose reform; what is not fair is denigrating people who work incredibly hard to improve our legislation. I am thinking of, for instance, the Environment Bill and the impact it will have on sewage discharge in my constituency, and the help that was given to us by the House of Lords, whose proposals the Government agreed with and our side voted for. Does the ministerial team agree that a little more respect is warranted?

Mr Speaker: Talking of which, I call Michael Ellis.

Michael Ellis: I do indeed agree. The fact is that the Labour party wishes to make cheap political points when in reality the House of Lords provides expert service to the nation, and does so extremely inexpensively compared to the second chambers in most western democracies.

T5. [904400] **Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): It is hardly a cheap point when it is about expensive donations.

More than two years since the first request, and more than a month since a judge refused the Government leave to appeal against the first-tier tribunal ruling, the Cabinet Office is yet to reveal the results and the details of its clandestine secret polling about Scottish attitudes to independence and the Union. Could a Minister—any Minister: I am not fussy—tell us when this information will be revealed, and what exactly it is that they are so scared of the Scottish people finding out?

Steve Barclay: We covered this a moment ago. It is right that, at every stage of the pandemic, insight was commissioned measuring a range of different factors. All insight and evaluation activity is assessed regularly for its appropriateness, impact and fitness for purpose.

As I said earlier, responses to all FOI requests are handled in line with legislation, and that includes applying relevant exemptions where applicable.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Veterans in Bury, Ramsbottom and Tottington must often live with a range of conditions that our brilliant doctors are not used to treating. Does my hon. Friend agree that the £5 million veterans healthcare innovation fund will play a key role in helping our injured veterans to live life to the full once they have returned from active duty?

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): I do agree that the £5 million innovation fund will help us to allow veterans to benefit from cutting-edge technology to assist their recovery. It is also an important part of the bespoke pathway that we are crafting for veterans through the NHS system, including GP accreditation. I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend does in his own constituency to support the care of veterans.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Can I press the Veterans Minister a little further on the veterans card? The right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) announced it in 2019, and the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), when he was Veterans Minister, said that it would be rolled out in 2020. That has been done for service personnel leaving our armed forces, but it has still not been completed for former personnel. I asked the Minister for Defence People and Veterans, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) some months ago to resolve this, as it is extremely important for many of our former service personnel to get the veterans card, so may I press him again on when this will be completed? It really does matter to so many veterans and their families.

Leo Docherty: I share the hon. Member's sense of urgency and I recognise the importance of this issue. I can tell him that we have commissioned new work to look afresh at how we can urgently deliver this important measure.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): The Prime Minister has backed a stronger code of conduct for MPs to ensure that an MP's primary job is, and must be, to serve their constituents, and to represent their interests in Parliament rather than those of private businesses—or trade unions, for that matter. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the changes to the code of conduct suggested by the Prime Minister will create up-to-date, effective and rigorous rules?

Steve Barclay: I do agree with my hon. Friend. It is an MP's primary job to serve their constituents and to represent their interests in Parliament, and indeed, the vast majority of MPs work tirelessly for their constituents. As you have said, Mr Speaker, it is for the House to decide whether MPs should hold second jobs, and that matter will be debated further in the Chamber.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is completely fair for us in the SNP to raise concerns over Lords in an unelected position who have just happened to give significant sums to the Conservative party. With the entry requirements for the UK's retirement home

for failed Tory MPs or Tories who cannot win elections—otherwise known as the Lords—coming under increasing scrutiny, attention should be paid to the fact that that unelected institution is bigger than the UK's elected Parliament in the Commons. Does the Minister not agree that having an unelected, crony-stuffed second Chamber undermines the UK's ability not only to claim to be a functioning democracy but to lecture others on their own democracies?

Michael Ellis: As we have already discussed in this Chamber, the House of Lords provides expert counsel and excellent value for money. If the hon. Lady wishes to compare the cost of the House of Lords to the public expenditure with other second Chambers in bicameral legislatures, she will find that it is extremely inexpensive and extremely expert, and that it provides excellent value for money. She characterises it in one way, but she forgets that it also provides a service to all sections of our society, including those in the medical profession, the legal profession, the military service and across the range of society, and it will continue to do so.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I welcome the recent appointment of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to his new role in co-ordinating efforts across the Government to tackle the cross-channel migrant crisis? In that role, will he persuade officials in his own Department, as well as those in the Foreign Office and the Home Department, to come up with constructive solutions that can be effectively deployed, rather than coming up with reasons why something cannot be done?

Steve Barclay: I, and I am sure all hon. Members, join the Prime Minister in saying how deeply saddened we all are by the terrible tragedy we saw yesterday.

The response to the challenge of small boats is a whole-of-Government endeavour, and it is therefore right that we work across the whole of Government to look at all aspects of that journey: upstream, our processing and our legal framework. My hon. Friend will be aware that progress has been made, and 20,000 crossings have been stopped so far this year. We will continue to work in partnership with the French to ensure we can avert tragedies such as we saw yesterday.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I do not want the Secretary of State to get away with it this morning. What is he doing about the “blob”? If he reads the Tory-supporting *Daily Telegraph*, it says that the blob is stopping the Government, and the Prime Minister in particular, getting their policies delivered in every Department. Can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster tell us a little more about what this blob is? If it is stopping the Government delivering their policies, could he do something about blobbism?

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Blobby.

Steve Barclay: Thank you for that, Mr Speaker.

On the substantive point raised by the hon. Gentleman, as was recognised in the declaration on Government reform signed by the Prime Minister, by my predecessor as CDL and by the Cabinet Secretary—and indeed by Ministers and permanent secretaries across Whitehall—we are committed to reform and modernisation. Covid has shown the opportunity to do things differently, but we should not lose sight of the fact that we have huge talent

and capability within our civil service. I can point to numerous examples, but the furlough scheme was put in place at great pace by officials in Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. There is already innovation within our civil service, but it is clear, as covid has shown, that there is opportunity to go further and faster. There is now a commitment from the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Secretary to do exactly that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We will have three quick questions.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster at least agree that any Member of Parliament whose gross misconduct has led to their being ejected from this place through a recall petition, or anyone who chooses to leave rather than face a recall petition, should not be considered a fit and proper person to be elevated to the Lords?

Michael Ellis: It is up to this House to regulate its disciplinary affairs. Of course, this House has done so and, under your leadership, Mr Speaker, will no doubt continue to do so.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I have previously written to the Minister for Defence People and Veterans about the delay that one of my constituents has experienced while waiting for a decision on his military pension. Will the Minister please look into this case and ensure that my constituent does not wait any longer than the year that has already elapsed since his application?

Leo Docherty: I confirm to the hon. Lady that I will pursue that again today and will get her an answer urgently.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Many banks and companies want to do their business online. Indeed, they insist on it. I am contacted daily by constituents who do not have the access or the technical ability to go online. What can Government Departments do to provide the option of a phone call, rather than the online service that is impossible for many people and therefore disadvantages them?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is right that there needs to be a mix of delivery options. By facilitating safe business online, as schemes such as "Help to Grow: Digital" do, we are helping customers. Alongside that, he is right: it is important that there are training opportunities for those who are less familiar. It is also important that those who do not want to go online are not left behind. One of the key objectives of our national cyber-security strategy is to ensure that the many who go online for the first time do so safely by ensuring that we make our defences far more resilient.

Mr David Davis: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have no wish to embarrass the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, who is an old friend of mine. As he says, we are both ex-Brexit Secretaries, but I am also an ex-Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee. I know a cost-effectiveness argument when I see it, and I know when it falls down. The questions I cited to him were tabled so as to avoid the Department's cost restrictions. As a result, the Department has used arguments of policy involvement in the statistics, and those arguments have been written off as bogus by the Information Commissioner. The Department is not obeying the spirit of the law. In the light of that, this cover-up has gone on long enough. In view of the unsatisfactory nature of the answers I have been given, I give notice that I intend to raise this matter on the Adjournment.

Mr Speaker: Noted.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. In answer to my question, the Minister told the House that the National Audit Office "always has power" to access any documents, but you were here last week when we heard from a Minister who said that those minutes were not available and they did not know where they were. My question was very clear: how can the NAO have access to documents where we do not know whether they exist or not? I was wondering whether we could get clarity on that matter.

Mr Speaker: I cannot continue the questions, but I am sure the right hon. Lady will not leave it at that and will pursue this matter in other ways.

Independent Fan-led Review of Football Governance

10.35 am

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State to make a statement on the independent fan-led review of football governance.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): First, may I take this opportunity to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), the advisory panel of experts and the thousands of football fans up and down the country who have contributed to this report? Football clubs are at the heart of our local communities, and fans are at the heart of those clubs, but there were problems in football governance and the voice of fans was not always being heard. That is why we committed to the fan-led review of football governance in our manifesto. The events seen at Bury and at Macclesfield Town, and with the European super league, made it vital that we looked at what reform was needed to protect those fans, and we triggered the review back in April. My hon. Friend has today presented her final report, setting out her recommendations. A copy has been made available in the Library, and of course the Government will formally and fully respond to the independent report in the new year.

The review is a comprehensive examination of English football, founded on more than 100 hours of engagement across the game and the views of more than 20,000 fans. I am grateful to all those who have given evidence, but most importantly to the fans who have had their voice heard. That voice will remain at the heart of our thinking in assessing the recommendations. The final report is a thorough and detailed examination of the challenges faced by English football. It shows the problems in football and is clear that reform is needed to solve them. I will not go through the 10 strategic recommendations and the 47 detailed recommendations here, Mr Speaker, but they are wide-ranging and comprehensive, addressing the need for an independent regulator, improved financial sustainability, better governance and a proper role for fans.

The report shows that fundamental change is needed in our national game, and fans deserve that. We are at a turning point for football in this country. The review is a detailed and worthy piece of work that will require a substantive response and plan of action from across government. However, the primary recommendation of the review—that football requires a strong, independent regulator—is one that I, and the Government, endorse in principle today. The Government will now work at pace to determine the most effective way to deliver an independent regulator, and any powers that might be needed. That is what the fans want, and this Government are on the side of fans.

Jo Stevens: I congratulate the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and her panel on their work, and thank the Football Supporters' Association and every fan who took part in the review. We have known for a very long time that football is broken—this is not a new thing—and we on this side of the House have called for years for an independent regulator to fix

it. We are therefore delighted that that is the report's key recommendation, and I anticipate there will be a great amount of consensus across the House on that. We would like to see a bit more fan involvement, so just as the Football Association will be allowed observer status on the independent regulator board, we believe the FSA should too.

I was somewhat concerned to see the Secretary of State's tweet this morning. She said she is

“endorsing in principle the primary recommendation”

of the review. Will the Minister allay my fears and confirm that the Government accept both the principle and the detail of the review's recommendations on the independent regulator, and that they will enshrine that in primary legislation? The Secretary of State's words in that tweet and the Minister's words just now appear to suggest something less than that.

Does the Minister agree that there is no need to delay further? Will he commit to bring forward a Bill in the new year? If not, when are we going to see the Bill? As the review makes clear, the recommendations should be taken as a package, not as a pick 'n' mix—anything less could leave us with a botched job—so will the Minister commit to accepting all the recommendations of this very thorough review?

On the golden share and supporters' shadow boards, does the Minister agree that any proposals for a breakaway league must be discussed with those supporters' shadow boards, regardless of any confidentiality agreements that might have been signed by the clubs involved?

Finally, have the Government had discussions at any point with the Welsh Government about the reform of football governance in respect of Welsh clubs that also take part in the English club structure?

Nigel Huddleston: I am grateful to the hon. Lady and for the cross-party approach to the issue of football governance taken by the Opposition Front-Bench team and, indeed, the whole House. I hope that that tone and co-operation will continue throughout, because our goals and intentions are absolutely aligned.

I am sure the hon. Lady understands the process. This is an independent report and if anybody knows my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford—she is behind me—they will know that she has taken a robust and independent approach. The Government need to respond formally, and I am sure that the hon. Lady and everybody else will understand that I cannot today pre-empt every single element of the Government's response to the conclusions. I only saw the full report myself just a couple of days ago. We take the recommendations incredibly seriously, and I am well aware of the strength of feeling behind many of the proposals, but I am sure the hon. Lady will appreciate that I cannot commit 100% to all the proposals today.

On how we go forward, I intend to proceed at pace—in fact, I had a meeting this morning with my officials to discuss how we move forward and how fast we can move. The whole House wants us to move quickly; please, watch this space.

Mr Speaker: I call Tracey Crouch. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Mr Speaker, I recognise that it is quite unique for the chair of a Government review also to be a sitting Member of Parliament and do not intend to abuse that position by—you know—urging the Minister to accept the recommendations as a whole package and advising that, obviously, if he says so in the Chamber, it has to happen. But will he join me in thanking the thousands of fans who took part in the fan-led review? Without the input of the fans who served on the expert panel, the fans of the 130 clubs across the whole of the pyramid who gave oral and written evidence and, of course, the 20,000-plus fans who contributed to the survey, the recommendations would not be as they are in the report.

Nigel Huddleston: Absolutely—I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I again offer sincere thanks to her, not only on my behalf but on behalf of the whole Government, for the work she has done at incredible pace. The work done has been extensive: she has travelled up and down the country and been involved in Zoom calls and so many other calls and, of course, 20,000 fans contributed online submissions to the review in an incredibly short period of time. We all need to recognise that we have already moved at pace and that my hon. Friend moved at pace. I respect everything she has done and look forward to continuing to work with her as we formulate the Government's response. I am hopeful that we will all get a positive outcome, because football needs it.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am immensely proud to be a supporter of Scotland's most successful team in the past decade: having waited 130 years for their first major trophy, St Johnstone have won three in the past seven years and are currently the holders of both cups.

I am also proud that the SNP Scottish Government's recent changes to club-ownership governance have been based on the development of a fan bank to help supporters to take control of their clubs. Fans already have a controlling interest in a quarter of the top flight: the three clubs being Hearts, Motherwell and, of course, the mighty Paisley St Mirren. By contrast, English football is now fully awash with blood money from dictatorships and oligarchs—similar to the Tory party conference, it must be said.

The Scottish Government fan bank will support more fan ownership where the supporters want it. Does the Minister agree that such a move in England would help to freeze out the spivs, gangsters and murderous regimes that are trying to sports-wash their image and are now running and financing many English clubs? What further actions do the Government plan to take to counter investors such as those now at Newcastle United?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman knows of course that sport is a devolved matter. I am sure that there are many learnings from the review for English football that the Scottish football ecosystem would perhaps take on board and consider. The clear message that I would like to send to Scotland and to football in the UK is that the report has made many recommendations, some of which may require legislation that we are likely to pursue, but there are many other things in the report that football itself can do anyway, and, as I have said, that applies in both England and Scotland.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I welcome the excellent report that my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) has prepared and I welcome as well the fact that the Minister has said that, in principle, the Government accept the creation of the independent regulator. Obviously, it is vital that the independent regulator, when created, has the powers that it needs to do the job. Can he confirm that, in principle, the Government accept that that must include real-time access to financial information about the clubs if we are to prevent more club failures?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend as well for his commitment, interest and insight into football and, indeed, into sport in general over many years and I appreciate what he is saying. Yes, I can say that, of course, we could not have an effective regulator without also having adequate powers, and the elements that he has considered will, of course, be part of that package. When I say that we accept in principle and are therefore considering moving forward with legislation that includes not only the regulator itself, but the powers that the regulator may have.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I thank my honourable football friend, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), for the report that she has produced. We look forward to further discussions with her at the football group meeting next week. Richard Caborn, a previous Sports Minister, convened a group of football parties in Sheffield, and we put forward a submission to the review, promoting the independent regulator, the golden share, and important elements of the review that have now been published and supported by the hon. Lady. That is really welcome. Does the Minister accept that, at the end of the day, the regulator must have real powers to redistribute the funding of football to do away with the cliff edge between the premiership and the championship and the cliff edge within the championship that is caused by parachute payments?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, I thank the hon. Gentleman. We have had many discussions about football and I know of his interest. In fact, most people in the House today have shown great passion and enthusiasm for football over many, many years and have all contributed to the review. He is right to point out that the regulator needs adequate powers. That is exactly the kind of thing that we are looking at and he will be well aware as well that, in the report, there are recommendations about flow of finance. I do not believe that we can completely divorce governance from financial flows, so, in our response—and I cannot pre-empt the response today—those will be exactly the kind of things we will be considering.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I welcome this report and pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). As the review states, Bury FC was founded in 1885,

“existed through countless economic cycles, several wars and 26 different Prime Ministers”—

but—

“ceased to exist in 2018-19 with a devastating impact on the local economy and... a devastated fan base”.

So although I fully support the recommendations—they are our vision for the sport going forward—the town of Bury should not be left behind. Does the Minister agree that, as Bury FC is mentioned 15 times in the review, one thing that should come out of this is that all stakeholders should work together to ensure that the community buys Gigg Lane for the people of Bury, allowing football to continue in our historic stadium?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. We have had many conversations about the situation in Bury. Indeed, I support the goals of trying to get Bury back again in some form, as it is so important. One of the underlying principles and thrusts of this very review is to make sure that another Bury situation never happens again. I agree with what he is saying and I would be happy to provide what support I can to him directly.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The 15th of May 2010 is etched in my memory as the sad day that Ross County was beaten by Dundee United in the cup final. Football is for everyone, particularly in Scotland, as the SNP spokesman, hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), has pointed out. Will the Minister have the closest possible negotiations with Ministers in the Scottish Government, and will he think about consulting the Scottish fan base, because the fans will have a lot to say?

Nigel Huddleston: I am sorry that that date 11 years ago is still scarred in the hon. Gentleman's memory. Indeed, he is right; we have constructive meetings at both ministerial and official level with the Scottish Government. Just last week or the week before, I met Scottish sports Ministers and sports Ministers from across the devolved Administrations precisely to share learnings, experiences and best practice. The fan-led review will be part of future discussions. I understand that fans from Scotland—I am not sure how many—have already contributed to the review through online submissions. We appreciate their involvement.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): As my hon. Friend has said, football clubs are at the very heart of local communities, including the mighty Leicester City, which has its training ground in my Loughborough constituency—and I am very proud about it too. Does he agree that the fans are at the centre of the national game, so it was absolutely right that the review was fan-led, and that it is what the fans deserve?

Nigel Huddleston: Absolutely. It is always a pleasure to talk all things sport with my hon. Friend, who represents one of the sportiest constituencies in the country, which appropriately has an incredibly sport-loving Member of Parliament. She is right to praise Leicester City and to focus on the fan-led aspect of the review, which is precisely why we had such levels of engagement from fans across the country. The outcomes of the online survey show overwhelming support for many of the measures outlined in the report of my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford, and we need to take that very seriously indeed.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I also join the congratulations to the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who I call my hon. Friend in this case.

The reports of the report are extremely promising, but if we are going to create the post of a regulator, that regulator must have not simply legal power, but the resource base needed to do the job. The same is true if we are going to give some control to supporters. Will the Minister guarantee that the supporters will have both the resource and the legal capacity to exercise that kind of control? Importantly, will it be clear that the objectives of the regulator will include the fact that football is a sport belonging to the community, not simply a commodity to be bought and sold like my club Manchester United or my other club Rochdale, which recently fought off a malicious takeover?

Nigel Huddleston: I recognise that the report is rather hefty at 160 pages, so perhaps not everybody has yet read every single element of it, but the summary reports are broadly accurate. I would not misread my comments; in principle, we support the regulator, but of course the details need to be worked on, including the scope, powers and resources, exactly as the hon. Gentleman has articulated. That is why I cannot come here today and say, "Absolutely, 100%". We need to work on some elements, including the ways of working. In principle, we absolutely accept the idea of a regulator. It has overwhelming support in the country, and I hope that everybody watching can see that it has overwhelming support in this House.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) on this review.

The English football pyramid includes five Welsh football clubs, including Wrexham football club, which is the fourth-oldest professional side in the world. Therefore, if my hon. Friend is going to take forward the proposals into legislation, will he assure the House that he will be liaising closely with the Welsh Government and obtaining all necessary legislative consent?

Nigel Huddleston: Yes, indeed; I can give my right hon. Friend that confirmation. He is absolutely right that we need to consider the clubs in Wales. I was delighted last year to visit Wrexham, which has some interesting and enthusiastic new owners, but we also need to consider the other clubs. Any changes in the English system would have implications for a limited number of clubs in Wales, and that would be taken into account in any forthcoming recommendations.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This is a brilliant report by a colleague of ours that everyone regards as their friend and a brilliant Sports Minister in the past. However, everyone knows that there is something not quite right at the heart of football, and it has to be sorted out. With a team and a club like Huddersfield right at the heart of the community, it is much bigger than just where it comes in the league; it is what it puts into the community. Real fans in Huddersfield and elsewhere will welcome this report. For too long we have had rich Russian oligarchs and rich Americans who do not really care about our communities doing what they will. As a Co-operative Member of Parliament,

[Mr Barry Sheerman]

I would like all the clubs to be co-operatives and mutuals, but I know that is not in the report. This is a good report and I hope the Government will support it.

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the pivotal role that our football clubs, and indeed many sports clubs, play in their community on an ongoing basis—and boy, did we see during the covid crisis how pivotal they were to their communities. I thank them for all the work they have done up and down the country in that regard. He is right that there are many elements in the report, some of which will require legislation. However, I repeat the appeal to the football authorities and football clubs: there are many recommendations in the report that make a lot of common sense, and they do not need to wait for legislation in order to move forward with changes on, for example, heritage, financial flows, aspects of governance and other things. In fact, I encourage them to start working and moving now.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome the report from my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). She and I share a passion in that we are both season ticket holders at Tottenham—and you have to be passionate about football if you are a season ticket holder at Tottenham at the moment. Yes, absolutely, the part about the regulator and all the other bits and pieces in the report are important. I agree a little bit with the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) with regard to the money. One of the areas that is really critical is that a successful league attracts money. As co-chair of the all-party Magnitsky sanctions group, I want to make sure that in the end, when the Government implement those, at the heart of it is an ability to stop people bringing money into our sport that actually degrades it and comes in very dangerous and dodgy circumstances.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments; he is absolutely right. There are, understandably, recommendations in the report on the owners and directors test, which is also right. There is an inherent instinct for not really liking too much regulation, but in this case, with football being so unique and so special, because it has shown itself to be incapable of reforming itself, we have to move, albeit reluctantly. Ideally we would not have had to take these measures. He is also right about the huge success and the important economic value of football to this country. A report recently came out that said, for example, that inbound tourism of people going to football matches was worth £1.4 billion alone to the UK economy, with 1.5 million people coming to the country just to watch our football matches. We really do appreciate that value and want to make sure that football is even more successful in the future because it is so pivotal to our communities but also our economy.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) for her work on this. Newport County is a club run by and for the fans and a stellar example of the benefits that supporter ownership can bring on and off the field.

As part of the Minister's response to this much-needed review of football governance, will he look at the Newport County model of community ownership as an example of how the game should be run—from the ground up?

Nigel Huddleston: We should be playing a game of football bingo today and see how many clubs we can tick off. The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I am sure I speak for the author of the report and everybody else in saying that we do not want to give the impression that all of football is bad. There are many, many examples up and down the country of incredibly well-run clubs and models of engagement with fans that are admirable and that we really need to applaud. Indeed, we would like to see more of these successful co-operative models adopted in other parts of the country. She is absolutely right to point out the positives as well.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) on producing such an excellent report and doing so at pace. Kettering Town football club is a popular local football club with a proud and long heritage and historical footballing success. It has scored more goals in all rounds of the FA cup than any other football club in the country and was the first club in the country to have sponsorship on its shirts. We need to get more money into grassroots football clubs like Kettering Town. Will the Minister therefore look favourably at the recommendations on the levy on transfer fees, which are currently astronomical? More of that money needs to go down to grassroots football.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for that piece of trivia—we learn something new every day. He is right that the flow of football finance is pivotal and it is important for the ecosystem that the grassroots succeed as well. We have already seen some changes and movement from the top tiers to grassroots and lower tiers, and the message today is that we would like to see more. Through the arm's length bodies of Government and indeed football itself, we want to see more money flowing through to the all-important grassroots levels.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Some premier league footballers get paid more for a single match than the entire balance sheet value of clubs such as my local constituency team of East Fife. That indicates the gulf in resources. Can I press the Minister on what action he intends to take to prevent entirely unsuitable individuals or organisations from swallowing up more and more football clubs? Does he agree that it is too important to be left purely to self-regulation? Does he agree that it is time for legislation to prevent people who are unfit to be given a licence to run a pub from taking over football clubs in England, Scotland or anywhere else?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman is right that the future regulatory environment needs to look at a whole host of things. We will therefore consider the powers, responsibilities and resources of any regulator. He is also right that—I have said this before, and it is clear in the report—we cannot divorce financial flows from governance. The financial flows within sport, including purchasing and acquisition, are an important part, and we will respond in detail in due course.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) on her excellent report. In my constituency I have Worksop Town—the Tigers—who are the fourth oldest club in the world. Worksop Town faced oblivion not too long ago but were saved by the fans and the community all pulling together to raise funds. We also had a generous benefactor as part of that. I am also a very long-suffering supporter of Notts County, who are the oldest professional club in the world, which I admit is hard work. Once upon a time, I was technically an owner of Notts County as I was a member of the supporters' trust that took over the club. It was very well meaning and seemed to be a great model, but it was a fairly unmitigated disaster: we did not really have any money to invest and that caused problems down the line. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that, as is emphasised in the report, we must concentrate on a partnership between fans and owners and that, unfortunately, one cannot exist without the other?

Nigel Huddleston: I agree completely. It is really important that all clubs take their responsibility to their fans incredibly seriously. Unfortunately, as we saw with the European super league proposals, that relationship had broken down with some clubs. However, in the lower leagues in particular, we see much better relationships between owners and fans. Again, one of the important messages is that many owners have a great relationship with the clubs and the fanbase, including some of the international owners. It can work. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of ensuring that that relationship is pivotal in any future business model.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) for her work on the issue and for championing the cause. The Minister has said many times to hon. Members across the House that he and the Secretary of State agree with the principle of the recommendations, and he has talked about legislation possibly next year. May I push him further for the detail of the Department's formal response to the report as soon as possible? Millions of fans across the UK are waiting to know what the Minister and Secretary of State will do on timescales. It cannot be that, in a year's time, we are still here debating it through another urgent question.

Nigel Huddleston: I absolutely appreciate the sense of urgency, because one basis of the report was to ensure that some of the crises that we have seen in the sport do not happen again, so there is an urgent need for action. On the process, the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that it is an independent report that the Government need to respond to formally. I do not want to pre-empt those conclusions today; we need to do some work. I can tell him, however, that my first meeting to discuss the response to the report happened this morning. I will then need to have some conversations with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who is sitting next to me, about the process and where we go forward as well—I am sure that he also heard the comments of the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore).

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) for all her work on this excellent report.

In my constituency, I have a series of very small clubs, such as Didcot Town, Wantage Town and Wallingford Town, which are often run on a shoestring by volunteers who put in their own money to keep them going. Can my hon. Friend the Minister assure me that, when he considers the report's recommendations, he will think about how we can protect clubs such as those, not just clubs in the top two divisions? If they go, the community loses something important.

Nigel Huddleston: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend about the pivotal role that clubs such as his play in their communities, as we have seen particularly in the last two years. It is vital that we put them on a sustainable and sound footing, so financial flows within the football ecosystem were part of the review. There is a lot of money in football, but it is not always in the right place.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The report suggests that the ban on drinking alcohol in the stands could be lifted. Although that may help to bolster club finances, it could have huge consequences for antisocial behaviour, particularly at big games when team rivalries can cause tensions to run high. Have the Government considered the impact that the ban's removal could have? What measures would they put in place to mitigate that?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Lady will be aware that one of the recommendations made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford is a pilot programme, rather than a full, wholesale removal in one fell swoop. In responding to the report we will consider all the aspects that the hon. Lady and others have mentioned, because there are many stakeholders with views and opinions about that.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Blackpool football club has suffered greatly over much of the past 10 years because of the actions of an irresponsible owner. Thankfully, the club is now in much better hands under its new chairman Simon Sadler and success is following on the pitch. Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the new owners and directors test for clubs that the review outlines, which will hopefully help to avoid the situation we saw in Blackpool being widespread among other clubs?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend makes some important points. Without pre-empting our conclusions to the report's recommendations, everybody is aware that the current owners and directors test has not fulfilled all of its expectations. Many issues and concerns have been raised about it, so my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford has made recommendations in the report that we will seriously consider. I praise the new owners because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) has shown, a change of attitude and ownership can change a club's position in its community overnight.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Like the hon. Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), I am a Leicester City supporter, which proves that the fanbase for the club transcends not only the Chamber politically, but the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I thank the hon. Member for Chatham and

[Jim Shannon]

Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) for her hard work and endeavours. The Minister is aware that the beautiful game can turn ugly when money becomes the only consideration for clubs. How will the reforms allow a structured approach without removing the ability for club governors to be innovative and make new calls? It is a delicate balance, as he has said, but does he believe that the Government have reached that point?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman makes some important points. We always need to ensure that the balance is right. The principle is that we want football to be even more successful and sustainable in future, which means encouraging and supporting innovation and investment. We need to make sure that that signal is out there, but that needs to be done responsibly. It is fantastic that he is a Leicester City fan. It is amazing how many new fans come out in this place when clubs are successful.

Mr Speaker: We must not forget the mighty Bolton Wanderers either.

Business of the House

11.9 am

Thangam Debonnaire (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 29 November will include:

MONDAY 29 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Bill [*Lords*], followed by a motion to approve a Ways and Means resolution relating to the Animals (Penalty Notices) Bill, followed by a motion to approve a money resolution relating to the Approved Premises (Substance Testing) Bill.

TUESDAY 30 NOVEMBER—Opposition day (9th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party, the subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 1 DECEMBER—Consideration in Committee of the Finance (No. 2) Bill.

THURSDAY 2 DECEMBER—Debate on a motion on stability and peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by a debate on a motion on economic crime. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 3 DECEMBER—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 6 December will include:

MONDAY 6 DECEMBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Armed Forces Bill, followed by the Second Reading of the Dormant Assets Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 7 DECEMBER—Remaining stages of the Nationality and Borders Bill (day 1).

WEDNESDAY 8 DECEMBER—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Nationality and Borders Bill (half day), followed by an Opposition day (7th allotted day—2nd part). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition, the subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 9 DECEMBER—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 10 DECEMBER—Private Members' Bills.

Right hon. and hon. Members may also wish to know that, subject to the progress of business, the House will return from the Christmas recess on Wednesday 5 January 2022. The House will rise for the February recess on Thursday 10 February and return on Monday 21 February. The House will rise for the Easter recess on Thursday 31 March and return on Tuesday 19 April. The House will rise for the May Day bank holiday on Thursday 28 April and return on Tuesday 3 May. The House will rise for the Whitsun recess on Thursday 26 May and return on Monday 6 June. Finally, the House will rise for the summer recess on Thursday 21 July.

Thangam Debonnaire: First, it would be churlish of me not to thank the Leader of the House for letting staff, in particular, know that they can now book their holidays with their families; a lot of them have been waiting a long time to try to get those booked in. I thank the Leader of the House both for the forthcoming business and for the recess dates.

Yesterday, we heard the tragic news that at least 27 people died crossing the English channel, including one young girl and five women, when an inflatable

dingly capsized near Calais. This tragedy reminds us of the risk to life in those perilous waters. My thoughts and I am sure those of all Members are with those who died and with their loved ones. Some of us are already wondering if they are relatives of our constituents who have been trying to be reunited with them, and that is quite hard to take. This is the most poignant of wake-up calls to the UK Government, and I really urge them to act—to take this matter seriously to prevent people from dying in those dangerous waters. Safe and legal routes, tackling the traffickers, reversing the cut on overseas aid and working constructively with our overseas partners are four things the Government could and should be doing today, and I very much hope they will be part of what the Home Secretary speaks about in her remarks later this morning.

On the theme of Home Office failures, yesterday the Home Affairs Committee published yet another report on the Windrush generation compensation scheme. It was a damning indictment, again, of the Home Office's inability to right a grievous wrong. Four years after the Windrush scandal emerged, just 5% of the people concerned have received their compensation, while 23 individuals, including a constituent of mine, died before they received a penny, still haunted by being wrongly deemed immigration offenders. The Committee recommends that the scheme is passed to an independent organisation and, frankly, we can see why. This is a Government departmental failure, and the Home Secretary should acknowledge that victims of the scandal will understandably have no confidence whatsoever in her Department. Will the Leader of the House urge his colleague to tell us what she will do to rebuild shattered trust in the Home Office?

This week, we learned in a written statement that British Airways was not told of the known danger that the passengers on the 1991 flight BA149 to Kuala Lumpur via Kuwait, who were taken hostage by Saddam Hussein's forces, were flying into. The UK embassy in Kuwait was aware of that, but as a result of not being notified the passengers on the flight were held hostage by Saddam Hussein's forces for months. A Government's first duty is the safety and security of its citizens and a written apology is not good enough. I urge the Leader of the House to ask the Foreign Secretary to do the decent thing and come to this House to apologise and explain to the people of this country how she will ensure that this sort of failure can never happen to British people again.

This Government's waste of public money is a theme of business questions and this week is no different: I have two examples that the Leader of the House can perhaps help with. Will he ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to explain why her Department has, according to a Select Committee report, only attempted to recover 10% of the £8.4 billion lost to fraud and error over the past year? Will he also ask the relevant Minister to come to this House to explain the loss of just shy of half a billion pounds on Radox contracts? That was briefly discussed this morning but this is still a House of Commons motion not yet complied with. Do the minutes even exist? I cannot imagine spending half a billion pounds and not keeping the receipt. Labour will not let this waste of taxpayers' money go, because that sum would pay for hospitals, perhaps some of the mythical 40 hospitals, or schools, or help for people struggling with fuel bills this winter.

On Monday, the Standards Committee will report on its proposed changes to MPs' code of conduct. That will be a significant step in untangling the mess that the Tories have forced this House into. I see from the business that the Leader of the House has not yet allocated Government time for a debate on this report; will he do so before the end of the year so that we can properly scrutinise it?

My final request is not to the right hon. Gentleman but to all the men in this place and beyond, because today is White Ribbon Day, the international day to end violence against women and girls, and the White Ribbon Campaign is a challenge for men to take on male violence. I urge all men listening to take this challenge seriously and do everything they can to end violence against women and girls. It is wonderful to imagine a world where that is eliminated, and I urge all men to help us go out and create it.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I endorse what the hon. Lady said at the end of her remarks and will highlight some of the things that the Government are doing to tackle violence against women and girls, which is obviously a top priority for the whole Government. The tackling violence against women and girls strategy is being refreshed, building on the £100 million already spent on tackling this issue since 2016. It includes establishing new police leads for violence against women and girls reporting to the Home Secretary, spending £30 million through the safer streets and women at night funds, a multimillion-pound communications campaign targeting perpetrators and misogynistic attitudes, and plans to commission a new 24/7 rape and sexual assault helpline and online support. The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue and I think the whole House agrees that everything possible should be done to stop violence against women and girls, and men must recognise that they have an important responsibility within that.

I am delighted that the hon. Lady will now be able to find bargain holidays for herself for next year and that this pressing issue has now been answered. It has to be said that our dutiful staff so enjoy being in the House of Commons that they never come up to me and ask for the recess dates, but hon. Members do from time to time as they wait to book their flights on easyJet or their private jets, depending on their predilection. But I am delighted to have cheered up the hon. Lady.

The hon. Lady rightly mentioned the terrible situation in the channel yesterday, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will be at the Dispatch Box later. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that the Government's priority must be to take every step possible to prevent deaths. The main way of achieving that is to stop the boats setting off; that must be the priority and it is why the Government have offered to help the French in any way that we can to try to stop those boats launching. Under the Nationality and Borders Bill, which the Opposition opposed, we are trying to make it easier for people to make legal claims for asylum, and harder for people who come into the country illegally to make claims. That must be right, because the evil of what happens is the people traffickers and smugglers who are entirely unconcerned about human life and take large amounts of money to put people on unsafe boats and push them out to sea at the risk of their lives. We must deal with them and make their business model fail, and

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

that way we will save lives. I announced that the borders Bill will be coming back, and I hope that the Opposition will seriously consider supporting those many measures and supporting the Bill's Third Reading, which will help us to ensure safer borders.

On Windrush, the Government are committed to ensuring that those compensation payments are paid. Everyone recognises that that was a great injustice and that the hostile environment policy did not succeed. Ensuring that those who are now quite elderly of the Windrush generation are properly compensated is the priority of the Government. I think changing the structure now would probably delay things more rather than speeding them up, but they have been sped up in the last few months and over the course of the last year, and that will continue.

As regards BA149, that happened some time before I was Leader of the House. Of course, Governments over many decades learn from the failings of previous Governments, but I do not think what happened in 1991 is immediately topical today.

On the issue of Government expenditure, I have warned the hon. Lady before about people in glass houses throwing stones, and I remind her about the £13 billion spent by the last socialist Government on the NHS supercomputer and the incredible failures with working tax credits, which led to masses of waste of taxpayers' money. The whole approach to money when the socialists are in power is to be irresponsible and loose with other people's money. As somebody once said, the problem with being socialist is that eventually you run out of other people's money. The Government are committed to tackling fraud—to dealing with it and reducing it. That is a major priority, as it is for all sensible Governments.

As regards the purchase of personal protective equipment, this was an emergency. The Opposition cannot have it both ways. The vaccine programme, which was an absolute triumph, was based on shortening purchase arrangements, getting things done quickly, moving ahead swiftly, and spending the money that was necessary then, rather than waiting three to six months and finding that we were as behind as some other places have ended up being. The same was true with PPE, but of course the Humble Address, an important constitutional process, will be dealt with properly.

Finally, the hon. Lady mentioned the Standards Committee report. I think she is being a little previous in asking for something to be debated before it has been published.

Mr Speaker: I call Mark Jenkinson.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. [Interruption.] Sorry—Mr Speaker. Apologies. I will be well down the bottom of the list next time.

Elements of the recently opened consultation on conversion therapy deal with how to treat children with gender dysphoria. This is a complex and sensitive area, and proposals risk criminalising clinicians and parents who encourage children to take time before embarking on a potential lifetime of medical treatment. It also cuts

right across the Cass review reporting early next year. Will the Leader of the House confirm that, given these complexities, and as is commonly indicated by the words “draft Bill”, it is the Government's intention to ensure significant prelegislative scrutiny?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was here when you were elected to that role from being Mr Deputy Speaker, on that auspicious occasion in 2019.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting prelegislative scrutiny, which can be extraordinarily effective. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which was passed earlier this year, benefited from it very greatly, and if one thinks back to the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, one will see that rushed legislation very often does not work. I can reassure my hon. Friend that the Government continue to consult with all interested parties and those who have been involved with conversion therapy, in addition to the public consultation, which is designed to hear the views of the wider public. The consultation follows the Cabinet Office consultation principles of 2018. It is always important in sensitive areas that proper consultation is carried out so that something of this kind can be carried forward with considerable consensus.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am sure that we are all appalled by the scenes we witnessed from the channel yesterday. I know we have a statement later from the Secretary of State, but can we have a full debate where all the issues around this tragedy can be explored and can we have it urgently? Top of those issues must be securing safe, secure legal routes to the UK, and the UK meeting all its obligations and its fair share of accommodating those fleeing violence and oppression. I think we can all agree that this cannot happen again.

Will the Leader of the House tell us exactly what is wrong with the Prime Minister? The delusional, gibbering stream of consciousness that we got this week—absolutely hilarious—was excruciating in the extreme: from Peppa Pig, to those weird car noises, to quoting Lenin, to his inability to read notes directly in front of him. If aliens had landed in Westminster last week, requested to be taken to our leader and found that dribbling wreck, they would have immediately asked to be transported back to the planet from whence they came. Surely, the days of this unfunny faux buffoonery are coming to an end. The nation is not laughing with him anymore; they are laughing at him. Perhaps it is time for this “Looney Tunes” Government to say, “That's all, folks!” [Laughter.] They liked that one, Mr Speaker.

We need a debate about the Metropolitan police. A couple of weeks ago, I wrote to them to investigate the recent cash-for-honours scandal, after it was revealed that all recent Tory treasurers had been given places in the House of Lords following £3 million donations to Tory party coffers. It took the Met less than three days to refuse to investigate, giving no reasons why. Along with the Good Law Project, I have written to the Met requesting that they give the reasons why they refused to investigate, or we will ask for that decision to be judicially reviewed. Surely the Leader of the House will agree that every whiff of corruption must be properly investigated? If the Met will not do it, maybe the Prime Minister could get his good friend Inspector Gadget to do it for us?

Mr Rees-Mogg: When anyone is reminded of the Good Law Project, one of course remembers that it is led by an infamous fox murderer who goes out in a kimono and bashes poor harmless foxes to death in a cruel and unusual fashion. I seem to remember that that did not lead to a prosecution—I may be wrong. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should take that to a judicial review to consider more serious sanctions. I am glad to say that the Government are toughening up on laws on animal cruelty, which may be of interest to the Good Law Project leaders.

On the very serious issue the hon. Gentleman raises about the channel crossing disaster, we are having a day and a half of debate on that on Report, which will cover legal routes of entry and toughening up on illegal routes of entry. It is a United Kingdom-wide policy, so I hope we will have the support of the SNP in doing that.

On the mainstay of the hon. Gentleman's question, this time he got so furious that he started giggling at his own fury. I have found out why he is so upset this week. It is not because he is waiting in eager anticipation for St Andrew's Day next year, which will of course be a proper celebration for him and his right hon. and hon. Friends. The reason he is so grumpy today is a new opinion poll that shows that the proportion of voters who ranked the constitution in their preference for the Scottish Government's top three priorities fell by eight points to 13%; and fewer than one third of SNP voters, 28%, ranked independence on their hierarchy of priorities. It is a sad day for him today. I will not tease him for being grumpy. He is justifiably being grumpy, because his sandcastles are gently being washed away by a tide of Unionism.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Given the outrageous information emerging from a Sheffield Hallam University study on the slave labour used in the mining of rare-earth materials that are used here in our solar array supply chains, and the Chinese Government's terrible record on the Uyghur genocide, Tibetan slave labour, and the threats to Hong Kong and Taiwan, will the Leader of the House provide time for a debate on whether this Government—any Government—should boycott the winter Olympics, which should never have been awarded to that despotic regime? May we have an urgent debate, please?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise these issues. The Government have been very clear about the human rights abuses against the Uyghurs, and about what has been going on in Hong Kong and the failure of the communist Government of China to follow the joint declaration that was agreed in the 1980s. The whole issue of religious toleration—so not just the Uyghurs, but what has happened in Tibet—is rightly raised very regularly in this House, and it is right that the communist Government are reminded of their moral obligations. However, the UK Government have long had a policy of thinking that sporting boycotts do not work and that it is a matter for the International Olympic Committee to decide whether the athletes go—[*Interruption.*] As regards whether Government Ministers would wish to go to the People's Republic of China, I can tell my right hon. Friend that no tickets have been booked.

Mr Speaker: I now call the *Spectator* campaigner of the year, Carolyn Harris.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Beauty Banks is a fantastic charity dedicated to tackling hygiene poverty. Colleagues across the House, working with the charity, regularly redistribute products to community groups and refuges. This Christmas, it has launched its “Make a Wash” appeal, encouraging the public to pledge a gift of giving. Every pledge enables even more personal care and hygiene products to reach those in need. Will the Leader of the House join me in championing that appeal and in congratulating the amazing Jo Jones and Sali Hughes for their relentless hard work and commitment to tackling hygiene poverty?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I join you, Mr Speaker, in congratulating the hon. Lady on being campaigner of the year at the *Spectator* awards? It is a well deserved award because, as I have confessed as Leader of the House, when she asks me questions, she tends to achieve what she wants because she charms everybody across the House into submission. Even the hardest-nosed Government Minister melts when she asks for things in her characteristically charming way, as she has done again today.

I am grateful to the hon. Lady for highlighting the work of Beauty Banks, an excellent charity, and I pay tribute to Jo Jones and Sali Hughes. Having realised that they could make a real difference by leveraging the kindness and generosity of others in the beauty industry, they have shown their own kindness and generosity in devoting so much time to a cause that they feel strongly about. I also thank the hon. Lady and many other hon. Members on both sides of the House who distribute the packages to refuges, hostels and other locations in their constituencies, and I certainly voice my support for Beauty Banks' “Make a Wash” campaign. The festive season is almost upon us and there is no better time of year for giving generously so that Beauty Banks can continue to distribute personal care and hygiene products to those who cannot afford them.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): As I am sure even you are aware, Mr Speaker, there is much opposition from Southport residents about the proposed liveable neighbourhood scheme that could be imposed despite strong local opposition. I have deep reservations about the way in which Sustrans has led the consultation process and would welcome an opportunity to relay the concerns of Chantelle and the wider community group. Would my right hon. Friend agree to have a debate in Government time to scrutinise this and other such schemes across the country?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think liveable neighbourhood schemes can easily become “bash the motorist” schemes, which I think are a very bad idea. Motoring is something that gives people very great pleasure and may be essential to their lives. The problem really for my hon. Friend is that Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council is a socialist council and is not run as well as it would be if it had good Conservatives in charge who took the interests of their constituents to heart. But this is a locally determined matter, so I encourage him to keep on campaigning and to stand up for his residents against the red tide.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): As chair of the all-party group on White Ribbon UK, I welcome the comments from the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debonaie), the shadow Leader of the House, on White Ribbon and violence against women and girls. I urge the Leader of the House to make the pledge and, indeed, to join the all-party group.

On Sunday, I attended a fantastic service and highly impressive exhibition at Renfrew Trinity church to mark the centenary of 2nd Renfrew Trinity scout group. The beavers, cubs, scouts and explorers groups were a credit to their leaders and parents. Just a few years ago, I loved my time in the beavers and the cubs and cannot for the life of me remember why I did not graduate through to the scouts—perhaps I was too much of a tearaway. Can we have a debate in Government time on the importance of the scout network and the values and skills for life that scouting seeks to provide?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I cannot believe that the hon. Gentleman was ever a tearaway. In this House he is a man of such dignity, and I am sure that that has always been the case.

I absolutely agree that the work of cubs and scouts is so important for children: it gives them a happy and safe environment in which to grow up. I pay tribute to the Trinity cub and scout group for its work. The hon. Gentleman uses business questions to highlight the wonderful work that goes on in his constituency, which is typical of many constituencies across the country; I am grateful to him.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Yesterday, I received a three-page letter from the leader of Dudley Council. A designated Traveller site in Dudley has been occupied by Travellers who have overstayed the terms of their licence. After due process was followed in the courts in co-operation with the police, the police commander refused to support the council to give cover to bailiffs, citing the European convention on human rights, as Travellers may have rights.

Will the Leader of the House agree to look into the matter and arrange a statement from the relevant Minister? This sets a terrible precedent for councils across the country, which may find that they have wasted taxpayers' money by following legislation set out by this place to invest in designated sites. It can provide indefinite leave to stay illegally, with no protection for landowners. It implies that the police can “woke interpret” and choose to follow laws other than this country's and its courts' instructions. Does that not give further credence to the need to repeal the Human Rights Act, as I have been calling for for many months?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend asks an excellent question. It is really important that we are all equal under the law, and it is fundamental that the law is carried out by the police. We police by consent; the police are us, and we are the police. For that to work, people have to have confidence that the law will be enforced. Having said that, I do not know the specific details of the case or the reasons for the police decision, but the Government are taking more action to deal specifically with the issues around illegal campsites and associated criminality. I will pass on my hon. Friend's

comments to the Lord Chancellor, and I note with great interest what he has to say about the Human Rights Act.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): More than 2,000 autistic people and people with learning disabilities are being held in inappropriate hospital units, 10 years after the Government promised to close them. Yesterday, we learned that an autistic man with a learning disability, Tony Hickmott, has been detained in care for 21 years, breaking the hearts of his elderly parents Pam and Roy.

That could change if the Government lived up to their promise. Indeed, in our report on the treatment of autistic people and people with learning disabilities, the Health and Social Care Committee has urged the Government to do so. The Government have not responded to that report, although a response was due on 13 September. Will the Leader of the House please take action to press the Secretary of State on the urgency of responding to the report and of acting to make sure that people like Tony Hickmott can live in their home, not in a hospital?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising the matter. I think that anyone who has seen the press reports will be as deeply concerned as she is. I point to a lot of cross-party work that has been done to raise the profile of autism, not least by my late right hon. Friend Dame Cheryl Gillan and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), who has been very committed in the area.

It is important that the Government respond to Select Committee reports in accordance with the Osmotherly rules. I will take the matter up to ensure that those rules are met.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Last Friday I was joined by my hon. Friends the Members for Stockton South (Matt Vickers), for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) and for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) in a “Ready Steady Cook” event in Ashfield. With the help of the local food bank, the college and local top chef Dave Marshall, we were able to produce 175 meals for just 50 quid. This is our fight against food poverty. Does the Leader of the House agree that we need a debate in this place on food poverty, so we can help people to cook on a budget and feed the nation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I commend my hon. Friend for his amazing achievement and his hard work. I have a friend who teaches people to cook on a budget and runs something called Bags of Taste, which is a very successful way of encouraging people to cook on a budget. My hon. Friend is leading by example.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Over a month ago, my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) tabled a named day question asking about the state of ambulance services. Not until two days ago did she receive a response, which said that all regional ambulance services had been on the highest alert level since 22 October. Recently, however, we have heard from ambulance leaders that, according to their reckoning, 6,000 people a year are dying unnecessarily because of service problems, including ambulances waiting for too long at A&E centres. More recently, West Midlands ambulance service said that for

a period 999 calls could not be answered owing to a lack of available ambulances. Will the Leader of the House, out of the goodness of his heart, grant us a debate on the state of the UK's ambulance services?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government are aware of the pressures that occur in many winters but, particularly after covid, have been higher than normal. The NHS will receive an extra £5.4 billion over the rest of this year to support its response, including £2.8 billion to cover related costs such as those of enhanced infection control and £478 million to continue the enhanced hospital discharge programme, which frees up spaces so that when the ambulances arrive, the throughput of the hospital will allow them to be emptied and then get back to work. This builds on work that was done last year. However, I do not think that anyone is underestimating the seriousness of the problem.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I have good news from Kettering. To highlight that, may we have a debate in Government time on private enterprise? So many new businesses have opened in Kettering that this week it was named the UK's second most entrepreneurial town by the business insurers Superscript. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that the number of firms in Kettering is now 4,475, up from 4,120 last year, and in the past three years there has been an explosion of independent shops opening in the town centre.

Is it not clear that as Britain bounces back from the pandemic, Kettering is leading the way? People are setting up exciting start-up businesses providing new products and services for local customers. Does that not make Kettering a beacon of hope and optimism for the future?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think that all those people are going to Kettering and setting up businesses because they want to see the local Member of Parliament. That is the great draw for businesses and shops, and all that is going on there.

To go from 4,120 small businesses to 4,475 in a year is a great triumph, and it shows that free enterprise is the way in which we pay the bills for everything else, because without the private sector, the public sector has no money. There is no Government money, only taxpayers' money.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the Leader of the House is interested in children's issues. May I press him for an early debate on dialysis, and particularly on how it affects children? Dialysis at home is very important for many children, but there is a real shortage in some parts of the country, including Leeds and Huddersfield.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Obviously the treatment of children is crucially important, and dialysis is a remarkable, successful and now well-established treatment. The specific issue raised by the hon. Gentleman sounds very suitable for an Adjournment debate, so I would point him towards you, Mr Speaker.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): Tomorrow will see the star-studded extravaganza that is Worksop's Got Talent, and we even have a member of S Club 7 coming to be one of the judges. Worksop's Got Talent

has raised about £40,000 so far for Retina UK, which helps to support people with inherited progressive sight loss. The organiser, James Clarke, himself has retinitis pigmentosa. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on inherited progressive sight loss, and will he wish Worksop's Got Talent all the best for tomorrow?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am delighted to wish Worksop's Got Talent every success and every good fortune for tomorrow, and I am sure that Members on both sides of the House will tune in to find out what happens. I hope that everyone involved experiences an enjoyable as well as a successful event. £40,000 is a great deal of money to raise for an extraordinarily worthy cause. I note from what my hon. Friend said that James Clarke, who is organising the event, is affected by retinitis pigmentosa, and therefore has a strong interest in ensuring its success. I think I understand, Mr Speaker: people have to reach for the stars.

Mr Speaker: Talking of stars, I call Chi Onwurah.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Thank you so very much, Mr Speaker. I appreciate the comparison.

The report of the Prime Minister's Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, otherwise known as the Sewell report, was published in March to almost universal condemnation because of its shoddy research and contentious conclusions. As well as denying the existence of structural racism, it proposed that the answer to bias in algorithms should be to define fairness mathematically. Having some familiarity with statistical and mathematical methods, I can say that I find that absolutely laughable, but despite having asked numerous questions, I have yet to find out the Government's view. I was told that there would be a response to the report over the summer, but given that even the most optimistic among us must now agree that the summer is over, could we have a debate in Government time on the Sewell report?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do not accept the way in which the hon. Lady looks at the report. It was a very respectable commission that came to interesting and important conclusions, which were received by the Government. It pointed out that some of the disparities were not where we might expect them to be, and that some of the people who had the least chance of success in life were people from white working-class backgrounds. That is something that it was important to say. I notice a sort of chant of, "Can there be a debate?" In the initial stage, I would suggest that the hon. Lady ask the Backbench Business Committee for a debate.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I am sure the Leader of the House knows that there are three Mansion Houses in the country, in Doncaster, York and London. He will also be aware that only one of those places is not a city. Given that Doncaster is home to a Mansion House, a minster, the Yorkshire Wildlife Park—which I am sure is equally as good a day out as Peppa Pig World—and two castles, at Conisbrough and Tickhill, does he agree that Doncaster surely deserves to be granted city status on its fourth attempt, and its only attempt with a Conservative MP?

Mr Rees-Mogg: So deep was my ignorance that I did not know that there were only three Mansion Houses in the country, so I am grateful for that nugget of information. I wish my hon. Friend well in his campaign. Perseverance in this area can be very successful, but I cannot make a promise because I have to remain independent in this area until a decision is made. A competition is being held on behalf of the Queen, which people can enter until 8 December. It opened in June 2021, and the results will be announced next year. City status will be awarded, or is intended to be awarded, in celebration of the platinum jubilee celebrations. If my hon. Friend keeps on campaigning, he may well find that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Last winter, a number of my constituents had problems with postal deliveries because of covid. I am sure that other Members have heard of similar experiences from their constituents. With Royal Mail now doing so well, with its £400 million profit, could we have an early debate on the effectiveness of its delivery service, at the same time as thanking our postal service for the Christmas deliveries we are yet to receive?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I know that many MPs like to visit sorting offices during the Christmas season to thank them for the incredible work that is done by Royal Mail at a busy time of year. It is of course nowadays a private company and therefore not answerable from this Dispatch Box, but if the hon. Lady has any points that she wishes to raise with Royal Mail and is not getting answers, I take the broad view that my role is to try to help Members to get answers to whatever questions they seek to ask, and I will do my best to help.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the incredible work being undertaken by hospices throughout the country? Helen, Nicola and the whole team at Bury hospice provide a wide range of clinical, medical and support services, together with their fundamental work and duty supporting local people and their families to achieve the best quality of life at a time when that matters more than ever. The whole town of Bury is rightly proud of them.

Mr Rees-Mogg: This country should be proud of the hospice movement. The fundamental point is that every life is valuable up to the point of natural death and should be preserved, helped, aided and kept free of pain as far as possible. The hospice movement does truly heroic work, and the people who work in hospices are such noble and good people. I join my hon. Friend in thanking the people working in Bury Hospice and in the hospice movement across the country.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On Sunday I marched with midwives in my constituency and heard their stories about the real pressures bearing down on their services. Babies cannot wait, and it is emblematic of the real crisis facing our NHS at the moment, ahead of even worse conditions over the winter. At this time of year, surely it is right that the Government schedule a debate on the winter crisis facing our NHS so that we can discuss some of the solutions that are urgently needed across all our constituencies.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The NHS recovery plan is taking place, and funding is being provided. In 2018, NHS England was given a historic settlement that sees its budget rise by £34 billion by 2023-24—I think that was the £350 million on the side of a bus. We have made around £97 billion available to help frontline services tackle coronavirus, and in September we announced an additional £36 billion for health and social care over the next three years.

Staffing will obviously be crucial, so there are now almost 5,500 more doctors and almost 10,000 more nurses than this time last year, with record numbers of undergraduate medical students and nurses. The funding is being provided and the employees are coming into the health service, but winter is always a difficult time of year for the NHS.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Yesterday's tragic event in the English channel has saddened us all. The people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke get very angry when they see French police standing and watching small boats beginning that perilous journey. Frontex, although it is tracking boats, is not being deployed in the channel to turn those boats around, while the French continue to demand more UK taxpayers' money and are refusing the assistance of our UK Border Force expertise.

I am aware there will be a statement later, but unfortunately I will not be here due to business back in my constituency. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Mr Macron and the French Government have to stop talking the talk and start delivering on the ground to make sure that no more lives are lost?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As my hon. Friend mentioned, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will shortly be making a statement on this tragedy. As I mentioned earlier, it is the evil work of ruthless criminal gangs that is at the heart of this problem.

It is obviously important that the boats do not set out to sea. That is how lives will be saved, and it is how the flow of illegal asylum seekers into this country will be stopped. That requires co-operation between us and not just France but Belgium, the Netherlands and other continental friends. I will pass on my hon. Friend's comments to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary but, yes, if the boats do not take to sea, the problem will be eased significantly.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Today is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, so will the Leader of the House make a statement on the UK Government's progress towards ratifying the Istanbul convention? Does he share my deep concern that, 10 years on, progress towards the UK's ratification has been shamefully slow and the UK Government have still not given a clear commitment to deliver ratification, even after passing the Domestic Abuse Act 2021? Does he further share my disquiet at the alarming development of countries such as Turkey and Poland withdrawing from the convention altogether?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The reality is that what matters is what we do domestically. It is much more important that we get on with the work I have already set out to the shadow Leader of the House. Under the violence

against women and girls strategy, £100 million has been spent on tackling this since 2016. There is a national police lead, the £30 million safer streets fund and the communications campaign to target the perpetrators and to get the message across that violence against women and girls is wrong, full stop. What we do domestically has an effect. Just signing up to things internationally may sound very nice, but it does not necessarily help people here in the United Kingdom.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): My constituency has been subjected to one of the highest rates of house building in the country. One problem that has brought with it is so-called “management companies” charging higher fees. Sometimes they are doing nothing for those fees. Sometimes they are increasing them—sometimes doubling them—year after year, with no justification for what they are doing for this money. May we have a debate on the role of these management companies, because our constituents are being subjected to some truly bad practices?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I visited my hon. Friend’s constituency recently and noticed that there had indeed been a considerable amount of building going on there. The Government are bringing forward a programme to reform and end unfair practices in the leasehold market. I announced that on Monday we will have the Second Reading of the Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Bill; there was a particular problem there, with ground rents doubling quite rapidly and affecting people who had bought newly built properties. Other things have been done, with regard to 990-year leases, removing the retirement sector exemption from zero ground rent measures, and commonhold. However, it is obviously important that consumers are protected from abuse and poor service, and are treated fairly, and I am grateful to him for campaigning on this issue.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Over the past decade, many charities have been forced to fill the gnawing gaps left by the state. The Government’s neglect has led to people such as my constituent Peter Bennetts devoting up to 100 hours per month of their own time just to help others. After 11 years, he was then told that his services were no longer required. As a volunteer, he had no right to appeal as an employee would. The Charity Commission does not have the powers to help him. May we have an urgent debate on protections for volunteers such as Peter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First, I disagree with the hon. Lady’s characterisation of charitable work. Every week, hon. Members from across this House talk about the wonderful work done in their constituencies by people who support charities. We should be so proud of the charitable sector. The state is not there to do absolutely everything; there is always a role for charity. The people who get involved are worthy of praise and not of censure. We should be proud of what goes on, as MPs always are individually about the work in their constituencies. Obviously, I do not know about the individual case she raises, but I would happily take it up with the relevant Department if she were to send me more details.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I was interested to hear the Leader of the House’s response to the interesting question from the hon. Member for Bury

North (James Daly), because the Marie Curie Hospice in Bradford has announced that it is pausing admissions on a temporary basis, due to staff shortages. Does the Leader of the House agree that that is a completely unacceptable situation? May we have a statement on the staffing crisis in our health and care sector?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I did speak earlier about the extra number of people who have been going into employment in the health sector in the past year. I reiterate that we are talking about 5,500 more doctors and 10,000 more nurses. Crucially, the record number of undergraduates—medical students and nurses—means that the supply pipeline will be increasing, which will be key. I also reiterate that the work done by hospices is of fundamental importance. Comforting the dying is a fundamental duty that is incumbent on us as individuals and the country at large.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The tragic loss of life in the channel yesterday underlines why we need to do everything possible to make these dangerous routes unviable. There is nothing compassionate or moral about allowing criminal gangs to exploit vulnerable people. The Leader of the House has already mentioned the Nationality and Borders Bill, but I fear that we will not be able to gain back full control of our immigration and asylum policy unless we scrap the Human Rights Act. Will he find time for a debate on alternatives to the HRA?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I notice a theme across questions today: raising concerns about the HRA. We must be able to govern ourselves in this country in a way that secures safety and wellbeing for people trying to come here and people who are already here. I remind right hon. and hon. Members that this place is sovereign and we are always able to amend any and all Acts of Parliament if we can get a majority for it in both Houses. That is of fundamental constitutional importance.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): This week, I received an email from one of my local headteachers in Putney who said she has had a letter from the Secretary of State for Education that went out to all headteachers throughout the country. She is extremely concerned about the implied criticism of schools in respect of attendance. The primary school in question is battling with 56 positive cases, three members of staff having tested positive and attendance running at around 50%, despite the staff having put in all the measures asked of them and more. Will the Leader of the House provide Government time for us to debate support for schools, to undo the damage done by what has been seen as a veiled attack by the Secretary of State for Education on the fantastic staff in our schools?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There will be Department for Education questions on Monday 6 December, so there is time for the hon. Lady to put in for an oral question or, indeed, a topical question. It is always right for the Government to hold public bodies to account and to say, “Please explain why attendance is only 50%.” If schools have a good reason, they can send that in, but the Government would be remiss if they did not ask the question.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Moira Anderson Foundation, based in my constituency of Airdrie and Shotts, is aimed after Moira, who was 11 years old when she went missing in 1957. It is believed that she was kidnapped, sexually assaulted and murdered. Her body has never been recovered. The foundation is dedicated to supporting children and adults affected by childhood sexual abuse and is headed by Sandra Brown, who was a childhood friend of Moira, in whose memory the organisation was founded. Sandra believes that her own father was involved in Moira's disappearance.

Last week, I was delighted to hear that Sandra was the gold winner in the lifetime achievement award at the National Business Women's Awards. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Sandra and make time on the Floor of the House for a debate on the impact of missing people?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank the hon. Lady for bringing the sad case of Moira to the House's attention and, yes of course, I am honoured to be able to congratulate Sandra Brown on being the gold winner at the National Business Women's Awards. It sounds like what she does has served great moral purpose and the campaign that the hon. Lady talked about deserves wider publicity. I cannot promise the hon. Lady a debate in Government time but it would be well worth while having a Backbench Business debate on the issue. I remind the House that at the end of business questions last week the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), asked for debate requests; I encourage the hon. Lady to be in touch with him.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): May I draw the Leader of the House's attention to the recent Public Accounts Committee report on the benefits system during the pandemic? Among other things, it highlights how the Department for Work and Pensions lost control of universal credit fraud, including in respect of a reported £68 million mass identity hijacking by organised crime groups that meant that 10,000 genuine claimants—we all wanted to see the money go quickly to genuine claimants—had their benefits stopped or were asked to repay, at huge cost to the taxpayer. Given the Leader of the House's earlier remarks, when will we have a chance to debate the report?

Mr Rees-Mogg: What was achieved at the beginning of the pandemic was to make sure that people who needed money got it, whether they were on the furlough scheme or universal credit. The numbers of people the universal credit system was dealing with on a daily basis were multiples of what was ever expected. It was so important to make sure that people in potentially desperate situations got money. Of course, that increased the risk of fraud—everybody knew that at the time and they knew it was a risk with the furlough scheme as well—but what were we supposed to do? Were we supposed to sit idly by and let people have no money? Were we supposed to sit idly by and let people worry that their jobs were not going to exist? It was a fundamental urgency.

Everybody knows that with any accounting mechanism speed and detail do not go hand in hand, but the urgency was fundamental. I therefore defend what was done by the Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Treasury in dealing with a very urgent

situation. Just imagine, Mr Speaker—cast your mind back for a moment—what the noise would be from those on the Opposition Benches had the situation been the reverse and we had said that we could not hand out money to people who had no money because we had to go through some massive bureaucratic system. They would have rightly howled us down.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): EU documents that define the best available techniques under the industrial emissions directive published since the beginning of this year no longer have direct legal effect. Can we have a statement from the Government to give certainty to businesses in my constituency that are concerned that the timescales and the requirements needed to meet the mechanisms for complying with the new regulations that will come in force remain unknown despite having been anticipated from early autumn?

Mr Rees-Mogg: One of the joys of our current situation is that we have left the European Union and therefore what the European Union says about regulations is no longer binding upon us. We have our own effective parliamentary system to ensure that things happen. We have just passed the Environment Act 2021, which sets up relevant systems. We should have confidence in our ability to do things for ourselves, because we will do it better.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Over the course of six weeks, more than 8,500 people in Rutherglen and Cambuslang in my constituency participated in the Beat the Street campaign. Collectively, they walked more than 118,000 miles—a huge achievement. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating everyone who got involved and schedule a debate in Government time on the benefits of exercise to physical and mental wellbeing?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will certainly congratulate the 8,500 people who walked 118,000 miles. I am always a bit nervous about encouraging too much exercise because I take so little myself.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Leader of the House provide an update on the case of Maira Shahbaz, a 14-year-old Christian Pakistani girl who was abducted, raped, forcibly converted and forcibly married. On Red Wednesday last year, more than 12,000 people signed a petition calling on the Prime Minister to give asylum to Maira Shahbaz. One year later, having escaped her abductor, Maira is still living in one room unable to leave for fear that she will be killed as an apostate. Will the Leader of the House provide an update and remind the Prime Minister that there is an urgency when it comes to the safety of those who are persecuted and that more delay will not suffice?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As always, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising such important cases. This case, following the appalling suffering of Asia Bibi a few years ago, shows that Christians in Pakistan often face terrible treatment for practising their faith. The Government condemn forced marriage and forced conversion of women and girls in Pakistan and regularly raise our concerns, including in individual cases, at a senior level with the Pakistani authorities. Her Majesty's Government

fund projects in Pakistan to help to address child and forced marriages, gender-based violence and discrimination and intolerance, especially against minorities. Obviously, the Government are aware of Maira Shahbaz's situation. As a request for asylum goes through a normal process, I cannot say what the outcome would be, but the aim of our Nationality and Borders Bill is to ensure that asylum requests that are brought in a lawful way by people who have come here properly will be treated more favourably, and we are trying to get a better system through the Bill. In the meantime, I will pass on to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs what the hon. Gentleman has said as a matter of urgency.

Army Restructuring: Future Soldier

12.7 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on the details and implementation of the Army's future capabilities, structures and basing.

In March I came to the House to announce the outcome of the Defence Command Paper, part of our integrated review. I said that we must adapt to new threats, resist sentimentality, and match our ambitions to our resources if we are to field armed forces that remain relevant and credible for the challenges of the future. I also said that we owed it to our service personnel to ensure that we now turn that policy into reality and that the work to do so had only just begun.

The Army was tasked with undertaking the most significant modernisation in a generation and, after an intense period of planning—for which I am especially grateful to the Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Mark Carleton-Smith, Brigadier Clark and the rest of the team—I can now announce to Parliament the details of its plans, entitled “Future Soldier”.

Let me begin by paying tribute to those soldiers, the brave men and women of the British Army. To me, they are the finest in the world. Yesterday, we witnessed soldiers, alongside colleagues from other services, parade outside Parliament. It was an opportunity to pay tribute to their extraordinary endeavours during Operation Pitting, helping to evacuate some 15,000 people in a matter of weeks, and to thank them for their service and sacrifice throughout the decades-long Afghan campaign. It was also a reminder that the Army that departed Afghanistan was a very different one from that of 2001. But the Army of the future must adapt even more radically if it is to adapt to the threats of the future. Let us be clear: those are proliferating threats, from increasing humanitarian crises, to ever more capable and determined violent extremism and the use of proxy forces, to the ever present spectre of great power competition.

To keep pace with the changing character of warfare, our Army must be forward-looking, adaptable and embracing of new ways of working as much as new weapons and technologies. Not only must it have the best force structure to counter an ever growing range of threats to the UK, our people and interests, but it must achieve our ambitions on schedule and in budget. Thanks to the Prime Minister's record settlement for defence announced at last year's spending review, we have been given the time and resources to undertake the generational modernisation that defence needs.

Far from being deprived of investment as some claim, we are injecting £41.3 billion into Army equipment and support this decade. That is £8.6 billion more than had been planned prior to the integrated review. We are using those funds to create a modern, innovative and digitised Army. Our future Army will be leaner but more productive, prioritising speed and readiness over mass mobilisation, but still over 100,000 strong, integrating regulars and reserves, as well as all the civil servants and partners from the private sector. As the Chief of the General Staff has said, it must be an Army that places a premium

“not just on mass, but on critical mass; relevant, networked, deployable”.

[*Mr Ben Wallace*]

The Army will now be reorganised to operate on a continuous basis, fielding all the relevant capabilities for this era of constant competition, and persistently engaged around the globe, supporting our partners and deterring our adversaries. Crucially, it will also be an Army that is designed for genuine warfighting credibility, as an expeditionary fighting force that will be both deployable and lethal when called on to fight and win. Since the publication of the defence Command Paper, my officials have worked hard to finalise a reform programme to deliver our priorities at home and abroad. Our future soldiers will find that tomorrow's Army has six distinct elements.

First, it will be globally engaged, with more personnel deployed for more of the time, employed in a new network of regional hubs based on existing training locations in places such as Oman and Kenya.

Secondly, it will be a key contributor to NATO warfighting, capable of fielding a division throughout the decade, as we transition to the new capabilities for a fully modernised warfighting division by 2030.

Thirdly, it will be enhanced by state-of-the-art equipment, including upgraded tanks and digitally-networked armoured vehicles, as well as long-range precision strike, cyber and electromagnetic capabilities.

Fourthly, it will exploit innovation and experimentation to get ahead of the evolving threats. Not only will the Army share the £6.6 billion of defence's increased research and development investment, but next year both the new British Army battle lab and a dedicated unit, the Army trials and experimentation group, will be established to stay at the cutting edge.

Fifthly, it will have integration at its heart, bringing together regulars, reserves and civil servants to form a more productive force with warfighting and resilience at its heart and cross-Government working in its DNA.

Sixthly and finally, it will be an Army that benefits the whole of our Union, with an increased proportion of the Army based in each of the devolved nations and expenditure contributing to prosperity throughout the United Kingdom under our upcoming land industrial strategy.

I am pleased to report that we have already made substantial progress. When it comes to global engagement, we have formed the new Army special operations brigade, in which the new ranger regiments will sit; established the security force assistance brigade; and set up a NATO holding area in Sennelager, Germany. In terms of warfighting, we have reinforced NATO's Allied Rapid Reaction Corps, established new brigade combat teams and reinforced the Army's global response force.

Over the next five years, implementation will continue apace. At the end of this year, our new ranger regiment will reach initial operating capability. By mid-2022 our new deep recon strike brigade combat team will be established, and by Autumn next year two battalions of the Mercian Regiment will merge to form a new Boxer-mounted battalion in one of our armoured combat teams. The recapitalisation of major equipment is already under way. I am determined to do everything within our means to accelerate the introduction of Challenger 3 tanks, with an ambition for their delivery to units starting from 2025 onwards. Likewise, we are transitioning

to Boxer armoured personnel carriers from the retiring Warrior, with units starting to receive their first vehicles from 2023.

We are resolving development issues with the troubled but, none the less, technically capable Ajax armoured reconnaissance vehicle. We are also upgrading the battle-proven Apache attack helicopters while investing in everything from long-range precision strike, ground-based air defence, uncrewed aerial systems, electronic warfare and tactical cyber. These cutting-edge capabilities will be wielded by the newly restructured brigade combat teams—self-sufficient tactical formations with their own combat support and logistics. They will include 16 Air Assault Brigade Combat Team and a new aviation brigade combat team, which together will form our global response force, providing defence's rapid response for crises overseas.

Let me now turn to our plans to streamline the Army force structures. For too long, historical infantry structures have inhibited our Army's transformation. We cannot afford to be slaves to sentiment when the threat has moved on. Today I can therefore confirm a major reorganisation under four new administrative divisions of infantry: the Queen's Division, the Union Division, the Light Division, and the Guards and Parachute Division. These divisions are designed to reflect historic ties, while balancing the numbers of battalions and unit roles, offering greater flexibility and opportunity to soldiers of all ranks.

As announced in March, these plans do not involve the deletion of any cap badges, further major unit changes or any military redundancies. Although we are significantly reducing the total number of Army personnel, we are not compromising our presence in and contribution to the devolved nations. The numbers will reduce slightly everywhere except Wales, but we are increasing the proportion of the Army based in each nation and investing millions in the defence industry and estate.

Northern Ireland will keep the same number of battalions, but host a greater proportion of the Army's workforce and gain an additional reserve company of the Royal Irish. Scotland will be home to more battalions—going from six to seven units—and a greater proportion of the Army than today. We will be retaining Glencorse barracks and will grow in Kinloss and Leuchars, thanks to £355 million of investment in the Army estate.

Wales will see the return of the Welsh cavalry—the Queen's Dragoon Guards—to Caerwent barracks and a new reserve company of 3rd Battalion, the Royal Welsh to be established in north Wales. The retention of the Brecon barracks and the growth of Wrexham are just part of a £320 million investment in the Army estate in Wales.

I know that colleagues will be enthusiastic to learn the basing implications for their own constituencies. The full breakdown of the Army's new structure can be found on the Government website or by clicking on the link in the "Dear colleague" letter that will be distributed.

Our future Army will be as agile in the new domains of cyber and space as it is on the ground. It will contribute the most personnel of all the services to those enhanced information-age functions, such as the National Cyber Force and Defence Intelligence, which are so critical to our new integrated force. In practical terms, this amounts to an additional 500 regular personnel, taking the number from 72,500 to 73,000. Together with

the more than 10,000 Army personnel who work in other parts of defence, we will now, as I said, have a figure of 73,000.

As I said back in March, the size and capabilities of our Army must be dictated by the threat. What we can show on paper or even muster on parade matters little if we cannot rely on those numbers when it counts, or deliver the relevant capabilities required. Unlike the purely financial or numerically driven reviews of the past, we have taken a positive, pragmatic approach, matching our size to the current security environment and the Government's current ambition.

Every single unit will be affected in some way by this change, and transformation on this scale requires radical change at the top of the Army. By 2025, the Army's headquarters will be reduced by 40% regular personnel, and reserves integration will be made more productive across the force. Notably, the covid pandemic underlined the need for resilience structures that can cope with crises on the home front, so a new reserve brigade based in York will ensure that we can provide forces at the point of need. Simultaneously, we will be strengthening our Army's institutional foundation across the United Kingdom by establishing regional points of command.

Our Army has always been defined by its people and their adaptive, resilient, determined and diverse qualities, so this review puts investment in human capital first. The more we use our people, the more we must make sure they are properly supported. That is why we will be modernising individuals' careers and family assistance, all of which will be consolidated in an Army people plan published early next year. Finally, in this more competitive age, we will ensure that equipping our people with the ability to understand, compete, and fight across all domains is firmly at the forefront of defence policy making.

This is an Army that we can remain proud of, not just for its historical achievements or the "Top Trumps" comparisons of numbers of tanks and people in its ranks, but because it is an honest force that is credible and relevant, relentlessly adapting to confront the threats to the nation and meet the challenges of the future, changing the way it operates as much as the equipment with which it does it, and evolving culturally as much as structurally to place our future soldier in the best possible position to compete in all domains, both old and new, to shape our world for the better. Like their forebears, I am certain they will grasp these opportunities with both hands. It is certainly an Army that I would have liked to serve in. I am certain that this modernisation programme will allow them to do just that and ensure the Army remains both relevant and credible, in support of our Prime Minister's vision for a global Britain that is a safer, stronger and more prosperous place. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: This is a very important statement and that is why I have allowed it to run three minutes over, so Members also have the ability to run over because there is a lot to take in. I am sure that Fulwood barracks was missed out, but there we are—we will leave that for another time.

12.21 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, although I am disappointed not to receive the breakdown

of the new Army structure, as I know he intended, which he says is now on the website. The devil, as always, is in the detail and we will study that closely.

The Defence Secretary says that this statement builds on the defence Command Paper published in March. It does indeed answer points about Army structure, but it provides no answers to the bigger, more important questions about Army strategy and Army size. The Command Paper confirmed:

"Russia continues to pose the greatest nuclear, conventional military and subthreshold threat to European security."

Yet it failed then to define a clear mission and role for the Army, especially in relation to that threat. This statement fails the same test. Given recent events, not least in Ukraine, surely the Army's primary role must be to reinforce Europe against Russia and to be an effective war-fighting partner to NATO allies. This demands high-end war-fighting capabilities, not just light forces and cyber operations. A single war-fighting division was promised for 2025. This is the heart of our UK commitment to NATO deterrence and defence. The Chief of the Defence Staff has said that it is

"the standard whereby a credible army is judged",

so why will this fully capable division, including a new strike brigade, now not be battle-ready until 2030?

The Defence Secretary has described the new Ajax armoured vehicle as the "nucleus" of our modernised war-fighting capability, yet his Minister has now admitted that there is "no realistic timescale" for getting Ajax into service. Why did the Defence Secretary scrap Warrior, scale back Challenger and double down on Ajax when the MOD knew that there were serious problems? What is the plan to provide the Army with kit it needs now if it has to contribute to a major conflict? The Secretary of State cannot say he has reduced the role of the Army; he cannot say the Army already has the high-tech kit it needs to replace boots on the ground; and he cannot say the threats to the UK have diminished—indeed, today he said they are proliferating—yet he is still cutting the Army's established strength by 9,000 over the next three years, and that is on top of 16,000 soldiers cut since 2010.

The Prime Minister promised at his election manifesto launch in 2019, on behalf of all Conservative Members:

"We will not be cutting our armed forces in any form. We will be maintaining the size of our armed forces."

The Prime Minister may take the pledges he makes to our armed forces and the public lightly, but we do not. By the time of the next election, Britain will have the smallest Army in 300 years. Size matters. The Defence Secretary's deeper cuts now could limit our forces' ability simultaneously to deploy overseas, support allies, maintain strong national defences, and reinforce our domestic resilience—just as they have in helping the country through the covid crisis. We are a leading NATO member and a United Nations P5 country that may again get called on to deploy and sustain forces away from the UK. We may not seek a major crisis but experience tells us that it may well come to us.

Why have MOD civilian staff increased by 2,200usb since 2015 while the number of full-time soldiers has been cut by 5,000? Why has the Defence Secretary recruited 962 MOD managers in the past year alone? Why has the black hole in the defence budget got £4 billion bigger since he became Defence Secretary?

[John Healey]

Why is he the only Cabinet Minister to agree real cuts to the revenue budget for his Department over the next three years? Despite what he claims, is not the truth that this plan for the British Army is dictated by costs, not threats?

The Army rightly says that the role of the infantry “is at the core of the Army; from peacekeeping to combat operations, anywhere in the world—our Infanteers lead the way.” Yet they will bear the brunt of the cuts in this new structure. What is the cut to infantry numbers? Will this involve a halt to recruitment or simply a slowing of the rate of recruitment? Will the new brigade combat teams have a mix of wheeled and tracked vehicles, and will this mean moving at the pace of the slowest? We welcome the new special operations brigade, but how will this increased number of special forces be fully recruited from the reduced ranks of the wider Army? We welcome the plan to maintain the British Army presence across the UK, but can the Defence Secretary confirm whether all existing planned base closures in England will still go ahead? Will the UK’s long-established training base in Canada close, and does this signal the end of training for tank warfare?

I fear that this plan leaves the British Army too small, too thinly stretched and too poorly equipped to deal with the threats that the UK and our allies now face, which are growing and diversifying.

Mr Wallace: Dear oh dear! I think the official Opposition are probably inaccurate and probably out-of-date and indeed pose all sorts of questions where the premise is just completely false. For example, we do have an armoured division that is a going concern—it is called 3 Div. It is in place. It is there to do its job. It is fulfilling the NATO commitment. Yes, much of its equipment needs to be updated, modernised or changed, which is why we are today announcing an extra £8 billion of spending, but it is actually an armoured division. A number of the platforms that the right hon. Gentleman talks about are going to be tapered out as new equipment comes in, so the Warrior is likely to come out in around 2025 as our Boxers start to get delivered into the different regiments. They will taper out of service as the new equipment comes in. Where gaps could arise, such as in the helicopter fleet with Puma coming out of service, I have sought an interim procurement, the competition for which will start soon. I am therefore determined to ensure that there is a limited gap, if any. There will be some gaps in capabilities, but that is the consequence of taking a decision to modernise and deliver for our armed forces.

I turn to some of the right hon. Gentleman’s other questions. First, the RDEL, which he often talks about, is in fact a 0.2% increase. It obviously depends on whether the line is drawn at 2021, 2022 or 2024—

John Healey: Look at the Red Book.

Mr Wallace: I have, but of course the Red Book changed in a different year from when our settlement started. The right hon. Gentleman will know that our settlement started a year before everyone else’s because I went in to bat for the Department recognising that a one-year settlement would have been too difficult.

Secondly, there is not a £4 billion black hole in our budget; in fact, it is on track. So that was not accurate, either. On whether the BCTs will be both wheeled and tracked, they will mix the two at certain stages. However, it is not just about tracks and wheels; it is also about speed. When I served in an armoured infantry regiment in Germany in 1991, the Warriors completely outraced the 432s, which were 1960s armoured vehicles. Indeed, I am so old that the tanks were Chieftains, and the Warriors had got ahead of the Chieftains. It does happen even in tracked, and the challenge in modern warfare is balance in bringing in the latest in a fashion that keeps pace with the integration required.

On the range of battalions, I welcome the Opposition’s acceptance that this is a good idea; I thought that they would. It is about being in the business of conflict prevention. One of the problems that we see is failed states and small conflicts being allowed to balloon into large-scale conflicts that displace people around the world. We should be there earlier with conflict prevention and help the resilience of many countries either that neighbour a failing state or where conflict could balloon out of control. Perhaps the best way for all of us to avoid both significant cost and stress and bloodshed is to be there properly and helping alongside aid agencies, the United Nations and others to ensure that conflict does not grow.

BATUS—the British Army training unit, Suffield—is not closing in its entirety; we will use it for different functions and purposes. It is a huge training area, and one of its challenges has been air, the demands on integration and getting a multi-domain operation running while using forces—a whole armoured battle group in effect—in the middle of Canada, when we could have greater effect by having them closer to home and more ready. Readiness and presence deters our adversaries. Sitting in Tidworth on a month’s notice to deploy does not put off an adversary such as Russia, which constantly exercises and changes the readiness profile of its forces to keep all of us guessing. That is one of our challenges. We are often worried by Russia’s actions and, after the recent Zapad exercise and the build-up of forces on the edge of Ukraine, it is right that NATO countries are deeply concerned by that activity.

I say to the Opposition that this is an increase in funding, in both capital and RDEL. It is a force designed to ensure that we get the right balance between people and equipment. If we play the numbers of people game, we will see, as we have seen over the decades, that the losers will be in equipment. We then get forces such as those when I served that are hollowed out and not able or ready enough to deliver the wanted effect. We should not forget that when the Iraq war happened in 2003 and a so-called armoured division was deployed, it was in fact one armoured brigade, 3 Commando Brigade and 16 Air Assault Brigade. It was not the armoured division in the field; it was pushed together in a whole group of different forces. That is because we need to be adaptable to the threat and the enemy so that, yes, when a conflict breaks out, we can deliver critical mass, but we also have to be in a position to join together with our allies, as we always have since the war. NATO is an alliance that we must plug in and out of to be part of a greater force to reach critical mass and, indeed, have concentration of forces.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): There is much to unpick in this big announcement, but may I commend the Defence Secretary on this major evolution in our expeditionary posture and defence structure, given the financial constraints that he faces? There are multiple fires around the world where such forces could lead or join alliances as we do in Mali, such as in Yemen, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Lebanon as well as, indeed, closer to home in Poland and Ukraine. However, if there were a more proactive UK foreign policy and we were more ambitious in the spirit of global Britain and engaged in any serious enduring commitment, our shrinking armed forces would be severely tested, highly trained though they may be.

Does the Defence Secretary agree that our world is becoming more dangerous and complex and that the scale of migrants fleeing failed states, with some attempting to cross the channel, is testament to that and will only increase? Therefore, as we wisely fine-tune our ability to fight, this is not the time to cut the defence budget or to reduce our tanks, our armoured fighting vehicles and our troop numbers as we are doing.

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend, like me, served in regiments that were hollowed out or did not quite do what it said on the tin because of either chronic underfunding or overambition without the funds to match. I totally understand his point and agree that the world is a more anxious, insecure place. Next year in particular will test many parts of the world and our resolve to stand up for what we believe in. However, how far we want to be ambitious and to commit to doing things, and how much determination and resolve there is to stick at the problem, is a matter for each Government of the day.

I understand my right hon. Friend's point that we should be prepared to do more and to be more ambitious. I think he has called for 3% of GDP to be spent on defence. The reforms that we are putting forward and the Army of the future as designed matches the current ambition of the Government. If the decision is made to be more ambitious—that is of course for me and for other members of the Government—I will not be shy in asking for more funding and investment. Indeed, I have received an extra £2 billion to the budget since the comprehensive spending review to take on different pressures and in recognition that the threat defines what we can deliver. That is why we see an extra 500 soldiers. I have always said that it is not an arbitrary, “Here is the number,” and I have always resisted any attempt of the system to deliver that. It is ultimately about making sure that we match our ambition and appetite to our funding.

I have aimed for the reforms to be as honest as possible and to do what it says on the tin. It might not be enough for many Members of this House—it might be too much for others—but what I do not want is, as we have all seen, men and women in the armed forces to be overstretched and asked to do things with inadequate kit, because that is the worst way to treat them.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for Defence for earlier sight of his statement. The scale of military, hybrid, environmental and global threats that we face must be met with a willingness, capability and capacity needed

to address them comprehensively. There is much to welcome in the future soldier initiative, although there are questions about how the Government will deliver on it given that, in the past, best practice in relevant areas has been sadly lacking. The Scottish National party therefore has a number of questions.

First, with the newly raised Ranger Regiment, what steps are the Government taking to ensure compatibility with allied frameworks as we develop the new future soldier capabilities? How do we best integrate that with our NATO allies?

Secondly, we have just come through COP26, where huge commitments were made on the environment. How is future soldier adapting our Army to the environments and theatres that the Army will face, given the threat of instability and crises posed by future climate change across the world?

On procurement, a recent report by the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee found that,

“The Department continually fails to learn from its mistakes”, and condemned the system as “broken”. Why do the Government not hold their hands up and admit that a total rehaul of procurement is required, particularly given the need for an agile and modernising Army built on innovation in terms of personnel and hardware? It is all very well for the Secretary of State to announce spending increases, but if that money is spent poorly, it is not in the best interests of the taxpayer or the serving personnel whom we want to support and ensure are as safe as they can be in different theatres.

Lastly, on Scotland, despite what the Secretary of State said in his statement, we still face base closures and a downturn in the presence of British forces in our country, which completely contravenes commitments given by many of his predecessors. As the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) suggested, the devil will be in the detail of this complex statement and we will need to look at it in great detail as the weeks unfold.

How will Scottish personnel be integrated in the future soldier initiative? How will the Secretary of State deal with the long-standing skills shortages, which are being compounded by issues in pay and conditions, which have an impact on the ability to recruit and retain soldiers across the armed forces? I look forward to his response.

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions. On the Rangers, we envisage that a large proportion of their time will not necessarily be spent with NATO allies. They may be in Africa, the middle east or further afield. We have already started spending the money to equip them to be, if necessary, more independent. The reason that they are partly special is that they will often have to deploy without the usual huge amount of logistical support that a normal conventional unit gets, so they will have to be effectively a more selected cadre of people with better equipment to be able to be more independent and more 360 in their integration.

They may well be alongside an African country with a lesser communications capability. Part of what we are trying to do is to help those countries by sometimes being their enabler and giving them support in signals, helicopters, or intelligence and surveillance so that they can understand what is coming, and I think the Rangers

[Mr Wallace]

will be able to do that. In anticipation of NATO's requirements, we will be plugged into the NATO special operations forces to make sure that we are aligned where we can be.

On equipment, I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. I have been clear that I feel that Ajax is a troubled programme and I have been incredibly open about the problems it faces. I will not hesitate to take difficult decisions. There are other programmes that I am deeply worried about, some of which are long programmes—too long—and some of which are on my watch or my predecessor's watch. I am determined that the way forward is a transparent discussion and openness. The MOD has often been a victim of suspicion because it will not talk to anyone about anything. I am not that way inclined and I or my Minister for Defence Procurement, my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), will be quick to come to the House and explain all the issues faced by that and other programmes.

I would say that complex systems are complex. The hon. Gentleman is a member of the SNP, which runs Scotland. Its experience with the Ferguson Marine yard is, I am afraid, a good example of difficult procurement choices and difficult management. The management of that yard by the SNP is not a track record any more glorious than that of Ajax.

Douglas Chapman *indicated dissent.*

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head. The SNP talks a good game, but when it runs a shipyard it runs it into the ground by the looks of things. We should remember that.

On Scottish units and basing, since March, it has not been a secret that the overall size of the Army is shrinking, but the proportion of the Army in Scotland is going up from 5.1% to 5.5% of regulars. The Army is just one part of the armed forces, however, and there will be a net increase of approximately 600 regular personnel in Scotland. They will be made up of more Navy personnel as we have moved HMS Dolphin from Portsmouth to the Clyde for the training of submariners and a training centre there, and more RAF personnel in Lossiemouth when I base the E-7 early warning radar planes there. That means that there is an overall increase. If we add that together with all the elements of the reserves and the extras, about 14,500 forces of regulars and reserves will be based in Scotland, which is a significant amount.

As a Scot and a member of a Scottish regiment, let me say that the saving of Glencorse is also pleasing and will be a good thing for Scotland, as is the expansion of RAF Leuchars as another military base. I was determined to ensure that we still have the Army in the highlands, so the Royal Engineers will remain at Kinloss, which is a large base so there is extra room should we seek to put any more forces there. We will also have two Scottish regiments based in Scotland plus the cavalry regiment, the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards, which is good for recruiting and for the economy in Scotland.

I also say to the hon. Gentleman that it might help our soldiers if the SNP did not tax them a bit higher than their English colleagues. They do not have a choice about where they are based; they are based where they are based.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman talked about courses and education. I hope that the Scottish Government sort out education in Scotland. As a Scot, let me say that education and financial stewardship were among Scotland's proudest things, and both have failed on the SNP's watch. The tragedy is that the children of our armed forces serving in Scotland face the consequences at those schools.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The British Army cannot fight without effective kit, but the Public Accounts Committee has declared the MOD's procurement system "broken", which it is, and has described the General Dynamics Ajax programme as a catastrophe. The next debacle is the Morpheus programme to replace Bowman, which also has General Dynamics effectively in the lead, and is horribly late and going round in circles as Bowman becomes increasingly obsolescent. Will the Secretary of State take personal grip of Ajax and Morpheus? What steps is he taking to ensure that his officials who brief him on those programmes tell him the truth?

Mr Wallace: I do not disagree with my right hon. Friend's observations about the troubled programmes of Ajax and Morpheus. Not knowing that he was going to ask the question, I had a meeting on Morpheus yesterday with officials. My Minister for Defence Procurement is close to all those issues to the extent of examining emails to make sure that we get to the bottom of the whole range of problems on issues such as Ajax.

A health and safety report is due to report soon; it is going through the Maxwellisation process. We will get to the bottom of not only what is happening to the programme and why it potentially damaged our soldiers' hearing in the trials, but why we did not act on any of those reports over the timescale of the programme. In addition, I will leave no stone unturned in relation to how we apportion blame. I will consider external judicial, or perhaps former judicial, personnel to look at those issues, because it is really important not only that we are open about the challenges of the programme but that we fundamentally learn the lessons and people carry the can for some of their decisions.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The Secretary of State is a military gentleman and served in the same regiment as my brother-in-law. Two of his colleagues on the Treasury Bench served Queen and country diligently and well, for which we thank them. When they joined the British Army, it was a viable career with opportunities. My question to the Secretary of State is simple: can he say, with his hand on his heart, that the reduction in the size of the British Army will not, sadly, discourage people from following the successful path that he and his colleagues followed?

Mr Wallace: I would have stayed in the Army if it had looked like this, but I was in an Army that I think was hollowed out. The equipment did not quite work and the greatest adventure anyone had was probably going to Northern Ireland every two years—that was about as far as it went. Hong Kong had closed and there was a lack of sense of purpose and a lack of a clearly identified adversary that we were setting ourselves against. That is really important.

This Army will be more exciting, more rewarding and more enabling for young people to grow their skills. It will be more fluid with the integration of the reserves, which will allow reserves and regulars to be much more able to move from one to the other, depending on their personal circumstances. There is the investment in the different models for family accommodation and single living accommodation, and a determination to be out and about around the world. The one thing that soldiers do not want is to be stuck in a barracks in the UK doing not very much. They want to be out. I was in Oman only the other week seeing soldiers exercising with the Omanis, and they could not stop talking about how exciting and fun it was. I was in Poland last week watching the United Kingdom forces doing a live-firing exercise in Poland alongside Polish, United States and Croatian forces. That is what I want our Army to do.

When we are thinking about soldiers' careers, we have to have a system that is much more enabling to them to move up and down the different functions of, for example, the infantry. By ensuring that we have these infantry divisions, young officers and young soldiers can, if there is not enough space in their own battalion to be a sergeant or a colour sergeant, move to promotions in such a function in a similar battalion in a similar division. A young officer who does not want to do armoured warfare, but wants to be with a security force assistance battalion abroad, they have such opportunities to move up and down. I think that will be exciting and flexible, and it will be an Army that will retain people because it will give them an exciting career and make sure that their families are properly looked after.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I declare my interest as an active reservist and a proud father of two serving officers. For 20 years, I have been fighting what has at times seemed like a rearguard action to keep Army officer selection in Westbury in my constituency. The location will be familiar to the Secretary of State and his two colleagues on the Government Front Bench who went through the process. Will he today commit to a future for the Army officer selection board at Leighton House in my constituency, and how will we invest in that site to ensure that the future officers implied by his description of the challenges going forward have the skills, attributes and characteristics equal to the tasks of the future, as they have been in the past?

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend has been a more than doughty campaigner on the regular commissions board. Let me put it this way: for many of us on these Benches, the Army would not be the Army without the RCB in Westbury. It is part of the rite of passage. I did not want to see it leave Westbury, and my right hon. Friend persuaded me against any move. He has done a brilliant job, and I am delighted that it is going to remain there. My hon. Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement would be delighted to meet him about the investment opportunities, but who could miss the logistics command task about how to cross a fictional river and work out whether we could do it with three or four people?

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Northumberland Royal Fusiliers was first given the freedom of Newcastle in 1948, and the freedom parade

of the 5th Battalion the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers through the streets of Newcastle with bayonets fixed is a symbol of the ongoing links between the fusiliers and Newcastle. Will the Secretary of State set out how this reorganisation will maintain and enhance those strong and prosperous links, which are so important both for public confidence and for recruitment?

Mr Wallace: First, on what we will see in the hon. Member's part of the world, we will see one addition. While there are bases that have been reprieved or saved and have gone up in numbers—Glencorse, for example, or indeed the new bases in Wales—the Topcliffe site will close, but the Newcastle site will double in size. We will continue to expand in the north-east and invest in our soldiers.

When it comes to culture, what we have done with the infantry is ensure that the four divisions of infantry are aligned with their similar cultures. We have not got rid of the cap badges. By making some of these bases effectively bigger, by putting in two units rather than one, and integrating our reserves at a much greater level in our frontline—such as our “teeth” arm units—people will be able to join the reserves of some of those famous regiments and find themselves, when they go into work, in a regular unit, or side by side with one. I think that will be a great opportunity.

I have been to what were then called Territorial Army units that were windy, empty, cold drill halls, with only about four people, and miles away from their parent unit. That was not a way to maintain people feeling used and useful; in fact, people would drift away, feeling quite isolated. There is work ongoing about making sure that we, in effect, reverse the atomisation of the reserves to ensure people are part of a bigger ongoing concern. I would be delighted to share any more details about the north-east with the hon. Member.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When Geoff Hoon announced an exponential increase in the roles for females in the armed forces, I welcomed it from the Opposition Benches, but praying in aid St Bernard of Clairvaux, I pointed out that there would be an administrative overhead to be paid. For that I was rewarded with an early-day motion concerning the disgraceful behaviour of the Member for New Forest West, but given the way things have turned out, my words were prophetic. I have another prophecy I would like to share with the Minister for the Armed Forces, if he will indulge me with a short meeting.

Mr Wallace: The Minister for the Armed Forces will be delighted to hear the prophecy offered. What I can say is that we should and we will do more not only to encourage, but to keep women in the armed forces. It has not been good enough, from the day of the announcement, to encourage it. We have not changed our culture enough, and we have not made sure we value them enough. On 29 November, we shall submit to the Defence Committee our response to the women in the armed forces report, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton), and I hope we will really start to motor and make the difference.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Can I come to that meeting? It sounds as if it is going to be fascinating.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I thank the Secretary of State for his clear commitment to the job in hand, and I welcome the additional Royal Irish Regiment commitment he mentioned and the increased cadet reserve forces for Northern Ireland. On the ground in Northern Ireland, there will clearly be a greater footprint and extra people available. However, may I kindly comment on the overall reported 9,000 smaller size of the Army as a whole? Even with the additions he has referred to, there will be reduced numbers, and that is somewhat concerning. Even though our soldiers are still the best in the world—we certainly relate to that—will this not mean reduced capability, and surely we must have soldiers in cyber-space along with soldiers in ground space?

Mr Wallace: I understand the hon. Member's point about the overall size. We will obviously be a more productive Army, but we are also going to use equipment that needs fewer people and crews to deliver. I am pleased that one of the Ranger battalions will be in Northern Ireland. I think that will be exciting for the men and women of that regiment, and it will also go to the esprit de corps of Northern Ireland or Ulster soldiers, who have not only contributed to the British armed forces for decades—for hundreds of years—but have always been of outstanding quality. We do recognise some of the issues about mass, but we think that critical mass is often more important in ensuring that we are out and about and present to make our adversaries think differently. Overall, I think Northern Ireland has a great future. We certainly know that the other Royal Irish Regiment battalion will be moving to Edinburgh, so they will be able to see each other—almost.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for being clearly on top of and in command of his brief. I welcome the plans for a fully deployable, fully modernised, full-scale warfighting division. That is planned for 2030, but major serious threats may not wait until then. In also welcoming the plans for the new Ranger Regiment, when will elements of that at battalion scale be deployable?

Mr Wallace: First, I know my hon. Friend is keen in the Parachute Regiment world, and I think there is an enhancement to the Air Assault Brigade, with an extra unit going in there, which is very important. It is also important to know, when we talk about the Rangers, that there is a difference between special forces and special operations. There is a difference between what we have with our excellent, amazing, elite soldiers of 16 Air Assault Brigade and what the Rangers will do. The Rangers will not deploy as a battalion, but in teams, and therefore make a difference in a different way. I do not want people to be confused: I do not want people in 16 Air Assault Brigade to think we have invented something that competes. It is not that at all; it is a different part of special operations. I know my hon. Friend will definitely understand that. First and foremost, the Rangers have to get up to the standard. I do not want it to run before it can walk. It will not deploy as a battalion—I do not expect it to—but, over the years, I suspect it will become more multi-armed or multi-disciplinary in that some countries will not want infantry, but may want signals or logistics support, so I think it will change. We are getting its first battalion up to capability by 2022—next year.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York is the UK's oldest military city and we are very proud to have the home headquarters of 1st Division and 4th Division 2 Signal Regiment. We believe that long history should continue. However, with a decrease in the size of our armed forces, we are particularly concerned about the loss of soft power, which makes an amazing contribution to de-escalating risk around the world. Will the Secretary of State commit to investing more in that soft power and de-escalation, and will he look again at the opportunity York provides not just for the new resilient home reservists but for our regulars, who love to come to York? That does help with recruitment, too.

Mr Wallace: I understand. The hon. Lady will know that Imphal barracks is already designated to close at the end of the decade, but she should also be pleased that the new 19 reserve brigade will be based in her constituency.

On soft power, we are creating eight battalions-worth of regiments that are designed to help in that space of security force assistance, training and resilience. They will go right up to the harder end, if that is what countries need, with Rangers doing training and enabling but also potentially fighting, or operating alongside those countries' forces, if they have to. That is a lot of capability, and we see examples of that from our forces all over the world: I have seen the Royal Engineers in Sudan helping to build in areas where only soldiers can build because of the resilience required. That will not stop, and it is partly what is at the heart of our defence Command Paper, recognising that post-conflict and pre-conflict activities are as important as actual war fighting capability. That is really important, because it is how we avoid wars happening in the first place.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Yesterday when I looked at the faces of young soldiers outside Parliament, I believe I saw a number of people who were haunted by their experiences. Will my right hon. Friend therefore make sure that in his people plan he develops our war fighting resilience by taking concrete steps to better equip members of our armed forces for what they will see on operations and better help them recover their mental health afterwards?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes an important point. What people want to do is changing, and so too is their own personal resilience; this is a different youth generation from mine, and we have to move as fast as we can to keep up with that. He is right that there will be people on tours such as Op Pitting who will face consequences in their mental health for decades to come; we have to be on top of that, and the Minister for Defence People and Veterans is setting about NHS improvement on mental health.

We also need to improve our training. I went up to Thetford last year and saw the troops planning for Mali, and indeed at that stage for Afghanistan. It was amazing to see how much better the training was even then compared with my day. We now use genuine citizens, or former citizens, of those countries to help train our troops in what the civilian population is like. In my day the local regiment turned up and pretended to be Iraqi or whatever, which did not usually work. We have to be more sophisticated about training now, and I will definitely take my hon. Friend's suggestions on board.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): This year we have seen a lot of very valuable discussion about women's safety and rights, and rightly so. Unfortunately, we also know the armed forces do not have the best record on these issues, so, on White Ribbon Day, will the Secretary of State confirm that these reforms will prioritise the safety of women soldiers and set out the steps being taken to do so?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Lady tempts me to get ahead of the report I have to give first to the Defence Committee. I would not want to eat their sandwiches for them, so all I would say is that I agree with many of her observations and we do have steps in place, but I will let the Committee criticise my attempts when it gets to them.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. Can he confirm that Army numbers will stay above 100,000 personnel including reserve forces, and will he outline how the greater agility and flexibility he has described as being created will improve our deployment capabilities when required?

Mr Wallace: One way we want to use the hubs is to have longer tours in places, rather than just a few weeks. In some of our overseas exercises we used to go there, get off the plane, do the exercise and then get back on the plane; we might as well have gone no further than around the corner. We had no influence in the region and learned nothing about it. Now we will see much more exercising in places like Oman and Kenya to enable us to be forward and present. Over the past five years we have had an armoured battle group in Estonia, permanently really—it rotates through every six months, but in fact it is a permanent location. Our presence there is deterring Russia as an adversary, and we are part of a multinational battle group; there are four or five such groups in that part of the world. I am determined that one of the premiums we get from being forward—just being in the area—is deterrence. It also makes us more ready, and if we are more ready, we are more productive when something happens.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. As a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme I was lucky enough to visit the Army Foundation College in Harrogate, a truly

outstanding facility training young soldiers and creating life-changing opportunities. How will the Army's training facilities support the restructure outlined today?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend has prompted me to visit Harrogate. One of the biggest mistakes in "Options for Change", a defence review I served under in 1990, was getting rid of what were then called junior leaders— young men who were brought into the Army at 16. That had knock-on effects, certainly in infantry recruiting, and I was glad that it was reversed about 15 years ago.

Harrogate does an amazing job. We must remember that these are young people who need safeguarding; we have to always keep an eye out for that, and safeguarding the young people parents entrust to us is one of the things I am most concerned about. We can do a number of things: we must make sure the training is as relevant as possible, with the right equipment; and we must also make sure those young people are safeguarded when they are, effectively, released by their parents to come under our duty of care. We must work on sending out the message that their children are safe with us and we will give them a great career.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): When the planned disposal of Vauxhall barracks in my constituency takes place, I and many of my constituents hope we might use some of the land for increased health services, because ours are bursting at the seams. Is there an update on the disposal date for the barracks, and will my right hon. Friend work with me and his colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care to explore the possibility of putting a Didcot health hub on that site?

Mr Wallace: I am sorry to say to my hon. Friend that the disposal of Vauxhall barracks will now be delayed for a further six years, to 2034. It is a useful barracks for our forces and is in demand. If he would like, however, I am happy to meet him about a range of issues, including whether we can free up any other defence land to help him with that. While some colleagues campaign to keep barracks, there is a delicate balance to strike, but I am afraid the Army requires that barracks up until 2034.

English Channel Small Boats Incident

1.8 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the tragic drownings that took place in the channel yesterday. At least 27 people lost their lives. I know the whole House will join me in expressing our profound sorrow. Our thoughts are with the loved ones of those who have died, and with those who responded to that extremely distressing event.

Information is still being gathered about the situation in France as it becomes clearer. The Prime Minister chaired an emergency Cobra meeting last night and then spoke to the President of France. I am glad that President Macron indicated his determination to stop the vile people-smuggling gangs and, importantly, to work closely with all partners across Europe.

I have just spoken again with my French counterpart, Minister Darmanin. I once again reached out and made my offer very clear to France on joint France-UK co-operation and joint patrols to prevent these dangerous journeys from taking place. I have offered to work with France to put more officers on the ground and to do absolutely whatever is necessary to secure the area so that vulnerable people do not risk their lives by getting into unseaworthy boats.

There is a global illegal migration crisis. I have stated many times that these journeys across the channel are absolutely unnecessary, but as I have been warning for two years, they are also lethally dangerous. What happened yesterday was a dreadful shock. It was not a surprise, but it is a reminder of how vulnerable people are put at peril when in the hands of criminal gangs.

There is no quick fix. This is about addressing long-term pull factors, smashing the criminal gangs that treat human beings as cargo, and tackling supply chains. That requires a co-ordinated international effort, and I have been in constant contact with my counterparts from France, Poland, Austria, Belgium, Italy and Greece, to name just a few. Due to the nature of the crisis and the fact that there are 80 million displaced people in the world, this was a major theme of discussion at the meeting of G7 Interior Ministers back in September. We are also seeing it play out on several land borders in Europe and in the Mediterranean sea.

Given the chance, the traffickers will always find people to exploit and manipulate, some of whom do not even know they are coming to the UK. That means tackling issues upstream and not waiting until people have reached EU countries. I have always been extremely clear that I want to co-operate—and am co-operating—with international colleagues.

The United Kingdom has given its unflinching and generous support to France to end this terrible trade in people smuggling. We are working to end these crossings not because we do not care and we are heartless; the United Kingdom has a clear, generous and humane approach to asylum seekers and refugees. Yes, people should come here legally and the system must be fair, but the main issue is this: crossing the channel in small boats is extremely dangerous. Yesterday was the moment that many of us had feared for many years.

The criminals who facilitate these journeys are motivated by self-interest and profit, not by compassion. They threaten, intimidate, bully and assault the people who get into these boats, and they have an absolute disregard for human life. They use the money they make for other heinous crimes. We simply have to break their business model and, of course, bring them to justice.

The Government's new plan for immigration, which will be put into law through the Nationality and Borders Bill, is a longer-term solution that will address many of these underlying factors to deter illegal migration and address underlying pull factors in the UK's asylum system. It will bring in a range of measures, including a one-stop appeals process; the ability to process claims outside the country; the ability to have differentiation and declare inadmissible to our asylum system those who arrive in the UK having passed through safe countries; and life sentences for people smugglers. People should claim asylum in the first safe country they reach, and nobody needs to flee France in order to be safe.

However, we are not waiting until the Nationality and Borders Bill passes; we are undertaking a wide range of operational and diplomatic work. I have already approved maritime tactics, including boat turnarounds, for Border Force to deploy. The Government, the police and the National Crime Agency are taking action at every level to take down the people-smuggling gangs. Once again, however, we cannot do it alone.

We continue to work closely with the French to prevent crossings. More than 20,000 have been stopped this year—all Members should recognise the magnitude and the scale of the illegal migration crisis that we are seeing. We have dismantled 17 organised criminal groups and secured over 400 arrests and 65 convictions. But this crisis continues, clearly demonstrating that we need to do more, together.

This is a complicated issue and there is no simple fix. It means a herculean effort, and it will be impossible without close co-operation between all international partners and agencies. I urge colleagues to reconsider their opposition to the Nationality and Borders Bill, because it is an essential element in finding a long-term solution to a long-term problem that successive Governments have faced over decades.

As we mourn those who have died in the most horrendous of circumstances, I hope that the whole House can come together to send a clear message that crossing the channel in this lethal way—in a small boat—is not the way to come to our country. It is of course unnecessary, illegal and desperately unsafe. I commend this statement to the House.

1.15 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for her statement and for advance sight of it.

Yesterday's human tragedy in the channel was the most awful of reminders of the dangers of crossing the channel, and that people's lives are at risk every day in these makeshift, flimsy small boats. It is a sobering moment for our country, for France and for the international community.

We understand that at least 27 people have died, with some reports that that includes seven women and three children. Across the House, we think of those lost and of their loved ones left behind. We think, too, of those

who have been rescued and are receiving medical treatment, fighting for their lives. I pay tribute to all those involved in the joint French-British search-and-rescue operation in the air and on the sea—people putting themselves in danger to help others.

I understand that there have been arrests in France of those suspected of this vile crime of people smuggling. I appreciate very much the difficulties and sensitivities when there is an ongoing legal case, particularly in another jurisdiction, and I further appreciate that it is at a very early stage. However, I would be grateful if the Home Secretary could give the House an update on possible timings for the legal case and reassure the House that Britain will give all co-operation that is required by the prosecuting authorities in France. Will that full co-operation extend not only to this tragic case but to all ongoing prosecutions where we can make an intelligence contribution?

I have raised on a number of occasions the arrangements we have in place with the French authorities. Will the Home Secretary set out how many days a week the full existing surveillance capacity is currently operating? What will she do urgently to increase that surveillance?

I pay tribute to the National Crime Agency and our frontline law enforcement officers for the work that they do. I heard what the Home Secretary said about law enforcement co-operation, but will she also tell the House what she will do to deepen that intelligence and law enforcement co-operation with the French authorities, and indeed with other countries, so that the focus is not only on coastal patrols, important though they are, but on disrupting the routes facilitated, often across hundreds and thousands of miles, by vile people-smuggling gangs with reckless disregard for human life?

May I also press the Home Secretary on properly managed safe and legal routes? Let me ask specifically about the Dubs scheme, which was closed down, having helped only 480 unaccompanied children, rather than the 3,000 it was expected to help. Will that scheme be urgently reinstated?

The Government have also announced the Afghanistan resettlement scheme. We took the salute yesterday in New Palace Yard from our magnificent armed forces, who, together with Border Force and our diplomats, showed the very best of us as a country in their actions during Operation Pitting. However, the Government now need to set out how, practically, they will make good on their promise to help a total of 20,000 people. We are some months on, and we need an urgent update on that.

Then there is the UK resettlement scheme, which was announced in February this year. The Government have released the statistics on that today. They show that, in its first year, only 770 people have been helped by the scheme. Taken with the other schemes, only 1,171 people had been helped to the end of September, when the promise from the Home Office was to help 5,000 people in the scheme's first year. What will be done to make good on that promise? What urgent action will be taken to help those most in need?

The Home Secretary mentioned the Nationality and Borders Bill, but she knows that the Opposition will not support a Bill that breaches the refugee convention and damages our standing around the world. Indeed, she has spoken today of a worldwide migration crisis. Will

Ministers revisit their decision to cut the international aid budget, and lead on the international stage to help those fleeing persecution around the world?

Yesterday's terrible tragedy must be a moment for change. The time for urgent action to save lives is now.

Priti Patel: I would like to begin my remarks by echoing some of the comments that the right hon. Gentleman made, in particular the direct reference to our operational partners, who day in, day out do incredible work, which too often gets overlooked in this House.

On joint patrols—the right hon. Gentleman asked about surveillance capability—officers from Border Force and UK law enforcement are working in conjunction with the National Crime Agency and their French counterparts every day in some of the most appalling conditions. I refer right hon. and hon. Members to previous statements I have made in this House on loss of life, people smuggling and the wider reforms that the Government are bringing in. I have specifically mentioned the weaponising of illegal migration: the fact that women, children and even babies are being threatened and forced into the most appalling, unseaworthy vessels. Officers in France have been physically attacked and injured. Our Border Force patrols and officers deal with many harrowing scenes every single day, so on that point I very much support and commend the work our people do. It is difficult work.

I will come to the right hon. Gentleman's other points, including the fact that there is a global migration crisis. This is not new—this is absolutely not new. Even in my days at the Department for International Development, humanitarian and climate crises led to forced displacement. We have seen many movements of people, through the Sahel, Libya and the eastern Mediterranean, since 2013, 2014 and 2015, culminating in much vaster people movements, with the Afghanistan crisis and other points as well.

I will go through many of the points the right hon. Gentleman made. Surveillance capability is stood up every day and is dependent fundamentally on, for example, weather and whether planes and drones can fly. In fact, on Monday when I came to the House for questions and the urgent question, I spoke about how drones are now being used in France. Previously, drones were not being used in France, because its laws did not allow it. We have to recognise that our laws differ to those of our counterparts, including our French counterparts.

On intelligence co-operation, their laws are different to our laws, and their prosecution powers differ to our prosecution powers. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we continue to not just co-operate—co-operation is what we do day in, day out—but intensify our work, including how we share data and intelligence. In fact, our laws prevent some of that from happening, and we are looking at ways we can bolster and strengthen them. We have to think about what that means for data sharing.

The prosecutions that have taken place are very significant. Prosecution pathways in France differ to prosecution pathways in the United Kingdom. We share across different jurisdictions information about individuals who have been arrested, because of course laws are different and differ. I should add that gangs do not just operate on the continent in northern France, Belgium, the Netherlands or Germany; they also operate in the

[Priti Patel]

United Kingdom, and that is where our resources are absolutely focused and targeted. This issue is not just about UK-France co-operation. I want to put this on the record once again: this is not just a problem for the United Kingdom and France. When we look at Europe, from the gateway into Italy, Greece and now Poland—I spoke to my counterpart in Poland earlier this week, as well as to those in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and so on—we see that this is a widescale problem.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to address just three other points if I may. Resettlement is a fundamental pillar of this Government's work. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned resettlement figures; I would just caveat much of those, due to the pandemic. He will respect and understand that travel movements have been restricted. Resettlement rights have been limited because of the pandemic, but we are committed and are working to resettle in the way that we have committed to do so. That links to the Afghanistan resettlement scheme, in addition to the 15,000 people evacuated under Operation Pitting. I have also publicly said that we can resettle only once we have the ability and the infrastructure to create resettlement pathways so that we do not just bring people here and let them lead an inadequate life. They need to rebuild their lives.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the Dubs scheme. I have actually put an offer on the table, not for the first time, to the French Government today on a returns agreement, looking in particular at family reunion children. This is an offer I have made repeatedly to my counterpart in France. We are determined. Over the weekend, we will be pursuing further discussions. We have to have viable agreements that reflect the type of crisis we face on migration and the toughest circumstances we are now confronted with.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is quite clear that this matter is not going to be ended at a stroke. The reality is that, even though we are no longer a part of the Dublin convention, the Dublin convention is completely broken. Across Europe, lots of countries are happy to see migrants travel across their country—as long as they do not stay—into somebody else's jurisdiction. That has led to the problem we face now, with those electing to come to the UK ending up in France. Can the Home Secretary assure us today that she is putting the greatest pressure on the French Government to allow us to work with them in their territorial area, through patrol systems and ships, and/or members of the police or armed forces, to help them and support them? Does she agree that they should do that because it would help them as much as it would help us?

Priti Patel: As ever, my right hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. He is absolutely right about the wider issues across EU member states, and we recognise that. I will be speaking to Commissioner Johansson later today—not for the first time; I have had previous discussions with her about this issue. I think there is a recognition now. It is absolutely tragic and appalling that it takes a tragedy of this nature for momentum to be galvanised across other countries on this issue. It should never take a crisis of this nature for action to come together. My right hon. Friend specifically asked me about putting

pressure—as far as I see it, not just pressure, but direct offers on the table—on France about joint patrols, whether in territorial seas or on territory itself. This has been a constant offer, it really has. I made that offer yesterday and to my counterpart in the last hour.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): This is a devastating tragedy and our thoughts are with those who have lost their lives, together with their friends and families.

I am grateful for advance sight of the statement, and I agree that greater co-operation to tackle the dreadful, criminal, people-smuggling gangs is required. However, this awful event should also signal a massive shift in approach towards the provision of safe legal routes to the UK, not doubling down on criminalising those who are the victims, if they get here, with up to four years in prison.

The Government's refugee family reunion rules are among the most restrictive in Europe. The Dubs scheme was closed and Brexit means that the so-called Dublin family reunion applications are no longer possible. Resettlement schemes are in limbo. The Nationality and Borders Bill will restrict family reunion rights even further, meaning that more people will feel compelled to make dangerous journeys to join loved ones. The reality is that offshoring is a disgrace. Will the Home Secretary publish the economic impact assessment for the Bill, which presumably confirms that it will waste billions of pounds and not work? Instead of blocking and closing down safe routes, we should be expanding them.

My question is quite simple: will the right hon. Lady commit to ending all discussion of the UK using dangerous and life-threatening push-back tactics in the channel? The Prime Minister said yesterday that all options were on the table in addressing this crisis. Will she confirm that they include looking at the one measure that would make an immediate difference, allowing refugees and asylum seekers to make their initial application from outside the UK, rather than forcing people to physically travel here to begin their applications?

Priti Patel: I have to say that I am very disappointed by the hon. Gentleman's tone and comments, and by his inability to understand what is taking place or the issues and challenges of global illegal migration. First, if the hon. Gentleman thinks there is a simple solution, I will restate for him that there is no simple solution. If he thinks that settlement schemes that have existed previously are the answer, I can tell him that they are not. If he has bothered to read the Nationality and Borders Bill, he should also look at the new plan for immigration and, importantly, at some of the wider reforms that are required to our asylum system, so that it becomes fit for purpose and meets the needs of people who are claiming asylum, and so that we have a differentiated approach to stop economic migrants masquerading as asylum seekers and elbowing women and children who need help and support out of the way. That is effectively what is happening right now.

This is about safe and legal routes—absolutely. If the hon. Gentleman has joined in previous debates, previous statements and questions—I am not sure whether he was in the House on Monday—he will have heard me say, not just on Monday but when I launched the new plan for immigration back in February, that the very purpose of safe and legal routes is to create the right

kind of resettlement paths for people who are fleeing persecution and oppression in countries for a whole host of reasons. The world is changing and there is a great deal of instability out there. In doing so, we will create a legal path for them to make their claim from outside the United Kingdom, so that they will not have to come here to do so, and we will ensure that when they come here, they are supported in the right way in terms of accommodation and resettlement so that they can start their new life in the United Kingdom. That is exactly how safe and legal routes should work. That is why I am working with the International Organisation for Migration, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other partners on that.

It is such a shame actually, that once again, the Scottish National party, which has failed to support asylum seekers in its own local authorities—31 out of 32 local authorities have not even—[*Interruption.*] SNP Members might sit there and yell, “Shame!” at me, but 31 out of 32 of its local authorities do not participate in the voluntary dispersal scheme for housing and asylum seekers. There is an inconsistency in their approach. I absolutely agree about the need for safe and legal routes. This Government will do that properly. We recognise the type of instability, uncertainty, persecution and oppression experienced by people who need and should be claiming asylum in our country, but who are currently not getting it, and we will change that.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I think the whole House knows that my right hon. Friend has strained every sinew since her first day in post to prevent the sorts of tragedies that we saw in the last 24 hours. My right hon. Friend is right to point to the pan-European nature of this problem. Frontex, for example, has quadrupled its expenditure on surveillance alone in the Mediterranean in the past year. She has accurately pointed to her ongoing co-operation with the French as central. Will she tell the House what additional measures she has offered the French in order to crack down on these evil gangs and to cut down this deadly trade?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend makes some very important points. On the role of Frontex, it has accelerated surveillance and border patrols, and it is even supporting activity in the Mediterranean to stop boats entering territorial waters illegally—I have seen those patrols. It is a complete myth and fallacy to say that we should not look at all options. We are doing so and will continue to do so.

In terms of the measures that have been offered to France, I have asked it today for an honest assessment of its numbers on the beaches, whether or not there are gaps, if more officers are needed and for a realistic assessment of the number of migrants that are coming through from Belgium, in particular. Minister Darmanin specifically mentioned the pressures from that border and that the boat that led to the fatalities yesterday came from Dunkirk, so clearly there are more flows there. But this is absolutely about more police officers, more intelligence co-operation and more on technology. We have put forward a very significant technology offer that includes enhanced surveillance and automatic number plate recognition on the roads coming up to the beaches. We have also offered to put in more officers—unwarranted, because they will not take warranted officers. These are

the things that I will be working through specifically, because the status quo cannot persist. There is a full understanding of that on the French side.

We absolutely are a Government that are incredibly propositional to France, in particular. We have to find joint solutions. If that means doing more with France and persuading it to take on more support, we will absolutely strain every sinew to do so.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Our hearts go out to all those affected by yesterday’s terrible tragedy. There was already deep concern in my constituency about the Government’s approach to protecting men, women and children seeking refuge in the UK. I also have many constituents with family members who are in fear of their lives and are seeking to escape Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover. A new resettlement pathway for vulnerable Afghans was announced in August, but three months later, we still do not know when the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme will be operational or how those who are outside the UK will be able to access it. Can the Home Secretary tell us that today?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady makes very important points about the Afghan resettlement scheme. It was announced in August at a time of great crisis, with Op Pitting taking place at the time. The Minister for Afghan Resettlement will update colleagues on this in due course. I would like to emphasise, however, that, under Op Pitting, we evacuated 15,000 people. We are still in the process of trying to resettle them. In terms of resettling more people from Afghanistan, I know that cases are coming through. This goes across Government and involves the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Ministry of Defence—there are still Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy cases being followed through with the MOD. We are trying to make sure that we can bring people forward and, when we do, that we can get them settled, rather than, sadly, as we have seen—we are very up-front about this—putting them in hotels, in inadequate accommodation, when we need them in the community.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What an appalling and entirely foreseeable tragedy. Does the Home Secretary agree that we cannot wait on her excellent Bill? We cannot wait on the French co-operating and taking these poor people back, as they should. We have to act now in a national emergency to save lives. There are only two countries in the world that have solved this problem: Australia, which has an offshore processing centre, and Greece, which does push-back. We have to be tough. We have to face down the human rights lawyers. If Governments are weak, people die.

Priti Patel: I echo my right hon. Friend’s frustration fully. In terms of toughness, I have been very clear—I know that this does upset some right hon. and hon. Members—that I have not ruled anything out. I put every option on the table, not just with France, by the way, but with other counterparts. For push-backs, Greece uses special forces, their military, the Hellenic coastguard and Frontex, just for the record—as I said, I have seen that. It also has a programme of reception centres. As my right hon. Friend will know, that is part of the new plan for immigration in terms of how we have differentiation, deal with the reform of the asylum system and make progress on casework.

[Priti Patel]

The fact is that there is no one-silver-bullet solution to this. I know that my right hon. Friend and my colleagues understand that. That is why the new plan for immigration and the Nationality and Borders Bill are important. All colleagues will hear shortly about the Bill coming back on Report and its next stages. It is an important piece of legislation because it will set the direction of travel. Importantly, it will give the Government more powers to be much firmer and end many of the pull factors that have existed for too long and have actually helped to facilitate and encourage illegal migration.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Does the Home Secretary accept that the only reason that people traffickers and gangs can operate is the absolute desperation of people across Europe and indeed, across the world? Instead of concentrating on more frontiers, more barbed wire, more surveillance and so on—not just in this country, but all across Europe—we should be looking at the causes of asylum in the first place: the environmental disasters, the wars, the abuse of human rights, the poverty. What are we doing to ensure that the European and UN conventions are adhered to and upheld? Those asylum seekers are desperate people trying to survive in this world. Pushing them back is not a solution; it is brutality that will go down in history as the brutal treatment of desperate people at a desperate time.

Priti Patel: First and foremost, there is a great deal of work. I should emphasise that the right hon. Gentleman's comments are presented in a light that is actually quite unfair and unreflective of the work that takes place across Government with multilateral organisations and the global situation. Humanitarian crises lead to displacement and climate crisis leads to displacement—that is a fact of life. None of this is new; it has existed for decades and decades. That is why the international community comes together, whether that is in convening power through the European Union, through the UN or through multilateral systems. That is exactly how it works.

The reality is that it is not the case that everyone who has come to this country illegally, whether on the back of a lorry or in a small boat, historically, is an asylum seeker. When they have their rights exhausted and we try to remove them, there are many barriers to removal. That is effectively what the Nationality and Borders Bill will address; I appreciate that the right hon. Gentleman does not want to support the Bill.

Migrants are not just in the hands of people smugglers. They are travelling through safe countries where there are functioning asylum seeking systems and where they could claim asylum. That is something that all international partners should support and work to achieve.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Did not the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) put her finger on the problem when she referred to Afghanistan, where there are many legitimate asylum seekers who deserve to come here? Is not the problem that if we have the fairest asylum seeking system in the world, a queue will form and that there will always be some people who are not prepared to queue, but want to jump to the head of the queue? Therefore, is not the only way to deter that to show, not that they will not get

across the channel or that getting across the channel is terribly dangerous, but that if they do get across the channel and if they have jumped the queue, they will be returned to another country? How can the Home Secretary secure that?

Priti Patel: I think I have spoken in this House a few times about bilateral returns agreements and the difficulties with getting them. I state again for the record that I have today put on the table another offer to my French counterpart, Minister Darmanin, that I am very happy to discuss returns agreements with him in the usual sense, but also to look at family reunions and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. We do not want children—kids—and family members in the hands of traffickers. Having established routes and working with our partners to establish returns agreements is absolutely the right thing to do.

I have stated many times with regard to EU countries that the matter sits with the Commission; it is a Commission competence. There is a great deal of frustration among EU member states about the issue, which is why I continue to pursue my discussions with the European Commissioner for Home Affairs.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I hope that the Home Secretary can confirm that there is no such thing as an illegal asylum seeker. Seeking asylum is a human right. When she says that people should seek asylum in the first safe country that they come to, I hope that she will confirm that that is an aspect of the Government's hostile environment policy, not a legal or treaty requirement under any international obligation.

On top of all that, at what point can the UK ever be the first safe country, given that this island is surrounded by water? What are the routes by which the United Kingdom could be the first safe country in which a displaced asylum seeker arrived?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman misses a fundamental point about the asylum system and the whole issue of people who come to the country who are not genuine asylum seekers—who are masquerading as asylum seekers.

Patrick Grady: You don't know that.

Priti Patel: We do know it, actually. There are many cases.

There also has to be a recognition—this shows how detached the hon. Gentleman is from the real world—that we cannot have a policy that we can accommodate everyone. Let me play back a bit of EU rhetoric and language to him with the concept of burden share, which is why we seek to work with our counterparts, co-operate with other countries and continue to work in a constructive manner on returns agreements. We also seek to change our laws so that individuals are not constantly using the appeals process and the UK legal aid system to frustrate the Government's ability to remove people from our country who have no legal basis to stay.

I really think that the hon. Gentleman misses the point, particularly at a time when we know that there is a major global migration crisis. We have to find collective solutions to the problem, not just take the ideological approach that he is taking.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday was a very sad day. All of us will have been moved after seeing the reports. As I put my children to bed yesterday, I just thought about the conditions that that poor child went through.

We cannot allow the situation to be exploited by those who are pushing the anti-immigration agenda. I welcome the Home Secretary saying that she will look at all options and that she is having operational and diplomatic discussions to bring down the people smugglers. I also welcome her comment about looking at safe routes, but will she please look at another option: providing a humanitarian visa scheme, so that people do not have to get on these boats? They are seeking safety and refuge for their family. That is another option that the Home Secretary could look at.

Priti Patel: There are lots of options that we could all look at, but we need the legal frameworks as well. That is why I am bringing forward the Nationality and Borders Bill.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The tragedy in the channel draws into sharp focus an issue on which we have no doubt about the Home Secretary's determined intentions. They are illustrated by her borders Bill, which will go some way towards fixing a broken asylum system that is gamed by traffickers, economic migrants and rights lawyers. She needs to go further, however. That is why the Common Sense Group of MPs has written to her saying that we need to disrupt the criminal gangs, process claims offshore and turn boats around in the channel, as the law allows us to do. People who voted to take back control have every right to ask the question: "If you cannot protect the integrity of the borders, what can you control?"

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend will know what is in the Bill. He mentions offshoring and third countries; all those options are under consideration, and our new plan for immigration covers those areas. He is absolutely right in his principal point, which is why we are determined. We will not cease after the measures that we have already announced, but look to augment and enhance some of them. With the state of crisis that we are seeing, with global migration issues right now and with the appalling loss of life that we have seen, it is incumbent on everyone—Governments, law enforcement, border controls and all the various agencies—to come together to stop the awful trade of human trafficking.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for the content and tone with which she delivered her statement. Does she agree that in dealing with these criminal gangs of people smugglers, we are dealing in every sense with the modern equivalent of the slave traders of yore? Will she ensure that the full force and diligence of the intelligence services and security services, working with their counterparts in friendly states, are brought together to address this terrible challenge?

To prevent further such tragedies as we saw yesterday, can my right hon. Friend see any reason to object to processing asylum claims at all British embassies, so that those who have a successful claim, who are the significant majority of those arriving by boat, can come

here in a legal and humane way once asylum has been granted, rather than risking their lives just for the chance to file paperwork in the first place?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend makes important and valid points. First and foremost, I agree that we are seeing a modern-day slave trade—there is no question about that. That is why, as he says, we are using the full force of our intelligence, security and law enforcement partners and agencies, not just in the UK or in France, but upstream. He will be very familiar with the footprint that the Government have, particularly in other countries upstream and in places such as Africa, where there is a great deal of work to stop the smuggling of people and the human trafficking that have taken place.

Processing outside the United Kingdom is very much part of the process that we are looking at: having safe and legal routes, but also creating the right kind of parameters and working with many of the humanitarian aid agencies that my right hon. Friend will be familiar with, which have led many of the safe and legal routes and resettlement schemes around the world.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): May I add my voice to those who have sent their condolences to the families and loved ones of those who died in this unspeakable tragedy?

Last night, I tuned into the BBC 10 o'clock news to get the latest on this terrible disaster. I was absolutely appalled when a presenter informed me that around 30 "migrants" had drowned. Migrants do not drown; people drown. Men, women and children drown. Will the Secretary of State join me in asking the BBC news editorial team and any other news outlet thinking of using that term to reflect on their use of such dehumanising language and afford these poor people the respect that they deserve?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman has made a reasonable point about the language that is being used. We see a lot and we hear a lot, and even during the Afghanistan operations, such as Operation Pitting, I heard a great deal of what seemed to me to be inappropriate language about people who were fleeing. So yes, I will do that.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I think that people in Wycombe would expect the Government to act with absolute resolve to get a grip on this problem, and also with compassion to save lives and look after people. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that that is her policy—to look after people, but to get a grip on the problem?

Priti Patel: I can absolutely reassure my hon. Friend, but I think that the approach we are taking is more than "grip". We have just been speaking about language, and "grip" is quite a simplistic word given the complexity of this issue. It is a very complicated issue, and it requires action in a plethora of areas. Humanity and decency are crucial, however, and while I will not labour the point, this brings us back to the question of how people are treated when they come to our country, how we accommodate them and how we support them. This is what we want to change with the Nationality and Borders Bill, because we can do things better. Our system is broken, and it is incumbent on us to apply a range of skills, experience and knowledge to provide a better system.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is truly heartbreaking to think of the lives, the hopes and the talents extinguished by the sea in that journey to our shores—a journey that the Home Secretary has characterised as unnecessary. Let me gently say to her that the men, women and children who got into that boat clearly did not think it was unnecessary, and we see more boats arriving today. Will she acknowledge that her policies are not working, that vulnerable people are paying the price, and that what we need are the safe, secure and fair routes into this country that she has failed to put in place?

Priti Patel: That is exactly what the Nationality and Borders Bill does.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I support my right hon. Friend's pursuit of all long-term options—including offshore processing, which I think will play an important part—but does she accept that in the short term we will see more such tragedies unless we can agree a strategy with the French? It is in the gift of the President of France to bring this to an end now. That will require more action by the French, but it must be in our mutual interests, because the more people cross the channel, the more people will come to France.

Priti Patel: My hon. right Friend is absolutely right, hence the discussions that took place between the Prime Minister and President Macron last night. We have been assiduous and forthright in making these points to our counterparts in France over the past two years. Members have heard about the offers that we presented to President Macron, the Interior Minister and the whole machinery of the French Government. We urge them to take up those offers. They may not be perfect, but that is not the point. We need to deploy every single tool that we have to save lives and to prevent the loss of life, and that is effectively what this is now about.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This is absolutely tragic: 27 people, including children and a pregnant woman, desperate for a safe future, were killed while being exploited. It is nothing short of murder.

Two years ago, the Foreign Affairs Committee concluded that closing down safe routes drives people into the hands of people smugglers. Will the Home Secretary immediately withdraw her dangerous Nationality and Borders Bill, which does just that, and put in place safe routes of passage to avoid more tragedies?

Priti Patel: The answer is no, because the Nationality and Borders Bill does create safe and legal routes.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): At the end of her statement, my right hon. Friend said that crossing the channel in a small boat was illegal. Would that it were, but it is not illegal, as was confirmed by the Crown Prosecution Service on 8 July. What would make it illegal would be passing into law my Illegal Immigration (Offences) Bill, whose Second Reading is due to take place tomorrow. I should be grateful if my right hon. Friend would agree to meet me to discuss the content of that Bill and how it will contribute to what we all want to see, which is an end to this vile trade.

Priti Patel: I certainly think that more needs to be done, so Ministers would be happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): On Monday I shared with the Home Secretary my concern about the French authorities potentially turning a blind eye to activities on the northern coast of France that were putting some of the most vulnerable people at risk. Sadly, this tragedy emerged yesterday. It is encouraging that five people were arrested overnight, but those five people were active yesterday, last week, last month and probably last year. I appreciate that diplomacy is required, but may I urge my right hon. Friend to make every effort to bring together the responses to this new-found urgency, and to work across Government and across authorities to ensure that all possible action is taken to combat the actions of these people smugglers?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is, of course, absolutely correct. Arrests have been made. It is not for me to comment in detail on the type of arrests or the type of work that is taking place, but I can assure my right hon. Friend and the House that, certainly for the last few years, the level of intelligence-sharing, both in the UK and in France and beyond—for we go much further than France when it comes to intelligence-sharing—has been pivotal to arrests, convictions and smashing up gangs. A great deal of outstanding work has been done. I may have alluded on Monday to a very big case in which an Albanian criminal was prosecuted. Such outcomes are not always reported, but collectively there have been some very significant arrests and prosecutions.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I believe that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has written to the Home Secretary seeking an urgent meeting regarding her recent attacks on Scottish councils and their responsibilities to asylum seekers. I urge her to take up that offer, so that a few home truths about the situation can be relayed to her. Does she agree that now is also the time, in the face of an appalling tragedy, to stop referring to this as simply a French or a UK issue and instead to address it as an international or global issue? Does she also agree that it is vital for disputes over Northern Ireland and fishing to be treated entirely separately from working together to find a joint solution?

Priti Patel: I take issue with the hon. Lady's comments. Let me say first that the Immigration Minister met representatives of COSLA on Monday and these issues did not arise. Secondly, I have never said that migration is a UK-France issue; I have always said that it is a global issue. It is no use pointing to my colleagues; the hon. Lady was putting the question directly to me. I have always maintained that this is a global crisis, and I have always been proactive in speaking to my counterparts in EU member states and other countries. I have even hosted meetings with them. I think that that context is equally important.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): This is the most awful tragedy, and I want to add my condolences to all who have been affected by it. However, it is surely right to point out that the Home Office has failed to get a grip on this issue for far too long. In a week when the Home Affairs Committee has recommended that the Windrush compensation scheme should be removed from the Home Office because of issues of competency, is it not time that this matter was also removed from the Home Office and given to the Cabinet Office, and is it not time for a cross-Government response?

Priti Patel: Let me say for the benefit of the House that there is a cross-governmental response to this.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): While we do not know the details or nationalities of those who sadly lost their lives in the channel yesterday, we do know that very large numbers of people who are refugees from the oppressive, brutal regime in Iran are desperately seeking to cross the channel to come to this country. Will my right hon. Friend consider the example set by the Albanian Government, who moved, satisfactorily, Camp Liberty from Iran into Camp Ashraf? That is a model for how to treat people who are refugees in a country as close as possible to the Iranian border. Perhaps we can somehow set up camps and other opportunities for people fleeing from those regimes rather than their being forced to make this perilous journey.

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes a highly relevant and important point. In terms of global migration crises, we need only to think back to not that long ago, in 2014-15, when our internationally supported policy and approach to the Syrian crisis was to keep people within the region, where we worked with—and are still working with—counterparts and colleagues in Jordan and neighbouring countries in the region. A great deal of work took place there. The sadness of all this is that it took a migration crisis and the tragedy of the loss of life for the international community to convene, coalesce and come together in that way. All I can say right now is that the British Government and I are working night and day to bring partners together to recognise that no one country can solve this on its own. That is why we need stronger co-operation across the board so that we can address these issues together.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): The people of east Kent are horrified and deeply upset by what the Chief Rabbi this morning called an “unspeakable tragedy” happening on our shores. We should be ashamed, too, that among the dead was a soldier who had served alongside British armed forces personnel and who reportedly felt unable to wait any longer for help to come here. I think the Home Secretary would agree that he was not an illegal migrant. Will the Government please act not simply to repel those human beings desperate enough to risk this incredibly dangerous crossing but to immediately open the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme and safe family reunion routes to prevent more deaths?

Priti Patel: I refer the hon. Lady to my earlier comments on both those points.

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): We have seen, with Afghanistan and Hong Kong, that the British people consistently react with incredible generosity of spirit towards people who are fleeing persecution, oppression and conflict. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the safe and legal routes to which she has referred consistently and which are central and integral to the Nationality and Borders Bill are vital and that they have to be the only viable route into the UK, not only to preserve life but to retain the support of the British public and the integrity of our asylum system, which is what we all want to see?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; that is spot on. In the changes that the Government have brought in, we are very clear about the legal routes and also about the issues. We are open and honest about the fact that for 20 years our asylum system has remained in aspic. It has not been touched or reformed, and it needs reforming. With that, we have set up resettlement routes, including those for Hong Kongers and BNOs. Look at the way that scheme has worked—it has been phenomenal, and it is incredibly moving to see how people have been resettled across the United Kingdom. The same applies to Afghanistan, and there are many other schemes including those for Syrian refugees. We need to build on those successes and do the right thing for people who are fleeing persecution. This is about a bond of trust with the British public. They are warm and generous and we need to deliver for them, but we cannot be walked all over by other countries that are not stepping up and taking responsibility. That is why we have to continue the co-operation with all our neighbours.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her commitment to finding a solution for this, and it is clear that she is doing just that. My heart aches at the lost lives that have become a reality today, and on behalf of my party, the Democratic Unionist party, I convey my sincere sympathies to all those who grieve for the loved ones they have lost. Will the Minister consider utilising private patrol companies offering services with boats ready and equipped to help patrol the sea, such as one called Osiris Marine Solutions that has emailed me to highlight its facilities? Is there a role for private enterprise in helping in the fight against these dangerous crossings?

Priti Patel: The answer is yes, there is a role. The Home Office has been tasked to look at private sector companies and support. In fact, I put the offer on the table to my French counterpart this morning, not for the first time, to have other contractors join the collective effort.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Against the background of British troops being sent to Poland to help to secure the border with Belarus, can the Home Secretary confirm and clarify the basis of her broad and generous offer to the French? Has she offered Border Force cutters to work close to shore off the French coast in conjunction with the French, and has she offered the deployment of British troops and UK police, if necessary under French command, to operate on French beaches?

Priti Patel: Yes, I have.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): First, may I commend the Home Secretary on her robust response to the Scottish National party? The London Borough of Hillingdon is currently buckling under the strain of looking after around 10% of all the refugees in the whole country, including large numbers who have been bussed up from Dover. Almost none of those people have a route to Scotland. Recognising the importance of safe and legal routes and the comments made by the French Foreign Minister about some of the pull factors in the UK, will my right hon. Friend consider what steps could be taken to remove the grant of asylum from those whose claim is subsequently shown to have been bogus?

Priti Patel: I would like to put on record my thanks to the London Borough of Hillingdon and to many other local authorities across the country, although they are predominantly in London. London is feeling the pressure in terms of accommodation, hotels and housing. My hon. Friend is right in his suggestions for solutions and working together. This is exactly why we are looking to reform the system through the Nationality and Borders Bill. We have to have that differentiation.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): Lives are tragically being lost in the channel, and the British people want the gangs to be smashed, the crossings to be stopped and people to be processed in the nearest country. Again and again, the Opposition have voted against our measures in the Nationality and Borders Bill to cut down on human trafficking via small boats, and the shadow Home Secretary has called our proposals “unconscionable”. In my area, the local Labour party and the Lib Dems—none of whom I see here today—are even campaigning against an immigration removal centre for foreign criminals and failed asylum seekers. Does the Home Secretary agree that Labour’s failure to support the necessary legislation shows that, when the chips are down, they are not only failing to understand the views of the British people but, tragically, failing to protect those being exploited by criminal gangs whose callous and criminal behaviour means that people are being left to die in the channel?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes some important points. We have removal centres for very good and strong reasons. They are for people with no legal right to remain in our country, and we have to put them in the removal centres as part of the process to move them on. The fundamental point here is the reforms that we

are trying to bring in, which are being thwarted by the Opposition. By preventing these changes and reforms, they are playing into the hands of the people smugglers and those who are being put into the hands of the traffickers.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): And finally, the price for patience and perseverance goes to Duncan Baker.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. That will teach me to be last in.

The situation yesterday was an absolute tragedy, but the Home Secretary has made it absolutely clear that there is no single silver bullet to fix the problem. Does she agree that there are, broadly, three huge areas to cover? The first is international co-operation, which has to be there if we are to work with other countries. Secondly, domestic legislation has to be put in place, which is what we are doing through the Nationality and Borders Bill, to fix our borders and the broken asylum system. Lastly, we need the toughest possible measures and surveillance to crack down on the criminality of those gangs that are aiding and abetting the situation every day.

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I thank him for his comments. He has summed up the totality of the challenge that confronts us all. It has existed for a long time, and that is exactly why we are attempting to fix the broken system by tackling the issue of the gangs at source, by going upstream, by using intelligence, by fixing the system here in the United Kingdom and of course by our continued work with our counterparts around the world.

Point of Order

2.9 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yesterday, during the urgent question on Bulb going into special administration, the Business Secretary told my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), after refusing to answer a question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), the shadow Business Secretary:

“There is no Government bail-out”.—[*Official Report*, 24 November 2021; Vol. 704, c. 358.]

Yet we learned from a court hearing on the same day, and indeed on the front page of *The Daily Telegraph* and other papers today, that the taxpayer is on the hook for as much as £1.7 billion as a result of this Government’s failure to properly regulate the energy market.

I ask for your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it right and proper for a Minister to say one thing to this House and another thing to the courts? Do you have any guidance on how the Business Secretary can be brought back to this House to explain why he has misled it in his answers to yesterday’s urgent question. [*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Although I am not listening to sedentary comments, I do not need to be reminded. I hope the hon. Gentleman will come back to the Dispatch Box and find other words for his last sentence. I am quite sure that no right hon. Member of this House could have misled it.

Dr Whitehead: Thank you for your guidance on this matter, Madam Deputy Speaker. Of course I withdraw the question of misleading the House. I hope the Business Secretary will come to the House in due course to explain his comments.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman. That is a perfectly polite and in-order question. However, it is not a point of order for the Chair, as I think he knows. Ministers are, of course, responsible for the content of their speeches and answers at the Dispatch Box, and the Chair has no control over such matters. If, however, he wishes to take the matter further and require the Secretary of State to come back to the House to revisit the matter on which he is in disagreement, I suggest that he visits the Clerks in the Table Office for advice on how he might go about that. I am also sure the Treasury Bench will have heard—

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly) *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have assent from the Minister who is now at the Dispatch Box. The Treasury Bench has heard what the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) said, and I trust that his concerns will be brought to the attention of the appropriate Secretary of State and that the matter will be revisited and, if necessary, clarified. I trust that that satisfies him.

Backbench Business

Freedom of Religion or Belief: 40th Anniversary of UN Declaration

2.12 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered freedom of religion or belief and the 40th anniversary of the UN Declaration on the elimination of religious intolerance.

I start by thanking the many colleagues in the Chamber for attending today’s debate, and the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for it. I signpost to colleagues that I hope to speak for no more than 20 minutes.

MPs have effectively challenged successive Governments over the years to increase engagement on freedom of religion or belief—FORB—and, indeed, on FORB for all, whatever one’s religion or if one has no religion at all. Parliamentarians have raised the importance of recognising FORB as a UK human rights concern, and it is only as I have worked internationally on this subject following my appointment last December as the Prime Minister’s special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, that I have come to understand in the international context the important role that our parliamentarians play and have played over many years in their cross-party commitment to this subject. In this we are showing global leadership.

I was told by those arranging a conference on FORB in another not-so-small country that they struggled to get just three elected representatives to speak about it on a panel, but our all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, under the tireless leadership of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), is one of the largest and most active APPGs, with 143 members.

One of the three key elements of my mandate as the Prime Minister’s special envoy, as listed on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office website, is:

“brings together UK efforts to promote religious tolerance abroad”.

So it is right that I engage with the APPG, although I am also a vice-chair, and I thank the stakeholders who facilitated the appointment of a strong, indeed recently strengthened, group of staff to support the APPG. Just yesterday, together we hosted an event here in Parliament attended by very many MPs, and I thank them all for attending, not least the COP26 President, my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma).

The event marked Red Wednesday, the day dedicated to shining a light on the persecution of Christians across the world and to standing up for the faith and freedom of all. It is a day when we light up public buildings, such as the FCDO, in red to remember in particular those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for their beliefs. This year, for the first time, Lambeth Palace was lit up. I thank the Archbishop of Canterbury for that and for his concern for FORB.

Yesterday we heard in person from victims of FORB abuses about the suffering of the Hazaras in Afghanistan and of the widespread persecution of the Baha’is. As today also marks the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, we were reminded of the

[Fiona Bruce]

double jeopardy faced by many women across the world. They are persecuted and discriminated against for their faith and their gender, which was articulated so harrowingly in the report published yesterday by Aid to the Church in Need, “Hear Her Cries.” Indeed, after reading that report, I simply had to sit down and cry.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am a huge admirer of my hon. Friend and of the work she does in this field. I am trying to help a Hazara Afghan woman who successfully got into Pakistan undocumented, but even now she has to remain in hiding lest our Pakistani “friends and allies” discover her and send her back to the tender mercies of the Taliban. Is that not a good illustration of what my hon. Friend is talking about?

Fiona Bruce: Very much so. If my right hon. Friend would like to give me more details, I will pass them on appropriately.

Through the APPG, and inspired by my newly appointed deputy special envoy, David Burrowes, whom I thank for his wise and unstinting work on FORB over many years, this year we have initiated a prisoners of conscience programme that enables those across the world who are imprisoned simply for what they believe to be virtually adopted by an individual MP, who commits to ongoing advocacy on their behalf. With the prisoners’ full agreement, the aim is to highlight their cases and the situation of all who are unjustly imprisoned for their faith or belief. I invite colleagues to offer to partner by contacting the APPG.

Through my parliamentary office, I am also launching a campaign titled “End the Persecution.” I invite all parliamentary colleagues to contact my office for the toolkit that will be available for MPs to use in their constituency to hold meetings and raise awareness among the wider public of the egregious infringements of FORB across the world, of which the public are still often unaware, so that they in turn can become ambassadors. In particular, we want to encourage the next generation to champion FORB, which is why the “End the Persecution” campaign will have a focus on creating young FORB ambassadors.

Along with the work of my parliamentary office and my work with the FCDO, my role comprises three legs of a stool: Parliament, the public—by working with civil society and engaging with non-governmental organisations—and the FCDO. My parliamentary office has conducted intensive deep dives over the past few months into countries where violations of FORB are egregious or of key concern. In effect, these have been virtual visits, as in-person visits have been impractical for much of this year due to the pandemic. We focused on a number of countries and spoke to dozens of witnesses who provided us with first-hand evidence of the concerns about FORB in their country. This has provided invaluable feedback to the FCDO, and the deep dives have helped to inform advocacy. In recognition of that, I am pleased that some FCDO desk officers have started to observe our deep dives.

We learned from the personal experiences of those on the ground in Nigeria, Myanmar, Eritrea and Afghanistan. I will briefly present some of the shocking things that have been shared. In Nigeria, marginalisation and persecution of religious minorities has in many areas

become institutionalised, from girls being forcibly married and converted to people being denied public office because of their faith. In Myanmar, human rights organisations report that since the military coup and the pandemic, those experiencing persecution due to their religion or belief have been increasingly targeted, denied access to key services and occasionally forced into unjust arrest, where they are tortured horrifically.

In Eritrea, those arrested are reportedly held in makeshift detentions. Many prisoners are held in shipping containers, where they can be at risk of being burnt to death in the heat of the day and then frozen at night—many go mad with the suffering. Others are held in holes in the ground. Upwards of 20,000 people are held in those camps, and many are beaten, including pregnant women beaten around the womb.

In Afghanistan, we spoke directly to members of several religious communities, including Christians, Sikhs, Muslims and Hazaras, and the non-governmental organisations supporting them. Those who do not submit to the beliefs of the Taliban are frequently at risk of losing their life, and some have lost their lives. We heard of some 1,000 Hazaras who had been thrown out of their homes and were wandering the countryside, with a dozen or so found by others beheaded at the roadside. Relocation and resettlement schemes urgently need to include religious minorities. As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), refugees who have fled to neighbouring countries continue to be vulnerable.

I turn now to the Truro review. The second part of my published mandate is to

“support implementing the Bishop of Truro’s recommendations on Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) support for persecuted Christians around the world”.

I should say that this is FCDO work not just for persecuted Christians, but for all those who are persecuted around the world, whatever their faith or none. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), the former Foreign Secretary, for initiating this review, and him and the Bishop of Truro for their continued strong commitment to FORB. Both of them have been of great support to me in my role. To oversee the implementation of the review, I hold regular meetings with officials and with the Bishop to ensure that the 22 recommendations will be implemented in full, both in word and in spirit, by the deadline of early next July. I am pleased that the FCDO indicates that delivery of more than half the 22 recommendations has occurred and that good progress is being made on the remainder, and that we are on track to deliver them all by July 2022 in line with our manifesto commitment.

Let me highlight a few of the recommendations. The last time we debated FORB in this place, concerned was expressed by a number of colleagues, on a cross-party basis, about the support for my role. Recommendation 6 was for

“suitable instruments / roles to monitor and implement”

the Truro approach,

“establishing permanently, and in perpetuity, the role of Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief with appropriate resources and authority to work across FCO departments supported by a Director General level champion for FoRB.”

I am pleased to report to the House that since those concerns were expressed there has been significant movement to provide more dedicated official support for the role, not least through the appointment of our

former colleague David Burrowes as deputy special envoy. Together, we can press on to ensure we make the most of the opportunities of the next eight months to build on the Truro review progress.

On recommendation 2, this year FORB was included in the G7 communiqué for the first time, laying the foundations for further collaboration within this group. Recommendation 8 was on a global human rights sanctions regime: In March, the Foreign Secretary announced sanctions, alongside the US, Canada and the EU, against perpetrators of gross human rights violations against Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang. I look forward to further sanctions specifically targeted at individuals who violate FORB, as that is much needed.

On recommendation 20, we have used our position on the UN Security Council to raise awareness of the persecution of religious minorities in conflict. Lord Ahmad hosted a successful Arria meeting in the margins of the Security Council in March.

On recommendation 14, freedom of religion or belief is a key theme of the annual human rights and democracy reports and will continue to be so in future. I would like to see greater integration of FORB with the reports on other human rights, as they are so interrelated; I think for example of the right to associate, freedom of speech and other rights, such as media freedoms.

Recommendation 11 was on religion training, and earlier this year, along with Lord Ahmad, I launched the core training unit on “Religion for International Engagement”, recommended for all FCDO staff and essential for FCDO officials in relevant diplomatic posts so that they can engage more informedly with religious communities in the countries in which they serve. During 2021, I wrote to every UK diplomatic post across the world—almost 200 of them—asking about our diplomatic engagements on FORB in the countries where they serve, and I was greatly encouraged at the clear increased understanding of and interest in engagement on FORB by our embassy staff. There is more to do, but there is no doubt that since the publication of the Truro report in 2019 this engagement by our diplomatic staff has markedly increased. Having said that, there is always more that we can do, and it is important that the religious training modules do not remain on the shelf—or, more accurately, in a portal that is not accessed by FCDO officials—but are accessed, with their understanding embedded in FCDO thinking.

There is still a way to go before FORB is at the heart of FCDO thinking in the way that other rights are, as was evidenced by the FCDO outcome delivery plan 2021-22, which was published in July, when FORB received slight or, some may say, scant reference. I am pleased, however, that on discussing this issue with our new Foreign Secretary, who took up the post after that date, I found that she has personal support for FORB, and she indicated to me that that document does need review. I look forward to working on this, and I thank the Foreign Secretary for her particularly strong statement for FORB this week when announcing the dates of a major international ministerial conference to be hosted by the UK on 5 and 6 July 2022, in London. She said:

“There are still too many places around the world where practising one’s religion, or having no religion, can cost you your freedom or even your life. The challenges to these freedoms continue to grow in different shapes and forms around the world. So we must act...to help ensure that everyone, everywhere can follow their own religion or belief.”

I am pleased that the Foreign Secretary used the word “act”. One of my priorities is to ensure that we move from awareness raising to action—to making a real difference in the lives of people who are losing their jobs, education, homes, livelihoods, families, freedom, access to justice and even life itself, simply on account of what they believe. These people are being discriminated against, marginalised, beaten, threatened, tortured and killed.

On recommendation 9, the John Bunyan Fund was founded as a result of the Truro review, and we have used it this year to fund research to understand the intersecting vulnerabilities experienced by those who are a member of a religious minority and are living in poverty in the shadows of covid-19. I commend the excellent research by CREID—the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development—which was funded by the John Bunyan Fund and was launched at an event I attended last week. It is helping to raise awareness of how the pandemic has affected the daily lives of religious minorities in India and Nigeria. I commend it to parliamentary colleagues, many of whom are passionately concerned about FORB but may not be aware of this work. It is an excellent example of something I constantly experience, which is that some really good FORB work is being done by FCDO officials but parliamentary colleagues are mostly unaware of it.

I see it as a key part of my role, in fulfilling my mandate to bring together UK efforts, to initiate better working together. This is about enabling all of us, whether officials or parliamentarians, to cross the road that is Whitehall more often. It is only a few yards between the Foreign Office’s King Charles Street building and the Houses of Commons and Lords.

Recommendation 17 required the initiation of a working group to include civil society organisations and is one of the success stories to have come out of the Truro recommendations to date. A roundtable, the UK FoRB Forum, was formed and has gone from strength to strength. Just a year ago, it had 45 member representatives; there are now nearly 100, including NGOs, civil society organisations, charities and academics. I meet the member representatives for one morning monthly, and those meetings are proving to be a powerful opportunity for them to bring grassroots information and concerns from the countries where they work, often bravely and with limited resources. Such engagement increasingly has the potential to inform Government action and policy development. It is a priority for me to take back to officials the information shared at such meetings.

The Bishop of Truro chaired the UK FoRB Forum for the first year, and it is now well served by the new, elected chair, the founder-president of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Mervyn Thomas. It is my pleasure to work with him. We have only just begun to understand the potential of what the roundtable can contribute to championing FORB and challenging its abuses. Again, it indicates the global leadership that the UK is demonstrating. It is not too much to say that I believe that, along with the work of the APPG and the engagement of parliamentarians, we can and must share such best practice at next year’s ministerial conference, to inspire others in countries across the world where, I have come to learn, perhaps only one or two parliamentarians champion FORB, or where NGOs do not have the opportunity for such collaborative joint working.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech and I thank her for her great endeavours in her role, which are making such a difference. Could the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association work with UK parliamentarians in the near future to reach out to other parliamentarians on freedom of religious belief internationally?

Fiona Bruce: I thank the hon. Lady for her engagement on this issue. She makes an excellent point; indeed, the reception that I hosted just yesterday, on Red Wednesday, was held in the rooms of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. I am sure there will be other ways in which we can work collaboratively together.

Let me turn to the third aspect of my mandate on the FCDO website, which is the importance of my working “with the members of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance to raise awareness of cases of particular concern” and to advocate

“for the rights of people worldwide who are discriminated against or persecuted for their faith or belief”.

I cannot overestimate the importance and the strengthening of the 33-country International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance over the past year. It was founded only in February 2020, with a handful of countries—one of the founders being the UK—but has now grown to 33 countries. As a founding member, the UK is a member of the steering group, at which I seek opportunities to raise instances of the suppression or threatening of FORB. I have been able to take information from my deep dives there.

Within the past year it has been my privilege to initiate an alliance statement on standing in solidarity with people of all faiths and beliefs in Myanmar who played prominent roles in the anti-coup movement. It has been of great encouragement to people suffering in Myanmar to know that they are not forgotten by the world in their fight for freedom. Following that statement, I was particularly moved by a letter I received from Cardinal Bo, the leader of the Catholic Church in Myanmar, in which he said that the statement

“was a very important message of support for religious leaders in Myanmar”.

It was also my privilege to help to draft the alliance statement on the importance of protection of religious minorities in Afghanistan and, more recently, one to highlight the ongoing plight of Yazidi women, more than 2,700 of whom are still missing.

We need to make sure that such statements lead to action. Encouragingly, that was the case with the alliance statement on Afghanistan. Not only was it well received by the White House, which commended it for “plugging a gap”—at that point, no other international statement had highlighted the risks to religious minorities in Afghanistan—but work on the statement led to action. It helped to trigger the alliance country representatives from Brazil and the US to talk to one another and recognise that one could provide the visas and the other an aircraft to provide refuge to 193 members of religious minority groups fleeing Afghanistan.

I take an active role on the alliance’s advisory council of experts, and on its education working group, along with Robert Rehak, the Czech envoy representative. The working group aims to promote an understanding

of FORB among young people, including through school textbooks, university programmes and more informal settings, so that they in turn can inspire the next generation to respect other people’s beliefs in communities around the world. The alliance wants to help to reverse the increase in the abuses of FORB around the world, so the education working group is helping to share ways, tools and best practice, not least from the UK, through the excellent work of the British Council—yet another way in which the UK is showing FORB leadership—on how to teach the next generation on FORB.

Going forward, it will be my continued privilege to work with an increasingly effective and growing alliance. I recently met with our Commonwealth envoy Jo Lomas to discuss how we can work together to encourage more Commonwealth countries to join. To coincide with this week’s anniversary of the statement, we held our virtual 2021 ministerial forum.

Speaking of the ministerial, I am delighted to have played perhaps some small part in helping to secure the UK’s hosting of the next in-person ministerial conference in July. The Prime Minister announced the principal of the conference in the integrated review earlier this year and will draw on all the UK’s FORB work to build stronger global partnerships and agree common goals on FORB for all. It will be a major international gathering and an opportunity for us as a nation to support FORB as a right for all and to agree concrete action with partners internationally. The conference will be supplemented in June and July by an active FORB fringe of no less than 100 events in and around Parliament and beyond, both in-person and virtual, to be organised by my parliamentary office and the FORB APPG, with the already enthusiastic support of many from civil society. Members should contact my office or the APPG to get involved.

I am also working closely with our US counterparts, who intend to bring international grassroots FORB champions for a follow-up conference on 7 July. It is critical that the alliance membership is fully engaged in and integrated into the official thinking as we plan the UK-hosted 2022 ministerial conference, because the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance and the international FORB conferences, which now go back some four years—next year’s will be the fifth—have the same inspirational roots.

In my role, I am aware that no single individual can possibly address the problem of the scale that FORB entails. We have to work together: faith leaders, academics, grassroots organisations, parliamentarians, officials and, of course, Ministers and the Prime Ministers all have a role to play. Next year, 2022, looks to be an exciting year for the UK to play our part and demonstrate our global leadership on FORB.

It is quite right that I have been overwhelmingly positive about the UK’s work on FORB this year, but before I finish, may I leave the deputy Foreign Secretary—the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, my right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly)—whom I thank for kindly attending this debate, along with the Leader of the House, with the following thoughts? Further work is needed to achieve the ambition of embedding FORB in the FCDO. One way that will be illustrated is through clearer advocacy and protection for religious minorities facing persecution in places such as Nigeria and Pakistan.

As the Bishop of Truro's review says, we still need to see FORB as more

“central to FCO operation and culture”—

of course, it was still the FCO when the review was published in 2019. The review also said that a commitment to it should be enshrined

“in strategic and operational guidelines.”

We also need to demonstrate that with sanctions tailored specifically to target FORB violators. We need to more effectively construct and impact FCDO work upstream to prevent mass atrocities with effective early-warning mechanisms. We need to see the vulnerabilities of religious minorities more clearly applied as a criterion for the distribution of humanitarian aid and relief.

We need to see quicker responses to individual cases of injustice and inhumane treatment raised by MPs and NGOs. In too many cases of individual abuses across the world, including many that I have raised, there has been only a general response, such as that for freedom of religion and belief, which is

“a key human rights priority for our Government”.

Where we provide more tailored responses, we can see real results. I was so encouraged by what happened after I highlighted concerns about four Christians in Somaliland, one of whom was a young woman imprisoned with her tiny baby. I heard that our diplomatic officials attended the court hearing, after which they were released. One will never know for sure what impact our engagement had, but we should not underestimate the UK's soft power in influencing freedom of religion or belief.

Where we cannot take action on individual cases or in particular countries, it would be helpful to have clearer reasoning as to why. Going forward to 2022, I would welcome a meeting with each FCDO Minister on their individual country responsibilities to help to promote mutual understanding and joint working on FORB. I thank Lord Ahmad, our Minister for Human Rights, for his strong commitment to collaborative working with me and I look forward to that being increasingly effective going forward.

More effective working will see my role as envoy given the support required to fulfil my mandate, which, until recent changes, was limited and in some cases lacking. Too much energy was wasted on internal issues rather than addressing the needs of the vulnerable. Indeed, there needs to be a fundamental discussion about the role of special envoys—indeed, all envoys. We need to examine how this relatively recently enhanced role, certainly in terms of numbers, fits into the mechanisms of Government, and how we can work most effectively alongside Ministers. That would help officials to work more effectively too.

There is a substantial piece of work to be done here, and I would welcome meetings with the Minister to develop thinking on this further. I end as I started—indeed, as I have highlighted throughout almost all of this speech—by thanking my parliamentary colleagues and indeed all I have worked with. So much progress has been made on FORB this year, and there is so much more we can look forward to in 2022, as we continue to exhibit global leadership, championing FORB for the UK, helping to promote countries to become more stable, less prone to insecurity threats and more able to

trade freely and to facilitate and release the potential of all their citizens. I close with some words from the Bishop of Truro:

“We cannot just see FoRB as a side-bar or special interest issue. It bears upon some deeply serious issues in today's world: issues with which governments...should be hugely concerned, issues such as trade, poverty, security, racism, women's rights and the very right to life itself.”

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I had hoped to manage without a time limit, but I think that it would be safer if I impose a time limit of six minutes for Back-Bench speeches.

2.42 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce).

I am delighted once again to participate in a debate on freedom of religion or belief.

Sadly, such debates to highlight the persecution of peoples based on which God they choose to believe in or which religion they choose to draw comfort from are as necessary today as they ever were. The persecution of any religious group is a fundamental breach of our basic freedoms. I wish to applaud the work of Open Doors, which works tirelessly to support persecuted Christians around the world while drawing up its annual World Watch List, launching this in the House of Commons every year to great interest and support from MPs across the House. At this launch every year, MPs have the opportunity to hear at first hand the harrowing testimony of those who have lived under these brutal regimes as Christians, as they bravely share the horror of the brutality that they have suffered and the desperate things that they have witnessed, which will be forever seared into their brains.

In the global scale of persecuting Christian minorities, at No.1 in 2021, we have North Korea, closely followed by Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya and Pakistan. These are countries where a person can be killed, forcibly converted as an alternative to death, and subject to institutional discrimination; where blasphemy laws encourage the targeting of all religious minorities; where young Christian girls can be forcibly married off; and where, during the pandemic, life-saving aid was withheld from Christians unless they converted to Islam. It is deeply disturbing and inexplicable that fewer than 1% of refugees that the UK accepts from Syria are Christian, despite the fact that they make up more than 10% of the Syrian population and are a persecuted minority. I hope the Minister will address that when he gets to his feet.

The list of despicable behaviour and practices carried out by, or sanctioned by, the state in such countries is completely unacceptable and must be wholeheartedly condemned. Earlier this year, I—alongside many of my colleagues across the House—was sickened to my stomach by the contents of the Open Doors report, “Destructive Lies”, which exposed the appalling persecution of Christians and Muslims in India.

The cover of that report bears the image of Preetha—not her real name—a pastor's wife in India. She was brutally beaten by Hindu extremists while praying with her husband and some friends. When she was taken unconscious to hospital, she was refused treatment because of her Christian faith.

[Patricia Gibson]

The report lifts the lid on vigilantism against Christians, which has been sanctioned by the government machinery, with even the Prime Minister of India himself staying stubbornly silent on the issue, as Christians are dehumanised, discriminated against, and subject to violence. There is no justice provided by the state through the courts or police, even despite public lynchings, with social media platforms apparently happy to host material that incites the targeting of religious minorities through mobs mobilising and discussing their plans on platforms publicly and visibly.

The international community must use every ounce of its diplomatic and economic weight and strain every sinew to do all it can to counter this appalling situation. In addition, it must establish a fact-finding commission on violence and other human rights violations against religious minorities in India, as the situation there appears to be especially grave. Furthermore, corporations, which own social media, urgently need to increase their moderators who can address specific local issues of discrimination, harassment and violence circulating on their platforms and apps in India. We know that this can be done as, in the US, Facebook has undertaken an overhaul of its algorithms and tripled the size of its moderation team to identify and address racialised and inciting speech against black groups in the US.

The recent report “Hear Her Cries” sets out harrowing case studies of the persecution of Christians in countries such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Pakistan, with the kidnapping, forced conversion and sexual victimisation of Christian women and girls. Indeed, in Pakistan, research suggests that Christians could comprise up to 70% of women and girls forcibly converted to marriage.

According to this year’s Open Doors report, the total number of Christians killed for their faith rose by 60% to 4,761, of which 3,530 were in Nigeria. During the pandemic, there have been reports of Nigerian families from several villages receiving only a sixth of the rations allocated to Muslim families, while in other countries where Christian persecution is rife, some Christian families had their ration cards torn up or were simply excluded from receiving covid-19 relief all together by the authorities, unless they denied their faith. Regimes and nations that attempt to dictate to people which God they should worship are regimes and nations that have no respect for basic fundamental human rights. The crushing of a minority faith is nothing more than a means of control—insidious control, over even which God people choose to worship. This barbaric persecution is evil.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Congleton, who was appointed special envoy for freedom of religion or belief last December, for bringing together UK efforts to promote religious tolerance abroad, and working on how the UK can protect and promote this fundamental freedom internationally. I know that this issue matters to her very much. I can say confidently that she will have the support of the SNP Benches as she seeks to address the appalling religious persecution that we see all too often around the world, and to help implement the Bishop of Truro’s recommendations on Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office support for persecuted Christians around the world.

2.49 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on her speech. I particularly follow her very good point about taking refugees from the camps in Syria. I have myself made the point to United Nations agencies that Christians, Yazidis and other minority groups in Syria are fearful of going to these camps because they are often bullied, and we are taking few minority groups from the camps.

The focus of this debate will be mainly on what is happening around the world, but I want to say a bit about our own country. Our country is noted for its tolerant attitude and freedom of religion, but we should be aware of focusing on the splinter in other people’s eyes and ignoring the beam in our own.

Most of us in this country—even religious people—have quite a relaxed view about our own teaching and follow a policy of “live and let live”, but for many years I have defended the rights of some religious groups that take a literal view of their teaching to be allowed space to practise their faith. I am thinking particularly of the orthodox Jewish community, some evangelical Christian communities such as the Plymouth Brethren, and observant Muslims who take a traditional view of their faith. Although we live in a tolerant and secular society, we should allow those people some space. There has been progress; I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and the Bishop of Truro on that. I also congratulate the Government on now being prepared to call out intolerance.

It is true that around the world, Muslims are persecuted. I am thinking particularly of Myanmar, the Uyghurs in China, and some low-level, casual persecution in India. But—this is the point that I want to make and it is one that people are often fearful of making in this place—overwhelmingly it is Christians who are being persecuted around the world. They are being persecuted or treated as second-class citizens in the Muslim world, and we have to be prepared to call this out.

We cannot just go on taking a completely even-handed attitude to this issue, by saying that freedom of religion is incredibly important, which of course it is, and that intolerance is terrible, which it is, but ignoring the fact that in every Muslim country—I would be happy to give way if somebody can prove me wrong—even if there is not outright persecution, Christians are second-class citizens. I am thinking of countries such as Egypt, which has a large and established Christian community, the Copts, who face all sorts of difficulties—for instance, if they want to build a new church. If there is an allegation of rape, or kidnapping of one of their children, they face difficulties with the police. Overwhelmingly, it is Christians who face this persecution.

We had a statement earlier about migrants and we feel strongly that we should help genuine asylum seekers, but some of us have again and again talked about genuine asylum seekers such as Maira Shahbaz in Pakistan—a 14-year-old girl who was kidnapped, raped, abducted and is still living in hiding. Has the Foreign Office really done enough to get that girl out and get her to a place of safe haven in our own country? We have to be prepared to take on some of our allies. I am thinking particularly of Pakistan, to which we give £300 million a year in aid. It is not just the fact that Christians and other minorities are second-class citizens there, but that

often the state, the courts and the police ignore the outright kidnapping and abduction of minority groups. It is a difficult argument for the Government to make. However, if the Foreign Office is not prepared to make that argument with our own allies—I am thinking of, for example, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Jordan and Egypt—then where are we going?

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, I really commend the latest report from Aid to the Church in Need—“Hear Her Cries”. Around the world, it is overwhelmingly women—particularly young women, and particularly in Muslim countries—who are the victims of either high-level persecution and terrorism at the hands of organisations like Boko Haram or low-level conditions in which they are second-class citizens, as in Egypt. There is widespread under-reporting and official denials of the scale of the problem. The research indicates that Christians make up 95% of women and girls held by Islamic extremists in Nigeria. As well as widespread under-reporting, there is fear of reporting abductions and rapes because of the shame that might accrue to the family.

This is a useful debate. I applaud the progress that we have made with the Foreign Office. I applaud what my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton is doing and I want her to be given more resources by the Foreign Office. We have to call out persecution where we find it and stop Christians being considered second-class citizens.

2.55 pm

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh).

The speeches in this debate have been insightful and have shone a light on the challenges that people face across the globe when attempting to freely practise their religion or belief. Members are rightly criticising various regimes for not allowing their citizens to freely practise their religion or belief. We also need to ensure that we are self-reflecting in examining what is happening here, across the four nations, and that is what I wish to talk about. This was not going to be the content of my speech, but yesterday during a Westminster Hall debate on Islamophobia I was shocked at some of the contributions—although I want to put on record, as I did yesterday, that the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) was very reasoned in his remarks.

I would like everyone to take a moment to think of a memory: a memory that you think changed your life. Most of us can think of one, whether it was the day you got married, when you had a child, or even when you were elected to this House. For me, a particular memory stands out: my ninth birthday. As a child I loved my birthday because it meant presents. To be honest, I still quite like the presents aspect. I was getting off the school bus and going back home. I saw my cousin's car outside my house and I knew that that meant I was getting a load of presents. I walked into the house and no one gave me any attention. I was a bit of a diva as a child—some people would argue that I still am—and I was annoyed that no one gave me any attention, because it was my ninth birthday. My mum was watching the TV screen: a news channel was on. That was normal in our household because we were always told to keep up to date with current affairs, which makes sense now that I am a Member of Parliament. I turned round to look—it

was Sky News or BBC News; I cannot remember which—and there was a clip, on a loop, of two planes crashing into towers.

My birthday is 11 September 1992 and I turned nine on the day the twin towers were attacked. That, for me, is the memory that I will never forget, because my life changed after that. I was always aware that as woman of colour and a practising Muslim I was a little bit different from my peers—they had church on Sunday; I had Koran lessons—but that difference was never really noted. However, the next day when I went to the school bus stop I was asked if my parents were terrorists. I was told that my skin colour was dirty. There are other memories as well. My dad was racially profiled at airports. My mosque was petrol-bombed just a couple of months after 9/11. This all happened in Scotland.

I am acutely aware of the privilege I hold in comparison with my Muslim sisters who wear the hijab, because I do not wear one. I am not identifiably Muslim. That does “protect” me, to an extent. But I do speak about my faith very often. Something remarkable since my election to this House is the number of people—in this House, in fact—who have said to me: “You are such an empowered Muslim woman.” What does that even mean? My religion gives me courage and empowers me to stand here.

Religious intolerance is sadly becoming more prevalent in the United Kingdom, especially on social media—but I do not have time to talk about that. In a recent survey conducted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, more than 70% of Muslims said they had experienced some form of abuse in the past year. After Muslims, Jewish people are most targeted with religious hate crimes—19% of these crimes impact them—and the number of anti-Sikh hate crimes reported increased by 70% between 2017 and 2020. It is scary to think that religious hate crimes are under-reported and that the figures are inaccurate. There is a lack of faith—pardon the pun—in the judicial system that crimes will be sufficiently investigated. There is no doubt that more must be done across all four nations—Scotland is no exception—to address that.

The Scottish Government recently passed legislation that expanded the definition of hate speech, making it easier to hold to account those who express prejudice in a threatening or abusive way. That is a step in the right direction, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister what the UK Government will do.

My name is Anum Qaisar and I am the Member of Parliament elected to the House of Commons by the people of Airdrie and Shotts. I am a Muslim. The reality is that I have posted social media stuff about Islamophobia today and already had abuse. After the debate, I will go online to check my social media and emails to see if anything merits police awareness. I can stay quiet. No one forces me to speak in these debates. But I do, for people of all faith and belief across the four nations and across the world so that they can practise their faith openly. I also speak out for nine-year-old Anum, because although back then I did not have a voice, I do now.

3.1 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for the role she plays in bringing attention to this issue not

[Derek Thomas]

just in this place but across the country and around the world. I also express my thanks to the Foreign Secretary for this week saying:

“I want all people, everywhere, to be free from discrimination and persecution regardless of their opinions and beliefs. We have used our G7 Presidency this year to defend and advance these fundamental freedoms and will build on that next year when we host friends and partners from across the world.”

It is nearly eight years since *The Times* published an editorial entitled “Spectators at the Carnage”. It began in these terms:

“Across the globe, in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, Christians are being bullied, arrested, jailed, expelled and executed. Christianity is by most calculations the most persecuted religion of modern times. Yet Western politicians until now have been reluctant to speak out in support of Christians in peril.”

That is changing, which is good to know, but that editorial captures exactly the work referred to by my hon. Friend of the independent review established by the Former Foreign Secretary—my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt)—and ably undertaken by my friend the Bishop of Truro, the right Rev. Philip Mounstephen. His task was to map the extent and nature of the global persecution of Christians, to assess the quality of the Foreign Office’s response and to make recommendations for changes in both policy and practice. When we in Cornwall heard that our bishop was to lead the review, we were proud, delighted and pleased that he was to be charged with such important work, which sends such a clear message to us and to the world.

The review stated:

“Persecution on grounds of religious faith is a global phenomenon that is growing in scale and intensity. Reports including that of the United Nations...Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief...suggest that religious persecution is on the rise, and it is an ‘ever-growing threat’ to societies around the world.”

We cannot measure the exact numbers of people persecuted for their faith, but reports from NGOs estimate that a third of the world’s population suffers from religious persecution in some form, with Christians the most persecuted group. The fact is that freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental right of every person. That includes the freedom to change or reject one’s own belief system. The UN universal declaration of human rights defines religious humans rights in article 18 as,

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Bishop Philip’s 2019 report seemed to be a groundbreaking moment in the sense that the UK Government freshly acknowledged the extent of persecution around the world and recognised the need to take global leadership in that area. The report’s recommendations are practical, timely and necessary. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton for giving much more detail about them. In summary, they fall under the following headings: “Make Freedom of Religion or Belief...central to the FCO’s culture, policies and international operations”; “Develop a religiously-literate local operational approach”; and “Strengthen joined up thinking”. The final recommendation is that,

“All of these foreign policy recommendations to the Foreign Secretary should be reviewed independently in three years’ time”, which is next summer.

I am grateful that this week the Foreign Secretary published the dates of the international ministerial conference, which is a global summit to promote freedom of religion or belief. It will be held in London on 5-6 July next year and is a significant and welcome opportunity for the UK. I agree with and wholeheartedly commend her for saying that religious freedom and belief is a key part of the UK’s foreign policy and development agenda. I lend my wholehearted support to that worthwhile effort.

I welcome the Bishop of Truro’s review, as I have said, and I am grateful to the former Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), for commissioning it. The FCDO asked the question about the extent of persecution around the world, and now that Bishop Philip has answered it by writing the review, the tricky bit is acting on the recommendations. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton set out the considerable progress that has been made but recognised, as I do, that more is needed.

As I said, the last recommendation called for the recommendations’ implementation to be independently reviewed after three years. That time is up next summer, so it is timely to urge the Government to redouble their efforts to ensure that the recommendations are implemented in full, in spirit and in letter, and, more specifically, to name a genuinely independent reviewer to lead the work and publish the terms of reference of that review as soon as possible. I would be glad to hear from the Minister how the Government intend to progress the recommendations further and what plans are in place to review them next year.

3.7 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate and on all her work as the special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. I echo her comments about the work of the APPG, which is so ably chaired by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is the friend of all hon. Members, and the secretariat.

The golden rule that is common to all major world religions is the ethic of reciprocity—that we should treat others as we wish to be treated. That is a foundational principle but, from the debate so far, it seems to be observed almost as much in its breach as in its practice. In the various reports from the different stakeholders that have been cited, there are many cases where a religious majority is oppressing a religious minority in one country, but across the border, the proportions are reversed and the oppression is happening in reverse. There is a huge challenge for Governments to implement all the recommendations that are being made and for everyone who professes a faith, in which I include myself, to live up to the highest standards of that faith.

During COP26, I was at an event at the University of Glasgow organised by the Global Ethical Finance Initiative in which my good friend Dr Lorna Gold took part. The point was made that 80% of human beings on the planet hold or profess some kind of faith or religious belief in a creator god. When decisions are made about ethical finance, they are not taken in a vacuum or by an atheist minority. A majority of people

claim to profess such views, so we have to find a way to play them out in practice, but we often see them compromised or abandoned.

The right to freedom of religion or belief is a huge concern to constituents in Glasgow North, as it is to the constituents of everyone who has spoken today. The situation in China, which we repeatedly hear about, is of particular concern. I have constituents who are very active on the issue of organ harvesting and the treatment of Falun Gong practitioners, and I know that they will be demonstrating outside Downing Street on Human Rights Day in a couple of weeks' time. There is the situation of the Uyghur Muslims being forced into labour and re-education camps. When we talk about climate change, a lot of Chinese pollution is from manufacturing things that we buy in this country, and how many things do we use in this country, knowingly or otherwise, that have been made by people forced into labour and re-education camps?

In Myanmar, there is the treatment of the Rohingyas, which Aid to the Church in Need has described as one of the most egregious abuses of human rights anywhere in the world. We have heard statistics from the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and others about Christian oppression, and some of the really horrific detail in the Aid to the Church in Need report for Red Wednesday looks at the oppression of women and girls held by Islamic extremists in Nigeria.

On minorities elsewhere, Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan face stigmatisation, and I pay tribute to the great work that the Ahmadi community does in Glasgow and elsewhere, despite all of that. There is the ever-present risk of both antisemitism and Islamophobia, about which my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) spoke so powerfully. The challenge facing indigenous beliefs and indigenous religions was particularly brought home to us during COP26. People are cleared off their land to make way for palm oil plantations or to access minerals that we all use in our mobile phones and jewellery. When those lands are sacred to people and they can no longer live and practise their beliefs on them, that is a form of religious oppression.

As we have heard, not least from my hon. Friend, intolerance and sectarianism are still far too common here at home. Many of us had difficulty worshipping as we would normally during the pandemic, when worship moved online, but an important judgment was made in the Court of Session in response to a case brought by Christian ministers, including my friend Canon Tom White, the parish priest of St Mary's in Calton. It recognised the importance of being to worship in person, and I think that it will set an important precedent in years to come.

Talking of Canon White, he has had first-hand experiences of sectarian violence and witnessed attacks on his church and on his person in modern-day Glasgow. I pay tribute to the work of Interfaith and other ecumenical networks in Glasgow and elsewhere that seek to challenge that.

There was a very powerful COP26 Interfaith demo in George Square. Nine different religions and beliefs offered prayer and reflection in their own traditions, with hundreds of people coming together in the square and thousands of people following online around the world. The work of Interfaith Week has been recognised by the First Minister, and I also support its campaign to

save the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow, which is a world-class facility and must be preserved.

There is a role for the Government. They are cutting their aid spend just at the time when projects need the most faith-based organisations to deliver the most humanitarian aid and response all around the world. We have to welcome people who are fleeing religious intolerance, and yet that is not really what we heard from the Home Secretary at the Dispatch Box during the previous business. There are lessons for all of us, and this has been an important opportunity to raise them in the Chamber.

3.13 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I am incredibly proud of the UK's law in relation to freedom of religion and belief. I think that in Wycombe we can be incredibly proud of the number of religions that get along with one another peacefully and in harmony. We have various denominations of Christian faith, various branches of Islam, a Hindu temple and a Sikh temple, and I am sure many other religions are represented. I am very pleased and proud that people get along very peacefully together.

I want to explore why other countries and sometimes places in the UK, as the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) said, exhibit Islamophobia. Why does tolerance break down? Before I do so I would like to thank the hon. Lady for her kind words. I am very pleased and proud that she is in this House. I hope she will not mind if I say that I think she is a wonderful champion for modern British Islam. My only regret is that she is not on the Conservative Benches, but I am grateful to her for her kind comments.

Why does intolerance arise? My first observation is that people sometimes seem to forget, as they live out their faith, that it is a faith. They sometimes talk about their religion as if it was a matter of fact. I only wish sometimes that I had their certainty about the Lord in my life, but I am afraid people need to remember that they have a faith, which means matters are disputable, and they get on to very grave territory—very thin ice over very hot water—if they forget that they are holding on to a faith and that the things they believe cannot be proven. Indeed, I think that when atheists look at those of us who profess a faith, they are quite reasonable in thinking sometimes that what we believe is absurd. We all need to remember that we cannot prove those things that we believe, and therefore it is totally unacceptable to impose those beliefs on others.

That brings me on to tolerance. We in the UK have in several areas started to forget what it means to be tolerant: we have started to behave as if to be tolerant is to all agree on a consensus of what goes, but that is not right. To tolerate something is to put up with it despite profoundly disagreeing with it; in other words, it is to live and let live—to agree to disagree. The things we tolerate are things that we do not like, yet we do not proceed against them by force. That is the crucial principle of a free society: it is a crucial principle that allows us to live in peace and harmony with one another that when we disagree we just tolerate; we do not proceed using force, legal or otherwise, against those with whom we disagree.

[Mr Steve Baker]

That brings me on to a sensitive subject. I really lament blasphemy laws around the world. We have heard how Christians are persecuted in several places in the world, and I do not mind saying that occasionally I am asked to support blasphemy laws but my answer is always the same. If somebody says to me, “But prophet Isa would be protected by a blasphemy law”, I always have to say to them, “I’m so sorry, but your prophet Isa is to me the incarnate and risen God, and I know that what I’ve just said is a blasphemy in your religion and I hope you won’t mind my saying that your characterisation of the incarnate and risen God might be characterised as a blasphemy in mine.” For that reason we simply cannot have blasphemy laws: for me, that example is a way of illustrating, in a way people can accept, why blasphemy laws are totally unacceptable, and I have not yet found a single person who has refuted that.

What I am trying to say to my right hon. Friend the Minister is that, as we go about the world trying to promote freedom of religion and belief, can we please not just look at the leaves of this terrible tree of suffering where people are persecuted; can we also please try to get down to the roots? I believe that the roots are that people forget that their faith is just that: a faith that cannot be proven. They forget that one of the most important principles of a free society is that we should tolerate things that are doing no harm.

As a Christian, I believe in the eternal, and I believe therefore that what really matters is what is true in religion, but I accept that I cannot prove it to anyone and I am thoroughly prepared to believe that each one of us is responsible for our own salvation and it is not my problem or responsibility in the end to save the souls of others; it is their problem, much as I might be willing to evangelise. I ask my right hon. Friend the Minister as he goes about the world to try to persuade politicians and indeed electorates elsewhere that what they need to do is learn to be tolerant: to let others go their own way in search of their own salvation in peace, and that way to enjoy freedom of religion or belief.

3.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on her presentation. Although she is too modest to mention it herself, I congratulate her on being invited to chair the 33-country International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance for the year from January 2022, which will provide an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the UK’s ambition to be the international champion for freedom of religion or belief that year.

I chair the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief. I speak for those with a Christian faith, those with other faiths and indeed those with no faith, because I believe that is what my Lord and Saviour tells me to do. He loves everyone; he is a God of love but he is a God of justice as well. It is a big honour to chair the all-party group and I am pleased to say that those present and contributing in the Chamber today demonstrate the all-party nature of the all-party group. It should not be a matter of politics whether someone believes freedom of religion or belief to be a fundamental human right. Everyone has the right to freedom of religion or belief, and that includes the right to change that religion or belief.

Open Doors sent some interesting facts, and in the short time that I have, I will give some examples from across the world. Some 340 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination. For the first time ever, all the top 50 countries on the Open Doors list score “very high” or worse for levels of persecution. At least one in eight Christians worldwide is affected by very high or high levels of persecution, and the total number of Christians killed for their faith rose last year by 60% to 4,761. Again, that illustrates to me just how serious the situation is.

The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) referred to Maira Shahbaz. I mentioned her in my question to the Leader of the House today, and I hope to receive a response from the Department responsible. I chair the Pakistani minorities APPG, and just today we launched a report to highlight the abduction and kidnapping of young Christian and Hindu girls in Pakistan. What is happening is horrendous. At a Red Wednesday event yesterday, we watched video testimony from a Christian girl in Pakistan called Neha Parvaiz. What has happened to her is horrendous. She was abducted by her aunt, forcibly converted and married to her uncle—her own flesh and blood—who then abused her. We must highlight these things. We must highlight this gender-based violence, and the fact that women and girls—Christian and other ethnic minority girls—are subject to sexual violence and, indeed, forced marriage.

I also want to highlight the issue of 41-year-old Pakistani Christian Sawan Masih. He was charged with blasphemy, which the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) referred to. After a court case, he was released, but he had to go into hiding as a result of what happened. Again, that highlights what happens across the world. Steadfast Global, a Scotland-based evangelical Christian ministry working with persecuted Christians, has provided safe-house accommodation for the family. That illustrates to me very clearly what is happening there. It also highlights why it is imperative that the Government recognise minority religious or belief communities as groups that often face increased vulnerabilities and should be prioritised in asylum and refugee schemes.

In China, Christians are facing increased problems from technology for their ability to worship. Reports from counties in Henan and Jiangxi provinces state that there are now cameras in all state-approved religious venues; in the very churches, the Chinese have CCTV cameras, as well as their own people to keep an eye on what is happening.

I will not go over the situation in India again—the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) mentioned it—but I want to highlight the problems that are occurring in Turkey, where society flagrantly fails to recognise that minority groups can have innocent motivations and legitimate concerns. The rights of tens of thousands—if not millions—in Turkey are at risk. Is it not time that we highlighted the issues for the Kurds, the Christians, the Jews, the Armenians and other minorities?

Nigeria is another country where Christians have really bad problems. Churches are burned and destroyed, and Christians are killed and injured; their women are assaulted and kidnapped and sometimes never heard from again. These are countries where we have to do our bit to help.

Let me finish on the situation of the Baha'is across the world. The Minister will remember the debate we had on the Baha'is. They are a lovely people, a gentle people, a religious people, but in Iran, for example, they cannot have jobs—they cannot have employment—and their land is stolen from them. For the Baha'is in Iran, it is cradle-to-grave persecution. Baha'i students are prevented from accessing university or expelled in the course of their studies. All these things, again, illustrate the issue.

Today we have named many religious or belief communities that face denial of the rights enshrined in article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights. In the wider struggle for freedom of religion or belief, it is encouraging at least to witness the cross-party, cross-religion and cross-belief nature of this endeavour. I urge everyone to speak up in this House and to be a voice for the voiceless. I will finish by reading from Scripture psalm 34, verses 4, 5 and 8:

“I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.

Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed...

Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!”

3.24 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate, which has been characterised by a number of very intelligent and very humanitarian speeches on today's topic. I was particularly struck by the comments from the hon. Members for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), and my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker).

The previous subject before the House—the events yesterday in the English channel—is one that all of us with an interest in humanitarian issues around the globe will reflect on. Were we to create a Venn diagram of different types of oppression, we would find a high degree of commonality between those places where there is a lack of freedom of religion and religious expression, and those places where there is a lack of freedom to express political, gender and sexual values in the way that we—in what is for the most part a liberal and western democracy—take for granted. As we consider the work of the United Nations, it is enormously important that in this place we can focus on values that are not just those of the great religions of the world but ones that we tend to hold dear as British values, too, which we hold in common and which we can defend robustly.

I was particularly struck by the comments of the hon. Member for Glasgow North, who is no longer in his place. Glasgow is one of those places that has stepped forward as a city of sanctuary for people seeking asylum in the United Kingdom. It stands out in Scotland for having done that. It is a place that has been known for many years for the compassion it has shown; compassion expressed not just as a sentiment but practically in ensuring that there is housing, education and care available for people going through the asylum process.

When it comes to challenging institutions, it is important to highlight the need for empathy, which the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts touched on in her comments. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe, I

represent an extremely diverse constituency where there are people of faith—there are Muslims, Christians and Jews—who adhere to all the great world religions and many of the smaller ones, too. Navigating things like the planning system can seem enormously challenging. If you want to create a new Islamic education centre and a mosque, it can feel like the odds are against you in a way that would not be the case if you wished to open a new church, for example. We in this country need to recognise that, and when we talk about shared British values we need to ensure that we are genuinely inclusive and that everyone in the United Kingdom who adheres to those values, from whatever faith, has equality of access to our system.

Since becoming a parent, I have been struck by the usefulness of the British values programme in our schools in opening that opportunity up to as many people as we can across our constituencies. For my six-year-old son, pursuing British values has meant the opportunity to go to a church to look at the symbolism of Christianity and to talk about what that means. It has meant making Diya lamps for Diwali and having discussions about what that means for people: why the celebration is taking place and what the overcoming of the darkness by light means. It has meant having people coming in from different local religions to talk about the work they have been doing to support members of their community through the covid pandemic and how faith in the religious institution they are a part of has been so important in making a difference to people of all faiths and none in their area. In a constituency where there are more than 100 first languages spoken, that diversity is something that we recognise as an enormous strength. It is a strength that has been proven in the context of the pandemic and it is a strength that we can see developing in our educational institutions for the future.

I will finish with a request for the Minister to consider. This comes back to what we were discussing earlier and is an issue that many have mentioned: those who come to seek asylum in our country. We know that there is a recognised need to establish safe and legal routes for people to disrupt the business model used by people smugglers—those who were clearly and very directly responsible for the deaths of people in the English channel yesterday. We heard in the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton and many others, including the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), about people across the globe who find themselves in a position of enormous difficulty and sometimes direct peril to life and limb as a result of adhering to a particularly religion. As the cross-Government discussion develops about what those safe and legal routes look like and what they mean to people in Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and various countries in Africa, I encourage Ministers to ensure that we always recognise the changing perils that adherence to a particular faith and freedom of religion may bring in those places; and that, in putting together those safe and legal routes for those who will find sanctuary in the UK, we think about how that freedom of religion can be protected and how those we are not able to protect can come to find sanctuary in our country legally.

3.30 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this hugely important but sadly still all too relevant debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon.

[Brendan O'Hara]

Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), who gave an extremely thoughtful and considered contribution to the debate, as have so many others, and I thank the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for securing it. I thank everyone who has taken part; it is good to see that the subject of freedom of religion or belief has such deep and widespread support across the House. I, too, pay tribute to everyone's hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for all that he does on the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief.

On this 40 days ago, 25 November 1981, the United Nations made its landmark declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief. As the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) said, article 1 of that declaration states:

“Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.”

Article 2 confirms:

“No one shall be subject to discrimination by any State, institution, group of persons, or person on the grounds of religion or belief.”

It is thoroughly depressing to think that in the intervening four decades, the world appears to have gone backwards on ensuring freedom of religion or belief across great swathes of the planet. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said, all one has to do is look at the Open Doors watch list for 2021 to see that practising one's Christian faith or expressing a deeply held Christian belief could come at the cost of one's life.

Of course, religious persecution is not exclusively against Christians—indeed, far from it, and I sincerely thank my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) for reminding us that these problems exist very much on our doorstep. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for highlighting the appalling ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, which, as he said, has been described as

“the most egregious violations of human rights in recent memory”.

I also thank him for raising the treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. That should remind us all that people of all faiths and none are facing persecution and that they all deserve equal protection from those who would seek to do them harm for practising their faith or expressing their belief.

Sadly, the evidence in front of our eyes and ears tells us that right now, across the world, there are hundreds of millions of people living in fear of persecution simply because of the convictions they hold or the faith that they profess. We have heard from Members that there is no typical model for how that manifests itself. It can come in the form of direct state suppression—a heavy-handed state crackdown, as we would recognise in China or North Korea. As we have seen in Myanmar, it can come through state-sponsored terrorism.

Persecution can also manifest in the form of discriminatory laws that favour one group ahead of another, as we are currently seeing in India and Pakistan. Of course, persecution can come in the form of organisations such as Daesh, who set out to eradicate the Yazidi people by murdering men and boys and

condemning women to a life of sexual slavery—a despicable and heinous tactic that is now being used in Africa by organisations such as Boko Haram and ISWAP. But wherever it comes from and however it manifests itself, we as individuals, as groups and as Governments have to call it out. We have to be seen to be doing everything we possibly can to stop it. It is incumbent on all Governments to take whatever action they can.

It is fitting that we are having this debate on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Yesterday, to mark Red Wednesday, the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need published a report, “Hear Her Cries: The kidnapping, forced conversion and sexual victimisation of Christian women and girls”. It is a harrowing read, but essential for anyone who wants to understand the day-to-day reality facing too many of our Christian sisters around the world.

“Hear Her Cries” comes in response to the Bishop of Truro's 2019 independent review, particularly its recommendation 5, which set out the need for further research on how issues of freedom of religion or belief intersect with basic human rights issues such as people trafficking, gender equality, gender-based violence, kidnapping, forced conversion and the forced marriage of young women and girls. On that point, I think that it is appropriate to mention the case of Leah Sharibu, who has been held captive by Boko Haram in Nigeria since February 2018. I urge the Government to do everything they possibly can to help to secure Leah's release.

One of the main findings in Aid to the Church in Need's 2021 report on religious freedom in the world is that crimes against women and girls, including abduction and rape, are happening in a growing number of countries. However, we have to accept that even that reported increase is the tip of the iceberg: the abduction, rape, forced conversion and marriage of young, mainly Christian girls remain chronically under-reported, as the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said. That was recognised by the Nigerian Government, who admitted that last year's officially recorded figure of 210 cases of conflict-related sexual violence did not reflect the reality of the situation on the ground.

Similarly, one report said that 1,000 Christian and Hindu girls were victims of abduction, rape, torture and forced conversion across the whole of Pakistan last year, while another equally important report said that the same figure represented just one province in Pakistan. It really should not come as a great surprise that these awful crimes are chronically under-reported. The United Nations recognises that in Nigeria, as elsewhere in the world, the under-reporting is due to people's fear of being stigmatised within their community and their fear of bringing shame on themselves or their family.

In 2019, the charity International Alert reported that when many of the thousands of women and girls who escaped from Boko Haram managed to return home, they faced rejection, marginalisation and stigmatisation from their friends, their family and the wider community. In Iraq, Archbishop Semaan of the Syriac Catholic Church recognised the same problem among women and girls from minority faith communities who had been abducted by Daesh, saying that they will not talk about it because they are ashamed. As wrong as that is, it is the sad reality.

Those who do have the courage to speak up are all too often met with indifference or open hostility from the authorities. We have seen too many examples of the judiciary siding with the perpetrator and sometimes sending very young girls back to the home of their abductor and rapist because a court chooses to recognise a false marriage certificate. Even if they escape, report the crime and actually win the court case, those young girls and their families have to live in constant fear of reprisal from the perpetrators and their religious supporters.

That point brings me to the awful case of Maira Shahbaz, a Pakistani girl aged 14 who was kidnapped by a gang of men. She was raped, tortured and forced to marry one of her rapists before falsely claiming to have converted. Maira's mother went to the police, but when the case came to court, Maira was sent back to the man who had raped her. She escaped and they are now living in hiding, while the men who raped her go door to door hunting for them. They are understandably terrified. She has effectively swapped one form of imprisonment for another. In the foreword to "Hear Her Cries", Maira asks, on behalf of thousands of girls:

"Who will help us? Who will speak up for us? Who cares about our situation?"

I know that the hon. Member for Congleton and others have lobbied the UK Government, and I hope and pray that the UK Government will be able to step in. They are aware of Maira's situation because of these interventions. In response to a letter that I wrote in September, the Home Secretary said that her officials were "exploring all possible options". I should be hugely grateful if, when he replies to the debate, the Minister could update the House on the progress of the application for asylum for Maira and her family.

3.40 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): We have had a very serious and sober debate, and one that is appropriate for the 40th anniversary of the UN declaration. I want to add my thanks to the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce)—whom I also want to call my hon. Friend, as we served together on the International Development Committee—for once again securing such an important debate, and also to thank the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, of which she is a deputy chair and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is the chair. The APPG has been instrumental in briefing Members throughout the House.

This afternoon we have heard important and often moving contributions. We heard, of course, from the promoter of the debate, the hon. Member for Congleton. We heard from the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who talked about the work of Open Doors, and the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who expressed concern about our own occasional religious intolerance in the UK and suggested that many groups on the edge of some of our faiths should also be allowed space.

We heard a very touching contribution from the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar): I found it moving and personal, coming from a Muslim woman living in Scotland who is now a Member of Parliament. We also heard from the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas). He is rightly proud of his local bishop, the Bishop of Truro, who led the review that instigated

some of the actions that have been taken and made clear to the hon. Member for Congleton the kind of work that she needs to pursue. We heard from the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), who is always very articulate. He mentioned Falun Gong and the organ harvesting, and the beliefs of indigenous peoples, which we must never forget. The hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) spoke about the diverse nature of his constituency. Mine is also diverse. Why, he asked, does intolerance arise? He talked movingly about his own personal beliefs, and about the principles of a free society.

Then, of course, there was everybody's good friend, the hon. Member for Strangford, who is always present at these debates and always keeps us well informed about such matters. As I said earlier, he is the chair of the APPG, and he mentioned problems in Turkey and Iran.

I found the final Back-Bench contribution, from the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), extremely well informed. He expressed many views articulately, including his views on the practical ways in which asylum seekers are helped up and down the country, but especially in the city of Glasgow. He also said that we must have consistency in our values in the United Kingdom.

As we have said, the debate comes at an important time as we mark the 40th anniversary of the UN declaration on the elimination of religious intolerance, as well as Islamophobia Awareness Month. With persecution still rife across the world, it is more important than ever that we, as parliamentarians on all sides of the House, reaffirm our commitment to the values and principles of that declaration. While we certainly have our own problems at home with several forms of racism—whether it be anti-Semitism, Islamophobia or any other prejudice—freedom of religion or belief must also be at the heart of our international relations. Where we are able to empower and promote individual and collective freedoms we must do so, because it is vital to international peace and stability. However, it is just as important that we challenge those who choose to persecute others on the basis of their belief.

Before I go on to speak about some of the religious groups that are being shockingly persecuted in many parts of the world, let me point out that we must not forget the people who are being persecuted simply for being non-believers. The fact that 13 countries in the world still maintain the death penalty for blasphemy or apostasy is extremely worrying, but many more have seen people murdered just for choosing not to believe.

Just one of the many people in prison for alleged blasphemy is the president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, Mubarak Bala, who has been locked away in prison since 28 April 2020, pending trial for a Facebook post that was deemed to be blasphemous. His arrest followed a pattern of online and physical harassment culminating in a legal petition to the police accusing him of being

"provocative and annoying to Muslims"

on Facebook. If he is convicted, the punishment will be death. I know that all of us across this House oppose the death penalty in any circumstances, but we have to face the fact that Mubarak has, like so many others, been denied access not only to medical care but to a legal team. We must pursue as many diplomatic avenues

[Fabian Hamilton]

as possible to deter this kind of behaviour. We all agree that it is totally unacceptable, inhumane and completely wrong.

I would like to turn now to one of the most disturbing cases of religious persecution in the world today, the genocide against the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. The Chinese Government's persecution of Uyghur and other Turkic minorities in Xinjiang has been widely and credibly reported, dating back to 2017. On this side of the House we will always stand up for human rights everywhere, and against violations wherever they take place, including Xinjiang. The allegations against Chinese Communist party officials are stark, and include the mass surveillance and arbitrary detention of more than 1 million Uyghurs and members of other Turkic Muslim minority groups, torture and inhuman treatment, the enforced separation of children from parents, the denial of people's right to practise their religion or speak their language, rape, forced sterilisation and forced labour. This is extremely disturbing, and the world simply must not turn a blind eye.

That is why, over the past 18 months, my colleagues the shadow Foreign Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), and the shadow Minister for Asia and the Pacific, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), have met a range of experts, including the World Uyghur Congress, and raised the issue with the Chinese embassy, as well as writing to our own Government Ministers. I would like to hear from the Minister what action he is taking to help to urgently resolve such shocking and vile persecution.

I also urge the Government to apply sanctions to the Chinese Government officials responsible—many more than the four who have already been sanctioned, which I believe is a pitiful number—as well as making clear the Government's support for UK businesses to ensure that their supply chains do not include workers who are subject to human rights violations in Xinjiang, by co-ordinating work across all Whitehall Departments to bring this about. If we are serious about playing our part in bringing this kind of persecution to an end, the Government must now state unequivocally, as this House has done, that they recognise the oppression in Xinjiang as genocide.

The UK's role should not, and cannot, end there, especially while other religious groups are being persecuted. As we have heard this afternoon, Christians in Iran are being denied basic human rights and a place of worship, with just four small and heavily monitored churches open in the whole country. We have also heard about the appalling treatment of the Rohingya people in Myanmar. We have to lead by example in standing up for basic religious freedoms.

I will end my remarks by reminding colleagues, who I am sure will be as worried about this fact as I am, that for the first time since 2001, authoritarian regimes now outnumber the world's democracies. More worryingly still, the number of such regimes is growing. That is bad news not only for freedom of religion and belief but for freedom of the press, freedom of expression and human rights more generally. We on this side of the House are clear that these freedoms—the rule of law, democracy and human rights—are at the very heart of our agenda. We are absolutely clear that religious freedom is a critical right that must be universally upheld, as every

speaker this afternoon from across the House has made clear. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister outlined the United Kingdom Government's commitment to those freedoms today.

I am proud to represent the constituency of Leeds North East, where just last week on Mitzvah Day the Jewish community came together with the Leeds Muslim community to work to prevent the exploitation of women and girls. This is just one example of the togetherness and collaboration that our city's religious communities have shown, especially throughout the past 18 months, which have been particularly difficult for so many. Whether it is Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs or Hindus, all our religious communities have shown what the kind of freedoms we enjoy in our country can lead to: peace and harmony between us all. That is what we should work towards for the rest of the world too.

3.49 pm

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): I am genuinely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for securing this debate on the anniversary of an incredibly important day. I also pay tribute to her tireless and inspirational work as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, and to the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, which also works so hard. It would be deeply remiss of me not to put on record my thanks, huge respect and admiration for the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who works so tirelessly on this issue, and for the incredibly effective work of the APPG, which he chairs.

It is fitting that this debate falls in the week of Red Wednesday, a day to stand in solidarity with persecuted Christians around the world. This debate marks the 40th anniversary of the declaration on the elimination of religious intolerance. Fittingly, today is also the UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, which I will touch on later.

The shared passion in this House for protecting the freedom of religion or belief, alongside other human rights, is clear, and it is something of which we can all be proud. Members on both sides of the House have made incredibly thoughtful and, at times, moving contributions. Although time is limited and I cannot attach remarks to them all, I will try to cover at least some of them.

The UK is fiercely committed to defending the freedom of religion or belief for all, and to promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities. That point was spoken about so well and so characteristically thoughtfully by my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), who is a good friend.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, I am pleased that, with the full and enthusiastic support of the Prime Minister, the UK will be hosting an international ministerial conference on FORB on 5 and 6 July 2022 right here in London. Conference planning is well under way, and we expect to engage with stakeholders including religious and non-religious groups. I know that my hon. Friend is playing a key role in supporting the efforts to deliver that conference, and I thank her for her positive comments about the work done by Ministers and, perhaps more importantly, by officials in the Foreign,

Commonwealth and Development Office, both over the road in King Charles Street and in posts around the world.

In addition to hosting the conference, we are pursuing three broad avenues to advance freedom of religion or belief and to tackle the associated human rights concerns. First, we are working through multilateral bodies. Secondly, we are working directly with states to encourage them to uphold their human rights obligations. And thirdly, we are continuing to take forward the Bishop of Truro's recommendations to strengthen our support for those persecuted for their faith or belief. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) is right to be proud of the work he has done.

On multilateralism, we work with organisations such as the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the G7 and the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. Again, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton for her active representation of the UK at the alliance. I am delighted that she is being considered for the chair. With characteristic humility, she managed not to mention that in her speech, but I think she should have done. I am glad she is being considered for the chair in 2022.

I also congratulate my ministerial colleague Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon on the important role he plays, representing the UK so ably within the alliance and the UN, as well as leading the UK's human rights advocacy around the world. I welcome the three joint statements issued recently by the alliance, which covered Iraq, Afghanistan and Myanmar.

On Afghanistan, we continue to work with the UN to deliver our FORB objectives. For example, on 7 October we co-sponsored a UN Human Rights Council resolution on Afghanistan that established the mandate of a special rapporteur to monitor and report on the human rights situation, including for religious groups, as well as for non-religious groups. As for other multilateral organisations, in June, alongside G7 members, we urged North Korea to respect human rights for all and engage substantively with the international community on FORB. In May, we secured the inclusion of language on FORB in the G7 communiqué for the first time, demonstrating our strong leadership on this issue and ensuring that FORB remains firmly on the world stage.

On our bilateral work, we regularly raise specific issues with other Governments, both in public and, when we believe it is most effective, in private. For instance, Lord Ahmad raised the issue of reports of discrimination and violence against religious and belief minority communities with Prime Minister Khan during his recent visit to Pakistan.

On the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, let me underline that we condemn forced marriage and the forced conversion of women and girls in the very strongest terms. A particular case has been raised by a number of hon. Members. Although

I am often uncomfortable speaking about specific cases for fear that the safety of individuals could be compromised, I can assure Members from across the House that we fund projects in Pakistan to help to address forced marriage and bring up the plight of both communities and individuals where we can. No one should suffer because of their religion or belief, and as many Members from across the House have said, no one should suffer twice because of both their religion and belief, and their gender.

Beyond the concerning issue of forced marriage in Pakistan and elsewhere, I also condemn all the violence in Nigeria. Terrorist attacks in north-east Nigeria and incidents of intercommunal violence across many states in Nigeria have had a devastating effect on both Christian and Muslim communities. Religious identity is a factor in the violence, but the root causes are of course more complex. In July, the former Minister for Africa raised those concerns with the Nigerian Foreign Minister in the margins of the global education summit. We will continue to raise issues and to encourage states to uphold their human rights obligations.

Turning finally to the Bishop of Truro's review, we are making good progress on all 22 recommendations in the final report, including the recommendation that called for an independent review—again, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton raised that. Just this week, the FCDO estate was lit up to mark Red Wednesday, standing in solidarity with persecuted Christians across the world. That follows specifically from recommendation 19 of the bishop's report about marking and promoting days in support of FORB for all. Recommendation 5 is about bolstering our research, and I am pleased that the FCDO launched the John Bunyan fund for FORB. We have used it to fund research on intersectioning vulnerabilities experienced by religious minorities living in Nigeria and in India in the shadow of covid-19. As has been highlighted, recommendation 8 concerns the use of sanctions to address FORB issues. In March, alongside the European Union, the United States and Canada, we imposed sanctions on four former Chinese Government officials and one Government entity for the gross human rights violations against the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, which the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) highlighted.

To conclude, the UK has a duty and a drive to promote and defend equality, inclusion and respect, both at home and abroad. I assure the House that that will remain a foundation stone of UK foreign policy and that the Government do not take that duty lightly. We are and will continue to be a voice for the voiceless and defenders of the right to freedom of religion or belief for everyone, everywhere.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered freedom of religion or belief and the 40th anniversary of the UN Declaration on the elimination of religious intolerance.

Alcohol Harm

4 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House notes the grave harm to society caused by excessive alcohol consumption and alcohol addiction; further notes that alcohol-specific deaths in 2020 were the highest ever recorded by the Office for National Statistics across many parts of the UK; and calls on the Government to commission an independent review of alcohol harm.

I thank the Speaker and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate to go ahead. I am grateful to have secured this debate because the issue of harm caused by alcohol misuse has concerned me for many years—since long before I got into this place. I have seen far too many examples of when alcohol misuse has wrecked lives, trashed families, caused great disruption to communities, exhausted police and NHS staff and led to a miserable, hopeless lived experience for those who find they have an alcohol addiction.

I was due to co-sponsor this debate with the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), who is unable to be here for family reasons. Colleagues will be aware of what he has had to say on this subject in respect of his own lived experience and through his sterling work as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on alcohol harm.

I declare an interest as a commissioner on the commission on alcohol harm, which is ably led by Baroness Finlay. She said:

“Alcohol harm impacts us all—in families, our communities, and throughout society. For too long, the onus has been on individuals, with drinkers urged to ‘drink responsibly’... We need to finally acknowledge the true scale of the harm caused by alcohol, which goes far beyond individuals who drink, and put the responsibility squarely with the harmful product itself. By doing so we will help to do away with the stigma and shame that surrounds those who are harmed by alcohol and often stops them from accessing the help that they need.”

Those words were in the introduction to the commission’s “It’s everywhere” report.

The alcohol harm commission was set up to examine the full extent of harm across the UK—the physical, mental and social harm caused to people around the drinker, to wider society and to the drinker themselves. We considered the effectiveness of current alcohol policy and made recommendations for the reduction of harm.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate forward. Is he aware that in Northern Ireland there were 336 alcohol deaths in 2019—the highest number of alcohol deaths on record, and up 18% on 2018—and similarly record-high figures in England and Wales for 2020? Does he agree that the Government’s current strategy is not working and that something has to change?

Derek Thomas: I absolutely agree. The figures are similarly worrying for Cornwall and across the Isles of Scilly, which I represent. The point of this debate is to try to start a new conversation about how we can support those who are caught up in such a difficult and tragic situation.

Those whose lives are affected by alcohol every day best understand its impact, yet their voices are often missing from policy discussions. We set out, as a commission, to give these individuals a platform. In

addition to experts by experience, we heard from hospitals; local councils; UK and devolved Governments; academics and universities; alcohol treatment providers; the alcohol industry; medical royal colleges; children’s charities; homelessness organisations; public health experts; and older people’s representatives.

The commission received evidence on the wide-ranging impact of alcohol on wider society through the burden it places on public services and the economy. In England, hospital admissions related to alcohol reached a record level of 1.26 million in 2018-19, and the total cost of alcohol to the NHS is estimated to be £3.5 billion. The costs of alcohol are not limited to health: my right hon. Friend the Minister for Crime and Policing has noted that

“alcohol-related crime in England and Wales is estimated to cost society around £11.4 billion per year.”

The body of evidence received by the commission indicates that alcohol is a harmful and addictive substance that must be carefully regulated—as is done with tobacco. Far from being an issue for individual responsibility, as it is often framed by the industry, there is a compelling case for Government intervention to end the cultural celebration and normalisation of alcohol in public, while vulnerable individuals suffer harm and stigma behind closed doors.

The long list of vulnerable people in need of protection from alcohol harm includes alcohol-dependent people, children, drink-drive collision victims, domestic abuse survivors and those who experience crime and antisocial behaviour, including emergency service personnel. Another such example is an unborn baby at risk of foetal alcohol syndrome disorder, a condition caused by prenatal exposure to alcohol in the womb and which is around three to five times more common than autism, but much less widely acknowledged and discussed. FASD is a lifelong neuro-developmental mental disability that affects the brain and body. Maternal alcohol misuse is one common factor in children being taken into care, increasing the likelihood that those children have been exposed to alcohol before birth. The prevalence of FASD is therefore much higher in those who are care experienced, with one study suggesting that two thirds of adopted children are potentially at risk of FASD. It is unacceptable to leave their fate up to individual responsibility. Instead, we need systematic change to protect vulnerable individuals and communities.

For starters, I call on the Government to ensure that those with FASD, or at risk of FASD, are given proper support. One possible route to provide that support would be as part of the excellent work of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom). Her vision for the 1,001 critical days now being brought into reality as part of a newly funded Best Start in Life initiative would be the obvious approach. The family hubs, which I know my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) has been a great advocate for, is a key part of this initiative and may well be the place where support for children with FASD and their families can be delivered.

The covid-19 pandemic has accelerated alcohol harm in the UK. Deaths from alcohol increased by 20% in England and Wales and by 17% in Scotland in 2020. They are now at the highest level since records began. In England, the number of adults drinking at high-risk nearly doubled between February and June of last year.

The data also show a rapid acceleration in deaths from alcoholic liver disease since the start of the pandemic, beyond that of the pre-existing upward trend. Those numbers are alarming. We know that drinking harms more than just our liver, with alcohol being a causal factor in more than 200 diseases and injuries. In my own constituency, between 2016 and 2018, 760 people received an alcohol-related cancer diagnosis. Alcohol is of course also linked to mental health issues: in many countries, including the UK, those with depressive or anxiety symptoms were among the groups with the largest increase in consumption during the pandemic.

Latest data provided to me by the Alcohol Health Alliance showed that, in my constituency, 73% of dependent drinkers in 2019-20 were not in treatment. Shockingly, that is better than the national average. The Royal College of Psychiatrists warned last year that addiction services in the UK are not equipped to treat the soaring numbers of high-risk drinkers.

Even if I had not taken a serious interest in alcohol harm previously, having seen further statistics that relate to my constituents, I have no excuse but to draw attention to this terrible situation. For example, those drinking above the chief medical officer's recommended levels—at-risk drinking—account for 24% of my constituents. There were 220 alcohol-related deaths recorded in 2019, 11,422 alcohol-related hospital admissions in 2019-20, and 192 road traffic accidents attributed to alcohol between 2014 and 2016.

Never before has action on alcohol been so urgently needed as it is now. We must do more; we must do better. The Government must commit to increasing treatment funding and maintaining that funding so that everyone who seeks support is able to receive it. The Dame Carol Black independent review of drugs called for additional funding of £1.78 billion for drug and alcohol treatment services over the next five years. The Government must act on this now. Additionally, there must also be a commitment to increasing the numbers of the addiction treatment workforce.

Outside of treatment service provision, significant work is needed to tackle the stigma surrounding alcohol. While serving on the commission on alcohol harm, I had the privilege of reading and hearing deeply personal and moving testimonials, with experts of experience commonly agreeing that the focus on individual responsibility for drinking leads to a culture of secrecy, shame, and stigma. Tim Norval, an expert by experience, told the commission that the stigma people carry tells them,

"I'm worthless. I'm not worthy of the treatment. I'm not worthy of the support".

But the blood that runs through their veins is just the same red as mine. There is absolutely no reason whatever that they deserve any less treatment than I would if I had any sort of health condition. We all have a part to play in changing the narrative around alcohol addiction: please, encourage and participate in conversations about drinking and its effects, and challenge the stigmas around alcohol use.

Beyond health consequences for the drinkers themselves, there is of course a significant impact on those around them. A national survey found that approximately one in three victims of domestic violence in England and Wales reported that the perpetrator was under the influence of alcohol. Alcohol or drugs was thought to be a factor in 61% of care applications in England.

Across the UK, the people from the most deprived areas are more likely to die or be admitted to hospital than those in the least deprived areas. The Institute of Alcohol Studies found that lower socioeconomic groups experience up to 14 times the incidence of alcohol-related violence than higher socioeconomic groups. Researchers have linked alcohol consumption with inequalities in life expectancy, social and emotional wellbeing, and child development. Public Health England has also stated that tackling alcohol-related harm is an important route to reducing health inequalities. In the light of this and the announced levelling-up White Paper, it is important to reiterate that for any levelling-up agenda to be truly successful, it must address alcohol harm as a top priority. Beyond that, there are several additional steps that could move the UK in the right direction.

I have long pressed for minimum unit pricing to be introduced in England to bring us in line with other UK nations. The evidence from Scotland has been highly encouraging. I especially highlight the fact that the impact on prices has almost exclusively been in the off-trade sector, while on-trades prices have largely been unaffected. This is important because colleagues have told me that a reason for not supporting MUP is the perception that it will harm our village pubs. This debate is not related to the "Saving Your Local Pub" campaign, but it is important to note that introducing MUP would have little, if any, impact on pubs and off-licences. What MUP can do is address the "in your face", cheap alcohol promotion that faces us all when we venture into a supermarket—something that appeared to be more apparent during the lockdowns.

To conclude—I am sure that you will be glad to hear me say that, Madam Deputy Speaker—there are some clear recommendations that I would like the Government to consider and act on, with no unnecessary delay. First, we need to deliver a new comprehensive strategy. The UK Government must introduce a new alcohol strategy as part of the covid-19 national recovery plans. The strategy must take into account the best available evidence and include population-level measures to reduce harm from alcohol. Its development must be free from the influence of the alcohol industry. Although the Government must support economic recovery and our hospitality industry, this must be balanced with minimising harm from alcohol. A new strategy should include the interventions recommended by the World Health Organisation.

The last alcohol strategy will be celebrating its 10th anniversary next year. The Government have so far failed to fulfil their promises for an update, and have now caused fears that alcohol will fall by the wayside while they focus on drugs and gambling. Developing such a strategy, specifically on alcohol, would allow the Government to understand all the influences and drivers of alcohol harm—including its availability, price and marketing—and to identify the most effective ways to tackle this in the UK. The final report of the commission on alcohol harm concluded that we need a new alcohol strategy that is evidence-based, comprehensive, and focused on population-level measures. Organisations such as Alcohol Health Alliance UK, Alcohol Change UK, the OECD and the World Health Organisation have echoed those calls. I support the recommendation wholeheartedly and call on the Government to launch such a strategy urgently.

[Derek Thomas]

The second of three recommendations is for the Government to introduce MUP without delay to reduce the consumption of cheap, high-strength products. The Chancellor's move in this direction in the Budget was welcome. However, alcohol duty collects between £10 billion and £12 billion each year, but is estimated to cost £27 billion in social costs, including the cost to the NHS that I have mentioned.

Finally, I call on the Government to introduce alcohol advertising restrictions to reduce alcohol harm, and protect children and vulnerable people, including those in recovery.

If we have any hope of turning the tide on alcohol harm, there is no more time to wait. We must do more, do it better and do it now.

4.14 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I am grateful for the chance to contribute to this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee. It is a real privilege to follow the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas). In my remarks I will speak for myself, but I will also try to say a few words for my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), who, as was mentioned, is with his family and his father Mike, who is receiving palliative care after treatment for lung cancer. I know I speak for all of us when I say that all our love, prayers and best wishes go to my hon. Friend and his family.

This debate is profoundly important. It is important for many people, such as the hon. Member for St Ives. It is important for many of those who are hon. Members and, like me, children of alcoholics. I am the son and the grandson of alcoholics. I watched those people die from alcohol and I watched how this terrible disease cascades down the generations, causing chaos, pain and distress in its wake. In the all-party children of alcoholics group, which I co-chair, we have come together because we know that we have to try to break the silence in order to break the cycle of the disease cascading down any more generations to come. We know too that we have to normalise the conversation, and that means that we have to help organise the conversation. That is why, for us, this debate is so important.

There are so many people, and so many Members of this House, who are still bound in fear with stigma and shame that stops them speaking out. I have now lost count of the number of our colleagues here who have approached me in the Lobbies and corridors to say, "I too am the child of an alcoholic", but, for whatever reason, they are not able to speak out. I almost did not speak myself. I did so only through the spiritual guidance of Father Gerry, God rest his soul, at St Chad's Cathedral in Birmingham, who helped show me that if, by speaking out, I could effect change, then I was doing the right thing: that in fact what I would be doing is honouring the boy that became the man that became my dad. My father was the child of an alcoholic and he had no help available to him. So I hope that this debate encourages more of us in this place to speak out and talk publicly about the things that people have said to me in the Lobbies and the corridors, because we have a wrong to right, and that wrong is that we have no strategy for tackling alcohol harm.

My work on this issue goes back to 2015 and the election of that year. David Cameron, the Prime Minister at the time, was busy waving my famous leaving note at the Treasury. It was something that caused me immense public shame. But what I could not talk about at the time was the intense private shame that I was going through nursing my father in the final days of his life at Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow. He died on the morning of St Joseph's Day. After his death, and after that election, I fell to pieces. It was only through getting in touch with the National Association for Children of Alcoholics that I discovered that I was not alone.

I grew up knowing all the feelings that every child of an alcoholic becomes all too familiar with: trying to make yourself invisible to disappear from the shame of some terrible public incident; the chronic insecurity; the co-dependency of supporting others, in my case, my mother, from the age of eight; the bouts of violence, luckily, in my case, occasional; the hospital visits; and the trouble with ambulances. There is the pervasive sense of guilt. Am I doing enough? Is my father okay? Is he eating? Is he starving? Or is he on a floor somewhere?

There is the drive for perfection: the striving to please someone who does not really seem to care. Not long after I got into the Cabinet—it was a moment of immense pride for me and I wanted to show my dad how proud he should have been of the work that I put in—he came to our office at the Cabinet Office; it is a grand place. He was too drunk to stand. It was utterly humiliating and we had to bundle him out as fast as possible. I came to see that nothing I could do would ever be good enough, and nothing I could do would stop him drinking. Every child of an alcoholic can tell scores of stories just like mine.

Those who helped me process trauma taught me that you have to build an integrated picture of the past with the good and the bad, the light and the dark. For children of alcoholics, the pieces of the puzzle that you try to put together are so sharp that they cut you, and you bleed. That is why support from organisations such as the National Association for Children of Alcoholics is life-changing. It is not just a helpline; it is literally a lifeline. That is why we must do better in putting a strategy in place to combat the harm of alcohol.

I am not sure that I would be here without NACOA's help, and that is why I say a profound thank you to Hilary Henriques and her team—Piers, and Josh Connolly. I also thank the amazing patrons Calum Best, Tony Adams, Camilla Tominey, David Coldwell, Sophie K, and so many others. I speak for all involved in our movement when I say a profound thanks to Her Royal Highness Princess Catherine for her leadership in supporting Forward Trust and the Action on Addiction alliance of which NACOA is so proud to be a part.

My father was an inspiration to me. He was brilliant, charismatic, a fighter for love and a fighter for decency. But he was in the grips of an addiction for which there was no help. What was true for him is now true of thousands of children. What is so appalling is that one in five children in this country are in that predicament—they are children of parents who drink too much. More than 60% of care applications involve the misuse of alcohol or drugs. Parental alcohol misuse accounts for nearly 40% of cases where a child is killed or seriously injured. Children of alcoholics are more likely to become addicted

to alcohol, to develop eating disorders and to take their own lives. That is why we need a strategy to combat the harm of alcohol.

When we started our work in 2016, we discovered that not one local authority had a strategy for children of alcoholics. In our last survey, that had gone up to half—but that means that half do not have strategies in place—and more than 90% of local authorities were cutting budgets for drug and alcohol treatment despite some having rising admissions for alcohol accident and emergency cases. Half of councils saw referrals for alcohol treatment going down, not up, yet we still do not have a strategy for alcohol harm.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton wanted to make the point that almost three people an hour die of alcohol-related causes. Alcohol-related harms now cost us £27 billion a year. People from the most deprived communities are 60% more likely to die than those in richer communities. Alcohol-specific deaths have soared by more than 20% over the course of lockdown, and 40% of crime is linked to alcohol, yet we still do not have a strategy to combat alcohol-related harm.

To help Ministers, children of alcoholics across the country united to draw up our first manifesto for change, with a simple set of 10 messages therein. It has a beautiful instruction from his grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, himself the child of an alcoholic. We want: to ensure that there is a strategy for children of alcoholics; properly funded local support; better support for families; better education and awareness for children; a plea for the Government to help lead a change of public attitudes; better education and training for those who work with children; minimum alcohol unit pricing; to curtail the promotion of advertising on alcohol; and the Government to take responsibility for reducing rates of alcoholism. We want a strategy for reducing the harm of alcohol.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton wanted to highlight the points made about minimum alcohol pricing. If he were here, he would have highlighted that in some ciders a unit of alcohol costs just 19p. That means a person can buy the recommended weekly maximum of 14 units for £2.68—less than the price of a cup of coffee. In Scotland and Wales there is minimum unit pricing, which is working—it is driving down addiction rates—and the Government should learn from it. Equally, alcohol advertising needs to be curtailed.

Finally, we thought that under the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) we were making progress. Funding for the NACOA helpline was put in place, as was funding for pilots. Inexplicably, at a time of surging alcohol misuse, the funding for those programmes has stopped. We assume that that is an error and we look forward to meeting the Secretary of State to talk about reinstating that funding.

We know that we cannot change things for our parents, but we are damn well going to change things for our children. That means campaigning until we get a strategy in place to tackle the harm from alcohol.

4.25 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I am honoured to make a contribution to the debate. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), who cannot be here and of whom we will be

thinking, and my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for helping to bring the debate to the House.

Before I go any further, let me say that the previous speech was probably one of the most moving contributions I have heard in the House. I say to the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) that his father would be immensely proud of what he has said this afternoon. I commend the bravery with which he stood up and spoke movingly about his personal experiences. Even though I do not know him, I am incredibly moved to have heard what he said, and I thank him.

The World Health Organisation estimates that, every year, some 3 million people around the world die due to the harmful use of alcohol. That accounts for a staggering 5.3% of all deaths. In England and Wales alone, there were 7,423 alcohol-related deaths in 2020, which, shockingly, was a rise of 19.6% from 2019. Based on those statistics, it is absolutely the case that alcohol remains an alarming and clear problem, not just around the world but in this country.

As we have heard, alcohol misuse can have many effects, from causing death and disability to fostering and exacerbating mental health and behavioural disorders. Health consequences aside, its harmful use can bring with it many socioeconomic losses to individuals and wider society. It is therefore paramount that we address alcohol misuse and work collaboratively to mitigate that sad and perennial problem in our society.

Tackling alcohol misuse will require a multi-pronged approach and an essential part of that is investing in programmes that address alcohol harm. I know that the Government continue to work on that and I am sure that we will hear more about that from the Minister. We must invest in bodies such as NHS England and Improvement, whose programmes have a long history and a deep understanding of how to help with the issue.

In my research for the debate, I was pleased to learn that £27 million has been invested to establish alcohol harm teams in hospitals that will provide specialist support where needed; that £80 million has been allocated for substance-misuse treatment in 2021-22; and that there is a further £90 million for medically managed in-patient detoxification units. That spending will come in, in addition to local authorities' funding for substance misuse treatment, through the public health grant. From what we have heard, that is welcome. More must be done, but things are being done.

I am a firm believer that through investing in such programmes, alongside strengthening the capacity for local authorities to help to co-ordinate community action and bring knowledge and expertise to the table, we can begin to make a difference. I do not think there is a quick fix or single solution to something that is very damaging for society, but we want the Government to take more approaches to deal seriously with the issue. They are taking action, engaging with campaign groups, and investing in services and communities, which is the only way really to begin to target the harmful effects of alcohol misuse.

4.29 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Members for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) and for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for

[*Martyn Day*]

securing this debate through the Backbench Business Committee. I would like to take this opportunity to praise the opening speech by the hon. Member for St Ives, who I think covered the points very well and summed up the position. I find myself in agreement with many of the points that have been made, and I am grateful to hon. Members for their personal testimonies, which have added very strongly to what we are considering today.

In Scotland, on average, alcohol causes about 688 hospital admissions and 23 deaths per week. That is a lot of misery for a lot of families, and it comes at a vast cost and disruption to the health service—a similar problem to what has been seen in England. Fighting alcohol abuse must therefore be a priority for us all, because all our families and communities must get the support they need. Alcohol is everywhere in our society, and in many ways it is hardwired into our cultural DNA. It features in countless songs, poems, stories and humour—from the works of our national bards, Burns and MacDiarmid, through to popular culture.

I remember hearing the late Hamish Imlach in concert, and he had quite a few songs about booze and drink in his repertoire, but he also used to crack jokes. He said that he had an allergy to leather because he realised that every time he fell asleep with his shoes on, he woke up with a blinding headache. I tell that anecdote not to be flippant, but in an attempt to illustrate how ingrained the problem with our culture actually is.

It will therefore come as no surprise to anyone that Scotland has a long-standing and problematic relationship with alcohol. The damage that misuse causes is indeed stark. It causes harm to individuals' health, employment and relationships, as well as to the wider community and public safety. Hearing figures that suggest one in five people have been harmed by other people's drinking in the last year alone is frightening. Then we have the financial burden on the economy through costs to the NHS, police and emergency services, and in lost productivity to businesses.

In 2020, adults in Scotland drank an average of 9.4 litres of alcohol per head, which is 18 units per adult per week, or almost 30% more than the low risk guidelines. That is an improvement from 2015, when the average was 10.8 litres. It is moving in the right direction, but not fast enough, and of course an average hides a wide variation in consumption rates between different individuals. Notwithstanding this trend of reduced consumption, the sad reality is that the pandemic has driven up alcohol-related deaths. Evidence from various surveys shows that those who were drinking heavily before the pandemic were more likely to increase their drinking during lockdown, thereby increasing their risk of harm.

Reducing harm from alcohol is an issue devolved to the Scottish Parliament. As we have heard, Scotland is leading the world on alcohol pricing, being the first country to implement a minimum price of 50p per unit, which aims to reduce the harms, save lives, reduce hospital admissions and, ultimately, have positive impacts across the whole health system and for our wider society. The early indications are very encouraging. Before minimum unit pricing was introduced in May 2018, the weekly lower-risk drinking guideline amount of 14 units could be bought for £2.52, which is as little as 18p per unit.

The ability of the Scottish Government to tackle health issues such as alcohol harm is now, I fear, at risk from the UK Government's plan to grab devolved powers back under the new internal market legislation. I hope that the Minister can give us a guarantee that under no circumstances will they use the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 to undermine the Scottish Government's ability to set minimum unit pricing, because it really is making a difference.

We must recognise that tackling alcohol harms does not simply mean addressing alcohol use. Mental health, trauma, isolation, housing and employment are just a few of the issues that can either lead to or contribute to problematic substance abuse. The Scottish Government's alcohol framework sets out our priorities for preventing alcohol-related harm, and includes consulting on potential restrictions on alcohol advertising and improving health information on product labels, although some aspects, such as TV advertising, are currently reserved to the UK Government.

The framework contains some 20 actions building on existing measures to change Scotland's relationship with alcohol, and there is a strong focus on reducing health inequalities and doing more to protect children and young people from alcohol-related harm, including through education. Key actions include consulting on options for mandatory restrictions on alcohol marketing in Scotland, and pressing the UK Government for a 9 pm watershed on alcohol TV adverts—as they have consulted on for high fat, sugar and salt in foods—and under-18 films at cinemas, or else they could perhaps devolve the broadcast advertising powers and we can do that ourselves. They also include giving consumers useful health information on product labels and continuing our "Count 14" campaign work to raise awareness of the UK chief medical officer's lower-risk drinking guideline of 14 units per week; I expect many people still remember the previous higher limits. I could say much more about the work done in Scotland but it is important to recognise that, whatever we are doing in any part of the UK, more can still be done to make sure people get into appropriate treatment quicker in order to reduce harms and help with treatment and recovery.

As I said earlier, while alcohol harm is a devolved matter, several of the levers that can influence the issue remain here at Westminster, and I therefore wholeheartedly support the call in the motion for the Government to commission an independent review of alcohol harm.

4.35 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate and to follow such powerful contributions by colleagues. I commend in particular the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing the debate and on the way in which he led it. He said he wanted to start a new conversation. That was an elegant way to put it and is a good challenge to us all; we should all work in that spirit, and his efforts in the commission and in Parliament more generally reflect that.

I was particularly grateful to hear the hon. Gentleman mention foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. That is a hidden harm in society; we are scratching the surface of our understanding of the profound challenges it poses for individuals and society at large. I hope the Minister

will give a commitment in her speech to a national prevalence study on it, as the sector is calling for; that would be an incredible thing for a public health Minister to pick up. That fits in neatly with what the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) said about investing in services that are proven to work. That is important, particularly in relation to work with our local authorities, which I will refer to shortly. Gathering evidence on conditions such as FASD would help us build services that could be very impactful.

The contribution from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) was exceptionally moving, and his candour and the vulnerability with which he spoke will have touched those watching the debate and given people permission to speak out themselves. I congratulate him on the work he has done, and the work my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), the shadow Secretary of State, has done in this area is also genuinely transformative, changing societal perceptions and giving people permission to speak. I felt very lucky to have been sat here to hear the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill.

My right hon. Friend spoke movingly as well for my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden). We have missed him today, for entirely understandable reasons today. He and I have been friends for a very long time—from long before we were elected here a few years ago—and he and his family are in the thoughts and prayers of me and my family, and I am sure they are also in the hearts of all hon. and right hon. Members. His courage, too, in speaking out as he has done has given others permission to do the same.

Every day in our country 70 people die from alcohol-related causes. Alcohol is a powerful drug that has a wide range of effects on the human body, and the impact goes far beyond just individual health: it meaningful both for the health and wellbeing of the person concerned and for their family and the community they live in. Alcohol is linked to 200 different diseases and injuries, including heart disease, liver disease and stroke, and costs the NHS £3.5 billion every year. Alcohol is now the leading risk factor for ill health, early mortality and disability for those in my age bracket of 15 to 49. There are over 1 million hospital admissions related to alcohol each year and, as with many public health issues, they are disproportionately reflected in the poorest communities; a third of all alcohol-specific deaths are in the most deprived 20% of communities.

In my city of Nottingham our hospital admissions entering the pandemic in 2017-18 were 25,000, an all-time high, and the pandemic will only have turbocharged that. We know that in 2020 a record high of nearly 7,000 people died from diseases that are a direct consequence of alcohol, up 20% on the year before. That is a staggering change. In 2020-21, 126 million extra litres of alcohol were sold, and the heaviest drinkers increased their buying by 14%. That is a really significant change in behaviour from what was already a very challenging baseline.

As I say, alcohol harm does not just affect the individual; it harms families, too. Alcohol harm is associated with violence and domestic abuse. While alcohol use is never the sole reason for domestic abuse, the World Health Organisation estimates that roughly 55% of perpetrators were drinking alcohol prior to an assault. As we have

heard today, alcohol is also a major factor in child maltreatment, with Department for Education statistics showing that parental alcohol use was a factor in 16% of child-in-need cases.

We feel the harm more widely, too, with crime and antisocial behaviour, traffic collisions and unemployment. As colleagues will know, I have been campaigning for a number of years on violence and abuse against retail workers; again, alcohol is an anchor factor in that type of abuse. Drink-driving causes almost 9,000 casualties and 260 deaths a year. That is an awful lot of empty places at the table this Christmas, and a lot of hearts broken.

Good treatment services are our way, as a society and as a Parliament, to respond to the harm in our society, but even prior to the pandemic, only one in five dependent drinkers were believed to be in treatment. We must do much better than that. I think we can be much more ambitious. The hon. Member for St Ives mentioned the significant proportion of dependent drinkers in his constituency who are not in treatment—and, as he said, his constituency actually outperforms the national average.

That takes us, as we are often taken in Thursday debates about public health, back to the public health grant and our cuts to it over the last decade, which have been a cost efficiency but, as a value proposition, poor public policy. Between 2016 and 2018, more than two thirds of local authorities in England cut their alcohol treatment budgets, with 17 imposing cuts of more than half. Those cuts are part of the reason why dependent drinkers are often unable to get support. St Mungo's estimates that funding cuts meant that 12,000 fewer rough sleepers accessed support in 2018-19 than if funding had remained at 2010 levels. Of course, as I say, covid will have exaggerated that even further.

Due to these resource cuts, alcohol treatment providers have reduced their offer to try to make sure that they can see as many people as possible. Currently, there are just six NHS in-patient detox units operating in the entirety of the UK, with fewer than 100 beds in total. A lack of outreach services means that those with complex needs are missing out, and a reduction in capacity means that those at lower levels of drinking, where treatment could be really impactful as an early intervention, are missing out too. We are not investing properly in those services, but we need to.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say. I hope that she will address the point about the public health grant and what more can be done to restore what we have lost. As I say, there may have been a short-term cost saving on a financial line in the Budget, but in reality the cost—in human terms, of course, but also in cash terms to the rest of the health service—far dwarfs whatever has been saved. I hope that we can look at that and restore it as a matter of urgency.

Before closing, I want to revisit the point about labelling on alcohol products that I and my right hon. and hon. Friends pressed during proceedings on the Health and Care Bill. I will not reiterate the arguments, which I had the chance to make at length, but it is safe to say that we on the Opposition Benches are impatient for consistent, high-quality information to be available. It is about informed choice; we know that that is what consumers want, too. The settled will of the House, as established during proceedings on the Bill, is to let industry continue its efforts through self-organisation,

[Alex Norris]

and it is doubtless true that significant progress has been made in this area in recent years, so we will watch that with great interest. I hope that those in industry who are least willing to make this important change do not see Monday's vote as a defeat of the concept of labelling itself but, rather, see that they are being given time and space to sort it themselves. If they do not, we will return to the issue.

In conclusion—I want to give the Minister plenty of time to address the comments that colleagues have made—the point about a strategy is well made. Now is the time to pull the efforts together under one roof so that they can be measured, understood and action-planned together—I think that is a good call. The funding that sits beneath them must be restored to its 2010 level. This is a significant harm for the individual and for our communities. I have no doubt that there is a cross-party commitment to attack this issue, and those are ways to do that.

4.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for leading on this important debate. There may not have been too many contributions, but those we have had have been really, really valuable. I am very sorry to hear that the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) cannot be here for this important debate. I send my best wishes to him and his family at this very difficult time.

The majority of people drink alcohol responsibly, but we know that there are people who drink at levels which lead to significant harms. Alcohol misuse can have devastating impacts on individuals, families, communities and society. Over the course of the pandemic, we have seen an increase in those drinking at higher risk levels, and, sadly, an increase in alcohol-specific deaths. I would like to take this moment to commend our frontline workers. They have been tirelessly working and supporting people in need in the most difficult circumstances.

Throughout the pandemic, drug and alcohol treatment providers have continued to support and treat people. To ensure treatment services continue supporting people to the highest standards, we have made the largest increase to treatment funding for substance misuse in 15 years. We have provided £80 million of new investment in 2021-22. Some £9.8 million of that uplift has been allocated specifically to increase the availability of in-patient places for medically assisted withdrawal. That is of critical importance for people heavily dependent on alcohol, where rapid withdrawal can be extremely dangerous. The funding is in addition to the money that local authorities already spend on substance misuse from the public health grant.

The Government have agreed to carry forward the recommendations of part two of Dame Carol Black's independent review of drugs—my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives talked about Dame Carol Black's report in his speech—and to publish a new drugs strategy later this year. Although the subject of the review was drugs, the implementation of many of its recommendations will also benefit people seeking treatment for alcohol dependency, for example through the introduction of

mechanisms such as an improved commissioning standard and a strong focus on building back the workforce. To further improve alcohol treatment, the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities is developing comprehensive UK guidelines for the clinical management of harmful drinking and alcohol dependence. The guidelines should develop a clear consensus on good practice and improve the quality of service provision.

There is clear evidence that growing up in a family affected by parental alcohol dependency can cause significant harm to a child's wellbeing and damage their long-term outcomes. Thanks to the personal testimony and campaigning from Members here today—I will respond further to the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) later in my speech—we have invested £7.2 million on a package of measures, over four years, to improve outcomes and support for children whose parents are alcohol dependent. Some £5.7 million of that has funded nine local areas to implement innovative and evidence-informed interventions, and will make system-wide improvements to working holistically with these families. Early findings of the programme indicate positive results, for example in the local areas receiving programme funding, and we have seen improved identification of children in need, and more parents starting alcohol treatment. We are actively considering how we share lessons from the programme nationally, and the implications for future policy and practice. To aid that, we have commissioned an independent national evaluation of the programme, expected to be published in spring 2022.

Alcohol harms are not experienced equally across groups. Despite reporting lower or similar levels of drinking, those of lower socioeconomic status experience disproportionate alcohol-related harm. There are also significant geographical disparities, with the highest rates of mortality from alcohol-specific causes seen in the northern regions.

As part of the long-term plan, we have provided national funding to support the implementation of specialist alcohol care teams in the 25% of hospitals with the highest rates of alcohol dependence-related admissions. It is estimated that the programme will prevent 50,000 admissions over five years.

We are also committed to supporting the most vulnerable in our society. This year, we are delivering up to £52 million for substance misuse treatment services for people sleeping rough, building on the £23 million in 2020-21. That will fund evidence-based drug and alcohol treatment and wraparound support to improve access, including for those with co-occurring mental health needs.

The Government believe that people have a right to accurate information and clear advice about alcohol and its health risks, enabling people to make informed choices about their drinking. As a result, we continue to educate the public, ensuring that people are aware of the health risks of alcohol through local and national programmes, such as the Better Health campaign and the Drink Free Days app.

An alcohol risk assessment is a mandatory component in the NHS health check so that people are given advice on cutting down if their drinking is putting their health at risk. To ensure that people have all the information they need at the point of purchase, we will shortly consult on whether mandatory calorie labelling should be introduced on pre-packed alcohol and alcohol sold

in the out-of-home sector. The consultation will also seek views on mandatory provision of the UK chief medical officer's low-risk drinking guidelines and a drink-drive warning. The hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) talked about the impact that drink-driving can have on families. Respondents to that consultation will have the opportunity to provide suggestions for further labelling requirements that they would like the Government to consider.

I will take the opportunity now to address the issues raised during the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives talked about foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and I reassure him that we take that very seriously. We have asked NICE to produce a quality standard in England for FASD to help the health and care system to improve the diagnosis and care of those affected, based around the Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network—SIGN 156—standard. To help improve support for those living with its consequences, we have funded five voluntary organisations in 2020-21, and we are analysing the evaluations to be taken into account for further policies on FASD.

The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill shared his moving and personal experiences of being a child and a grandchild of an alcoholic. I thank him for his openness. He talked about stigma and the importance of sharing experiences. I am sure that, by sharing his experience today, he will have made a difference to so many people, and I thank him for that.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about a number of other issues, including the strategy, as the hon. Member for Nottingham North and the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) did. The Government have committed to publishing a new UK-wide cross-Government addiction strategy, which will focus on creating further opportunities to tackle and address addictions, such as alcohol and drugs as well as gambling-related harms, in a comprehensive and joined-up way. As I said, alcohol and drug addiction are far too often intrinsically linked, and we are committed to tackling that.

Liam Byrne: I wonder whether the Minister could share with the House her forecast timeframe for that addiction strategy and, in so doing, perhaps recognise that there are significant differences between addiction to drugs and alcohol, not least because one is legal and the other is illegal.

Maggie Throup: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I am sure he will appreciate that Dame Carol Black's report acknowledged that there are differences, but they are intrinsically linked as well. I fully take his point that one is illegal and the other is illegal, and that will be taken into consideration.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill and the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk, talked about the minimum unit price. The Government continue to monitor the impact of the minimum unit price as evidence emerges from Scotland and Wales. Although some evidence has

been published by Public Health Scotland relating to the impact of MUP, further important components of the evaluation are not scheduled for release until 2023, including the impact on alcohol-related admissions and deaths.

Another important issue raised in the debate was the relationship between domestic abuse and alcohol addiction. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 will mean better protections for victims and more effective measures for going after perpetrators. We are reflecting the importance of joined-up domestic abuse, mental health and substance misuse services in supporting statutory guidelines.

Let me briefly address the issue that the hon. Members for Linlithgow and East Falkirk and for Nottingham North raised about amendments that were not made to the Health and Care Bill. Alcohol has not been included in the advertising restrictions in the Bill, mainly because the Government have existing measures in place to protect children and young people from alcohol advertisements. The 2019 and 2020 consultations on advertising restrictions on less healthy food and drink did not consult on including alcohol in the restrictions, either online or on TV. Finally, alcohol products are not available for children to purchase, so they do not have the same level of exposure to them.

In closing, I reiterate the Government's commitment to supporting those who are most vulnerable to and at risk of alcohol misuse. I am confident that our strong programme of work under way to address alcohol-related harms, the increased funding for treatment providers and the recommendations in Dame Carol Black's review that we are taking forward will all further support people who are experiencing alcohol dependency and alcohol-related harms, as well as those on whom they have an impact.

4.55 pm

Derek Thomas: I appreciate all that has been said, including the Minister's response. In my speech, I talked about

"miserable, hopeless lived experience for those who find they have an alcohol addiction."

We have heard clearly how that experience extends to families and particularly to children. I do not believe that it has to be hopeless, but we need a nationwide strategy with population-level measures.

I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate, which has helped to address the stigma and put the subject back on the agenda, and which may start a new conversation. I appreciate all that the Minister said and all the measures that are being introduced. I would love the conversation to continue, to really help the families who are being severely harmed by alcohol misuse.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the grave harm to society caused by excessive alcohol consumption and alcohol addiction; further notes that alcohol-specific deaths in 2020 were the highest ever recorded by the Office for National Statistics across many parts of the UK; and calls on the Government to commission an independent review of alcohol harm.

Tidal Energy Generation: Ringfenced Funding

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

4.56 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to bring this critical issue before the House this evening. I have been passionate about the tidal marine industry's potential for some time. I am glad that now, only a few weeks after the conference of the parties in Glasgow, it is finally getting the focus and attention that it deserves.

Ahead of this debate, as we all know, the Prime Minister announced at Prime Minister's questions yesterday that there will finally be some ringfenced funding for tidal energy: £20 million in the forthcoming contracts for difference auction. I wish I had known that securing a debate in this House is all it takes to get some movement out of the Government and the Cabinet. I must really start securing adjournment debates much more often.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It was my PMQ.

Ian Blackford: Of course—I congratulate my hon. Friend on his Prime Minister's question yesterday.

While my party colleagues and I were glad to see some movement yesterday, we have also been very clear that it amounts to only a partial U-turn. The Government have a way to go yet. Every little may help, but if we are serious about the scale of the opportunity, we need to go further.

In securing this debate, our ask was for a £71 million ringfenced fund. The ask remains for £71 million, which we genuinely believe is the level of investment that will allow the industry to fulfil its potential to provide green baseload energy that is so critical to our situation, and will support a sector that has massive potential not just at home but as an export industry. The level of investment that we put in now will ultimately determine whether the industry will reach its potential on these shores or we miss the chance and let it slip through our grasp.

Let me put the issue in context. The Royal Society report published this month refers to tidal marine contributing 11.5 GW of electricity. That is 15% of UK generation capacity.

Alan Brown: May I go back to the pots of money? As my right hon. Friend says, £20 million is clearly welcome compared with where we were, but would a bigger pot of money not unlock greater investment and create a better jobs return? A £70 million pot could unlock £140 million of private investment and create 400 jobs, whereas £20 million would unlock only £20 million and create 100 jobs. A bigger pot would get a better return for consumers.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is right. We are, essentially, at ground zero today. This is about how we kick-start the industry. The modest Government support for which we are asking would unlock that private investment, and when we think about the 11.5 GW that I talked about—that 15% of UK electricity—

5 pm

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

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

Ian Blackford: That 15% is equivalent to the contribution that nuclear makes. When we put into context the relative level of funding we are asking for, the scale of the opportunity is huge. We are talking about an industry in which Scotland and the UK lead the world in terms of technology. The ability to create green baseload electricity is there 24/7, 365 days a year, along with the capacity to use that technology and that ingenuity to export to Canada, Thailand, France, Japan and so on. There is a massive opportunity for us to benefit from that first-mover advantage, to get behind an industry where we can make sure that we control the entire supply chain and have the potential to navigate away from fossil fuels and create the jobs referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown).

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): My right hon. Friend has talked of an opportunity. We have known about tidal energy for a long time. We should have invested in it 20, 30 or 40 years ago; if we had done so, we would have a much more mature industry today. If this Government do not invest now, we will look to the future and see nothing more than negligence.

Ian Blackford: We are where we are at the moment. My point to the Government is this. We know that the technology is there. We know that relative costs are already coming down dramatically; we can see that from the MeyGen project in the Pentland Firth, for example. Here is the opportunity to get behind something that could be revolutionary, in terms of providing clean energy—baseload energy, as I mentioned—but also the ability to create a manufacturing industry. We can perhaps learn from the mistakes that were made with wind turbines, and ensure that we are not relying on other countries to provide the infrastructure that we need, because we can do this ourselves. There is a responsibility that we have here, now, today, to get behind this industry.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I will give way one more time.

Richard Graham: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, and I much appreciate his relatively new-found enthusiasm for the marine energy sector. I pay tribute to his colleagues, the hon. Members for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), for the help that they have given the all-party parliamentary group on marine energy, which I founded in July 2016. The group has 25 members, two of whom are from the Scottish National party, and their support is greatly valued. However, this is a great British success story, which has an impact on opportunities from the Isle of Wight, along the coast of Cornwall, up through Wales and into Northern Ireland.

As the right hon. Gentleman will know, this wonderful decision by the Government has been greeted by the chair of RenewableUK as a "major step forward for the...tidal energy industry."

The chair of the Marine Energy Council has said:

“The impact of this support cannot be overstated.”

Furthermore, Nova Innovation has said that this will be “turbocharging the delivery of tidal energy”.

This is a pivotal moment, and I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will agree that it is a huge leap forward for marine energy.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. It is not customary to read out very long interventions.

Ian Blackford: I must say to the hon. Gentleman that my support for this is not just for the short term; I was at the port of Nigg when the MeyGen project was launched many years ago, so the subject has been dear to my heart for a long time. I do, however, agree with him about the scale of the opportunity. Of course the £20 million of investment that was announced yesterday is important, because it will allow us to develop the industry, but the question at the heart of today’s debate is about the scale of our ambition.

I respectfully ask the Minister, as I would ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, for a recognition of the scale of this opportunity. Phase 2 of the MeyGen project has already been permitted to go up to 80 MW, and in the Pentland Firth it could ultimately reach as much as 400 MW, but the ability to expand from the current 6 MW installed in MeyGen phase 1 is restrained by the investment that has been put in place in this round. We would certainly not be looking at deploying the 80 MW; it would be a much reduced figure. I would simply say to the Minister and to all Members: let us have that ambition. Let us have that desire to see this green energy source get to 15% of UK electricity production. To do that, however, we have to show more ambition than is being shown today. I do not wish to be seen as ungrateful for what has happened; all I am asking the Government to do is to recognise the scale—

Alan Brown: Will my right hon. Friend give way one more time?

Ian Blackford: Let me make a little bit of progress. At this rate, I am going to use up all the time myself, but I want to be respectful to the Minister.

My message to the Minister is to reassess what has been done and to do all that he can to ensure that we develop this green potential. The funding of £71 million that we have asked for would have resulted in 100 MW of capacity deployed in the very near term from what we know from planned projects. Let me ask him this specific question. With a funding pot of £20 million, what specific assessment of capacity deployment have the Government made? I genuinely ask him not to duck this question, as it is critical to revealing what assumptions the Government have made in relation to their lower level of investment. I am sure that they will not have made this announcement without making such an assessment, and I look forward to the Minister addressing that question when he responds.

It is important to set out just how obvious an opportunity investment in the tidal marine sector is, and why it is important for us. First and foremost, we should remind ourselves of how deeply fortunate we are that this world-leading technology is already located in the United Kingdom and particularly in Scotland. We have a chance

to grow this sector exponentially, but we have to take it. It is estimated that the tidal stream industry could generate a net cumulative benefit to the UK of £1.4 billion and support at least 4,000 jobs by 2030. Additionally, although wave energy is a less mature technology than tidal stream, it could add a further net positive contribution to the UK economy of £4 billion and support 8,100 jobs by 2040.

This industry is not alone as an emerging opportunity; there is also emerging evidence of just how big this opportunity can be for our present and future energy needs. A recent report for the Royal Society, led by Daniel Coles at the University of Plymouth in collaboration with the Universities of Aberdeen, St Andrews and Highlands and Islands, has found that the UK can get 15% of its electricity production from tidal stream power. That would be a massive contribution to the work that needs to be done to get to net zero by 2045 in Scotland and by 2050 in the rest of the UK. Achieving this would require around 11.5 GW of tidal stream turbine capacity to be installed.

Just to put that in context, we currently stand at 18 MW. This takes us to the nub of the issue regarding the support required from the Government to create the investment in the industry that my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun mentioned. To meet those ambitions means installing a least a further 124 MW by 2031. That would put tidal stream on a trajectory to install the estimated 11.5 GW needed to generate 34 terawatt-hours a year by 2050.

The recent research for the Royal Society also indicates that if we build up this targeted support for the tidal industry, it will drive down the levelised cost of energy to below £150 per megawatt-hour. This would make tidal stream cost-competitive with other technologies such as combined cycle gas turbines, biomass and anaerobic digestion. So, from the current position where there is no route to the domestic market, it is now clear that if this sector gets the investment it needs, it will quickly become a key component in meeting our energy needs.

Alan Brown: Does my right hon. Friend agree that another thing the Government could do that would not cost them or consumers any money would be to set an interim date and target for hitting 1 GW of tidal stream? That would send a signal to investors about how seriously the Government are taking this.

Ian Blackford: Absolutely, because it is about that ambition. I hope the Government share our ambition to see this sector generate the level of electricity we believe it can generate. It is about creating the circumstances, by kickstarting the sector with modest Government investment, so that investors come in. We have developed an opportunity for green energy, but let us also think about the opportunities for manufacturing and for a global success story, given the technology that has been developed on these islands.

A proper level of investment will allow existing developments such as the MeyGen project to take off. This project, the world’s largest tidal array, is already exporting significant amounts of electricity, and it has significant capacity to grow. This presents a transformational opportunity for the tidal sector and would once again demonstrate Scotland’s commitment to a green recovery.

[*Ian Blackford*]

It could also create thousands of new full-time roles in the Scottish supply chain, helping to achieve its full potential.

We also need to think about the opportunity for our industrial base in Scotland, because the ability to tie in green energy to the powering of data centres, for example, would be an enormous opportunity throughout Scotland, particularly in my area of the highlands and islands. From this ability to generate green energy, we can develop a wider industrial strategy to create the job opportunities and the wealth that we all want to see.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): My right hon. Friend mentioned supply chains, and 25% of Nova's supply chain spend is in Shetland, with 98% of its spend being in the UK. If the UK Government are serious about levelling up manufacturing, is this not a golden opportunity for them to get behind it fully, instead of the partial funding we have seen in the last 24 hours?

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Actually, 90% of the Nova project's supply chain comes from the UK, but let me put that into context. For a traditional wind turbine, the UK contribution is some 30%. We lost the opportunity to command the supply chain for the traditional wind industry, and here is an opportunity to make sure we do not make the same mistake again. It is important the Government recognise that.

We have an opportunity to have a green future driven by green jobs, but it will happen only if the opportunity is matched by the ambition of Government investment. In truth, the ask from the industry is modest compared with the support offered to other sectors. The ask is for a £71 million ringfenced fund from the UK Government so the sector can flourish. Although the Government's offer of £20 million in yesterday's contracts for difference auction is a step in the right direction, it is not the full stride that the sector deserves.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun has repeatedly stated on the Floor of the House, £71 million is a drop in the ocean compared with the billions that have been offered to the nuclear industry. There was seemingly no problem in finding £1.7 billion to further develop and design the Sizewell nuclear power station. There can be no reason, no logic and no excuse for failing to find the £71 million needed to support this vital industry.

Let us remind ourselves of the potential. This is an industry that can grow to 15% of the UK's electricity production. If we look at a typical day over the last few weeks, on 16 November nuclear contributed 14.6% of the UK's electricity. We do not need nuclear in Scotland. We can provide the baseload we need from this clean source of energy. We have the potential to deliver safe green energy and to provide jobs and energy security for a fraction of the cost of nuclear.

There are many other favourable comparisons, too. The predictability and stable power output of tidal stream energy offers additional benefits over other technologies for our future energy supply. For instance, this predictability and stability even compares positively with floating offshore wind, which secured a £24 million ringfenced budget in the draft budget for the fourth-round allocation.

The ask is modest and the picture for investment is clear. If we do not grasp this opportunity, other countries will. Countries including Canada and France have already put in place financial mechanisms to capitalise on tidal energy. Canada has a feed-in tariff equivalent to £300 per megawatt-hour, with many multi-megawatt projects in the pipeline. Nova, based in Leith, has an order to ship 15 turbines to Canada. The Canadians would love to have our technology, and they are enticing companies such as Nova to relocate. The French Government are about to announce a feed-in tariff for tidal energy backed by the EU green deal. Japan and Indonesia are piloting projects and negotiating power purchasing agreements to accelerate tidal energy deployment. We need a domestic market for the industry to grow and thrive. It is a case of use it or lose it. It is that stark, it is that simple. The grim reality is that if the UK Government fall short and short-change this sector, the industry could be lost to other countries that are willing to invest in this technology. We are back to where we were with wind and, in many cases, where we were on oil and gas. We must make sure that we do not lose the full extent of this opportunity. We must make sure that tidal stream cannot be lost to Scotland and the UK—it will certainly not be lost to the world, and we need to make sure that we fully play our part. In case that all sounds familiar, we should remember exactly what happened to the wind industry in the 1980s and 1990s. As I have mentioned, only 30% of the UK supply chain for UK wind is domestically generated.

If we are to reach net-zero and have a just transition, we simply cannot repeat those mistakes of the past. Let us just think of the job opportunities through developing the Scottish, UK and global markets. There are expectations of a global market of 100 GW, an industry that will be worth £126 billion by 2050. We have a choice: lead this emerging green energy sector or sit back and watch our sector-leading companies move wholesale to overseas markets. We can embrace the opportunity for green jobs, for base-load energy and for transitioning to that green energy future. We can lead the world in tidal marine or we can walk away from the opportunity to develop and deepen the sector leadership that has been developed in Scotland and the UK.

It will come as no surprise to Members from across this House that I am not the biggest cheerleader or supporter of the UK Government. Normally when I walk into this Chamber, I do so to firmly oppose those on the Government Benches. Today, though, I walked into this Chamber with a different intention, because this is an issue where we have a chance to work together; here is an area, an industry and an opportunity where we can genuinely work together in our common interests. With a modest amount of support in terms of the overall intervention in energy—of £71 million—the industry can reach its potential and we can all benefit. I hope the Government see it that way too, and I hope that yesterday was only the first step and that there are bigger and better strides to come. I hope the Government are listening, and I very much look forward to the Minister's response.

5.17 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Hands): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (*Ian Blackford*) on securing this important debate, and I

welcome his support for the UK Government. He said that he came into the Chamber and, unusually, wanted to support the UK Government, and I am very grateful for that. I very much welcome that change of tack.

Marine energy, and tidal stream energy in particular, is of great interest to the Government. Our theme today is the merits of ringfenced funding for the deployment of tidal stream generation, and I shall say first that I agree entirely with the right hon. Gentleman that tidal stream is a homegrown industry of considerable potential. We have Europe's and probably the world's foremost tidal and wave energy testing centre—the European Marine Energy Centre on Orkney. We have other exciting testing centres and marine energy hubs burnishing their reputation on Anglesey, the Morlais project, and on the Isle of Wight, with the Perpetuus Tidal Energy Centre. That cropped up two weeks ago in Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions, when my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) asked about it. We have a raft of brilliant developers designing and building tidal stream devices in the UK, notably in Edinburgh, in Leith.

The right hon. Gentleman said that the UK Government funding of £20 million has come “only now”, but the picture is so positive, in large part because we have under successive Governments provided more than £175 million—not just the £20 million announced yesterday by the Prime Minister—in innovation funding to the marine energy industry in the past 18 years, of which more than £80 million has come since 2010. So when he talked about 20 to 30 years ago, this is exactly what we have been doing. Thanks to the extensive support afforded under the renewables-obligation mechanism, we were able to build in 2018 the largest tidal stream generating array in the world in the fast-moving waters of the Pentland firth.

It is fair to say, then, that the Government have a sound track record of supporting the tidal stream industry and helping to get it into the position it is in today, on the cusp of commercialisation and with good export potential. This week, however, is an occasion for looking to the future. We were all delighted to hear the Prime Minister announce yesterday at Prime Minister's questions that the Government will establish a ringfenced budget of £20 million for tidal stream developments in pot 2 of the upcoming fourth contract-for-difference allocation round. The CfD scheme is our flagship mechanism for supporting the cost-effective delivery of renewable energy. Our decision this week will ensure that the nation's tidal stream innovators get the opportunity they need to bring their cost of energy down, to ramp up the UK's capture of the abundant energy flowing along our coastlines and to learn the valuable and exportable lessons that come with being the first in the world to deploy a cutting-edge technology at scale. The decision has been warmly welcomed.

Richard Graham: The Marine Energy Council has said clearly that it is grateful to Ministers for having listened, understood and acted, and so am I. There is now an opportunity for the sector to make a success of delivering on the funding that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced and then of ramping up domestic capacity. At the same time, as the Prime Minister's trade envoy there, I will continue discussions with Indonesia about perusing potential opportunities. Will my right hon. Friend accept an invitation to come and meet

members of the sector and interested colleagues at the next meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on marine energy before the House rises?

Greg Hands: I gladly accept my hon. Friend's invitation to meet. He does a brilliant job as the chair of that APPG and he does an amazing job as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Indonesia. He mentioned one or two of the warm words of congratulation on the announcement yesterday. RenewableUK said it was “a major step forward” and that it

“puts us in pole position to”—

lead—

“the global market in due course.”

RenewableUK also said it would

“unlock private investment and secure green jobs”,

while Neil Kermode of the European Marine Energy Centre on Orkney said:

“This support for the marine energy industry is absolutely pivotal”.

I appreciate the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber having brought this topic to the House. He perhaps might have left one with the impression that just he had made representations to the Prime Minister, but I checked back and found representations from my right hon. Friends the Members for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt) and for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), and from my hon. Friends the Members for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford), for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), for Moray (Douglas Ross), for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie), for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory), for Gloucester (Richard Graham), for Sedgefield (Paul Howell), for Blyth Valley (Ian Levy), for Workington (Mark Jenkinson), for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) and for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell).

I heard some doubt from the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber as to whether the £20 million per annum is a substantial-enough sum to put the tidal stream sector on its best footing. Indeed, the right hon. Gentleman suggested that £71 million is the minimum required for the job. I am afraid I cannot agree with him on that, because £71 million would mean the awarding of a contract to virtually every developer who shows interest in the auction as long as they bid at a level just a single penny under our stated maximum price. He and I worked together in the City of London in our time. He will know from his knowledge of financial markets—I know that he has since rebranded himself as the simple crofter—that there is no way to run an auction of that sort in that way.

Ian Blackford: I hope that we can dispense with the silly gibes.

What I explained to the Minister was that £71 million would justify 100 MW of output. Perhaps he can explain what he expects to see from the £20 million. Crucially, I did point out that MeyGen has consent for 80 MW and that, within the envelope of that £71 million, it could have been fully exploited and ultimately ramped

[*Ian Blackford*]

up to 400 MW. As things stand, MeyGen 2 cannot be fully exploited and that is the impact of not going to the £71 million.

Greg Hands: The right hon. Gentleman is mixing up funding with the process of an auction. It is a contract for difference auction. The idea of £20 million being available is that it allows us to have a competitive process between all of the different parties that may be interested, and then to make sure that at least £20 million goes towards these projects. It is not the same as granting funding, which is what I think he is looking for, of £71 million. It is a competitive auction process. The purpose of the CFD scheme is to support and push for—

Alan Brown: Will the Minister give way?

Greg Hands: I will try to fit in a response to the right hon. Gentleman.

The purpose of the scheme is to support and push for only the most promising and competitive projects in the offing. My Department's analysis shows that £20 million

is optimal for that purpose and that a larger ring-fenced budget would serve neither the interests of the electricity bill payer, nor the interests of the sector itself, which must be pushed to innovate and find ways of bringing down its costs. So, yes, the Government have, this week, delivered for the burgeoning tidal stream industry and it is for the developers now to really push on and make good on their promises and their potential to demonstrate the value for money and the scalability that we need to see from our renewable energy technologies as we transition to an efficient and net zero-ready power sector.

We all remember the remarkable fall in the cost of offshore wind energy, to which the right hon. Gentleman referred in his speech, once it was able to take full advantage of the contracts for difference scheme. We have, this week, given the tidal stream sector the chance to push on and try to do the same. It will all be to our benefit and to the benefit of our planet and environment if the sector succeeds in this endeavour.

Question put and agreed to.

5.26 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 25 November 2021

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

International Men's Day

1.30 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when they are not speaking in the debate, in line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. I also remind Members that they are asked by the House to have a covid lateral flow test twice a week if coming on to the parliamentary estate. This can be done either at the testing centre in the House, or at home. Please also give each other and members of staff space when seated, and when entering and leaving the room.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered International Men's Day.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Sharma. I have been asked to send apologies from my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). He wanted to speak in this debate, but with the date change, he was unable to make it.

International Men's Day—I am not really a fan of these days. We seem to have a day for everything at present. However, as someone who cares deeply about preventing young boys and men from being left behind, it is fitting that I lead today's debate. In recent years, there has been a creeping narrative that males have it easy; that their life is a breeze and there is nothing to complain about. My standing here may, in fact, be used as evidence of that, yet it is clear that life is tough for many men and young boys, and many of our boys in schools are far from privileged. I certainly was not; in fact, I came from what I would consider a pretty standard working-class background. I do not begrudge that fact at all, because coming from such a background gave me the attitude that if I did not do something myself, no one else would. That attitude is what put me here.

However, it is clear that many young men and boys are struggling and, for whatever reason, are lacking the can-do attitude that will enable them to get on in life. The statistics speak for themselves: as a whole, men and boys are doing disproportionately poorly in education and health settings. To give a few statistics, boys are lagging behind at school, especially in maths and English. Some 13.2% of men are not in employment or education; the equivalent figure for women is 10%. Suicide rates for men are three times higher than they are for women. Life expectancy for a man today is four years lower than for a woman, 83% of rough sleepers are men, and a staggering 96% of the prison population are male. While I do not believe that men are a wholly victimised group, it is clear that if we witnessed such disparities between other groups, there would quite rightly be uproar. However, such statistics do not generate the headlines they should, because issues that affect men do not seem urgent enough to talk about.

Why is that the case? Personally, I believe that this place operates like a pendulum, swinging from left to right as it continually struggles to correct wrongs and injustices. That is a very noble endeavour that has been pursued in this great institution for many centuries. However, I am afraid that the pendulum often swings so far that reaching an equilibrium is no longer the objective. As such, over the decades during which this place has rightly corrected society's injustices—empowering females and protecting sexual and ethnic minorities from discrimination—we have unfortunately left the struggles of many males out of the discussion. Some may say that men have had their turn, and it is women's turn now. I find that poor argument rather infantile, yet it is something I have heard within these walls during private discussions, and it is a narrative that I feel has penetrated popular discourse.

I am in no way denying that men have had many opportunities that women have not had, and that remains the case in too many instances. That is wrong and should be continually challenged and put right. However, such a wrong should not be corrected by simply ignoring the issues that many men and boys face. As the saying goes, "Two wrongs don't make a right." So what can we do? And why did coming from such a working-class background not stop me from reaching the position I am in now?

First, we must consider the need for boys to have male role models, just as they need female ones. The need for such male role models is highlighted by groups such as Lads Need Dads, a fantastic charity that has done some excellent work in encouraging boys to pursue their passions and to learn skills from male volunteers. The results speak for themselves, and I urge all Members here to look into the organisation's work and to promote the group in their constituencies. It is time that we recognised the need for positive male role models for our boys. After all, failure to do so will only mean that boys continue to be let down.

Secondly, we clearly need more male teachers in our schools if we are to address some of the educational disparities that I touched on earlier. I have spoken to teachers in Don Valley who said that the poor behaviour of young boys with no positive male role models at home is often exacerbated by the lack of male role models at school. Consequently, I say to the Minister that an active campaign to encourage men to become teachers ought to be a fundamental part of the teacher recruitment and retention policy.

Thirdly, it is clear that boys need to have their own clubs, just as girls need their own clubs. It is indeed a wonderful thing that women's football is on TV, and it is terrific that female tennis stars are finally starting to be paid as much as their male counterparts. As the father of a daughter, I applaud all who have corrected that wrong and hundreds of other injustices. Yet I will also reiterate something that seems very topical at the moment, although much more for women than men, which is the need to have their own identity and for masculinity to be something that can be celebrated at times rather than being continually vilified.

Everywhere, not least within the cultural sphere, there seems to be a call from a tiny yet very vocal minority that every male character or good role model must have a female replacement. One only needs to consider the discussions about who will next play the James Bond to

[*Nick Fletcher*]

see that. And it is not just James Bond. In recent years, we have seen Dr Who, the Ghostbusters, Luke Skywalker and The Equalizer all replaced by women, and men are left with the Krays and Tommy Shelby. Is it any wonder that so many young men are committing crimes? Such programmes make crime look cool. Trust me, a lifetime in prison is not cool, and neither is living with the memory of a stabbed son or daughter.

There is no doubt that we have witnessed awful events over the past year in which the victims have been women. Being the father of a daughter, as I have mentioned, my heart goes out to the victims of such crimes and their families. Yet the awful events that have taken place have led, in many ways, to the word “masculinity” being preceded by the word “toxic” more and more frequently in our public discourse. Yet again, we have to ask ourselves, “Who does this help?” I have an answer: no one. How will this situation make boys and young men see themselves? Poorly, that is how.

If we are to strive to be a safe and inclusive society, we should not vilify 50% of the population and neither should we immediately vilify the term “masculinity”. That is because, just as I hope all women love being women, I love being a man. Most of my friends are men. Indeed, coming from an electrical engineering background, most of my former colleagues are men. My understanding of the world has largely been shaped by the fact that I am a man. I do not think that being a man makes me superior in any way, yet being male is an essential part of my identity, and just as with any other identity—whether religious or ethnic—I believe that male identity should be celebrated, not vilified.

Some may argue that I did not choose to be born male and so it is ridiculous for male identity to be celebrated. I do not suspect that anyone would say that about any other identity. In short, I believe that we should encourage boys and young men to be proud of being men, because it is important for boys to know that, as males, they can make a positive difference to society.

Following on from that, I will just go back to how I ended up here in Parliament. First and foremost, I came from what I believe was a very good home. I was lucky to have good parents and two wonderful brothers. Overall, I was surrounded by excellent role models, who often told me, “Don’t say ‘I can’t’. Say ‘I can’ and ‘I will’.” I did, and look where it got me.

I also went to a great school with the best headteacher, Mr Stephenson, who knew what it was to be a great role model, and I thank him for the time he spent with me. I went to Scouts, practised taekwondo, and became an apprentice at 16. Throughout that time I was surrounded by male role models, many of whom were very good, speaking positively about each other and where they lived. If more of our boys and young men had that experience, we could make enormous strides for the most disadvantaged of boys.

Going back to the earlier mentioned statistics on education, some excellent research contained in the report by the all-party parliamentary group on issues affecting men and boys, “A Boy Today”, highlights some of the reasons why boys may be disadvantaged. One such reason is that boys are likely to be taught better in a vocational setting, than in a classroom. The

Government must take this seriously and tackle the fact that boys generally do much worse in a classroom setting.

Speaking from a personal perspective, I can see why this may be relevant to many boys in education. I can completely relate, because I am an action person. I prefer to learn something on the job and for a reason, after which I like to put it into practice. Basically, I just like getting on with it. I can imagine many boys and young men in education feel the same.

We need to find out what the boys who do not do well in traditional educational settings are good at and provide the resources to support them. If it is something out of school, it should, where possible, be brought into school, even if it is just an assembly piece. While we should encourage and champion all children, research suggests boys are much less likely to push themselves, so this needs to be addressed at every opportunity.

In school, the workplace and home, we should also begin to recognise that language is most important. Negativity is never the right approach. One of the greatest lessons I learned as a parent and an employer of many young male apprentices over the years is that we must speak positively in front of young people. Any concerns should be addressed privately with other adults who are responsible for the child’s development or young person’s progression. Telling a young person they are useless or will never achieve is catastrophic. This kind of language is too often directed at boys. I have witnessed it myself.

When a young boy hears such things and continually hears masculinity linked to toxicity in societal discourse, it is no wonder that many suffer from feelings of worthlessness and isolation. I never felt left behind or disadvantaged, because no one told me I was. Instead, I had positive role models who took the time to teach me what an upstanding man should be. We need more of that these days in youth clubs, schools and homes.

I say to the House and the Minister, let us provide families up and down the country with the help and support they need, but let some of that help be directed to our boys and young men. Let us do all we can to introduce policies that help to build strong families. Let us help our communities organise themselves around assisting young boys to turn into great men—great men who can look after themselves, lead and be role models for the next generation.

However, this quest to uplift young men and boys must not come at the expense of the progress women are making in all walks of society. That is especially true after this year’s events, which have shone a light on how many women feel vulnerable in many situations. That is clearly not right. As has been pointed out, men have a role to play in solving this societal issue, yet this cannot be done by vilifying men. Instead, it can be achieved only if we encourage young men and boys in educational and family settings to think highly of themselves and be respectful of others, particularly women.

Therefore, we need to encourage a type of masculinity that promotes individual responsibility, educational achievement and looking out for people, especially women. We should also teach young boys in the classroom and at home not to objectify women, but to be much more like the moral, upstanding male role models who were in my life growing up.

As espoused by Lads Need Dads, give a young lad a good dad or a male model, teach him what is right and what is wrong, watch what he watches—I cannot stress that enough—and who his influences are. Teach him to be proud of what he is—a boy—because from this you will get a man who is an asset to society, a fantastic son or husband and may be even a fantastic dad.

As a society we should continue our pursuit of inclusiveness, but not so that policy makers forget half of society. If we get that right, we should need fewer police, not more. We should need fewer courts, not more. We should need fewer prisons, not more. This is a long game; we need to help men at all stages of their lives. Some are already in a bad place, and we need to help them, but we also need to prevent our next generation from following them. Addressing the disparity that many men and young boys face should be a long-term goal; one that recognises that there will be no quick fixes. However, with a clear strategy and the right people, good things can happen.

Let us celebrate International Men's Day each and every year by speaking men up, not talking them down, and by speaking well of our sons, our dads, our brothers and our husbands. If we speak well of them, highlighting whenever we can their good points and not their bad, then we will watch them bloom, trust me. They will bloom into someone who is an asset to society, someone to rely on, someone to be proud of and someone who is, most of all, a good man.

1.46 pm

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate my fellow Yorkshireman, my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), on a brilliant speech and the excellent work he does as the chair of the APPG on issues affecting men and boys.

Unfortunately, men's issues have been swept under the carpet for far too long as society focuses on the false narrative of male privilege. The very mention of men's issues will have hypocritical virtue signallers seething as they try to condemn white men as oppressors. People will no doubt sneer and ask why we even need an International Men's Day. However, the statistics on a number of key metrics are contrary to that popular misconception. The damning facts show that there are more male suicides, men's health outcomes are worse and boys' attainment in education is below that of girls. As a former schoolteacher, I have seen at first hand how boys, specifically disadvantaged white boys, fare far worse than their peers on all key attainment measures during education.

Earlier this year, the Education Committee concluded that decades of neglect have let down white working-class children. There is, of course, no simple fix. However, if we do not fully acknowledge and accept that this is a persistent and real issue, then a co-ordinated cross-departmental plan to target and reduce this educational gap injustice will never be achieved. A 2017 report from the University of Edinburgh highlighted that there are improved outcomes in education for boys who have a positive father figure, as well as improved mental health and lower levels of police contact.

Men are too often run down and berated in society and the media; they are presented as villains or the butt of jokes, rather than being shown as the positive role

models they are. The promotion of traditional family values and male role models is vital. It has been suggested that one in 10 fathers suffer mental health problems in the first few years of their baby's life, and that many fathers do not speak out because they do not want to detract and take attention away from the health needs of their partner. Studies have shown that when men speak up and seek help, there has been a positive effect, both for themselves and for the child. Encouraging that would reduce the far too high number of children having little, or next to no, contact with their father, and the detrimental consequences that follow.

All too often men do not seek the mental health support they need. Data shows that, although men report lower levels of life satisfaction, they are less likely to access therapy. Despite recording fewer suicidal thoughts, men are three times more likely to commit suicide. Men are also three times as likely to become dependent on alcohol or drugs, are more likely to be sectioned under the Mental Health Act, and more than eight out of 10 rough sleepers are male—as my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley has already mentioned.

It must also be remembered that men can be the victims of domestic violence, and statistics show that they are less likely to speak out about their suffering on this issue. Furthermore, men are more likely to be victims of violent crime in the UK and twice as likely to be murdered and, among children, boys are more likely than girls to become the victim of crime and violence.

Those statistics shine a light on the so-called reality of male privilege. Rather than campaigners undermining the role of men in our society in the name of equality and diversity, or leaving white working-class boys at the bottom of the pile, we should be trying to increase opportunities and raise ambitions for all. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate on International Men's Day to try to increase awareness of the challenges facing men.

It is not a sign of weakness to ask for support, and I encourage men to access help when they need it. There are some fantastic initiatives and charities out there to provide help, including Elliot's Place in Blackpool, a sanctuary garden in memory of Elliot Taylor, who tragically took his own life in my constituency last year after battling with mental health problems.

Action must be taken. We cannot simply let this debate become an annual event and then gloss over the issues men are suffering with until this time next year. There are challenges affecting men each and every day, and I hope at next year's debate we can stand here celebrating some genuine progress and achievements.

1.51 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank the hon. Members for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) and for Shipley (Philip Davies) for securing this important debate about last Friday's International Men's Day. I know the hon. Member for Shipley also sponsored last year's debate on this topic in the main Chamber, and that he will be disappointed that he cannot be here today, but I am sure his ongoing commitment to men's and boy's issues does not go unnoticed.

[Margaret Ferrier]

As a society, we are becoming more aware of equalities issues, and today's debate is an opportunity to highlight those that impact on men. This past year has been a watershed moment for women's rights, and rightly so in the light of many recent events, but it is important to remember that there are issues that disproportionately impact on men too. I also acknowledge that today is White Ribbon Day, founded by the White Ribbon campaign, a global movement of men and boys working to end male violence against women and girls. It is in that spirit of solidarity that we should remember that the fight for equality can only be won when that equality is given to all, regardless of gender.

A few months ago, I met Jason Schroeder, chief executive officer of the Scottish Men's Sheds Association. Men's Sheds are an excellent example of a true grassroots movement. A Men's Shed is a space for men to come together informally and voluntarily, whatever their background. They can come together for social or leisure activities in a relaxed, zero-pressure environment. Perhaps most importantly, unlike the vast majority of social spaces and activities aimed at men, they are completely alcohol free. I am proud to have the Rutherglen and Cambuslang Men's Shed in my constituency. Its impact is invaluable, and I hope all hon. Members will join me in thanking Men's Sheds for their contributions across Scotland and the UK.

My conversation with Jason was enlightening and his passion for the movement and the men involved is unquestionable. He explained how the sheds help men across a broad spectrum of ages and backgrounds in innumerable ways. In particular, the support they provide for men who might be stigmatised for their mental health problems or employment status, or who are suffering from things such as alcoholism, is vital. It was clear that a common thread tied many of the issues back to one big problem: isolation.

Social isolation is an issue for men of all ages and comes as a result of a variety of factors. The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness found that 8 million men of all ages felt lonely at least once a week. Another 3 million said that they felt lonely on a daily basis, and one in 10 men said they would not want to admit to feeling lonely. That is a problem that must be addressed. Increased social inclusion can address a number of problems. Having a solid support network is key, but they can be hard to build, even more so for men who live alone or who might have lost their support network under tragic circumstances, or for men who suffer with conditions such as depression and anxiety, which we already know are underdiagnosed because men are less likely to proactively seek diagnosis or support.

That brings me to another way men can be isolated—through the healthcare system. Because men are more likely to internalise their feelings thanks to an outdated social stigma, there is a higher risk of mental health issues worsening, which can lead to self-medication and unhealthy coping mechanisms such as alcohol or drug use. In turn, that leads to physical health issues, a deteriorating mental state and, sadly, feelings of overwhelming hopelessness and an increased suicide rate.

It is not just mental health services that men can struggle to access. Physical health literacy among men must also be improved. Social isolation makes men

much harder to reach when it comes to preventive healthcare measures and early intervention. Does the Minister agree that further research should be done on how barriers to preventive healthcare for men can be overcome?

These issues are even starker when we look at men from ethnic minority backgrounds. Cultural differences can severely impact on the ability of those men to seek formal support, maybe for reasons stemming from their faith or because of the taboo that poor mental health carries in some communities. Black, Asian and minority ethnic men are more likely to grow up and live in impoverished areas where health services can be so over-subscribed that they cannot meet demand. Language barriers can also present real logistical difficulties in accessing healthcare. All of these issues can combine to make the very idea of seeking out support completely insurmountable. Will the Government review the barriers to accessing healthcare for ethnic minorities? Each community has its own cultural taboos and stigmas. Will that be looked at in more detail, so that support can be better tailored?

While we are on the topic of health, I highlight the work of the Movember Foundation, which sets out every November to raise awareness of health issues such as prostate cancer and testicular cancer, to increase early detection rates and effective treatment, and to make a difference in mental wellbeing and suicide prevention. A movement born from a small group of men in Australia is now impacting on the lives of men across the world.

Another group of men who might find themselves socially isolated are single parents. One Parent Families Scotland, a charity that operates in my constituency, told me recently that, although its services are predominantly accessed by women, it has seen a noticeable rise in single fathers seeking out help over the past 18 months. That is a position that is often overlooked, unsurprisingly, as men make up only 10% of single parents. We should think about what that might mean for those 10%—for a start, it could mean a lack of peers, which brings me back to my earlier point about the importance of a strong support network. Mother and baby groups are part and parcel of life for many single mothers, but a lot of fathers would not feel comfortable going along and socialising when they might be the only man present.

The prevailing belief in society that mothers should be the primary caregiver, which is problematic in itself, means that single fathers face a raft of unfair assumptions. That very British stereotype of a stiff upper lip means that fathers may often not be seen as warm, loving and caring. If a child has a parent who loves them and does their very best for them, that is all that should matter.

This debate is so important and I am happy that has been recognised here today. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to speak. I hope that, through discussions such as this, we can work towards a society that is truly equal and fair for all.

1.58 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for his opening speech. While we deeply miss my hon. Friend the Member for

Shipleigh (Philip Davies) and always will in debates like this, my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley did an extremely good job in opening this important debate. It was also good to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton). It is interesting that we have two men from Yorkshire and two Members from Scotland in today's debate—perhaps we need to spread our geography a little wider. I am here as the token Member from Hampshire, but I am sure other colleagues from Hampshire would want to be here if their diaries allowed.

I am particularly pleased to follow the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) because she raised a number of incredibly powerful issues, particularly the social isolation that men can feel not only if they are single parents but as they get older. I have visited a number of Men's Shed projects around the country, which are particularly good at reaching out to older men to enable them to understand better the importance of comradeship in older age. I applaud the Men's Shed in my community, which does so much in that area.

On 19 November we celebrated International Men's Day, as a way of recognising the positive values that men bring to our society, our families and our communities. I have to celebrate the men in my life—I hope you will allow me to do that, Mr Sharma—including my father, who was a self-made businessman; my husband, who is a highly successful lawyer; my two brothers, who are very successful in their own family lives; and of course my two sons, one of whom was born on International Women's Day. He has had to endure me referencing him for 15 years now on International Women's Day, so I am glad to be able to reference him now in relation to International Men's Day. He is a highly successful young man, just embarking on his university career.

This debate continues to be incredibly important. With the advent of shared parental leave, the right to request flexible working for everyone, and equal marriage for same-sex couples, all of which have come in during the last 10 years, I do not think that British men have ever had more opportunities to challenge some of the really negative gender stereotypes that have been alluded to already. May I gently say that men need to find their voice? Three hon. Gentlemen have taken time out of their busy schedules to be part of this important debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Shipleigh would have been present if his diary had allowed him, but people—particularly male leaders in our community—need to be prepared to speak out and challenge status quos that they feel are not right.

I was really privileged last Friday evening to be at an event organised by a constituent of mine on the importance of challenging ethnic stereotypes. At that event, one of my councillors talked about the importance to him of the changes that had happened in our society that affected gay men, how important it is that gay men can now have a marriage in the same way that anybody else can and adopt children, and the incredible way in which our society has adapted and changed. I do not think that we should forget that in the debate.

There is, however, still much more to do. When we turn on the television or the radio we hear stereotypes—in the media, online and in advertising—that portray men as if they may be failing if they are not a dominating male breadwinner, or if they have experienced family

breakdown or been made redundant through no fault of their own. Issues of consent in intimate relationships can feel very complex and even frightening for young men, so International Men's Day is a real opportunity for us to voice some of those issues and really challenge that. I urge all Members of Parliament, particularly the men, to see their important role in doing that in their own community.

The pressure of stereotypes could be very closely linked to the issue that the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West talked about: the prevalence of suicide among men, which has a devastating impact on not just a family but a whole community. Suicide is disproportionately likely to happen to men. It is the biggest killer of men under the age of 50, with those aged 20 to 59 at the highest risk, as well as people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Last year in England, 75% of all suicides were men, with a similarly high, or higher, figure across the UK. Even more worrying is the gap between men and women, which has increased over time.

We can all play a part in dismantling the stigma around mental health and, as the hon. Lady said, supporting men to access medical support more easily, particularly mental health support. It is really important that we do that, because although men report lower levels of satisfaction with their lives, which is startling enough, according to the Government's national wellbeing survey, NHS data show that they are less likely to access psychological talking therapies for even common mental health problems. I really hope that the Minister takes away from this debate that iniquity of access, because it affects all of us who have men in our families, and we do not want them to feel as if they cannot access these things.

By having open and honest conversations with our family and friends, we can remind the men in our lives that they are not alone. I am pleased that the Government have already invested £57 million in suicide prevention through the NHS long-term plan, but I hope that that is part of a bigger plan for supporting men to access the sort of mental health support that they need. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South said, many organisations can help anyone who experiences distress or anxiety or who feels low. I would encourage anybody to visit the Every Mind Matters website and gov.uk for advice, particularly on practical steps to support their wellbeing and to manage any mental health problems. I also take this opportunity to highlight fantastic mental health services and suicide prevention organisations such as MIND, Campaign Against Living Miserably and Rethink Mental Illness, which are doing incredible work alongside organisations such as Samaritans.

Men face many challenges in society, including attainment levels in education, which my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley talked about, high levels of prostate cancer, higher levels of absence from family life, high levels of rough sleeping and difficulties in reoffending. These are incredibly complex issues, which is why I am glad that we are able to shine a light on them today and to look at how they disproportionately affect men.

I will spend the rest of my time in the debate talking about one of the themes of International Men's Day this year: better relations between men and women, which we always strive for in my household. This is a simple concept, but it encapsulates the core action

[Mrs Maria Miller]

needed to achieve and embrace equality, so that we can lift each other up. I am particularly keen to press for better relations to be fostered and strengthened online, because too often we hear about cases of abuse between men and women; behaviour that would be difficult to comprehend in the offline world appears every day in the online world.

I hope that the Online Safety Bill, which will hopefully come shortly, will address some of these issues. For instance, the Government's own research found that there is a substantial evidential link between the use of pornography by adult men and harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours towards women. Studies also reveal that the algorithms of porn websites have been actively promoting sexual violence, and even illegal pornography, with one in eight video titles on the home pages of porn sites promoting this content. It is not right that tech companies should fuel division between men and women through their algorithms, so I hope that the Bill will address that.

Practices such as image-based abuse primarily affect women but can affect men too, and can thwart men and women from having healthy relationships and respect for one another. This attitudinal problem trickles down to cultures between boys and girls in school, as was evidenced in the recent Ofsted report on sexual abuse in schools. It is with the combined strength of men and women that we will be able to create a fairer online world, fairer workplaces and fairer communities. We should work together on this.

I end by thanking the inspirational men not only in my life but in my whole community for helping to tackle the inequalities and challenges that men face and for the way they work with women to create a stronger and fairer society. I hope that, in future debates, more male colleagues will find time to come and find their voice on these issues. We have huge support among male colleagues for the many debates we have on women's issues. I wish they would find a voice to talk about the issues they face as well. By doing that, we can find the right solutions for everyone.

2.9 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I commend the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for securing the debate and for his opening speech. I may have misunderstood him, but he mentioned a number of television shows. I am not sure if he would think that Queen Latifah taking over a role in "The Equalizer" from Edward Woodward, and now Denzel Washington, means that strong female characters are negative, when I see that as a positive myself.

I enjoyed the opening speech a lot more than I enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton). I disagreed fundamentally with his opening remarks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and others mentioned the organisation Men's Sheds. I have visited the Men's Shed in my local area, and it is a fantastic group. She made some fair points about male single parents, as well.

The former Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), mentioned one of the themes of International Men's Day—better relations between men and women—and said that she sought better relations in her own house. I am completely outnumbered and surrounded by women and girls in my house—even the cat is a girl—so I have no say whatsoever in my house.

I agree with much of what has been said on men's mental health, suicide rates, social isolation and men's health in generally, but these subjects all merit their own debates in which we can drill down on the issues involved. They are very serious issues that we have probably not shone a big enough light on in this place. They deserve more attention, not just in this place but in society at large.

This is where at least some of my consensual remarks end, because International Men's Day is anathema to me. It is a rather cruel joke concocted in response to feminism, women's rights and International Women's Day. My personal view is that international days are usually for the oppressed, the underprivileged or those facing inequality. It is shameful that in 2021 International Women's Day is still all too necessary, and even sadder that the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women is even more important than ever. It is the bitterest of ironies that this men's debate takes place today, on that very day. It is also called White Ribbon Day and it marks the start of 16 days of activism.

The vast majority of people involved in International Men's Day, particularly here in the UK, are doing so for the very best of reasons. I pay tribute to what they are setting out to do. I do not want any of them to think that my negative comments cast aspersions on them, but I have a fundamental problem with the day itself.

I want to briefly address one of the substantive issues raised by Members, because the Scottish Government are taking action on the issues that impact men and boys in particular, including improvements in mental health support and suicide prevention, which every Member here has spoken about.

The Public Health Scotland has stated:

"There were 805 probable suicides registered in Scotland in 2020, which is a decrease from 833 in 2019."

As far as I am aware, that is a similar rate to the rest of the UK. It goes on:

"Just under three-quarters (71.4%) of people who died by suicide in 2020 were male...The highest crude rate of suicide for males occurs in the 35–44 age group."

There is regional disparity in Scotland, and the further north one goes the higher the rate of suicide, with Orkney the highest at 19.3 deaths per 100,000, and 18.9 per 100,000 in the Highlands, compared to 14 per 100,000 for the whole country. We know that these suicides sadly occur for a variety of reasons, but sexual identity, societal and cultural conditioning and role models all play a role. This says a lot about the psychology, behaviour and mental health of men in our communities.

The Scottish Government published Scotland's mental health transition and recovery plan last year. It prioritises rapid and easily accessible support to those in distress and ensures safe, effective treatment and care of people living with mental illness, long-term physical health conditions or disabilities. Between 2002–2006 and 2013–2017,

the rate of death by suicide in Scotland fell by 20%. Under the current plans, the target is to further reduce the rate of suicide by another 20%.

I want to go on to talk about men's achievements, although I doubt they will be the kinds of achievements that Members want talked about today. I am not sure that the hon. Member for Blackpool South will be keen on my remarks. It is fairly easy to make sure that men's achievements are celebrated regularly when, essentially, the entirety of western society has been run for the convenience and security of men over women since God was a boy. That has also meant that men's other achievements—the ones that are not so positive—are also pushed down the pecking order.

The Femicide Census, published last year, found that more than 1,400 women and girls were killed by men in the decade starting 2009. We know that high-profile cases, for whatever reason, capture the headlines: Sarah Everard, Sabina Nessa, Nicole Smallman and so on. They are the tragic tip of a much larger iceberg of endemic male violence against females: 92% of defendants in prosecutions relating to domestic abuse are male; 84% of victims relating to sexual offences are female; one in three teenage girls have experienced some form of sexual violence from their partner; and one in five have experienced it since the age of 16. Incidentally, I thoroughly recommend that Members watch the BBC Three documentary by Zara McDermott on rape culture and sexism in our schools, which I watched last night. It is essential viewing.

Nick Fletcher: Those statistics prove why we should have an international men's day and why we should speak men up instead of continually putting them down. As I said in my speech, the vilifying of men and continually expecting them to fail makes the situation worse, not better. We should, with the help of the Government, help families and young men to live good lives in which they feel valued and not isolated, and proud to be men instead of having to cover up all the time and feel awful for being men. If we celebrated men and said, "You can do good things and you are a good person", we would see the statistics that the hon. Gentleman spoke about, which are absolutely dreadful, fall. Let us talk positively instead of negatively about men all the time.

Gavin Newlands: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I have a lot of sympathy with elements of the point he made, but before we get to that we need men in general to take responsibility for what men have done and continue to do. We see it in our papers and news bulletins day in, day out. We need to take responsibility. We need to stop this at source. It is up to us not to walk on by and allow abuse or anything of that nature to happen in the streets and dressing rooms. I played rugby for 17 years. I heard plenty of sexism and misogyny in that time. To be completely honest, for those 17 years when I was younger, I probably did not say a thing about it, either, but that is what we need to change.

Although I accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman's point, I think we need to get to a state of acceptance first and take responsibility for the issue at hand. It is men who are overwhelmingly responsible for the violence and misery suffered by millions of our families, friends or colleagues—misery that they suffer purely because they are women. Frankly, I am a bit sick of hearing unadulterated mince about how hard done by men are

becoming, as we have heard in this debate as well. We are not the ones who are afraid to go out on the streets, especially after dark, with this time of year effectively keeping many women prisoners in their own homes.

We are not the ones who are outnumbered two to one in this place and who have had the right to vote on the same basis as men for less than a century. We are not the ones, 50 years after the Equal Pay Act 1970, still sitting at the sharp end of the gender pay gap. It is not women who are setting the pay rates. Under 40% of FTSE 100 board members are women, and only eight of those companies are headed by women.

Nick Fletcher: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gavin Newlands: I will complete my point first. I do not for one moment suggest that if boardrooms suddenly looked a bit more gender balanced and reflected wider society, we would suddenly see an outbreak of pay rises and better terms and conditions, because big business will always be big business, but as men we should accept our part and our responsibility for maintaining the status quo.

Nick Fletcher: On the point about how women are not doing as well as men, I pulled together some statistics before the debate to see where we are, especially in Doncaster. Some 27 of the 32 primary school heads are female, and four out of seven secondary school heads are female; chief constable for South Yorkshire Police, female; Doncaster district commander and chief superintendent, female; senior coroner, female; South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue chief fire officer and chief executive, female; chief executive of Rotherham Doncaster and South Humber NHS Foundation Trust, female; Doncaster Council directors, two female and three male, and assistant directors nine female and four male; elected Mayor, female; opposition council leader, female; chair of the board of Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, female. Shall I go on? The idea that women are completely oppressed is definitely and utterly incorrect.

Gavin Newlands: All that proves is that it can be done. I presume the hon. Gentleman was talking about his local area, constituency and local authority. That sounds fantastic, but I am citing the overall figures for the entire country, and I stand by them. His part of the world might be a pocket of equality, but those figures simply do not stand up to scrutiny from a nationwide point of view.

International Men's Day should be, in part, about us all reflecting on our own behaviours and attitudes, and those of our peers. The patriarchy was not created out of thin air; it is a product of how we and our forefathers have viewed the world and women's places in it in relation to men. For far too long, that place has been the second-class section of society. Some of those behaviours and attitudes were on display in Parliament when it came to ratifying the Istanbul convention, which is the gold standard in preventing violence against women and girls.

I campaigned pretty hard on that issue, and indeed, I spoke about it during my Westminster Hall debate on men's role in ending violence against women and girls. I was thoroughly delighted when my then colleague Eilidh Whiteford was able to make the ratification of that

[Gavin Newlands]

convention a statutory obligation for the Government. We are now coming up to the fifth anniversary of the Second Reading of her Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Ratification of Convention) Act 2017, however, and we still have not ratified the convention.

I remember that day well. A certain MP spoke for well over an hour in an attempt to talk out the Bill, which aimed to ensure that the UK met its international obligations, as well as its obligations to women and girls. That is the kind of behaviour that confirms for many that the pervasive attitudes at the top of society have not changed much over the decades. When that same Member says:

“I don't believe that there's an issue between men and women” while speaking at a conference for an organisation that issues awards for “Lying Feminist of the Month”, it simply speaks to a wider perception that there is a serious whiff of misogyny and hardcore sexism about this place.

For the avoidance of doubt, that Member was the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who originally co-sponsored this debate. It would be an understatement to say that that undermines what many who support International Men's Day were hoping to achieve for this debate—[*Interruption.*] Yes, I emailed the hon. Gentleman to let him know that I was going to mention him, if that is what you are about to ask, Mr Sharma.

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Order. Please confine your speech to International Men's Day and not to violence against women and girls.

Gavin Newlands: I am moving past that very brief mention of it. I know that those perceived sexist attitudes are not held by the majority of Members, and it falls to us to say that these antediluvian attitudes do not represent us or, I hope, how our Governments and civil society think.

Scott Benton: The hon. Gentleman is certainly making some interesting comments. On the advancement of women in politics, it is brilliant that the number of female MPs in this place has risen so starkly since 1997. Of course, that has been replicated in the Scottish Parliament, where we have a female SNP leader.

The hon. Gentleman has been speaking more broadly about some of the negative effects that men have had on society, particularly in relation to sexual violence against women. What impact does he think the purported actions of the previous leader of his party have had on the confidence of women and girls in Scotland to come forward and report issues?

Gavin Newlands: I am not really sure that I will dignify that question with a response. It is for that person to justify his actions. There have been plenty of court cases on that issue; I will not stand here and defend anyone.

To go back to International Men's Day, as you hoped I would, Mr Sharma, let us talk about the full achievements of men: centuries of subjugating and belittling half of the population, and having to be dragged kicking and

screaming to give women the vote. I appreciate that it is all very negative looking backwards, but my point is that we need to accept the reality. Far too many men still do not accept the reality or take responsibility for these actions, which we need to look back on and accept before we can move forward. These actions included locking single mothers up in homes with their babies until the right adoptive parents came along, at which point the male-run state forced those mothers to sign over their own children. That happened not once or twice but hundreds of thousands of times across these isles.

Yes, there are issues and challenges specific to men, which must be highlighted and tackled: the attainment gap in education, the lower life expectancies linked to poorer health and care, and the huge human cost of prison and recidivism. However, let us not pretend that the balance sheet is not tipped hugely in favour of men and against women. That culture and our deeply ingrained structures in society contribute to a toxic masculinity that is to the detriment of both men and women.

Mrs Miller: I do not think this is a zero-sum game. It does not have to be that women are gaining or losing at the expense of men. We can have a situation where the lives of women and men improve. In taking that approach, we might come to a better solution.

Gavin Newlands: I hear what the right hon. Member says. She obviously speaks with a great deal of knowledge, with her background in Government and Committee. However, while I accept the premise of her point, I have stressed before that there are far too many people in society and in this place who still cannot accept the reality of the situation. Until that is the case, we cannot really move on, and that is my central point, which is exactly in the spirit of what the right hon. Lady suggests. Once we get to a point of acceptance, then we have to move forward in lockstep and improve the lives of everyone together.

The combination of our culture and our deeply ingrained societal structure is toxic, but we are gradually moving beyond a model of families and households that treat one partner as inferior towards a model where gender roles are ignored. I welcome the progress of Governments both north and south of the border in expanding free early years learning and childcare, although I would say that our colleagues down south have some way to catch up. That is helping to reshape the expectations for family life towards a more equitable set-up. This has been helped by changes in attitudes and entitlement to paternity leave.

We are not going to change this country's culture and ingrained attitudes overnight, but we can make significant changes that help women and men redefine their positions and place in the world. A transformational boost in paternity leave would be one of those changes. I hope that the Minister will take that back to her Department for further study.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group for the White Ribbon campaign, and I am proud to be an ambassador for both White Ribbon UK and White Ribbon Scotland, whose badge I wear on my lapel today. That campaign, which was referenced already by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West, was set up in the wake of a horrific massacre in Montreal,

where a self-identified “anti-feminist” murdered 14 women in cold blood. That was in 1989. Decades later we are still seeing that toxic masculinity embed itself in large parts of society with the rise of the incel movement. What links those is a learned behaviour of men and boys towards women and girls. That behaviour and the social cues and norms that back it up have to be challenged by men—all of us.

We have to acknowledge the wrongs we have perpetrated on women for millennia. We must each do our bit to try and roll those wrongs back for the future. The fight for gender equality needs action at the top, from our Governments to our businesses, employers and public services. It also needs individual action from every one of us. We need to tell our friends when their behaviour is unacceptable and tell our colleagues when their actions—while perhaps unintended or unknowing—are helping to continue the cycle of disrespect.

If International Men's Day is to be something worth commemorating each year, it should be as a reflection and acknowledgement of the damage and human suffering that our place, versus that of women, has caused and is still causing. It should be a time when we come together to discuss and debate how best to change our own behaviours to support women and build a better, more equal and fairer society.

2.29 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Sharma.

Let me of course congratulate the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on opening the debate, and all the right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed. We have had such an interesting discussion over the last hour. As the shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities, I want to stress how important it is to me and my party that we address inequalities wherever we may find them and however they manifest themselves. We will never, as a country or a society, be able to truly flourish if we are not enabling all our people to access opportunities and fulfil their potential, whatever their background. As we have all heard this afternoon, for too many men in our country that is not always possible, and for many men it has become harder over the last 10 years.

I will begin with one of the starkest statistics of all. It has been referred to by a number of speakers in this debate. It is the very disturbing figure that men are now three times more likely than women to commit suicide, and that gap has grown over time. We must all ask ourselves what more we can do to support men who feel that they have lost all hope, and how we can reduce that awful figure. Part of the answer advocated by specialists in this field, and referred to in this debate by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), is to break down stereotypes that make it harder for some men to talk about their mental health. I add my praise to the various organisations that work on this: the Men's Sheds project, Mind, Rethink Mental Illness, the Samaritans and so many others that do tremendous work, and of course the many volunteers who support those organisations.

Another part of the solution is ensuring that we have better provision of mental health services overall. That is more important than ever, given the dreadful waiting

lists for mental health support in many parts of our country. I am sure that all Members here today are aware of that, having seen in their postbags quite how long those waiting lists are now. My party, the Labour party, has said that we would take strong action to reverse that trend and ensure access to mental health treatment within a month for everyone who needs it—a distant dream for so many men and women across our country currently—and that we would hire 8,500 new staff, so that 1 million new people could access treatment by the end of our first term in office.

It is also clear from this afternoon's debate that we need early action to prevent the problems that some men and boys face from arising in the first place or worsening over time. We need a serious discussion. I found some of the debate a little confusing, perhaps reflecting some of the confusion reflected by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). I probably misheard the suggestion that, for example, discussion about who should be the next 007 was a reason for boys potentially turning to a life of crime. The situation is surely far more complex than is suggested by an easy read-off from cultural discussions of that type.

We know, and have discussed this afternoon, that boys tend to perform worse than girls in education. That is the case at the end of primary school, with 60% of boys reaching the standard expected of them compared with 70% of girls, but also at the end of the GCSE year, when 75% of girls achieve at least grade 4 in both English and maths compared with 69% of boys. We also know that boys are three times more likely than girls to be excluded from school—something that I know causes tremendous concern to many people.

Reducing those disparities requires early and sustained intervention. It is of course very concerning that we have seen the removal of Sure Start centres, which provided that early intervention for so many families and supported them, and that we have not seen the sustained programme of education catch-up that is so necessary, with many boys and girls of course missing out on the support that they need. My party has called for both a proper catch-up education plan and a catch-up for children's social skills. That is why we say that breakfast clubs need to be provided for all children as an element of catch-up—something that has not happened.

We also need early intervention when it comes to addressing men's health issues, about which a number of concerns have been articulated during the debate. Early intervention is particularly important for male-specific cancers, and overall cancer incidence is 24% higher for men than for women. More men than women are overweight or obese, and in 2020 almost 14,000 more men than women died from heart disease. I am particularly concerned by both the extent of drug-related deaths across the UK and the very stark gender disparities there. Men are far more likely to die drug-related deaths, and, disturbingly, that rate has been going up in our country, particularly strongly and worryingly in Scotland. We must deal with that.

Those stark statistics show the need for a proper public health strategy focused on acting early to support people so they can nip problems in the bud, live healthily and get the care they need. There have been substantial cuts to public health budgets, and even before the pandemic only half of all adults over 40 in England

[Anneliese Dodds]

were attending the regular health checks that were introduced by a Labour Government in 2009. Those checks are particularly important for the men who may not proactively seek support with their health, and they are especially important for spotting disease early on, not least cardiovascular disease. To address the problems we have heard about this afternoon, we need to turn the tide on rising health inequalities and improve health for men—indeed, for everyone—by tackling problems at source and seeing health as not a stand-alone policy issue, but one that is embedded in, and impacted by, everything the Government do.

We also need to consider these issues at a more detailed level than just the overall category of men and boys. In the three areas that I have just highlighted—male suicide, educational attainment and men's health—we know full well that not all men and boys are affected in the same way: other deep-rooted inequalities are overlaid on those worrying trends. The Government's own suicide prevention strategy from 2012, for example, highlighted that gay and bisexual men are at higher risk of experiencing suicidal ideation, self-harm and substance misuse, and as well as the educational attainment gap between boys and girls, there is an even starker divide between children from poorer backgrounds and their wealthier peers, with secondary children on free school meals being 18 months behind by the time they take their GCSEs. Disturbingly, life expectancy is actually falling in some parts of the country. That is not happening in many other countries, but it is happening in ours. The largest decreases have been in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods in the north-east of England, while the largest increases in life expectancy have been in the least deprived 10% of neighbourhoods in London. We need to look at these inequalities in the round and we need a Government who are committed to addressing all of them. It is that holistic, ambitious approach that will ultimately improve life for everyone in our country, men and boys included.

I will finish by mentioning a fact that a number of other Members have drawn attention to: we are discussing International Men's Day, which, of course, was last week, on 25 November, which happens to be White Ribbon Day—a day on which men across our country are called upon to make a promise that they will never commit, excuse, or remain silent about male violence against women. The comments made by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke about online harms are very important in that context. We need strong reform and for internet companies to take strong action against online harms against women and girls.

We also need strong action against other forms of violence, including domestic violence. Yesterday's truly appalling statistics showed that overall levels of domestic abuse have doubled in the last five years—I am slowing down to emphasise that appalling state of affairs—and three quarters of domestic homicide victims were women. It would be remiss of me, therefore, not to mention that we are in the midst of an epidemic of violence against women and girls in this country. Sadly, that epidemic is not being dealt with effectively by Government. The number of charges and prosecutions has actually dropped year on year over the last five years; the figures have been getting worse.

The hon. Member for Don Valley seemed to suggest at various points—I am sure that he did not mean to suggest it, but that is what it sounded like—that there was some kind of a trade-off between celebrating the achievements of men and boys, which I am sure we all want to do, and taking action on violence against women and girls. Of course there is no trade-off; we must do both. As I say, I am sure that he did not mean to suggest that there is a trade-off, even inadvertently.

We must all take action against forms of violence against women and girls, so I hope that everyone will listen to the messages from the very important White Ribbon Campaign today and that everyone will act to ensure that, in every action we take in this place, we also celebrate the achievements of everyone in our country, including boys and men.

2.41 pm

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for securing this debate and for his ongoing work to ensure that the issues faced by men and boys are not neglected. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on issues affecting men and boys, he headed up the publication of the report "A Boy Today", which is essential reading on the barriers that many boys and men face in today's society. I thank him and all the members of the APPG for their work, and all those who contributed to that valuable report.

We are now in the seventh year of marking this day with a debate, illustrating the importance of the event to all of us here. The issue, of course, is not just important in this House. Over 400 organisations across the UK are taking part this year; I think that "Loose Women" even became "Loose Men", if only for one day. My hon. Friend should know that these swapsies happen across the board.

I thank everyone who has spoken in the debate for their thoughtful contributions to it and the shadow Minister in particular for the spirit in which she made her remarks. We have highlighted the wide-ranging areas on which we need to continue to make progress if we are to achieve equality for everyone—the areas on which we agree and those on which we disagree.

My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley spoke movingly about the issues that men and boys face. I would like him to know that I agree with him that we must not pathologise masculinity or any other protected characteristic. Men and women are not in competition with each other, and our vision of equality is one where both sexes thrive and succeed, rather than one succeeding at the expense of the other.

If hon. Members will indulge me, I will talk a bit about covid because I have spent quite a lot of the last two years working on it. This year has been another dominated by covid, which has had a huge impact on us all. We know that the health and economic impacts of the pandemic have not been felt equally by everyone. Being male is the single biggest risk factor for covid after age, and men have seen higher redundancy rates over the course of the pandemic than women.

However, men are not one homogenous group with one shared experience, and it would be ridiculous to treat them as if they were. That is why we have focused our efforts on ensuring that support gets to those who

need it most. We will continue to do that as the successful roll-out of the vaccine and booster shots progresses.

We are also determined to ensure that covid does not have a lasting impact on children's education. The hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) mentioned educational catch-up; no doubt she will be pleased to know that we have set up the national tutoring programme to help schools access targeted support for those hit hardest by the disruption. Over the next three years, we expect that programme to deliver 90 million hours of tuition across the country, which will particularly benefit those in more deprived areas—including white working-class boys, who I know are of concern to Members from all parties in this House, as evidenced by the recent Education Committee report.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) mentioned that one in 10 fathers suffers from mental health issues. I send my condolences to him and to the family of his constituent, Elliot Taylor, following Elliot's tragic death. We take mental health very seriously. The challenges that we have faced over the past year have shown the importance of taking care of our mental health and that of those around us. We know the value of asking for help when we need it. Sadly, we also know that some men are more reluctant than others to ask for help.

The Government's national suicide prevention strategy highlights men, especially middle-aged and young men, as a group at high risk of suicide. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) mentioned that the Government will invest an additional £57 million in suicide prevention by 2023-24 through the NHS long-term plan, which includes funding to reduce male suicide. She will be pleased to know that that is not all we are doing: we are also providing an extra £5 million for this financial year, specifically to support voluntary and community sector organisations working to prevent suicide. We have ensured that the suicide prevention funding for local areas is used to test different approaches to reaching and engaging men.

Despite all this work, we are not complacent. We must all do more to encourage men to seek help and ensure that we listen more closely to those who do. I urge any man who is struggling to speak to a GP to seek out mental health support delivered by charities or the NHS. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) for highlighting the work of charities such as Men's Sheds and Movember and the need to remove barriers that prevent men from seeking help. I am sure my colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care will be happy to hear from her on more work that could be done in this space.

Several Members mentioned stereotypes and role models, and I agree with the arguments made. Not only can stereotypes prevent some people from seeking help when they need it, but they can also limit people's aspirations in school. Capable young boys can be held back from reaching their potential. We see this, for example, when young men say they want to work in the care sector or with children, when too many people around them act surprised or laugh.

A 2017 report suggests that 46% of men aged 18 to 30 feel that society tells them it is not good for a boy to be taught how to cook, sew, clean the house or take care of children. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and

Hamilton West made an excellent point about the stigma surrounding what men should be seen to be doing. We should all counter these messages when we see them, so that young men—as well as young women—can make the most of all the opportunities available.

This highlights the importance of role models. My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley praised the organisation Lads need Dads, for example, and I pay tribute to their good work. Fortunately, there is no shortage of positive role models in public life, including those here today, as well as in business. However, these sectors have not always represented the full diversity of men in the country and I am pleased we are making progress so that young boys who may be LGBT, disabled or from working-class backgrounds can also see people who look and sound like them in public life. Aspirations should not be determined by who you are or where you live, but by your talents and abilities.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke raised an important point about the Online Safety Bill and its role in tackling the promotion of sexual violence through pornography. We agree that the online world is a place where very harmful stereotypes are reinforced. I am certain that she will be working with the Government to help us tackle this issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) is not here. I am afraid I did not tell him that I would mention him, but I suspect he would be very concerned if I did not mention the issue of family courts and parental alienation, which we have not touched on too much in this debate. He is right when he highlights that, unfortunately, not all families are happy ones, but a child's welfare is best served by the continued involvement of both parents, provided that that involvement is safe.

We know that parents can face difficulties when attempting to spend time with their children after a separation. Sometimes that is because of the obstructive behaviour of the parent the child spends most of their time with. Family courts recognise the problems that such situations can cause, as does the draft statutory guidance for the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which highlights parental alienation as an example of coercive and controlling behaviour for the first time. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley for his work on the issue, which will ensure that more children benefit from contact with both parents.

One of the themes for this year's International Men's Day celebrations is better relations between men and women. This reflects the Government's equalities work. It is not about pitting one deserving group against another, but about ensuring that everyone is able to make the most of the opportunities offered in our country and gets the support they need to make their lives a success. That is why my combined Government responsibilities make so much sense together; as Minister for Levelling up, Communities and Equalities I can work to ensure that everyone can benefit as we build back better, wherever they are in the country and regardless of their sex, age or any other characteristic.

One particularly interesting part of the APPG report on men and boys is the focus on getting a better understanding of why they face specific barriers. This priority is shared by me and other equality Ministers. Our data and evidence-driven approach to equality ensures we consider sex alongside factors such as race, sexual orientation, geography and socioeconomic

[*Kemi Badenoch*]

background, so we can be sure that we are levelling up right across the country. That approach helps to inform policy making across Government, so all my ministerial colleagues contribute to tackling the specific problems faced by men and boys.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) took an interesting approach to this debate. I tend to believe that on these occasions we highlight the positive more than the negative. I thought I might give an alternative view on some of the statements that he made. He said that it is men who are overwhelmingly responsible for the violence perpetrated against women, which is true. However, men are also overwhelmingly responsible for perpetrating violence against other men, the numbers of which are far greater. That is why my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke said that this is not a zero-sum game. What we want to tackle is violence—whether violence against women and girls or violence generally. We highlight areas where we think there are particular problems, but a holistic approach is the best way to resolve the issue.

We can talk about identity in a way that is too negative, emphasises difference and builds walls between groups, rather than talking about equality and how we can bring people together to solve problems. Yesterday, I was in this Chamber to speak in the debate on Islamophobia Awareness Month. Members across the Chamber agreed that there is too much pathologising of identity, where people target Muslims as perpetrators of particular acts, which is very bad for the general population.

I do not believe that every man is a risk. There are some who have committed atrocious crimes, but I treat people as individuals. My experience—whether in my family, with my father, brother or son, or with my male hon. Friends in this House—has been overwhelmingly positive. As someone who is black, female and an immigrant, when I hear the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North say such things, I can tell he is saying them to sound positive; however, the way he makes those comments is not as constructive as the way Government Members make theirs. Their approach is the better way to resolve those issues. I am very happy to share more of my views on the topic outside of the debate.

It has been a privilege to have the opportunity to join the debate again this year and to celebrate the essential contribution that men and boys make in all our lives. I close by thanking all those who work in or raise money for organisations supporting men across the country—people such as Martin Seager, my constituent in Saffron Walden, whose work on male psychology is to be commended. By working together, we can make real progress on the important issues raised today.

2.52 pm

Nick Fletcher: It has been a very good debate. International Men's Day is extremely important. The essence of my speech was to get an equilibrium by lifting up all men and women at the same time, and I think that is what most Members want too. We should be able to celebrate men without downing women, and celebrate women without downing men. That is basically what we want to do.

I stand by what I said: if we talk up the behaviours of men, rather than continually talking about how some men—a very minute minority—do bad things, we stand a better chance of being good role models for young people. The debate is huge and covers all sorts of issues. Hopefully, over the next few years, while I am fortunate enough to be here, we will talk about a men's health strategy and a rehabilitation strategy—maybe next year. There are lots of other issues.

However, I did want to speak about bringing up young boys and the influences we have in their lives. The more positive—instead of negative—male role models in the cultural sphere, and the more everyone speaks up about the good things men can do and how boys can turn into upstanding citizens and upstanding men, the better. We should try to do more of that. I thank all Members for a really good debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered International Men's Day.

2.54 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 25 November 2021

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Liverpool City Council: Commissioners' First Report

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): On 10 June 2021 the then Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), updated the House that he had appointed a team of four commissioners to Liverpool City Council. The commissioners' responsibilities are set out in directions¹ made under section 15(5) and (6) of the Local Government Act 1999 and include oversight of the council's highways, regeneration and property management functions together with the associated audit and governance arrangements. The original best value investigation was initiated following a police investigation into allegations of fraud, bribery, corruption and misconduct in public office which involves a significant connection to Liverpool City Council. The wider criminal investigation into corruption is ongoing.

The commissioners submitted their first report to me on 5 October 2021 and I have discussed it with them. I was pleased to hear about the steps the council has taken to expose and stop wrongdoing. It is vital for Liverpool's transformation that a clear line is drawn between the council of the past and the council of the future. The commissioners recognise the hard work, ambition, and determination of the Mayor and her cabinet, as well as the corporate leadership team. The commissioners have met dedicated and talented staff across the council who are working hard to deliver vital public services.

The commissioners have outlined to me, as they have stated clearly in their report, that the council is at the beginning of a long improvement journey and has a great deal to do in the next three years. In addition to the precise functions listed in the directions, the commissioners have encouraged the council to take a whole-council approach to improvement, with an expectation that the plans being developed will reflect this position. The commissioners are working with the council to develop their strategic improvement plan so they can focus on setting a sustainable long-term financial plan, improve corporate governance, deliver basic services well and meet the requirements of the statutory directions.

The commissioners shared with me their concerns about the council's financial resilience and have outlined these in their report. I welcome the forthcoming review of the council's financial resilience being conducted by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) at the request of the commissioners. This review is expected to be completed before Christmas.

Given the circumstances of the intervention and legacy of the previous administration, it is not surprising that commissioners have found that the council's approach to regeneration and property management lacks rigour and commercial awareness. I welcome commissioners working with these teams to embed strong commercial principles in these functions. Commissioners are also working with the planning team to address the lack

of strategic policy frameworks and the significant backlog of planning applications which are constraining development in the city. It is likely to take another 12 to 18 months to fully stabilise the highways and transport functions in order to provide a firmer foundation for onward improvement.

Electoral reform in Liverpool is an important part of the intervention. On 22 September, in line with the terms set out in the statutory direction, a submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) was approved by full council. In this the council proposed a reduction in the number of councillors from 90 to 85; and on 1 October, the LGBCE announced it was "minded to" accept the proposal. The council is due to submit its ward pattern proposal in December 2021. In addition, the intervention package includes the use of powers in the Local Government Act 2000 to provide for full council elections for the City of Liverpool from 2023. An order which delivers these electoral changes was laid before Parliament on 27 September and came into force on 29 October 2021. It provides for all Liverpool City Council councillors, and the directly elected executive Mayor of the City of Liverpool, to be elected and retire together every four years, starting in 2023.

I am mindful of the recent terrorist incident which took place in Liverpool on 14 November and commend the council for its response efforts. No one can doubt the professionalism and public service shown in the response by local government, the NHS and emergency services. I know that going forward, the Council will draw on the expertise of the commissioner team as needed as the community pulls together from this event over the coming weeks and months. I am however clear that the parameters of the intervention have not changed, and I expect the council to continue to prioritise the intervention and transformation work.

The council has a significant challenge ahead of it to provide the services that the residents of Liverpool City Council deserve. My Department stands ready to support commissioners in any way needed to secure this transformation and enable the council to contribute to our levelling-up agenda.

The commissioners have agreed to provide their next report to me in April 2022 and I will update the House on further progress with the intervention at that time.

A copy of the commissioners' first report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/liverpool-city-council-directions-made-under-the-local-government-act-1999>

[HCWS422]

TREASURY

Tax Credits, Child Benefit and Guardian's Allowance Update

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Simon Clarke): The Government will bring forward regulations that will increase most tax credits rates, and thresholds, and will increase the child benefit and guardian's allowance rates in line with the general rise in prices as measured by the September 2021 consumer prices index (CPI). CPI has been the default inflation measure for the Government's statutory annual review of benefits since 2011.

The annual uprating of benefits will take place for tax credits from the start of the new tax year and for child benefit and guardian's allowance in the first full week of the 2021-22 tax year. In 2022, this will be 6 April for tax credits and 11 April for child benefit and guardian's allowance.

The annual uprating process includes the following measures:

The majority of elements and thresholds in working tax credit and child tax credit will be increased by September's CPI figure (3.1%) from April 2022. In line with established practice and the Office for Budget Responsibility's expectations in their welfare forecast, the maximum rate of the childcare element, the family element, the withdrawal rate and the income disregards will remain unchanged.

The 3.1% increase will be applied to the rate of the working tax credit basic element announced by written ministerial statement on 4 November 2020 (£2,005).

Child benefit will be increased in line with September CPI (3.1%) from April 2021.

As set out in section 49(3) of the Tax Credits Act 2002 (TCA), guardian's allowance will be uprated in line with prices, measured by September CPI (3.1%).

The full list of proposed benefit and credit rates will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses in due course.

[HCWS419]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

News UK: Release of 2019 Undertakings

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): On 1 February 2021 News UK submitted an application requesting the Secretary of State to release in full the undertakings accepted in 2019. The 2019 undertakings were accepted in lieu of the conditions put in place when the newspapers were acquired by News International in 1981.

The conditions included provisions relating to the continued publication of *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* as separate newspapers, to the number and power of the independent national directors of Times Newspapers Holdings Ltd, and to editorial control over the journalists working for, and political comment and opinion published in, each of newspapers.

The undertakings accepted in 2019 made changes to the conditions, to allow for sharing of journalistic resources between the two publications and to strengthen the arrangements relating to the independent national directors. News UK now seeks the release of the undertakings in their entirety.

On 24 June DCMS issued a public "invitation to comment", which included a redacted copy of the application, and the written views received from the editors and independent national directors. On 30 July, DCMS requested Ofcom and the Competition and Markets Authority to advise by 24 September on the public interest considerations and changes to market circumstances relevant to the case, respectively.

I have now taken into account the reports and all relevant information submitted to the Department. Acting in a quasi-judicial capacity, I am minded to grant the request by News UK and release the undertakings. I am satisfied that there has been a material change of circumstances since the acceptance of the undertakings in 2019 and that, having considered the public interest considerations applying to newspapers, the undertakings

are no longer appropriate or necessary for the purpose they were intended to achieve (and so should be released).

In accordance with the Enterprise Act 2002, I will now consult on this minded-to decision and publish the reports commissioned from Ofcom and the CMA. Respondents will have 15 working days to provide representations, after which I will come to a final decision.

[HCWS418]

Fan-led Review of Football Governance Final Report

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): Football clubs are at the heart of our local communities. They have a unique social value and many possess great history and legacy. Fans are at the centre of our national game, which is why the Government committed to a fan-led review of football governance in our manifesto.

In April this year, the Government launched that review, led by the chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch).

As the terms of reference set out to this House, the review was a comprehensive examination of the English football system with the aim to explore ways of improving the governance, ownership and financial sustainability of clubs in the football pyramid, building on the strengths and benefits of the game.

Today the Government have published the final report setting out the recommendations of the review. This report is founded on the basis of over 100 hours of engagement with supporters' trusts, fan groups, women's football representatives, football authorities, club owners, players representatives, and under-represented interest groups, alongside over 20,000 fans responding to an online survey. The report is extensive, so we will now be considering the detailed recommendations ahead of a full Government response.

All football stakeholders have had the chance to contribute to the review and I am very grateful to all those who have given evidence. Most importantly, fan voices were at the heart of the review and will remain at the heart of the Government's thinking in responding to the recommendations.

I would like to place on record my thanks and appreciation to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford for her tireless work and for delivering her recommendations so swiftly. She has done a superb job in bringing together such a range of views from across football with such credibility and consideration.

The final report is a thorough and detailed examination of the challenges faced by English football. It is a demonstration of the financial problems being caused by incentives within the game and reckless decision making by some clubs and owners, both of which are unsustainable and threaten the future of the game. It is clear that current oversight of the game is not up to the challenge of solving the structural challenges and action must be taken.

To address this systemic challenge, the review presents the following 10 strategic recommendations, which are accompanied in the report by detailed sub-recommendations:

To ensure the long-term sustainability of football, the Government should create a new Independent Regulator for English Football.

To ensure financial sustainability of the professional game, the Independent Regulator for English Football should oversee financial regulation in football.

New owners' and directors' tests for clubs should be established by the Independent Regulator for English Football replacing the three existing tests and ensuring that only good custodians and qualified directors can run these vital assets.

Football needs a new approach to corporate governance to support a long-term sustainable future of the game.

Football needs to improve equality, diversity and inclusion in clubs with committed equality, diversity and inclusion action plans regularly assessed by the Independent Regulator for English Football.

As a uniquely important stakeholder, supporters should be properly consulted by their clubs in taking key decisions by means of a shadow board.

Football clubs are a vital part of their local communities. In recognition of this there should be additional protection for key items of club heritage.

Fair distributions are vital to the long term health of football. The Premier League should guarantee its support to the pyramid and make additional, proportionate contributions to further support football.

Women's football should be treated with parity and given its own dedicated review.

As an urgent matter, the welfare of players exiting the game needs to be better protected—particularly at a young age.

The Government welcome the work of the review and will now consider the detailed recommendations ahead of providing a full Government response in spring 2022.

The review demonstrates that there are fundamental issues with our national sport, and that this merits radical reform. Fans across the country want and deserve that reform. We have seen in the past how football has been unable to reform itself and to deliver changes that stop the likes of Bury FC or Macclesfield Town FC going out of business, or which stop clubs breaking away to set up the closed shop of a European super league.

We are at a turning point for football in this country. The review is a detailed and worthy piece of work that will require a substantive response and plan of action from across Government. But the primary recommendation of the review is clear, and one the Government choose to endorse in principle today: that football requires a strong, independent regulator to secure the future of our national game. The Government will now work at pace to determine the most effective way to deliver an independent regulator, and any powers that might be needed.

This is an important review that we hope will lead to change for good in football. The Government will now work at pace on how to make that happen.

I have today deposited a copy of the report in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS417]

EDUCATION

Early Years Education Entitlements: Hourly Funding Rates

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Will Quince): Today I am confirming the hourly funding rates for the free early education entitlements in 2022-23 for each local authority.

We have spent over £3.5 billion in each of the past three years on those entitlements to support nurseries and childminders in England to deliver high-quality care and education.

At the spending review on 27 October the Chancellor announced increases in the funding for the early years entitlements worth £160 million in 2022-23, £180 million in 2023-24 and £170 million in 2024-25, compared to 2021-22. This is for local authorities to increase the hourly rates paid to childcare providers for the Government's free childcare entitlement offers and reflects cost pressures, as well as anticipated changes in the number of eligible children.

As a result of this additional funding, we will increase the hourly funding rates for all local authorities for the two-year-old entitlement by 21p an hour. Funding for the three- and four-year-old entitlements will also increase by 17p an hour in the vast majority of areas. We are increasing the minimum funding floor for the three and four-year-old offer to £4.61 per hour.

Ten local authorities have had their 2021-22 hourly funding rates for three and four-year-olds protected by the "loss cap" in the early years national funding formula, to ensure that they do not face large drops to their funding rate. Funding for Bristol, Camden, Ealing, Halton, Islington, Lambeth, Southwark, Tower Hamlets and Westminster will be maintained in 2022-23. Funding for Rutland will be increased by 13p per hour, in recognition that Rutland's loss cap protection was only worth 4p per hour in 2021-22.

I can also confirm today that the supplementary funding hourly rate for maintained nursery schools will increase by 3.5%, equivalent to the increase in the three and four-year-old hourly funding rates.

We are also increasing the early years pupil premium by 7p to 60p per hour, equivalent to up to £342 per eligible child per year, to support better outcomes for disadvantaged three and four-year-olds. Funding for the disability access fund—an additional payment made to providers to help to make reasonable adjustments within their provision to support eligible three and four-year-old children with a disability—will also increase by £185 to £800 per eligible child per year.

For 2021-22 we put in place a temporary variation to the way we fund local authorities for the early years entitlements, using a termly rather than annual census, in response to coronavirus (COVID-19). I can confirm that, from 2022-23, we will return to the normal process of allocating funding based on the annual January census.

In addition to the increase in funding rates for the early years entitlements, we have also announced £153 million of recovery funding which will be used to strengthen teaching in early years and ensure our youngest children are given the support they need as we emerge from the pandemic. This includes high-quality, online training available to all early years practitioners, access to mentor support for those settings that need it most and opportunities to build innovative practice. We will increase supply of qualified graduates in the sector through a substantial expansion in the number of fully funded early year initial teacher training places, and improve the identification and support of SEND children by increasing the numbers of staff with special educational needs co-ordinator qualifications. Through home learning

programmes, early years practitioners will also be better equipped to support parents with their children's development in their own homes.

Further details and guidance on early years entitlements funding will be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS421]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Statutory Review of Benefit and Pension Rates: 2022-23

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I have concluded my statutory annual review of benefit and state pension rates. The new rates will apply in the tax year 2022-23 and come into effect on 11 April 2022.

The consumer prices index (CPI) for the relevant reference period (the year to September 2021) was 3.1%, and I can confirm that benefits will increase in line with that. This is consistent with the use of this index since 2011. The weekly earnings limit in carer's allowance will also be increased by 3.1%.

In line with the Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Act 2021, state pension rates will rise in line with CPI of 3.1%.

I also confirm that the local housing allowance rates for 2022-23 will be maintained at the elevated cash rates agreed for 2020-21. The Office for Budget Responsibility made this assumption too in its expenditure forecast.

All of these matters are transferred in Northern Ireland, and corresponding provision will be made there.

Some benefits are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, but there are benefits that are still temporarily being delivered by DWP on behalf of the Scottish Ministers under agency agreements; these will rise with CPI of 3.1%. The Scottish Government will need to bring forward corresponding uprating legislation in the Scottish Parliament.

I will place the full list of proposed benefit and pension rates for 2022-23 in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS420]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 25 November 2021

TRANSPORT

Transport for the North

The following is an extract from the urgent question on 24 November 2021.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Following the Minister's words about Bradford, the whole city of Bradford and my constituents are angry. Some 530,000 people have been failed. Although I welcome the question of the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) to focus on Bradford, the truth is that the Government have stripped it of £30 billion of growth in the next 10 years. It is the fourth-youngest city in the country. I also hear on the grapevine that the Government have held on to the IPOSs for Leeds because there might be a U-turn. My question is simple: when will he U-turn on the NPR?

Andrew Stephenson: The hon. Lady asks when I will U-turn. We do not intend to U-turn for all the reasons set out in the integrated rail plan. To spend billions of pounds investing in the existing rail route from Manchester to Leeds, and then to spend £18 billion more building a brand-new line, simply did not make economic sense. We will reduce journey times from Bradford to Leeds from about 20 minutes to 11 minutes, and we will continue to work with regional stakeholders to deliver benefits.

[Official Report, 24 November 2021, Vol. 704, c. 367.]

Letter of correction from the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson).

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah).

The correct response should have been:

Andrew Stephenson: We will reduce journey times from Bradford to Leeds from about 20 minutes to **12** minutes, and we will continue to work with regional stakeholders to deliver benefits.

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