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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 2 December 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

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Israel: Trade Co-operation

1. **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): What progress she has made in discussions with her Israeli counterpart on an agreement for further trade co-operation beyond the trade continuity deal. [904513]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I welcome the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) to his place. It is a pleasure to be working with him, and I look forward to discussing some of the many exciting things that will be going on in the Department for International Trade in the months ahead.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) is aware, on Monday the Prime Minister announced plans to enhance our trade and investment relationship with Israel. Last week, I held productive talks with the Israeli ambassador on the matter, and I look forward to strengthening that important trading relationship.

Scott Benton: As the Prime Minister rightly said on Monday, our close co-operation with Israel on security, science and technology benefits not only our two respective nations, but the entire world. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the new strategic agreement signed between the UK and Israel will further enhance those ties over the next decade, and will she update the House on when we can expect the consultation period for the new bilateral free trade deal to begin?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The strategic agreement signed with Israel is the starting point for a series of activities that will deepen our trading relationship. We will be opening a public consultation on our enhanced bilateral free trade agreement in January, and we look forward to hearing the views of businesses and stakeholders across the UK on their priorities for that deal. We will also be hosting a joint innovation summit with our Israeli friends in March next year, in order to support new technology ideas.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Secretary of State aware of the huge dynamic in Israeli universities? Will she make every effort, including with resources, to encourage partnerships between UK and Israeli universities, in terms of research, development and innovation?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I said, we will be hosting a joint innovation summit in March with our Israeli friends in those areas of research and development, as mentioned by the hon. Gentleman. How we can work together between our universities is very much on our list of priorities, and I am also working closely with the Secretary of State for Education to ensure that we link in the international relationships that we want to grow with Israel.

Free Trade Agreements

2. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): How many free trade agreements her Department is negotiating. [904515]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): For the first time in 50 years, we are an independent trading nation, able to strike deals around the world. We have already secured trade deals with 70 countries, plus the EU, covering trade worth £766 billion last year, and we are just getting started. We have secured an agreement-in-principle with Australia and New Zealand, and we continue to work on a deal with the US. We are preparing for negotiations with India, Canada, and Mexico, and we have also launched a public consultation on a deal with the Gulf Cooperation Council. As we have heard from the Secretary of State, we are due to begin work early next year on an enhanced and improved free trade agreement with Israel.

Mr Hollobone: Warner's Distillery, based in the village of Harrington in the Kettering constituency is the largest independent craft-based gin distillery in the country, and it is seeking to export even more of its wonderful product. Is it not the case that businesses that export are more profitable, productive and resilient, and is it not exciting for businesses such as Warner's Distillery, and other businesses in Kettering, that more free trade agreements are coming down the track?

Mr Jayawardena: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Across north Northamptonshire, businesses such as Warner's Distillery are exporting some £1.5 billion of goods around the world, as measured in 2019. I am confident that the trade deals we are signing globally will benefit more businesses just like Warner's, to create opportunities and support jobs in my hon. Friend's corner of the country, and beyond.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Minister will know that the ratio between damage from Brexit and the trade deals is substantial. Indeed, in terms of pounds, there is £490 of Brexit damage for a £1 gain from the New Zealand deal, £2 gain from Australia, £8 gain from the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, and £20 gain from America, if that comes together. If all that happens, it comes to about £31. Where will the Minister find the £459 of Brexit damage that the trade deals cannot make up?

Mr Jayawardena: We are working for every corner of our United Kingdom, backing British businesses. We are supporting Scottish jobs as much as those in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, at a time when the SNP wants to cut itself off from its largest market, the British internal market. The truth is that the SNP is

anti-trade. Not only does it want to cut itself off from the United Kingdom, but it does not back any trade deal with anyone.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): The point and purpose of trade deals—I hope the Minister will agree—is that they are not static, and the forecasts are just an indication of what will come; they will be able to grow and develop. Can the Minister reassure the House that the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership offers an opportunity for the UK to expand its businesses and its exports across the country?

Mr Jayawardena: My hon. Friend is of course right; the TPP offers a great opportunity to access a fast-growing part of the world as part of our Indo-Pacific tilt, as detailed in our integrated review. The opportunity to engage with this part of the world, where there is a growing middle class and increased demand for our products, goods and services, is one that we should seize.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Free trade negotiations with the US are vital to lifting Donald Trump's tariffs on British steel and aluminium exports, which in turn are crucial to protecting jobs and businesses in communities across our country. Given that the US has already agreed to lift tariffs on many EU steel products, if we are to get a level playing field for our firms and our workers, might it not be time for Lord Frost to be given a little help to stop bungling discussions with the EU so that this vital US-UK trade deal can be sorted?

Mr Jayawardena: We will always stand up for the British national interest, and that includes with the European Union. We will make sure that our United Kingdom remains strong and can trade with the world. The truth is that America's unjustified tariffs on UK steel, aluminium and derivatives are unfair and unnecessary as those imports do not harm US national security, so we will continue to make representations to back British businesses.

British Exports

3. **James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase British exports. [904517]

5. **Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase British exports. [904522]

9. **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase British exports. [904526]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): The Secretary of State announced a refreshed export strategy—Made in Britain, Sold to the World—on 17 November during International Trade Week. This business-centred 12-point plan is designed to transform our support for exporters, encourage them to sell to the world and accelerate our race to £1 trillion-worth of exports per year.

James Wild: I welcome that new strategy. The port of King's Lynn handles half a million tonnes of exports of barley and other high-quality agricultural products as well as imports, and it has just had one of its busiest years. Does my hon. Friend agree that the investment that Associated British Ports is making in new facilities to support the growing demand for timber from the construction sector and other supply chains is a vote of confidence in Norfolk and will help our economy to bounce back?

Mike Freer: I welcome ABP's investment in King's Lynn and was glad to hear of the new Vancouver timber terminal, which I understand will open on Monday, representing £1.4 million of investment. With 95% of the UK's trade facilitated by the maritime sector, our ports are integral to UK trade and to the success of our Made in Britain, Sold to the World strategy.

Andy Carter: I am sure that the Minister, like me, has been incredibly impressed by the small and medium-sized businesses that are looking to export to new markets. What support is available for a business such as N'Genius, which is based in my Warrington South constituency and has patented a new high-strength stainless steel that can revolutionise engineering and construction? How can this Government help it export that UK innovation to the rest of the world?

Mike Freer: Our new export strategy is a 12-point plan focused on tackling the barriers to trade faced by SMEs. We are opening markets and supporting companies through the export support service, which provides a single point of entry to DIT support for SMEs. This new service will direct businesses to services such as those provided by UK Export Finance, the UK Export Academy and our pilot UK trade show programme. I am happy to connect N'Genius to one of our international trade advisers for further assistance.

Jason McCartney: Growing British exports has a key role in our levelling-up agenda. I am particularly proud of some world-class textile, engineering, sheet metal fabricators and food and drink businesses in my Yorkshire constituency. What more can the Minister and his Department do to support my world-class Yorkshire businesses to export to the world?

Mike Freer: Our export strategy will ensure that those companies in Yorkshire will be supported through all stages of their exporting journey, whether through the UK Export Academy, the advice of our global network of international trade experts, or the financial support or export credit provided by UK Export Finance. In my recent visit to Leeds, I met our excellent team of international trade advisers there. Again, I am more than happy to put them in contact with my hon. Friend to provide additional support.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Exports from Northern Ireland to Ireland were €2.8 billion in the first nine months of this year, up 60% on the same period in 2020. Does the Minister agree that while Brexit has been an export disaster for GB, it has certainly been a boon for exports from Northern Ireland?

Mike Freer: The President of the Board of Trade, the Secretary of State for International Trade, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) took the Board of Trade to a meeting

in Ireland. I am sure that that issue was discussed. If the hon. Gentleman would like to know more details of what we are doing to support mutual trade, I am more than happy to have a discussion with him.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): When negotiating free trade agreements, the Government must promote and protect the interests of industries across the UK. What steps are the Government taking to protect the interests of Scottish agriculture in future negotiations?

Mike Freer: The Department for International Trade is always looking to protect our own industries and sectors, including the agricultural sector, while ensuring that they are able to exploit new markets. In terms of beef and lamb, our teams are working hard to ensure that the new markets we are opening up will be available to Scottish farmers. Again, if the hon. Lady would like to know more about the support we are able to offer, I am very happy to facilitate that discussion.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his responses, but bearing in mind the fears of our farmers and farmers' unions following the New Zealand deal, will he outline what steps have been taken with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs at the Northern Ireland Assembly to promote our British produce exports to global markets affected by the New Zealand deal?

Mike Freer: My understanding is that there are regular and frequent conversations between the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and DAERA. I am more than happy to ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets details of those discussions if he has any specific concerns he wishes to have addressed.

Labour Shortages: Exports and Imports

4. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What recent assessment has your Department made of the impact of labour shortages on UK (a) export and (b) import levels. [904518]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): As the global economy has rebounded from the pandemic, we have seen pressures placed on supply chains across sectors and across the world. It is this Government who have taken quick and decisive action across the United Kingdom to ease those pressures where immediate interventions have been required.

Gavin Newlands: The Minister is redefining "quick and decisive". An Aviva study indicates that more than seven out of 10 businesses are worried about skills shortages and 25% of businesses said their biggest risk is the uncertainty caused by Brexit. The temporary visa scheme for poultry workers has now closed and only nine people applied to join the Government scheme designed to boost the number of fuel tanker drivers, out of an intended 300. Given the failure of those schemes, why will the Government not consider devolving immigration powers, which could deliver the stronger labour market they profess to want but in reality are actively frustrating?

Mr Jayawardena: I am afraid that SNP Members have not woken up to the reality of the opportunities that we now have to trade around the world as part of being an independent trading nation. The hon. Gentleman refers to tanker drivers. Some 5,000 visas have been made available for HGV drivers for a three-month period to provide short-term relief. We have gone further. The long-term sustainable solution is to support and develop our domestic workforce, and to improve the pay and conditions in the sector. That is why the Government are working to correct the structural problems in the haulage industry. We are increasing testing availability by 50,000 a year. We are streamlining the process for efficiency and we are committing £17 million in free skills boot camps for HGV drivers.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The problem that the Minister has is that the shortage of HGV drivers in the UK is happening now. It is already causing huge disruption and we are all anxious to ensure that the situation does not get worse in the run-up to Christmas. Will the Minister tell us how many of the 5,000 temporary worker visas that the Government made available to overseas lorry drivers in September have been allocated?

Mr Jayawardena: We are not going to provide a running commentary on numbers, but what I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that this is not a problem faced only by the United Kingdom. He is so keen always to talk about our friends across the channel, so he will know that France has a shortage of 40,000 drivers, Germany has a shortage of 60,000 drivers, and Poland has a shortage of 120,000 drivers.

Bill Esterson: I find it extraordinary that the Minister was unable to tell us how many visas have been allocated to overseas HGV drivers. We were told in October that it was just 20; I wonder what the figure is now. The reality is that the Wine and Spirit Trade Association warns of "delivery chaos", of "major delays on wine and spirit delivery times"

up to five times longer than last year and increases in freight costs—no doubt that will not affect parties in Downing Street. Does he want to be responsible for cancelling Christmas celebrations elsewhere, because if not, he needs to give a much better answer than the one he just gave?

Mr Jayawardena: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman has not realised that this is not Transport questions, but International Trade questions—I am sure that his new shadow ministerial colleagues will raise questions with Transport Ministers in due course. We continue to see businesses thriving, including in the wine and spirit industry, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) pointed out.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Eight out of 10 businesses in Scotland say that they need to recruit staff, yet three quarters are reporting skills shortages. Businesses cannot export what they can neither make nor supply, yet the Government's already tired 12-point plan, which has been mentioned this morning, has nothing to cover workforce shortages or dealing with them. Will the Minister explain why?

Mr Jayawardena: Again, this is International Trade questions, but I am happy to provide an answer on behalf of the Government. We are putting significant resources into training people up to develop our domestic workforce. My understanding is that many people are very keen to find a new job potentially in a new industry. This Government will help them to do that.

Drew Hendry: Clearly, the Government are keen to duck all these issues relating to trade. The Federation of Small Businesses reported to a Committee in this Parliament that a fifth of its members have ceased trading with the UK's biggest export market—the EU—either temporarily or permanently due to bureaucracy or costs, yet the 12-point plan contains nothing to deal with that issue. The Government's priorities are clearly elsewhere. Tory cronies are queuing up for a Christmas come early to get contracts and big donors are fairly leaping into the Lords. Why are backbone businesses being short-changed and served only a thin gruel?

Mr Jayawardena: I know that the hon. Gentleman's Twitter followers will be happy with that statement. The truth is that we have secured trade deals with 70 countries around the world, and the EU. The EU deal is the best deal that it has ever secured with anyone. A zero-tariff, zero-quota deal has been done with no one bar the United Kingdom, and we look forward to trading with not only them, but new markets, as I have outlined.

Trade Deals: Animal Welfare and Environmental Standards

6. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on (a) animal welfare and (b) environmental standards into future trade deals. [904523]

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Jayawardena.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): Oh, that question is for me as well—thank you, Mr Speaker. I am delighted with the interest from Opposition Members in trade matters.

Her Majesty's Government share the British public's high regard for animal welfare and environmental standards. We have agreed ground-breaking animal welfare provisions with Australia and New Zealand, including stand-alone chapters reflecting the importance of animal welfare in those agreements. We have secured ambitious environmental chapters that preserve our right to regulate to meet net zero, affirm our shared commitment to the Paris agreement and will help us to co-operate on a range of environmental issues.

Munira Wilson: My residents in Twickenham are deeply concerned about both the ethics and the quality of the food that they eat, and they have written to me in their hundreds about protecting standards in future trade deals. They also want to protect British farmers, yet farmers across the country, from Cumbria to Shropshire to Cornwall, are being let down by trade deals that threaten to undercut them. If the Minister truly backs British farming and high food standards, why will he not give a cast-iron guarantee to protect them in future trade deals?

Mr Jayawardena: I am sorry that the hon. Lady has clearly not been at previous Trade questions. Britain has secured agreement in principle on free trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand, following deals with the European economic area and Japan that will maintain Britain's high levels of environmental protection and facilitate trade in goods and services for those farmers.

Foreign Investment: South Yorkshire

7. **Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage foreign investment in South Yorkshire. [904524]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): We are dedicated to facilitating international investment into all regions of the UK, including South Yorkshire, where we work with stakeholders across the region to identify and promote opportunities with high potential, including—my hon. Friend will be pleased to hear—one in Doncaster, focused on the rail sector.

Nick Fletcher: I have spoken to national and international companies about investment in Doncaster, mainly at two sites: DN7 at Thorne and GatewayEast around Doncaster Sheffield airport. I even personally managed to secure a visit to Doncaster from Apple's UK representative; it was fantastic for him to come up. What steps has the Department taken to encourage international companies to invest in Doncaster?

Mike Freer: We have invested heavily and are building close relationships with the Mayor and the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority to support investment into the region. Details of capital investment projects such as GatewayEast will soon be added to the investment atlas that was published as part of the global investment summit.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Investment in South Yorkshire is important, but even more important is investment in northern Lincolnshire. Could the Minister give an assurance that he will work closely with me and with businesses in northern Lincolnshire, particularly to develop the renewable energy sector, in which we have great expertise?

Mr Speaker: I think there might be a link there somewhere—maybe a road. Carry on.

Mike Freer: I think my hon. Friend was campaigning for a rail line last time we spoke about the area.

My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that we will continue to give his area access to the export support scheme, the export champions, the Export Academy and our vast network of international trade advisers.

Trade Deals: Environmental Standards

8. **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on environmental standards into future trade deals. [904525]

12. **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on environmental standards into future trade deals. [904531]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): I refer the hon. Members to the reply that I gave a few moments ago.

Gill Furniss: The Minister claims that environmental protection is a priority in trade negotiations, but that simply does not resonate with the Department's actions. In the Government's desperation for a trade deal with Australia, they agreed to water down limited reference to climate change. Australia's current commitments are consistent with 4° of global warming, far off the international 1.5° target. How is that at all consistent with the Government's moral commitment to fight the climate emergency?

Mr Jayawardena: I am pleased to reassure the hon. Lady that the environment chapter will break new ground for the United Kingdom. Our agreement in principle includes real commitments to work together more closely on a whole host of areas. The truth is that we are leading the world in the area; we were the first country in the world to legislate for net zero, and we will continue in our endeavours to protect our environment for our children and grandchildren.

Kate Osamor: We cannot claim to have reached genuine net zero as a country, or even to have a plan to do so, until we take into account the impact of our imports on global carbon emissions. Will the Department for International Trade therefore agree to consider the evidence gathered by the Environmental Audit Committee in its inquiry into carbon border taxes? Better still, will the Department initiate an inquiry of its own?

Mr Jayawardena: Her Majesty's Government welcome input from all parliamentary Committees of this House and will always look closely at all recommendations made, but I would highlight examples of how we are actually delivering on the agenda. We are working with countries such as Brazil and others to support how we reduce the impact of agriculture on the environment, through building new dialogues with agricultural producers and consumers through COP26 and beyond. We aim to support those collaborative actions and ultimately to reduce the impact of agriculture on carbon-rich ecosystems such as rainforests. This is an important area and we will continue to work very hard on it.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The UK-Australia agreement in principle marked the first time that Australia had ever agreed to a specific reference to the Paris agreement in a free trade agreement. Does my hon. Friend agree that trade is an effective way of encouraging other countries to bring their environmental protection standards up to the high levels of our own?

Mr Jayawardena: I commend my hon. Friend for his research. He is absolutely right: this is an important part of our wider diplomacy. Economic diplomacy is crucial to making sure that we spread British values around the world, including protections for the environment. As economies develop, they will of course want to seek the technologies that we have in this country to decarbonise and improve the quality of life for their people, too.

Mr Speaker: I welcome Nick Thomas-Symonds to his new position on the Front Bench.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am also grateful to the Secretary of State for her welcome. I look forward to our debates on the crucial importance of trade to our national economy and, indeed, to promoting our values around the world.

The objective of the New Zealand-led international agreement on climate change, trade and sustainability is to break down global barriers to trade in green goods and services and eliminate the subsidies that are propping up fossil fuel producers. The Secretary of State announced last week that the UK would not be taking part in this crucial initiative. Can the Minister explain why?

Mr Jayawardena: I, too, welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his place. He is right—the United Kingdom is not currently considering joining the negotiations on that agreement—but we will continue to work with partners to establish how such plurilateral initiatives can help to support discussions at the World Trade Organisation. We will also continue to work closely with our partners on wider trade and environment matters, both through bilateral dialogue and through multilateral forums. That is how we believe we can secure the best results for not only the British people but the world.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The Government have not made an inch of progress on green trade in any of the bilateral trade agreements signed since 2019, so why should we put faith in that now? The Board of Trade itself has said:

“There are two main ways that trade can accelerate the green transition: liberalising green trade; and reducing market distortions”. Does the Minister accept that that is exactly what the New Zealand agreement does, and if so, does he not think that now is the time to show global leadership and not to stay on the sidelines?

Mr Jayawardena: We are absolutely committed to ensuring that the environment receives the full attention of Her Majesty's Government, but we will also seek to end other environmentally wasteful practices that arise from other state actors, such as the subsidising of the illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing sectors that exist in some countries, and we will press for the successful conclusion of the fisheries subsidies negotiation. That demonstrates that we are working across a number of areas, not just the one to which the right hon. Gentleman has referred.

Trade with the EU

10. **Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP):** What recent assessment she has made of trends in the level of UK trade with the EU. [904528]

13. **Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP):** What recent assessment she has made of trends in the level of UK trade with the EU. [904532]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): UK trade in goods with the EU has been increasing this year. According to the latest data available, goods exports in September were up by 5.7% on those in the previous month.

Steven Bonnar: Between 2019 and 2021, the value of exports from Scotland decreased by 24%. In England the figure was 12%, in Wales it was 24%, and in the north of Ireland it was 15%. This follows a period of steady decline since 2018. It is economic vandalism. There is hardly a sector in the country that does not attribute at least some of the blame for its difficulties to Brexit. What agreement that removes all tariff and non-tariff barriers do the Government plan to make with another country that can account for 48% of all UK trade?

Penny Mordaunt: Goods exports between Scotland and the European Union were up 4% in quarter 2 compared with the same period last year. We are getting growth back after a period of dealing with the pandemic and other shocks to the global economy, and I ask the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues to start focusing on those opportunities. I have had discussions this week with representatives of pretty much every other political party—I have talked to parliamentarians, metro Mayors, local enterprise partnerships and all sorts of bodies around the country in preparing for the further negotiations that we will have in the forthcoming weeks—but I have not heard a peep from his party.

Peter Grant: If the members of the Minister's party had not cold-shouldered the positive and constructive suggestions made by the Scottish Government immediately after the referendum—if they had even bothered to open and read the document—we might not be in the mess that we are in now.

This month, our figure has improved slightly from an all-time low, which is nothing to celebrate. Exports of food and drink from the United Kingdom to Europe have halved. The Food and Drink Federation has described that as a “disaster” and said that there have been only tiny gains in other markets. There was never going to be a Brexit that would be good for British businesses, but why do the Government not finally come clean and admit that their botched handling of Brexit has made the position even worse?

Penny Mordaunt: I ask the hon. Gentleman: what possible good could come from plugging every part of the UK economy back into the global economy, including the trading powerhouses of the future in emerging parts of the world? What possible good could come from championing a free trade policy globally that would end trade distortions and lift millions of people out of poverty? What good could come of that? I urge his party to get focused on those opportunities and to work with us and enable us to work with the businesses in his constituency to seize those opportunities. The country has decided that that is the future for the United Kingdom. I do wish that he would get on board.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Is it not interesting that my right hon. Friend highlights the recent increase in exports to the European Union, in stark contrast to the doom and gloom that we heard from our opponents, who are saying that there will be a catastrophe and collapse in trade? Will she focus on the countries in central and eastern Europe and the Three Seas initiative—some of the fastest-growing countries on our continent—and build strong bilateral trade agreements with countries such as Poland and others?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the opportunities that exist there. Clearly, we had good news recently on exports, but we also had fantastic news about inward investment and he is right to be optimistic. I think that our businesses are going to thrive in this new environment. There are some challenges that we have to address, but they are being addressed and we can see from the numbers that this is paying off.

New Zealand Trade Agreement

11. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What assessment her Department has made of the potential impact on UK farmers and crofters of the planned UK trade agreement with New Zealand.
[904529]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): This deal brings new opportunities to agricultural producers, making it easier to trade with New Zealand. It is a gateway to joining the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership—the CPTPP—a high-standard free trade agreement involving 11 Pacific nations. This will create new export opportunities for British farmers to those markets.

Mr Carmichael: I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I have to say to the Minister that her confidence is not shared by hill farmers and crofters, or by the National Farmers Union and the National Farmers Union of Scotland. If the Government are confident in their assessment of the opportunities and threats from this agreement, will they commission an economic and environmental impact assessment, independent of Government, to show that they are correct?

Penny Mordaunt: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, this will be independently scrutinised, and there is obviously the Trade and Agriculture Commission as well. We have ensured that any reports are produced in good time for all the relevant Select Committees of this House to scrutinise them. There are tremendous opportunities. I also work closely with my counterparts in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ensure that we are dealing with the genuine concerns of that sector, and we will continue to do so as the negotiations and deals progress.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Obviously the concerns of farmers and crofters will have to be addressed as the final agreement comes into place, but does my right hon. Friend agree that counter-seasonality offers a huge opportunity for British farmers to enter into agreements with farmers in New Zealand, so that markets across the world can be supplied all year round?

Penny Mordaunt: There are certainly opportunities through that to grow the market further still. I also think that we have to dispel some myths. It is not the case that the market is going to be flooded with New Zealand lamb. New Zealand already has tariff-free access through its WTO quota, of which it uses only half, so it is not the case that those things are going to come to pass. There are some massive opportunities and it is those opportunities that we need to focus on.

Exports: Financial Services

14. **Sir Robert Syms** (Poole) (Con): What recent steps her Department has taken to increase the export of British financial services. [904533]

15. **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): What recent steps her Department has taken to increase the export of British financial services. [904534]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): With colleagues in the Treasury, we are committed to championing export opportunities for our world-class financial services sector. We have done this through targeted export campaigns supporting specific UK financial services, as well as through signing ambitious free trade agreements that are reducing market access barriers and opening new doors for great British businesses to sell their services worldwide.

Sir Robert Syms: Financial services are so important to our economy, providing high-paid jobs and earning a substantial amount of revenue. We have done really well on our trade deals and it is vital that financial services are an important factor when we secure them. Will the Minister assure me that that is first and foremost in the Government's mind?

Mike Freer: We share my hon. Friend's ambition to ensure that the UK remains a global hub for services and digital trade, which is why we are striking a series of advanced, high-standard FTAs with leading nations around the world. We have already made progress: our FTA with Japan provides greater benefits for financial services than the EU-Japan FTA, and includes provisions to ban unjustified data localisation and to support regulatory co-operation. Our recently signed FTA with Australia also includes an ambitious financial services chapter that will enable businesses to build on the £800 million-worth of financial services exported to Australia in 2020. So, Mr Speaker, the answer is yes.

Mr Speaker: It might have been easier just to say that!

Felicity Buchan: Financial services account for more than 10% of our total tax take and are responsible for more than 1 million jobs throughout the country. Financial services are important not only to my constituents in Kensington but to Scotland, including Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Glasgow, and to Newcastle, Leeds, Bristol and Chelmsford. Does my hon. Friend agree that financial services need to be priorities in all future trade agreements to secure best market access?

Mike Freer: We are absolutely committed to prioritising British financial services in FTAs. I am sure that my hon. Friend, as the Government's trade envoy to Iceland and Norway—a role that she fulfils with her usual vigour—will be pleased to see our commitment in practice in the UK's recently signed FTA with Norway, Iceland and Lichtenstein, which benefits financial services.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Office for National Statistics data shows that services trade with the European Union is down 28%—the Minister neglected to mention that in his long response. So could he say where we are in terms of negotiations with the EU on equivalence for our financial sector?

Mike Freer: I will have to refer the hon. Gentleman to discussions with colleagues. I will write back to him.

Aluminium Extrusions

16. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential effect on UK industry of the Trade Remedies Authority's investigation into aluminium extrusions. [904535]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): It is an ongoing independent investigation by the Trade Remedies Authority. Although the authority indicated last month what it is minded to do, it would not be appropriate for me to try to pre-empt the outcome of the investigation.

Liz Twist: It has now been more than eight months since the European Commission imposed anti-dumping duties on aluminium extrusions from China. Will the Minister tell us why, by comparison, our Trade Remedies Authority has been so slow to act on this issue? Will she assure us that the authority will take into account the risk of Chinese imports being diverted into the UK after the EU decision?

Penny Mordaunt: I am afraid that, as I alluded to, I cannot comment on the investigation or its potential outcome. The TRA is carrying out its work methodically and thoroughly. I encourage the hon. Lady to ensure that the businesses in her constituency that have an interest in the issue make representations to the TRA. I am sure she is encouraging them to do so, and that evidence is critical in ensuring that we get the right outcome. I will undertake to keep her up to date as things progress.

Topical Questions

T1. [904505] **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): Last week my Board of Trade published our "Digital Trade" report, which demonstrates how we can boost exports, turbocharge economic growth for the whole UK and create high-paying jobs across all four of our family of nations using digital tools. Because geography is now history, digital tools ensure that services can be delivered from anywhere.

We export more than £200 billion of digitally delivered services. With investment and the right planning, I want to make sure the UK improves on its already pretty impressive second place in global digital trade to get to the top of that chart. I have negotiated a world-first set of digital trade principles with our G7 partners and will be continuing to deliver these through our trade deals in the months ahead.

Lee Anderson: Boneham & Turner in Ashfield has been around for more than 100 years and, post Brexit, it is thriving, like many other businesses in Ashfield. Its boss, Charlie Boneham, tells me that the US is a big part of its business. Will my right hon. Friend please advise me on where we are with a possible trade deal with the US?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The US is currently reviewing progress on all the free trade agreement negotiations under the previous Administration. We welcome the opportunity to feed into that review. We have always been clear that a good deal is better than a quick deal, and we are here when the US is ready to continue those discussions.

A deal with the US will benefit not just manufacturers like Boneham & Turner in my hon. Friend's constituency but the other 30,000 small and medium-sized enterprises that also export goods to the US by removing tariffs, simplifying customs procedures and therefore making it easier to export. We already have £200 billion of bilateral trade with the US, and we continue to encourage those businesses that want to do more to come to the export support service, which the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), discussed earlier, to ensure they have all the tools they need to maximise their trade with the USA.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The emergence of the omicron variant surely underlines that, if we are to protect our citizens from covid, we need to help to accelerate vaccination programmes in developing countries. With Norway the latest country to agree that, in these exceptional circumstances, a temporary waiver on patent rules to help boost vaccine production is needed, why is the Secretary of State so intent on blocking any progress on such a deal?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We have been world leading throughout the pandemic in our negotiations with AstraZeneca on ensuring that vaccines are produced at cost. When I was Secretary of State for International Development, I made sure we invested in COVAX so that we led the way and brought other countries forward to ensure that as much vaccine as can be made gets to those who need it the most. Countries are continuing to work with the smallest and most vulnerable developing countries so they get the vaccines they need. We continue to have discussions on a waiver to the World Trade Organisation agreement on trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights, although those discussions were postponed this week due to the complexity of omicron and movement. We will pick up those discussions in the new year.

T2. [904506] **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): Earlier this year, in partnership with Google, I arranged a digital course to train and upskill service sector businesses across Rother Valley. Will my right hon. Friend set out how our trade deals, including the recently announced New Zealand trade deal, support the service sector, 70% of which is based outside London and some of which is based in Rother Valley?

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): I thank my hon. Friend for what he is doing to improve digital skills in his constituency. In 2019, 40% of service exports to New Zealand were delivered digitally. Under the New Zealand deal, service exporters, particularly those in his constituency and region, will benefit from more opportunities to deliver services through digital trade. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, in her topical statement, referred to the Department's focus on digital trade, which is vital for the future.

T3. [904507] **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): National Farmers Union Scotland says the Australian trade deal is

“a slow journey to the Australians getting unfettered access to UK markets and with no guarantees that the promises of other safeguards will address the fact that very different production systems are permitted in Australia”.

When was the last time the Department involved officials from the Scottish Government and Scottish farming representatives in the negotiation of future free trade deals?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): We engage with officials from the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Government all the time, and we look forward to continuing that.

T4. [904510] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I was recently fortunate enough to visit the DP World London Gateway container port in my constituency to hear about its exciting plans—its commitment to the construction of a fourth berth, and its ambition to become the largest container port in the UK and to use the opportunities that freeport status brings. Will the Minister update the House on what the Department is doing to support freeports and promote UK exporters?

Mr Jayawardena: Freeports will be national hubs for trade and investment. They will regenerate communities, attract new businesses, and create jobs and opportunities across our country. As they move towards implementation, my Department is working closely with each freeport, including London Gateway, to help pull new investment in and to support exporters to seize the advantages that freeports will bring them.

T5. [904511] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Last weekend, we saw the release of the Xinjiang papers, highlighting how human rights atrocities go right to the heart of the Chinese Government. As a result, I want to ask what steps is the Minister taking to review our trading relationship with China, because it cannot be business as usual?

Mr Jayawardena: China remains, of course, an important trading partner for Britain, but we have no plans to negotiate a trade deal with China. We will build trade only where it supports British businesses and jobs. We will seek to reduce barriers to accessing the Chinese market, but I can assure the hon. Lady that our approach to China will always be rooted in British values and British interests. We want a positive and constructive relationship with China, but I can assure her that we will not sacrifice our values in doing this.

T6. [904512] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): With the exponential growth in offshore wind, including off the East Anglian coast, where 50% of the UK's wind farms are located, world-class knowledge and skills have developed and the UK is now a global leader. Will my right hon. Friend outline the steps that are taken in negotiating trade deals to both promote this expertise abroad and attract inward investment into the UK offshore wind sector?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting that trade in itself is a force for good in the world, as well as having environmental chapters in trade deals. One example of that is our free trade agreement with New Zealand, which will include the most comprehensive environmental list of goods with liberalised tariffs in a free trade agreement to date. He is right to point to the technology being developed in the UK, which can provide solutions for nations around the world, whether they are developed or developing nations, to meet net zero.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has a long history of being a supporter of the creative industries and I know that, like me, she will be concerned about the possibility of Channel 4 being lost to Leeds if it is taken over by a global player and taken away—I hope she is concerned about that. We have the BBC in Salford and Channel 4 in Leeds, so does she agree that levelling up would be deeply damaged if we were to lose Channel 4 from Leeds?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue. The points he makes are well understood. We often talk about the BBC and soft power, influence and all it brings, but Channel 4 has also done some incredible things, particularly in the disability space, during the Paralympic games in 2012 and since. His points have been well made. This is a matter for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, but I am sure those in that Department will have heard him.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on what steps are being taken to establish a free trade agreement with our historical ally Pakistan, and specifically to encourage trade between our country and the Kashmir region?

Mr Jayawardena: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his consistent interest in this area, and I value the conversations we have had on this matter. In the four quarters to Q2 this year, we have had £2.6 billion-worth of trade with Pakistan, and I am pleased to confirm to him that we already offer Pakistan the enhanced framework in the generalised scheme of preferences, which ensures that it has more generous access to the British market than others do today. He will also know, and the House will want to be aware, that between July and September this year we ran a consultation on our proposed new developing countries trading scheme. This is a statement of our intent: the British Government want to take a more ambitious, more generous, more pro-growth approach to trading with developing nations. Our new scheme will mean more opportunities and less bureaucracy—

Mr Speaker: Come on. I call Alistair Carmichael.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for the support that she has given in the past to the development of tidal stream renewable energy generation. Now that we have the very welcome ring-fenced pot for tidal stream energy, will she charge her Department with the development of a strategy to ensure that we can export that expertise as we move towards commercialisation?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The right hon. Gentleman will be as pleased as I am to see that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Treasury

were able to find a way to make sure that the contract for difference, now published, will be able to provide that ring-fenced support for tidal stream. As he knows, I visited earlier in the year to see the work for myself and to talk to those who have been developing this technology. As part of the work that the Department for International Trade will be doing on green trade across the world, we want to ensure that, as that potentially becomes commercially viable, such firms are absolutely at the forefront of the package of tools that other countries will also be able to use to help them to decarbonise their energy sectors. We will work very closely with those firms. The Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green, who is overseeing the export service, will make sure that they are included and supported as they think about where those markets might be.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Will the Secretary of State update the House on trade discussions with India? She will know that any reduction in the punitive tariffs that apply to Scotch whisky would be an enormous boost for the industry.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call Peter Grant—[*Interruption.*] I call the Minister first.

Mr Jayawardena: I commend my right hon. Friend for his endeavours in making sure that Scotch whisky can be enjoyed by more people more reasonably all around the world. Britain wants a deal that slashes barriers to doing business and trading with India's £2 trillion economy and its 1.4 billion-strong population, and Scotch whisky is at the top of our agenda.

Madam Deputy Speaker: And now we come to Peter Grant.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I could never have thought that I was about to be called, Madam Deputy Speaker.

In a few weeks' time, the United Kingdom will start to apply import controls to goods coming from the European Union. Last year, when the European Union started to apply its controls, a large number of small and medium-sized exporters, particularly in the Scottish food and drink industry, felt that they were simply left to sink or swim. What assurances can the Government give that small import businesses in Scotland will not be hung out to dry next year in the way that small exporters in Scotland were left hung out to dry last year?

Penny Mordaunt: I encourage the hon. Gentleman, if he has not already done so, to put businesses in his constituency in touch with our Department. The export support service runs alongside the trader support service—indeed they are joined up organisations—and we are there to provide bespoke support to businesses, to help them work through some of the challenges with new paperwork and so forth, and to give them the information they need to make business planning decisions. I encourage him to put those businesses in touch with us directly, and we will support them.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Alongside Blackpool tower and the pleasure beach, Blackpool rock is just one of the things that makes my constituency world famous. Exports of our most famous edible product, produced locally, are growing year on year. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can boost these exports around the world?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): I am more than happy to ensure that my hon. Friend is put in contact with our export support scheme, our international trade advisers, our export champions, and our Export Academy to ensure that the world-famous rock continues to be sold across the world.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Let us try again, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Exports from Ireland to GB soared in the first six months of 2021 after Brexit, as imports sent in the opposite direction declined. I wonder whether the Minister can come to the Dispatch Box and advise the House on this matter. With a post-Brexit imbalance in trade, with Irish imports up 20% in the first six months of 2021 and GB exports to Ireland down by more than £2.5 billion, do they not recognise that, for GB—not Northern Ireland—Brexit is a trade disaster?

Penny Mordaunt: From figures that I mentioned earlier, the hon. Member will know that the situation is improving for Scottish businesses. He will also know that the bulk of the disruption and slowdown has been because of the pandemic. We are now coming out of that, and we would love to have a constructive dialogue with his party and its Members of Parliament to ensure that businesses in their constituencies are getting the right support to seize the opportunities that are now opening up. If we provide the right support for businesses, this should be an exciting time when they will be able to thrive. I encourage the Scottish National party to come to terms with the fact that we have left the EU, and that we are determined to make a success of this and to plug the economy of every part of the UK back into the global economy. The sooner that SNP Members come to terms with that and start pulling in the right direction, the better off their constituents will be.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Big landmark trade agreements such as those with Japan, New Zealand and Australia make the headlines, but the excellent work that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is doing to remove trade barriers around the world also creates big new opportunities for businesses in my constituency of Dudley South. What progress is being made on the work to remove the trade barriers that restrict the flow of British goods and services?

Mr Jayawardena: Every year, we break down barriers across the world, and this year there has been a 20% increase in the number of barriers that we have broken down, benefiting businesses across the whole of our United Kingdom—in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We look forward to continuing this work to generate more jobs for people across our country in the years ahead.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): COP26 was an important step towards meeting our international climate commitments, but that must be carried through into all aspects of Government policy. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that the environmental impact of trade, through both imports and exports, is mitigated as far as possible?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: UK leadership through COP26 has been world respected and renowned. The Department for International Trade is now able to continue the extraordinary leadership shown by my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma) as COP26 President to ensure that the technologies that the UK is developing, has developed and will continue to develop will be at the forefront of all matters environmental in order to help every part of the world meet its decarbonisation challenge.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What discussions have taken place with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Home Office to place Afghan refugees in work in places such as Mash Direct and Willowbrook Foods in my constituency of Strangford, and across the agrifood sector in Northern Ireland, which is in need of migrant workers to fill the vacancies that presently exist?

Penny Mordaunt: I would be happy to get those Departments to give the hon. Gentleman some further details. Every Department across Government, including the Department for Education, is focused on ensuring that people who are coming here to restart their lives in safety are given every opportunity, and that their skills can be utilised. We are also thinking about how we can help those who are still left in country. I undertake that the FCDO will write to the hon. Gentleman.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): As the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Fairtrade, I have been heartened by how many British people have been looking to support Fairtrade products, including bananas, coffee and chocolate, and to support Fairtrade producers and farmers around the world. Will the Minister continue to put fair trade at the heart of new trade deals so that we can continue to support these Fairtrade producers and farmers around the world?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As the Minister for Trade Policy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), mentioned earlier, now that we are a sovereign independent nation and can make trade deals in our own right, we want to ensure that we use trade for good and that the UK brings that leadership. Next year, we will be working closely with our African colleagues in particular to think about how we can boost trading relations and the support that we can provide to encourage the value chain to sit with those developing countries, which have the opportunity to grow their trade balance and ensure that they see the benefits of trade too.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I wonder what the Minister makes of the report in the *Financial Times* that far less than a trade deal, America will lift its steel tariffs if the UK violates article 16. Does she welcome America keeping control?

Penny Mordaunt: That story might be true in terms of how some people in the United States feel, but it is a false narrative. These are two entirely separate issues. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be discussing the issue of steel and other matters next week with her opposite numbers in the United States, but we not do ourselves any favours if we perpetuate these false narratives. They are entirely separate issues. I again encourage the hon. Gentleman and his party to start talking about what the UK has done to protect peace

on the island of Ireland, and our reasonable request to the EU. He might also like to talk to his American friends about what the EU has done to disrupt that, including triggering article 16 on the most sensitive of goods—vaccines. We have acted in good faith. We will do more to tell America that we have acted in good faith and are determined to be pragmatic, and Lord Frost is going to do that. The hon. Gentleman has to separate false narratives from how some in the US feel.

Business of the House

10.36 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 6 December will include:

MONDAY 6 DECEMBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Armed Forces Bill, followed by 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 Opposition day (7th allotted day—second part). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 9 DECEMBER—Debate on a motion on the contribution of financial services to the UK economy, followed by debate on a motion on consular support for British citizens. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 10 DECEMBER—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 13 December will include:

MONDAY 13 DECEMBER—Remaining stages of the Subsidy Control Bill.

Thangam Debbonaire: Let me first say how pleasing it was yesterday to see the Leader of the House in a splendid-looking mask in Prime Minister's questions. It is nice that he has responded to the urgings from Labour Members. I also make a request that neither of us refers to what one may or may not do underneath mistletoe. I thank him for the forthcoming business.

Yesterday was World AIDS Day. The Global Fund, with thanks to UK Aid Direct, has made remarkable progress against AIDS, TB and malaria, and that partnership has saved 44 million lives around the world. Unfortunately, however, for the first time in its history, results from its key programmes have declined, which means that fewer people are helped. Department for International Development funding used to be globally renowned and rightly celebrated. The Government chose to abolish DFID. Will the Government instead stop cutting international aid to vital programmes that are protecting lives, providing healthcare and preventing transmission? That is how we end HIV infections and deaths by 2030. That is the global leadership we need, but it seems to be sadly lacking from this Government.

At the start of the week, the Government mentioned changes to mask wearing for students in schools and colleges, but we have not yet had a statement from the Education Secretary on these new measures. The current Education Secretary must surely have learned from the previous one about the chaos that is caused when information is not provided in a timely manner. Will the Leader of the House therefore ask him to come and provide clarity in this place for both parents and children who have already lost out so much during the pandemic?

Back in October, the Prime Minister appeared to confirm that the online safety Bill would have completed all stages by Christmas. Then it was just going to be

Second Reading. Then No. 10 seemed to row back even further to some vague commitment that the Bill will be presented at some point during this Session. Yesterday, I think I got a muttered assurance from the Prime Minister that it would be brought forward by that wonderful date "soon". Could the Leader of the House help us out? Could he tell us what "soon" means? Will he tell us what the timetabling is for that Bill, because the Prime Minister does not seem to know?

On Monday, the Committee on Standards published its proposals for an updated code of conduct for MPs. I am looking forward to hearing the statement on that from my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) after business questions. Given the Prime Minister's apparent, alleged, new-found respect, so he says, for standards in public life, surely we should have a debate on these proposals in Government time. However, if the Government response is anything like their response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life report, I am not holding my breath. It took them three years to accept that report. Once again, it seems that the Government are saying one thing one day and then the complete opposite the next, and the Leader of the House knows where that leads.

Two weeks ago, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, a Humble Address motion was passed by this House, so the Government must now publish any and all of the minutes from the meeting between Lord Bethell, Owen Paterson and Randox over the award of a contract that involves hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money. As the Leader of the House knows, the Government must do that in a timely fashion, otherwise they will be in contempt of Parliament, as I understand it, yet nothing so far has been produced. That is much like the delays to the online safety Bill.

There just seem to be more delays and more delays, with Ministers saying that they cannot possibly make the minutes public for another two months. That leads me to wonder whether those vital minutes actually exist. If they do, will the Leader of the House ask Ministers to come and tell us about them? If they do not, can they admit that now, rather than pretending to spend the next two months looking for them? I have to say that I find it rather odd that this Government think they do not need to keep any receipts for spending half a billion pounds of public money, but then again, if they do not, it is just taxpayers' money they are wasting, so why would they bother?

In conclusion, we seem to have a Government who fail to plan, who fail to bring forward key legislation and who fail to keep receipts for taxpayers' money. They are a Government who have lost their grip, and it is working people who are paying the price.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady seems to have missed the fact that the rules on masks changed, which is why people are wearing them more. They are compulsory in public transport and in shops, but they are not compulsory in the Chamber. It is a matter of judgment for people, and people are entitled in this Chamber not to wear them if that is the decision they want to make. That is really important and comes to the point that the hon. Lady was making about schools. There is advice to schools that older students and teachers may want to wear masks in communal areas, but people must make decisions for themselves. We on this side of the House believe in individual responsibility.

I encourage schools to keep up with their activities and with their nativity plays. I hope to be absent from spectating at Prime Minister's questions next week so that I can watch one of my children—young Alfred—appearing as a donkey in a Christmas play, although from what I hear he will be modelling himself on Balaam's ass, which of course was a talking donkey, and I understand my son will be a talking donkey at the school nativity play. I encourage all schools to carry on with these very important activities.

I am grateful to the hon. Lady for welcoming the work being done by the Government in support of World AIDS Day and the ambition to stop new infections by 2030. An extra £20 million of public funding—the Government using taxpayers' money—will be devoted to that end, and a written statement was issued yesterday.

As regards the online safety Bill, it is going through pre-legislative scrutiny. That is very important, because we often hear the Opposition say, "Wouldn't it be nice to have a bit of pre-legislative scrutiny? Isn't that a good way of proceeding?" Then, when we have it, they say, "Well, you are being frightfully slow." They cannot have it both ways, and then we get into a metaphysical discussion of "What is time?", "What is soon?" and "What is Christmas?" We could say that Christmas goes on at least until 2 February, which is Candlemas and the formal end of Christmas, but then we could decide to use the Orthodox calendar, which goes on even later. Such metaphysical discussions of time are not necessarily elucidating for the progress of legislation.

I am much looking forward to the presentation by the Chair of the Committee on Standards, to which the hon. Lady referred, on the important report that the Committee has published. The report asks for a consultation period, which I think will inevitably include a debate in the House. I look in the direction of the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), because when the Committee was set up, it was generally considered that Select Committee reports would be debated in Backbench Business time. I hope that we can come to a suitable arrangement, but it is inevitably something that the House will want to discuss.

There is more joy in heaven, as we all know, over one sinner who repented than the 99 who remain unrepented. The hon. Lady has at last eschewed socialism, because she has used the words that we use on the Government side of the House—taxpayers' money. Normally, the socialists think that it is their money or the state's money that they allow poor hard-pressed taxpayers to keep a little of out of their benignity, but we on this side know that it is taxpayers money. There is no other money in the system than that taken from people up and down the country.

Conservatives have therefore always held spending taxpayers' money to the highest standard, while the socialists spent—what was it?—£13 billion on some scheme to make the NHS's IT system technologically efficient and squandered money on tax credits over and over again, because they have always been incontinent in their use of taxpayers' money. I am delighted by the hon. Lady's conversion and move in the direction of Toryism, which is a welcome joy for those of us on the Government Benches. I assure her that we also take the constitution seriously and believe that Humble Addresses must be respected, as they will be.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Government take the constitution seriously, so I put it to the Leader of the House that although we are about to have the opportunity to question the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) about his report, a debate in Government time would be helpful because of some aspects of the report. For example, the potential extension of the jurisdiction of an official into what happens in the Lobbies and in Select Committees touches on the principle of the Bill of Rights that no proceeding in Parliament be questioned in any place or court other than Parliament itself. Indeed, the principle of democracy is undermined by the proposal that we may be required to subscribe to behaviours to promote certain attitudes. I hope that my constituents never elect a racist or a misogynist, but they have a right to.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend shows that there is much to debate on the report. As I have said, I think it is important that the House debates those matters. I point out that in terms of the Floor of the House, there is no difference between the standing of a debate in Government time and of one in Backbench Business time. The Chair of the Backbench Business Committee is here and will have heard the requests for a debate on the subject loud and clear before his Committee meets, but I am open to a discussion with him to ensure that time is available.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Hip, hip, hooray! Raise the flags—Union Jacks, of course—and let us have a party in Downing Street. The Leader of the House at last had a face mask on his fizzog at Prime Minister's questions. All he needs to do now is to convince those menaces on the libertarian wing of his Conservative party to do the same. He and I were at the same meeting when Public Health England told us that if everybody on the estate wore a face mask, infections would be cut by 12%, so no more excuses: masks on mushes.

Tuesday was a big day in the House which we will have to debate properly. For probably the first time, the L-word—the one that rhymes with "mire" and "fire"—rang out loud and clear in the Chamber. You, Madam Deputy Speaker, ruled that it could be used in the context of the debate on the conduct of the Prime Minister, possibly because no other word could be found as an appropriate replacement or substitute. The public's outrage at the conduct of the Prime Minister just goes on, and we have to be able to debate this in the proper context and use the words that are right and appropriate for the behaviour displayed.

Today, of course, it is the Leader of the House who is all over the headlines, as he emerges as the latest Government Minister to be investigated because of his outside interests. Six million quid! I never knew he was so loaded. He could buy two peerages in the House of Lords with that money. We have to debate the Standards Committee's report. Will he now pledge to recuse himself—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I ask the hon. Gentleman to be very careful about what he says on any matter being considered by the Standards Committee, whose Chairman is listening carefully, as am I. I am sure the hon. Gentleman can find a way of making the points he wishes to make from a political point of view without straying into matters that should not be brought here to this Chamber at this time.

Pete Wishart: Absolutely, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I cannot wait to hear from the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) about his report. It is right that this is debated, but the Leader of the House must recuse himself from participating in that debate.

Lastly, the Conservatives say none of this matters; that is what they told us on Tuesday. They have lost their opinion poll lead to the Labour party—the Labour party, for goodness' sake—but in Scotland there was an opinion poll showing support for Scottish independence is now back up to 55%. I repeat, 55%. The Scottish people are looking at this corrupt, sleazy cesspit, and they do not like what they see and are quickly determining that it is time to get the hell out of this place.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the Leader of the House answers the points made by the hon. Gentleman, I feel it incumbent upon me to clarify that the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in what he said about my ruling on what the parliamentary leader of the SNP, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), was permitted to say in this Chamber during the Opposition day debate earlier this week. However, I must make it absolutely clear to the House, because I do not think this has been widely understood, that that was very specifically in the context of the debate being on a censure motion about a particular person, and the use of any word that implies that a Member of this House has not told the truth is allowed only in that very narrow context. This is not to be taken as a general ruling that these words can be used. There are, of course, always polite and moderate ways of making points, and that is how they should be made here in this Chamber.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is so easily pleased. Had I realised that he would become sweetness and light merely by my momentarily wearing a mask, I may have been tempted to do it before the Christmas season or the season of Advent was upon us.

The hon. Gentleman wants to bat back and forth opinion polls, and I note that, as I told him last week, even SNP supporters do not think that having a referendum on independence is very important. I think they want to see the SNP Government in Scotland getting on with running Scotland properly—making the health service work, building the roads and dealing with all the problems that they are singularly failing to deal with. They could not even get the new advice out to vaccination centres so that people could get their vaccines when the advice was changed around the country at large.

The hon. Gentleman wishes me to go to the House of Lords, which is very flattering of him. He is clearly unaware of the 1539 Act about places in Parliament—the House of Lords Precedence Act 1539—which allows the Lord President, when not a peer, to go and sit in the House of Lords. It is not a privilege I have ever taken up, as I am worried that their lordships might be a bit surprised, but the Lord High Chancellor, the Lord Privy Seal, the Lord President of the Council, the Lord Treasurer—a position currently in commission—and various others have the right to go and sit in the House of Lords when they are not peers, so I assume that is what the hon. Gentleman was talking about.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I have been campaigning for much-needed improvements to two tube stations in my constituency, South Kensington and

Ladbroke Grove, both of which desperately need step-free access. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Transport for London and the Mayor of London are letting down Londoners by mismanaging TfL's finances, and would my right hon. Friend contemplate a debate on the subject?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We could have a debate on the terrible failures of the Mayor of London and Transport for London. Transport for London seems to have a campaign of hating the motorist and doing everything it can to make driving in London difficult, with ridiculous 20 mph speed limits on straight and wide roads, with road closures and every possible inconvenience to the motorist—and then it cannot run the underground system properly. I agree with my hon. Friend, though she may wish to apply to the Backbench Business Committee in the first instance.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I apologise to hon. Members across the House for my absence from this place last week. I was with the Education Committee on a visit to a prison—somewhere many of my constituents think I should have been for some time. I will just point out to the Leader of the House that when it comes to debates on any given matter that hon. Members want, if we receive a formal application from Members, we will of course consider it, but we have not yet received any sort of application about the subject discussed earlier. I wonder whether the Leader of the House could give us privately an indication of any plans for Backbench time in the first week back in January, as we need to plan for that in advance of the Christmas recess.

I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for football supporters, a group we established a number of years ago. We welcome the publication of the recommendations of the fan-led review of football governance, under the leadership of the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). The recommendations have been warmly welcomed by fan groups and fans of football across the country, so can the Leader of the House give us some insight as to whether they might be brought forward as part of the Government's legislative programme in the remainder of this parliamentary Session, or be included in the Queen's Speech for the next session?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will do my best to give the hon. Gentleman a private indication as soon as I possibly can about when there will be new Backbench Business debates. I note his support for the report of my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), which was very popularly received. I doubt I would be giving away too great a secret if I indicated that the state of business at the other end of this Palace is so crowded that the prospect of new legislation in this Session is probably limited.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Leader of the House gave us the business until 13 December, but the House rises on 16 December, so we still have three unallocated days. After four years, two general election manifestos and a pledge in a national newspaper hand-signed by the Prime Minister, still we have not introduced the much-delayed legislation to end the cycle of endless investigations against Northern Ireland veterans. The Secretary of State for Northern

Ireland told us we would have it by the summer recess, and he faithfully promised that it would be into Parliament by the end of the autumn. I think we can agree that Christmas means the end of the autumn. In the three-day window that remains, I earnestly ask the Leader of the House to ensure that that legislation appears—#wheresyourbillbrandon.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend makes appeals that are always heard, and can sometimes be assured of falling on fertile ground. I hope I will be able to reassure him that this matter is at the top of the priority list for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): A constituent of mine recently wrote to me to say that she was concerned, looking at how this House operates, that children do not figure very often. We are approaching a Christmas and a winter when a large number of poorer families with children in this country are facing a really tough time. Can we put the record straight a bit? I know the Leader of the House knows about money—he was telling us he was very conversant with it. We desperately need to give help to the poorer families in this country before Christmas so that they can enjoy Christmas and their children do not go to bed hungry.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Of course it is important to support children, and to support families, which is what the Government have been doing with a number of schemes. Children who live in working families have a much better chance of not being in poverty, and raising the national living wage to £9.50 next year means an extra £1,000 a year for a full-time worker. Two million families will get an extra £1,000 a year through our cut to the universal credit taper and the increase to work allowances. There is £200 million a year to continue the hugely successful holiday activity and food programme. The Government of course take the needs of children into account in what they do, the benefits that are provided, and the welfare given, and that is fundamental to how the welfare state operates.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the concern that the consultation on so-called gay conversion therapy, which clearly needs to be stopped, has been extended to include matters of gender, which are considerably more complex, especially as concerns children. The consultation period is too short at six weeks, especially as one version has had to be withdrawn because it contains factual errors. It seems as though the Government are trying to rush through decisions before the Cass review comes out. In those circumstances, will the Leader of the House commit to subjecting the eventual Bill to full prelegislative scrutiny?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. As I was saying about the online harms Bill, it is often useful to have prelegislative scrutiny, particularly for Bills that need cross-party support to be effective, and that need to carry the whole nation with them, rather than cause contention and dispute. I note very much what he says, but also what I said in response to the shadow Leader of the House, because sometimes we get criticised for delay if we have prelegislative scrutiny, but criticised for rush if we do not have it.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Earlier this week, the third party, the Scottish National party, lost our Opposition half-day debate on the cost of living. Like others, I lost the opportunity to raise directly with the Minister important cases for my constituents, including those of student nurses, WASPI women, frontline healthcare workers and people with disabilities, who are suffering as a result of this Government's failure to take measures to assist them with the high cost of living. Will the Leader of the House tell us when we will get that time back, so that we can have a debate about the struggles that our constituents are having with the current high cost of living?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I answered that question when I announced the change to business, and said that we looked forward to doing that as soon as is practicable.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): May we have a statement from the vaccines Minister about the booster roll-out in Dorset? On the face of it, the roll-out is successful nationally, but my constituents in Dorset go on the national website, put in their postcode, and are referred to all sorts of areas and have to get their atlas out to find where they have to go. I went on the website yesterday and was referred to Newport in Wales. Some have been referred to Exeter or Reading, and all those points are nowhere near Dorset, which has nearly 1 million people. There seems to be a vast deficiency in the ability to put vaccines in people's arms where my constituents actually live. On occasion, it has even been suggested that people go to Yeovil, and although I suspect that a day out in Yeovil is something most of my constituents would love, an hour's drive there and back is rather long to get the vaccine in their arm. Will my right hon. Friend please draw to the attention of the vaccines Minister that there is a problem in Dorset?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yeovil is on the Dorset border, so there are some people in Dorset for whom Yeovil would be extremely convenient. Yeovil is a town in Somerset, and therefore it is beautiful, glorious, and magnificent. I would have thought it would be a joy for anybody to go to Yeovil. But my hon. Friend makes a serious point, and after this statement I will of course take it up with the vaccines Minister. GPs are getting more involved and being paid £15 for every vaccine they are able to inject. That may be part of the process, but people need to be able to get to a vaccine centre that is reasonably close to them.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): May we have a debate on what happens to British nationals when they are stuck overseas, for instance when there are changes to the rules on quarantine? There are 42 Welsh rugby players stuck in South Africa at the moment, including one of my constituents. They are in a double bind. Some of them have now had covid, so they might have to do 10 days' quarantine in South Africa and then, on top of that, another 10 days' quarantine in the UK. There is obviously a significant cost to that; more importantly, there is a cost to their mental health, too. Is there more we can do to help them to get home?

Mr Rees-Mogg: If there are specific constituency cases, the hon. Gentleman should raise those in the normal manner. If he needs the assistance of my office in doing that, I am always willing to help hon. and right

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hon. Members. The issue could have been raised in the broad debate on introducing the regulations, which took place when we took away the half day from the SNP. So there was a chance to debate it, but certainly we would be very keen to help with individual constituency cases.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Following Kristallnacht on 9 to 10 November 1938, the then British Government relaxed the rules on Jewish refugee children from Austria, Germany, Czechoslovakia and Sudetenland, and allowed 200 to come here. Today is the 83rd anniversary of the first arrival of the Kindertransport. May we have a debate in Government time on safe routes for refugee children to come to the UK in the time-honoured way that we in this country have always allowed and encouraged refugees from war-torn areas?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is so right to remind us of the 83rd anniversary of the Kindertransport, which was a wonderful humanitarian approach that crucially ensured there were safe routes for coming to this country. That is what we should work on, as the previous Prime Minister David Cameron did, taking up to 20,000 Syrians from refugee camps around Syria, rather than expecting people to take dangerous journeys. It is really important that people who come to this country to claim asylum do so by legal and safe routes, rather than being in the hands of people-traffickers. That is why the Nationality and Borders Bill, the remaining stages of which we will have next week, will make it easier for people who make legal claims and come here lawfully, and harder for people who come here using illegal routes.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): In my constituency, a 91-year-old man was left waiting for an ambulance for seven hours. This crisis includes the Leader of the House's constituency: in the south-west, ambulance waiting times are sky high. The crisis is also reflected across the country. In north Shropshire, response times to urgent calls are now four hours. May we, urgently, have a debate in Government time on ambulance waiting times?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that point because our constituents in North East Somerset and in Bath share health facilities. We have over 4,000 ambulance crews in operation across the country, which is an increase of 500 since 2018. NHS England has given ambulance trusts an extra £55 million to boost staff numbers this winter and there is an extra £5.4 billion for the NHS altogether. Significant amounts of money are being put in, but I accept that when one is waiting seven hours for an ambulance that is not much of a compensation. There is an issue and things do need to improve.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Can the Leader of the House please confirm to my constituents that the UK Government are committed to at least two freeports in Wales? Will he update the House on how discussions on freeports are progressing with the Welsh Government?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Freeports are a really important way of levelling up. They are national hubs for trade, innovation and commerce, regenerating communities across the

UK, attracting new businesses, and spreading jobs, investment and opportunity to towns and cities across the whole of the United Kingdom. Her Majesty's Government are committed to establishing the freeports programme in Wales as soon as possible. I suppose there is a difficulty, Madam Deputy Speaker. I do not know whether you have heard the news that the socialists have gone into partnership with the separatists in Wales, so we now have to wonder whether the socialists are any longer a Unionist party.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Now that we are into December, families across the country will be sitting down together to stream their favourite festive films. The Prime Minister clearly is not a fan of "Home Alone", but perhaps the Leader of the House is. Despite the House legislating for minimum levels of subtitles, British sign language signing and audio description for on-demand services in the Digital Economy Act 2017, it has taken four years for Ofcom to make final recommendations to Government on the level of access services to be provided and which broadcasters should be covered. Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport before Christmas setting out when she will introduce regulations to make video-streaming services accessible to all our constituents?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising a point that will be important to many of our constituents. Ofcom is an independent statutory body and is therefore not directed by the Government. We cannot say go and it goeth, but the issue is important and I will take it up with the Secretary of State on the hon. Lady's behalf.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Can we have an urgent debate on the need for an efficient service from the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to get our heavy goods vehicle drivers back on the roads? My constituent, Mr Martin Hewitt, has had eight letters from his local hospital or his GP go missing at the DVLA. That has kept him off the road, it means that he cannot earn, and it puts further pressure on our supply chains.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The situation facing Mr Hewitt is clearly a failure, and I am glad that my hon. Friend has raised it on the Floor of the House. I will send an extract from *Hansard* to DVLA, so that it is aware of this particular case once *Hansard* is published. However, there is good news from DVLA that the additional online services and additions to staff have meant extra space in Swansea and Birmingham to house more staff to reduce waiting times. DVLA has been apologetic for the delays that have been created in returning people's documentation, but with the 32 short, medium and long-term interventions that the Government have taken to help to tackle the global driver shortage, we now have over 90% more testing spaces available for HGV drivers on a weekly basis. So the HGV problem is being tackled, things are beginning to change and I understand that DVLA is beginning to get to grips with its backlog, but that is not very satisfactory for Mr Hewitt.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): On Hogmanay, we will commemorate the 92nd anniversary of the Glen cinema disaster, when a smoking

film cannister caused a panic, which, due to a blocked exit, led to a crush that killed 71 people, all of them children. Last week, a permanent memorial to those who died was unveiled in the centre of Paisley just yards from the site of the Glen. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking those who organised the memorial—Future Paisley, the Paisley Community Trust and Paisley Rotary club—send best wishes to two living survivors, Emily Brown and Robert Pope, and perhaps find time for a debate to honour those young lives?

Mr Rees-Mogg: How remarkable that there are two survivors from a disaster 92 years ago—they must be shortly due to receive a telegram from Her Majesty to congratulate them on their longevity, if they have not already. I would indeed like to join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating the organisations that have built and paid for the memorial of this terrible tragedy, killing 71 children—all children. I particularly praise Paisley Rotary, because I am a Rotarian for Midsomer Norton and Radstock rotary. The unsung work that Rotarians do up and down the country is really heroic in so many of our communities. They do things that other people do not necessarily want to do and they just get on with quietly. They do not ask for a lot of thanks, so I particularly thank Paisley Rotary.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I cannot help saying to the Lord President of the Council that my grandfather was a founder member of Paisley Rotary club. The question from the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) is really important in Paisley, as was the right hon. Gentleman's answer.

I call Mr Liddell-Grainger.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I hope I did not point my finger the wrong way just then, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Government did not listen to the referendum in Somerset over unitary, and they did not listen to the districts when they held their own referendum, but I am delighted to say that they have now said that the elections for Somerset will take place next year. My right hon. Friend knows how important democracy is, as we all do. Putting those elections off would have been absolutely appalling, so I am delighted. Could we have a debate in Government time on the wonders of democracy, what it means to all of us and how important it is across the world, including—dare I say it—to the Commonwealth and others?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is a delight that my hon. Friend is happy. I thought it was quite something when the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) was happy, but if my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) is also happy, it is clearly getting close to Christmas. I would say to him that every sitting we have in this Chamber is a celebration of democracy and the ability to use freedom of speech to express what we want to say, stand up for our constituents and seek redress of grievance. Every day, we do it; we should carry on doing it, and we should celebrate it.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): I am very proud to represent Coventry's NHS workers, who make the NHS an incredible public service. Today, I am

wearing University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire's charity T-shirt, featuring Penguino and friends, to raise money to support staff and patients.

But NHS workers are exhausted, worn down by the pandemic and a decade of underfunding, so will the Leader of the House give his support to the UHCW charity T-shirt and give Government time to debate the needs of the NHS? As a public service, it should not rely on charity; it needs proper Government funding and an end to privatisation. Its staff deserve a proper pay rise, not the pay cut—once inflation is factored in—that is proposed.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her support for Coventry's NHS workers and for the charitable work that is going on there. I thought that she was going to ask me to wear a T-shirt, to which I am afraid the answer would have been no, but that does not mean that I am not very sympathetic to the cause.

May I just point out what the NHS recovery plan is? In 2018, delivering on the £350 million on the side of the bus, we gave NHS England an historic settlement that will see its budget rise by £34 billion by 2023-24. To help frontline services to tackle the coronavirus, we have made available approximately £97 billion of taxpayers' money—ninety-seven thousand million pounds. That was sixty-three thousand million in 2020-21 and a further thirty-four thousand million in 2021-22. In September, we announced an additional £36 billion for health and social care over the next three years.

Applications to study nursing and midwifery have risen by 21% this year. If people are applying to join the NHS, that is surely a good sign about the terms and conditions available.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It has occurred to me that I have failed miserably to get the Leader of the House to grant debates in Government time, so I have thought of a wheeze.

Will the Leader of the House kindly come to my constituency of Wellingborough and Rushden in the east midlands? He can whizz up from St Pancras on the newly electrified line. As he gets out at the station, he will see the beginning of the electrification north to Sheffield. We can pick him up and take him over the new railway bridge; through the new development of Stanton Cross, to see the new houses; on to the wonderful double roundabout at Chowns Mill, which will be opened officially this week; along the A45; past the new magnificent Rushden Lakes leisure facility; further along, seeing on our left-hand side the Wellingborough prison that will be open in the new year—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Is this going to go on for a very long time?

Mr Bone: I must get him there, Madam Deputy Speaker. We can go up through Wellingborough; go up where the new Isham bypass will be built; see where the new Boris hospital is to be built; and then meet Jason Smithers, the new leader of the new unitary council. Then might I persuade the Leader of the House to have, in Government time, a debate on what levelling up means?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It would be a joy to go back to Wellingborough. I have been to my hon. Friend's constituency before; if I come, I hope he will invite me

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to speak to his local Conservative association and thank it for all the good work that it does.

My hon. Friend is heroic, because he has saved hours of Government time and Backbench Business time. He has managed to advocate the advantages of levelling up in one question, albeit a slightly long one.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It may disappoint you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but it will come as no surprise that I am no monarchist. Nevertheless, I am sure that the Leader of the House will join me today in congratulating the Countess of Dumbarton on the rejection of the appeal by *The Mail on Sunday* relating to the invasion of privacy, and will therefore set aside Government time to ensure that a judgment that cements the fact that *The Mail on Sunday*—which is owned by a member of the peerage—has broken the law, and that whether one is the Countess of Dumbarton or a citizen of that ancient, noble borough, the right to privacy and a private life is far more important than the money spent on clickbait in *The Mail on Sunday*.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. I am a monarchist. I think that monarchism is essential to our country, and I think that republicanism is a most unpleasant activity. However, I also think that freedom of speech is more important than privacy. I find it concerning that the rich and powerful can use the courts to protect their private lives when others cannot, and I would be deeply concerned about anything that undermined freedom of speech. Freedom of speech is one of the great protectors of our national life and of our constitution.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Five-year-old Willow Jessica Phillips from Ashfield is having her hair cut off on Saturday to raise money and donate her hair to the Little Princess Trust, which is for little girls who have lost their hair through illness. I am sure that a mention from the Leader of the House would go a long way to help her to increase the £600 that she has already raised and help little girls throughout the United Kingdom.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. What a wonderful little girl Willow sounds, given what she is doing for the Little Princess Trust. This is a truly moving cause, supporting young children suffering from cancer. I commend the trust for its work and its fundraising, and for committing millions of pounds to supporting children directly and funding research on children's cancers. Willow's efforts are particularly impressive: raising £500 is a terrific achievement. I wish her all the luck in the world in her fundraising, and I am sure she will raise as much as she possibly can. It is right that my hon. Friend has brought this to the attention of the House, and I hope that the wider public watching on the BBC Parliament channel will dig deep into their pockets to increase the amount given to Willow.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I have been contacted by constituents employed by the Department for Work and Pensions in my city of Dundee who are deeply concerned about a return to in-office working for all staff—throughout Scotland—from this week. That is

contrary to the clear and consistent guidelines from the Scottish Government, which state that working from home should continue to be the norm where possible. Given the timing, may we have an urgent statement, and can the Leader of the House reassure my constituents that he understands that health is a devolved matter, that the DWP will continue to listen to Scottish Government guidance when it comes to the matter of home working, and, finally, that UK Government Departments do not consider themselves exempt from Scottish Government guidance?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think people do want to get back to the office to work. I think it is a good thing to be doing, and I think it increases productivity. One reason that we have heard all those complaints about the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency is that people were not in the office to work, and therefore the 60,000 pieces of post that were received were not all being dealt with. Working from home has disadvantages in respect of the services delivered to people, and the DWP deals with some of the most vulnerable people in the country, who need and expect to have an efficient service which is best given in person. I would therefore encourage people to go back to work.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The rise of GB News has been welcomed by many of my constituents who are sick and tired of the stale, politically correct and ideologically biased output of much of the mainstream media. Given the availability of so many other channels, is it just that those on low incomes still have to pay a regressive TV tax in the form of the BBC licence fee? Will the Leader of the House make time available for a debate on scrapping it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: GB News is marvellous. I went on it with Mr Farage. The programme was called "Have a pint with Nigel" or something, and I took along my own cider, which we both enjoyed. I would encourage people to watch GB News, and to go on it. I think that the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) would be a star performer, and I hope he will take people from GB News up to his farm so that they can watch his lambing in the spring, for which we have specially dedicated recess times that are convenient for him. The question of the licence fee is, of course, a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Digital, Media and Sport, and I urge my hon. Friend to lobby her enthusiastically with his views.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I refer Members to my chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group on oral hormone pregnancy tests. The Leader of the House is aware that I have been campaigning for a number of years on behalf of the victims of the drug Primodos. The noble Baroness Cumberlege, a former Conservative Health Minister, produced a review in which she found that there was no excuse for not having withdrawn the drug many years earlier, that harm was caused to the victims and that they should have redress. That report was produced a year and half ago, but to date the Department of Health and Social Care will not engage with us on the matter. Will the Leader of the House please use his endeavours with the Government to ensure that these

people get justice after so many years? There was an argument that this was a legal issue, but Baroness Cumberlege was aware of that fact. This is a question of getting redress for those victims.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I congratulate the hon. Lady on the work that she has done on Primodos. I was also a member of her all-party parliamentary group, and I saw at first hand the incredible work that she did tirelessly over many years to bring this issue forward. Without her hard work and effort I do not think that the Cumberlege report would have looked into it. I am very sympathetic to what she says, and I note that she asks for the Department of Health and Social Care to engage with her and discuss the matter. I will certainly do my best through my own office to ensure that there is engagement, because she is arguing for justice and right. The Cumberlege report was an important step in that direction.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I should be drawing proceedings on the business question to a close very soon, but it would be better if everyone had the chance to ask their question. I must ask for brevity, please. Sometimes business questions become mini-speeches, but they do not have to be. If everyone is brief, everyone will get in. If there is not brevity, lots of people will be disappointed.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): It is small business Saturday this weekend, and me and my partner will once again be shopping local for our festive gifts for each other. I will also be joining local councillor Adam Gregg and local campaigner David Heathcote in Lindley in supporting local businesses. Can we have a debate in Government time on the importance of supporting local businesses on our high streets, and will the Leader of the House join me in encouraging everybody to shop local in the lead-up to Christmas and of course to wear their masks in shops?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is a tireless campaigner, and he is quite right to support small businesses. There is often very good service from small businesses, and one can help the local economy by encouraging people to shop locally, in farmers markets and so on. I would encourage people to follow the model that my hon. Friend is, in this regard.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Over the past two weeks, the number of pupils absent from schools has risen by 47% to the equivalent of some 8,300 classrooms-worth of children missing from school. As always, the most disadvantaged are disproportionately impacted, so will the Leader of the House please grant a debate to discuss this pressing issue and ensure that we keep schools open through the winter with maximum attendance? This is vital for our children's wellbeing and learning.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am in considerable agreement with the hon. Lady. It is so important that children are in school. This is very often a question of the way we look at the figures. As I understand it, 88% of pupils are in school. I cannot absolutely swear to that figure, but I think I heard it on the wireless this morning. We want as many children as possible in school, and we want

schools to get on with the business of teaching. We want to encourage them to carry on with normal activities. The advice from the Government is for teachers and pupils in secondary schools to wear masks in crowded communal spaces. It is so important that children are in school.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): The East Lancashire steam railway in my constituency has the oldest continuously-in-use locomotive shed in the world at Buckley Wells. The redevelopment of this truly historic site would create a mechanical engineering hub, but it requires between £10 million and £12 million of additional funding to achieve that transformative vision. Will my right hon. Friend make time for a debate on the positive contribution to the wider community of steam and heritage railways throughout the country and their potential to deliver a wide range of economic and social benefits?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is not the first to raise at business questions the importance of heritage steam to local history and culture. Over the summer I had the pleasure of being shown around the Etruria Industrial Museum in Stoke by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon). It boasts the world's only functional steam-powered flint mill, which is a great example of how innovation has played a part in our industrial history.

We were obviously, as a nation, a pioneer in the history of railways, from Brunel and Stephenson, to the modern day, with the enormous £96 billion railway programme announced recently by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport. Heritage railways are important and welcome, and I encourage people to enjoy their pleasures, possibly even in Midsomer Norton, which has a very nice heritage railway centre.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): We are in the middle of UK Disability History Month, yet two of the three train stations in Luton, including Leagrave station in my constituency, are completely inaccessible to people with mobility issues. Does the Leader of the House agree with me and with campaigners that it is now time not just for a debate but for action on the situation disabled people face when trying to use train stations in this country? It is time for lifts at Leagrave.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, because there was a disability access campaign in my constituency. One of the disadvantages of our industrial heritage is that things were built in the 19th century and early 20th century without the type of access we now take for granted, and retrofitting is an expensive business. I commend her for raising the issue, and I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate. In my experience, things happen when one keeps up the pressure.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I request a statement from the Foreign Secretary on the terrible repeated violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria, with religious minorities being subjected to discrimination, harassment, intimidation, marginalisation and violence? My constituents and I need an assurance that the Government are concerned and appalled by the United States' decision to remove Nigeria from its list of countries of particular concern, in essence abandoning civilians at a time of escalating

[*Jim Shannon*]

terrorist attacks, ignoring the pervasive threat of Boko Haram and shirking its responsibility to the victims of such violence.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right, and the hon. Gentleman campaigns on it very effectively. The UK condemns violence across Nigeria, which has a devastating effect on all communities. The drivers of these different conflicts are complex, localised and relate to a number of factors, including competition for resources and criminality, as well as religious identity.

Unfortunately, since 1776, the actions of the United States Government—although it did not exist then—are not a matter for me at the Dispatch Box, and the hon. Gentleman is trying to invest me with a power I neither have nor wish to claim. However, the UK is a staunch champion of the right to freedom of religion or belief for all. In July 2022, we will host an international ministerial conference to energise collective efforts on this agenda.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Last week I met community development workers from Sheffield Wednesday football club. As the club are pushing to level up back into the Championship on the pitch, their commitment to levelling up communities in my constituency of Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough off the pitch is just as firm. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Sheffield Wednesday for this vital work? What more should the Government do to support such community initiatives?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is a real pleasure, and I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I would love to congratulate Sheffield Wednesday on their community efforts, which are a reminder of the importance of local football teams to their communities. It is right that the Government should encourage this, and there are various initiatives. Obviously the national lottery is an important part of it, but congratulations to Sheffield Wednesday.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): A constituent recently contacted me desperately seeking help in obtaining a passport for her child. The family are British and live in Greece, where the baby was born, but they need to return to Scotland. Owing to red tape in Greece and delays at the Passport Office, they are currently stranded there, and they are not the only ones. Can we have a debate in Government time on the impact of the delays in issuing passports to British citizens overseas?

Mr Rees-Mogg: If the hon. Lady passes the details to my office, I will make sure they are taken up with the Home Office. There is a hotline, or there certainly used to be a hotline, for MPs to contact the Passport Office. If she and her staff have not used it already, I encourage her to do so.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Last week, Premier League club Brentford FC announced that it is going to retain its home strip for a second season to save the fans money and to reduce the environmental impact of clothing—polyester, in particular, in this case—so will the Leader of the House congratulate

Brentford FC? My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) asked him to congratulate clubs such as Sheffield Wednesday and Brentford on their community impact. Will he also congratulate them on their environmental impact?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Again, I am grateful to the hon. Lady because I know what a burden it is for parents to have to buy the new strip every year. The club keeping its strip will be welcomed by fans and particularly young fans' parents, who will have a significant saving in the run-up to Christmas. I congratulate Brentford FC and encourage it to continue its community activities. It is very impressive that it is doing good environmental work as well, possibly with a small hit to its bottom line, which makes it even more impressive.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): Paragraph 8.14 of the ministerial code states that, when Ministers meet external organisations, private secretaries or civil servants must be present and details must be taken down. Recently, we had a debate on the Randox contracts, where there was some confusion from the Minister about exactly whether or not minutes were available. Following that, I wrote to each Department asking how it dealt with such a thing and I received a variety of replies, most of which said that not all meetings needed to be minuted. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in Government time on this issue, so that we can actually get some clarity on this very important matter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think it is clear that external meetings that relate to Government business are minuted and that is routine civil service practice. But I think the hon. Gentleman has received replies from a large number of Ministers, including from my own office, although I am afraid that my office said that we followed the practice of the Cabinet Office because the Office of the Leader of the House technically comes under the Cabinet Office. But we do take minutes. It is what the civil service does and does very effectively.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Next Friday, I am bringing in a Bill to ban the importing of hunting trophies. The public and all parties, including the Leader of the House's party, agree on this issue. Last month, I raised it at Prime Minister's questions and he replied that the Government were going to introduce legislation, but there is still no sign of it. So will the Leader of the House either urgently bring a Bill to the House or tell his Whips not to block my Bill next week, so that we can get a law as soon as possible and end this vile trade once and for all?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The right hon. Gentleman has asked the Prime Minister and is now asking me. He has asked the organ grinder, and I do not quite know why he has come to the monkey. None the less, the monkey will do his best to say that it is Government policy to ban the importing of hunting trophies and that legislation is likely to come forward in the fullness of time, but there is no specific introduction date.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): In June and in September, I asked the Leader of the House about prioritising research into childhood cancers and he was very helpful both times, following up his and my correspondence to the Department of Health and Social

Care on that issue. Despite our chasing up, it took a very disappointing 118 days for the Department to respond to my initial inquiry and, unfortunately, the response, once received, was not worth waiting for; it added nothing about research into childhood cancers and was a grave disappointment to my constituent. Every single day counts for families in this situation and I wonder whether the Leader of the House could provide Government time for a debate on why a clear focus on research into childhood cancers matters so much.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that point and, obviously, I am sorry for the delays in replies. I have noticed in terms of my own constituency correspondence that the replies from the DHSC have got much better in the past few weeks—they have become much more prompt. I hope that that is a common experience. She asks for an important debate. I suggest initially that that should be an Adjournment debate to raise the specific questions that she wants to raise, and then she could look to the Backbench Business Committee. This is an issue of great importance. The Government do devote money to investigating cures for childhood cancers, but she is so right to raise the issue.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Last week, in a written statement, the Government ended 31 years of cover-up and admitted that, in August 1990, the Government of the day had sufficient time to warn British Airways not to allow flight 149 to land at Kuwait airport, which was then being over-run by Saddam Hussain. The Government failed to give that warning and, of course, we all know that the passengers and crew were seized and subjected to unspeakable mistreatment for a lengthy time before finally being released. While the written apology last week is welcome, does the Leader of the House not agree that these matters are serious enough to merit at least an oral statement and, ideally, a lengthy debate in Government time, so that the full facts of that dreadful affair can finally be made public?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This matter has been raised in the House before. Governments should always try to put right mistakes that have been made by their predecessor Governments. This Government cannot take responsibility for what was done by Government 31 years ago. However, as we were discussing with Primodos earlier, when Government make mistakes there is no point in a successor Government trying to pretend that it was not a mistake. However, what is done has to be practical and have reasonable effect, so one needs to investigate what would be the benefit of this to work out where to go next. But I think Adjournment debates are a suitable way of starting as specific an issue as this.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My constituent, Ms Dutton, launched an appeal to a decision to refuse her a European economic area residence card in July 2020. The UK Government withdrew their decision in 2021, meaning that her appeal was successful. However, EEA residence card applications

closed on 31 December 2020 and my constituent has never been issued a replacement for her expired biometric card, which overlapped the Government's decision. Can we have a debate in Government time on the difficulties faced by such constituents over these ridiculous Catch-22 situations?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is exactly the sort of thing where raising it in Parliament ought to solve the problem. I will take this up with the Home Office if the hon. Gentleman will send me more details. There is nothing more frustrating than when the Government say, "We were considering your application. Now you have passed the deadline, so we can't consider it." That is something that happens in bureaucratic systems and the great joy of democracy is that we flush bureaucracy away on these occasions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): And the prize for patience and perseverance—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): What is the prize?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am not telling you what the prize is. The prize goes to Angus Brendan MacNeil.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is indeed like the wedding feast at Cana.

I thank the Leader of the House for his lambing recess. It is greatly appreciated in Na h-Eileanan an Iar. On an even more serious point, may I ask the hon. member for his help on the UK's departure from the safety of life navigation system that is the European geostationary navigation overlay service—or EGNOS as it is known. This is affecting airports at Campbeltown, Islay, Tiree, Barra, of course, Wick, Kirkwall, Sumburgh and Dundee. It is especially important in fog and mist and the UK is the only G20 country without such a navigational system. It is still actually switched on in Cardiff and in Glasgow to help Cork in Ireland. Why can Ireland have this and not Scotland? Can we—in the modern parlance—level up with Ireland and have systems that will help us to land in fog and mist?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. Yes, of course, he is the wedding feast at Cana, and the fine wine has been saved for last. I now understand the reason he wrote to me about being missed. His point is an important one and I will take it up with the Secretary of State for Transport. We obviously want to have efficient transport across the whole of the United Kingdom, and we particularly need the hon. Gentleman to be able to come here because he does so assiduously and dutifully, and, I think, he wins the prize for finest heckler in the House.

Chris Bryant: No! Division!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): There seems to be some dissent on that matter.

Points of Order

11.44 am

Martin Docherty-Hughes: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Before the Leader of the House departs the Chamber, I wonder if he would respond to a point of order relating to what he said in business questions in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) about Scots law. I am sure that he did not mean it to come over the way that it did, but it did seem to some of us that Scots law—whether passed in the Parliament of Scotland or indeed in this House—and its rights and privileges were not being recognised by the Department for Work and Pensions and other Whitehall Departments. I am sure that he would want to correct the record on that point, critically in relation to public health.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): As the hon. Gentleman knows, that is not a point of order for the Chair. I am not really impartial on the matter of Scots law. If the Lord President wishes to respond, he may do so.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Madam Deputy Speaker, I was absolutely clear that I think it is good and thoroughly beneficial when people go back to work, including in the DWP. I did not mention Scots law; that was not within the remit of my answer.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am not going to continue this matter, as we have a lot of other things to deal with this morning, but I will hear Chris Law.

Chris Law: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am speaking to my own question about my own constituents in the city of Dundee. The Leader of the House made clear his point about DWP staff returning to work. May I ask for your guidance and make it clear to the House that, in fact, throughout

the entire pandemic our DWP staff have been working from home, not sitting at home doing nothing? The suggestion made by the Leader of the House may have been seen as implying that my constituents who work for DWP—indeed, for DWP across Scotland—have not been working, when in fact they have been working exceedingly hard, despite the difficulties that they face.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has made his point, although it is not a point of order and I am not going to continue this. There is a difference of opinion here—that is what this Chamber is for—but the period during which we were discussing these things, in business questions, is now over.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: If it is a different point of order.

Chris Bryant: This is a very different point of order. Madam Deputy Speaker, you know that the Government now publish their list of written ministerial statements on the Order Paper. For instance, today it reads:

“Secretary of State for Health and Social Care... Health update”.

The title “Health update” is about as useless as a chocolate teapot, because nobody has any idea what that is about. I mean, I know exactly what this ministerial statement is about—it is about acquired brain injury, and the fact that the Government are going to set up a strategy and a panel to examine the issue—but would it not be a bit more helpful if, when the Government say that they are going to make a statement, they make it a bit clearer what the statement will be about, so that we can find it if we want to?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point and I cannot help but agree with him, while also saying that it is a matter not for the Chair, but for the Government. The hon. Gentleman has made his point and the Government have heard it. Let us hope that it will be acted upon.

Code of Conduct: Consultation

COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We now come to the Select Committee statement. Chris Bryant will speak on his subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and call Mr Bryant to respond to these in turn. The Front Benchers may take part in questioning. I call the Chair of the Committee on Standards.

11.47 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I do not want to be too pious about it, but the House has a set of rules and seeks to enforce them, first, because all Members aspire to a set of values and principles, and because the public have a right to expect that all Members abide by the highest possible standards in public life. The Committee on Standards has been reviewing these rules for some time. It started doing so in both the 2015 and 2017 Parliaments, but the general elections cut short that work. We have continued to work on it during this Parliament and have had the benefit of some members who have been on the Committee much longer than I have, including some of the lay members, in putting together the report that we compiled last week.

Our report has recommendations that fall into two main sections: suggested changes to the substance of the rules; and questions about the process whereby the rules are enforced and adjudicated. On the substance, we are recommending the following: first, an outright ban on any Member acting as a paid parliamentary adviser, consultant or strategist, which was a recommendation of the 2018 Committee on Standards in Public Life report on Members' outside interests; secondly, the introduction of a new requirement that a Member must have a written contract for any outside work that makes it explicit that their duties cannot include lobbying Ministers, Members or public officials, or providing advice about how to lobby or influence Parliament, and that their employer will give them an undertaking not to ask them to do so; and thirdly, clarification of the criteria for the "serious wrong" exemption in the lobbying rules, to make clearer the risks of conflicts of interest and to put an end to this being used as a loophole.

Next, we propose a doubling of the six-month limit on reward or consideration restrictions in the lobbying rules to 12 months. Members will still be able to release themselves immediately from the restrictions by repaying any sums received in the relevant period if they wish to do so. In order to encourage Members to seek expert advice before acting, the Committee proposes a new "safe harbour" provision whereby Members cannot be found in breach of the rules if they sought and followed the advice of the House of Commons Registrar. This ensures that Members who seek advice from the Registrar or the House officials and follow the rules accordingly cannot accidentally find themselves in breach of the code of conduct.

We want to end the exemption whereby Ministers are not required to register with the Commons Registrar gifts and hospitality they receive in their ministerial capacity, so that other outside interests of all Members', whether they are a Minister or not, can be found in a single place. We want to improve the transparency and searchability of the Commons Register of Members' Financial Interests, and we have written to the House of Commons Commission to try to get it to speed up that process. We also want to add a new rule to the code of conduct prohibiting a Member from subjecting anyone to unreasonable and excessive personal attack in any medium.

In relation to the process of enforcing the rules and adjudicating cases, we have heard the complaints that there is no formal process of appeal at present. We were actually considering this for some time before the Owen Paterson case. We dispute that there is no process of appeal at the moment. Owen Paterson appealed the decision of the Commissioner for Standards to our Committee, and we took his evidence orally and in writing. Indeed, the Prime Minister also appealed the commissioner's finding in a previous case, and we found in his favour and disagreed with the commissioner.

We have regularly received legal advice that our processes are article 6 compliant, but we accept that there are some blurred lines here. It might be better, for instance, to have a formal appeal process with established grounds of appeal, which might be more legalistic. It might be better if that process were akin to the existing structures for appeals under the independent expert panel that hears independent complaints and grievance scheme cases on sexual harassment and bullying. For that reason, we are engaging a senior judicial figure to advise us on improvements that could be made to provide greater clarity and to ensure that we are following best practice in embodying due process and guaranteeing a fair hearing to all Members and to complainants. We want to explore the pros and cons in detail before making any changes.

This report is not our final word on the subject. We are consulting on our recommendations and urge Members to send us their thoughts. It would be very helpful if there were a debate on the proposals early in the new year, because we may have got things wrong and we are happy to listen to Members. The closing date for written submissions is 20 January. There are some issues that we are considering separately, including the rules on Members' use of parliamentary stationery, offices and facilities. I get the feeling from quite a lot of Members that it would be helpful if we provided new updated advice and recommendations in that field. We will be holding evidence sessions at the end of January and hope to produce a new draft code of conduct and guide to the rules for approval by the House by Easter. I am sure that the Government would then want to make time available for us to consider that.

Above all, we believe it right that the House should consider these matters in the round rather than piecemeal. The Government and the Opposition have both said that they believe it right that changes should proceed on a cross-party basis. We agree and believe that the best way of doing that is through the formal processes of the Committee.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his statement, for his calm chairmanship of the Committee through a particularly

[*Sir Bernard Jenkin*]

difficult period, and for the consensual way that he chairs the Committee. Does he agree that it is really now time for some calm deliberation? Although this was a unanimously agreed report, by no means are all the proposals in it unanimously supported by all the members of the Committee. They are proposals for consultation, and he is right to invite evidence. Will he join me in drawing attention to the very useful summary of issues that is on the Committee's website? Perhaps we should circulate that as a link to all Members.

Does the hon. Gentleman recall that we set out to try to simplify the code of conduct? Does he think we are succeeding in simplifying? Or, by adding more, are we perhaps being drawn dangerously into a zero-sum game, where rules beget rules and more rules beget more rules in an effort to try to clarify, and in fact making it more complicated? I particularly draw attention to section 8 of the report, on "Training, advice and promotion". That is nothing to do with the enforcement of the code but is about promoting understanding of the purpose of the code and how we can more easily comply with the spirit of the code and avoid falling foul of the rules. What does he think we should do next to pursue that part of our thinking?

Chris Bryant: I am grateful for the work that the hon. Gentleman has done on the Committee. It is right that we take our time to get this right, rather than rush at it like a bull at a gate, because there could be all sorts of unintended consequences, including from some of the recommendations we have come up with. We are very happy to listen. We will be circulating the consultation document to all Members, which I hope will prompt lots more Members to take part in the consultation. The worst thing of all would be that we change the rules and then everyone says next September, "Oh, I did not know we were doing that." We want to ensure that people can understand them.

On simplification, our rules are quite complex, and Members are caught by lots of different sets of rules, as we lay out in the report, including those of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority and the Electoral Commission. I am aware that sometimes Members are advised on the use of stationery by a House official, because it is a House responsibility, but that may not be the eventual decision of the commissioner. That is unfair to a Member, so that is why we are introducing the safe harbour provision, which would mean that if someone has taken advice and followed the advice, then fair do's; they cannot be found guilty of breaching the rules. However, I spent last weekend reading the House of Representatives code of conduct. It is 467 pages long. I think we have done well that ours is not quite as long as theirs.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The report considers interests and voting, but only in the context of a Member's financial interests and the policy generally. It does not consider whether Members should vote on motions directly relating to them, such as reports on breaches of the code of conduct itself. I am aware that there is a convention that Members should not vote, but that was breached last month by Mr Paterson. I thank the Chair and the Committee for their work in this regard, but can the hon. Gentleman advise

me what consideration the Committee has given to putting that convention on a statutory footing within the code of conduct?

Chris Bryant: I am not sure whether the hon. Member means a statutory footing, as in putting it in a piece of statute law. It might be a relevant change to Standing Orders. If she wants to make that recommendation to our Committee, I am sure we would listen to it.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On the issue of natural justice and a fair hearing, as I have said several times recently, all Members of the House, because of article 9 of the Bill of Rights 1689, are treated differently from every other citizen in the country. I welcome the consultation, but in regard to paragraphs 196, 243 and 244 of the report, will the Chairman accept that there must be full and proper consultation before any judicial figure is appointed, and therefore before his or her report comes about? Otherwise, we will have a prejudgment on the question of fairness, article 6 and all that goes with it and the issue of a fair trial with Members. The person in question must be approved by the House by resolution, and the House must not be bounced.

Chris Bryant: No, I disagree with the hon. Member. There is an issue about appeals, but it is not as simple as he would like to have us suppose. At the moment, a Member who has been found in breach of the rules by the commissioner can effectively appeal to our Committee. They can appeal on any basis whatever—no formal ground of appeal needs to be advanced. We might go to a more formal process, but that might limit a Member's right to appeal; they might be allowed to appeal only on certain fixed grounds, as happens in most other appellate bodies. Members might think that that ended up leaving them in a worse position, rather than a better one. It is for our Committee to decide who we appoint to advise us. That is the standard way in which every Select Committee of the House works. If the person we are thinking of and are trying to secure ends up taking up the post, I am sure the hon. Member will be happy with the appointment.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I noted that in presenting the report, the Chair of the Committee suggested that it would be useful to have a debate on the issue early in the new year. I wonder if the Leader of the House could give us clarification about whether the Government are intending to provide time for that or whether it is anticipated that the Chair of the Committee will have to apply to the Backbench Business Committee for such a debate. If that is the case, I ask the Chair of the Committee to do so, so we can facilitate that if the Government provide us with time.

Chris Bryant: To be honest, I think the debate should be in Government time for the simple reason that, when we eventually get to a set of motions, they will have to be tabled by the Government. It would make far more sense for it to take place in Government time rather than Backbench Business time. I note that, thus far, there have been moments when the Government have been very involved in the debate and others when they have wanted to withdraw. I ask the Leader of the House whether it is possible to have a debate in Government time early in the new year. The whole Committee would be grateful for that.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I have to say that I disagree with the last remark of the Chair of the Committee, because it is clearly a House matter, so it would be better coming from the Backbench Business Committee.

I certainly welcome the proposal that the advice given is firm advice, even if the advice is wrong and is acted on. That would be a sensible safeguard.

The one area about which I am concerned is the right of appeal. I think there should be an independent right of appeal at the end of the process. In 95% or 98% of referrals, when the Committee makes its decision, the Member accepts it and we move forward, but on the rare occasions when the Member feels badly done by, there should be, as in other organisations, a right of appeal to a completely independent organisation. I wonder whether the Chair of the Committee would take that view on board in the consultation, because it is probably the only bit that I disagree with.

Chris Bryant: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for agreeing with nearly all of it. Personally, and I think this is true for the rest of the Committee, I do not have a final fixed view on how we should implement appeals. The issue will arise, however, that one of the available sanctions is suspension from the House—or expulsion, for that matter—and historically, it has been the House's view that that has to be a decision of the House rather than of any separate body. That is why, even in ICGS cases on sexual harassment and bullying, where there is an appeals process and the whole process goes through an independent expert panel, the final decision is none the less taken in the House. The hon. Gentleman knows—I think he voted for my amendment—that the motion comes straight from the IEP to the House and is voted through without amendment or debate. That is my only caveat to what he has said about appeals.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for the work that he and his Committee are doing to uphold Parliament's reputation. At present, Ministers do not have to declare gifts or hospitality received in their ministerial capacity, whereas we MPs are required to. Will he comment on that distinction, which appears perverse to most of our constituents?

Chris Bryant: Incidentally, I am not right honourable, but my hon. Friend makes an important point. I have a view about that; I am not sure whether it will end up being the settled view of the House. It seems illogical to me that two Members of the House, one of whom is a Minister, could be wined and dined at Wimbledon on a ticket that costs £2,500, then the Minister does not have to register that with the House and never has to register its value, even though they might be the Minister who makes decisions about tennis funding in the UK, whereas the Member who is not a Minister has to register it within 28 days. It seems perverse, and it is difficult for members of the public, who might want to see all the information about an individual MP in one place.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): May I refer the Chairman to paragraph 58 on page 19 of the report? I take the point he has made very clearly that these are proposals for consultation and could be changed. However, the paragraph says:

“We therefore support the addition to the Code of a rule similar to those adopted by the Welsh Senedd and the Northern Ireland Assembly, making it an investigable breach of the Code for a Member to subject anyone to unreasonable and excessive personal attack in any medium”;

which presumably includes the Chamber and Select Committees. *[Interruption.]* Well, if we read it literally, that is how we would interpret it.

Let me give the Chairman a quick scenario. In a Select Committee, a Member is pressing a witness, maybe about some Government procurement programme that has gone horribly wrong, and they are reluctant to answer. The member of the Committee, doing their job, presses them harder, and the witness says, “I’m sorry, but I regard your behaviour as an unreasonable and excessive personal attack, and if you continue this line of questioning I’m going to report you to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards.” To take another example—this is important, Madam Deputy Speaker—Member A and Member B have a heated disagreement in the Chamber, and someone watching on television writes to the commissioner and says, “I think A made an excessive personal attack on B, and I want you to investigate it.”

The point is that this paragraph seriously impinges on article 9 of the Bill of Rights, if we take it literally, so here is my consultation submission early on: this is actually dangerous, and it should not appear in the final version.

Chris Bryant: I disagree with the right hon. Member's interpretation of where we are going, not least because I think article IX is perfectly clear that no proceeding in Parliament should be impeached or questioned in a court of law or in any other place.

Mr Francois: But it would be by the commissioner.

Chris Bryant: No. That has the force of statute law—the Bill of Rights is statute law—and we are not intending to derogate from that in any way at all. The Chair of a Select Committee at the moment could perfectly well say to an hon. Member, if he or she thought that the hon. Member was being excessively or unreasonably rude or personal towards a witness, “Let's tone that down a little bit, shall we?” I think it would be in the interests of the House and its reputation for the Select Committee Chair to say that, and it is perfectly within their powers now. Indeed, in the work we have been doing in the Privileges Committee, we have been looking at how witnesses should be treated.

It may be that this rule is not perfectly worded as it is now. None the less—and, again, this is me on a personal level—it just seems odd that we would want to argue that we have to continue the right to make unreasonable and excessive personal attacks on others, especially when we are using the reputation of the letters “MP” behind it.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I thank the Chair of the Committee on Standards and his colleagues for all the work they have done. I also warmly commend the Chair for the way he has conducted himself over the last month or so, which has possibly been the most difficult period that anyone in his office has had to deal with.

I welcome the proposals on the declaration of Ministers' interests, because my constituents cannot understand how it can be that a Minister, who must be a Member of one or other House of Parliament, enjoys all the rights

[Peter Grant]

of a Member of Parliament but does not have to comply with all the responsibilities that the rest of us do. Are there opportunities to take that further? For example, are there ways in which the conduct of a Minister can also be deemed to be the conduct of a Member of Parliament, and therefore, possibly as an alternative, subject to independent examination, rather than the picture we have just now, where the ultimate arbiter of a Minister's conduct is the person who appointed them, who quite clearly has a significant political interest in the fate of any Minister whose conduct has been called into question?

Chris Bryant: I think that the questions asked thus far have made it evident that we need a full debate so that people can make speeches. The sooner we have that in the new year the better, and I will listen to all the comments people make.

I have lots of views about the ministerial code, but it is not the business of our Committee to have views about the ministerial code. That is a matter for another Committee, and we have touched on it only tangentially. As it happens, however, it does seem odd to me that a series of actions by a Member could get them taken through the ICGS process for bullying, but if done as a Minister within their Department would lead to no sanction whatsoever. In the end, I think that brings the whole of politics into disrepute. However, as I say, that is not a matter for the code of conduct. We are only interested in regulating Members' performance in their duties as Members.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I reiterate that these are supposed to be fairly short, concise questions, including from the Front Bench. Debates will come later.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and his Committee on a very good and worthwhile report. He is right that all the issues need to be properly debated, and we should be able to do that as soon as possible. This report has been constructed and designed in the white heat of unprecedented public interest in the standards of this House, which I am sure has added to the pressure of his deliberations over the past few weeks. I have a number of issues with it, which we do not have time to go into now—that is why we need a debate. I will discuss the matter privately with him, and I know he will be open to that meeting, because there are certain things I want to get clarity on.

One thing I ask the hon. Gentleman about at this stage is appeals. With all due respect, I think he has been pushed into this by Conservative Back Benchers and because of the very keen interest in how the debates have been shaped over the past few weeks. He is absolutely right, and he should stick to this, that what his Committee does is an appeals process. That is exactly what happens. I have great concerns about this being conflated—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

Pete Wishart: I thought I had a minute, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is that not right?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): They are supposed to be fairly short questions, including from the Front Bench.

Pete Wishart: All I will say is to be careful about conflating this process with sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is significantly different from conduct on propriety, and we have to be careful not to conflate the two. I know the staff are concerned about that, so, as an early point, I ask the hon. Member for Rhondda to think very carefully about bringing those two things together. They are significantly different.

Chris Bryant: Sir Stephen Irwin, who, as hon. Members will know, chairs the independent expert panel, came and gave us advice on this whole issue of appeals. One of the points he made to us was that of course it makes sense to have a set of people on the independent expert panel who are experienced in sexual harassment, employment and bullying cases—lawyers, in the main, and their kin—because they are dealing with sexual harassment and bullying cases, and sexual harassment and bullying are the same in any workplace. There is no difference, and they do not need to have particular parliamentary understanding.

However, when we are dealing with things such as parliamentary stationery, use of offices and paid lobbying, Sir Stephen's view was that there is a significant benefit to having a body that has some laypeople with some of that experience and some Members of Parliament. I think other members of the Committee would admit that it is quite interesting that lay members often say, after a Member has made a contribution, "That's interesting—I would never have seen that or had that insight into how Parliament works."

I think we will want to keep that mix in some shape or form, but we will be able to clarify the situation and get rid of some of the blurred lines, so that everybody has equal confidence. I do not like the idea that there might be some people still saying at the end of the process, "No, there is no appeal process." We want to ensure that everybody is confident in the processes we have.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I have one question, but first I must congratulate my hon. Friend and his Committee on excellent, thoughtful work. I am particularly pleased with paragraphs 15 and 16, stating that values are something we should incorporate into our daily lives—something to be proud of rather than something to be wriggled round.

My one question is about paragraph 120. Could my hon. Friend elaborate on the work his Committee is planning to do on accepting gifts from foreign donors? This is about whether there should ever be circumstances in which a Member should accept a gift, hospitality or money from a foreign Government. Can he say a bit more about that? I know there is concern from both outside and inside this place about how those boundaries are drawn.

Chris Bryant: Interestingly, in the United States of America no member of Congress is allowed to accept anything from a foreign Government at all. That includes visits to foreign countries; if there is a visit, it is paid for by Congress, not by the other Government. I know there has been some expression of concern, particularly in relation to some of the all-party parliamentary groups,

about whether it is right that British MPs are being lavishly entertained—I say this as someone who has just come back from Qatar, and Qatar paid for my trip; that is all declared—and whether it might not be better for us simply to say as a House, “If we really want to have strong relationships with those other Governments, we should be paying for those visits.” It is important to do that work, but we ought to be cognisant of the danger that a foreign power might be seeking to lobby the British Parliament through the back door. We will be doing work on that as part of our ongoing inquiry into all-party parliamentary groups.

BILL PRESENTED

AMBULANCE WAITING TIMES (LOCAL REPORTING) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57).

Daisy Cooper, supported by Ed Davey, Wendy Chamberlain, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Tim Farron, Layla Moran, Jamie Stone, Wera Hobhouse, Christine Jardine, Sarah Olney, Munira Wilson and Sarah Green, presented a Bill to require ambulance services to provide more accessible and localised reports of ambulance response times; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 10 December, and to be printed (Bill 209).

Backbench Business

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Stability and Peace

12.15 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House notes the concerning political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina; expresses its support for institutions set out in the Dayton Peace Agreement, and the office and work of the High Representative, Mr Christian Schmidt; and supports continued efforts by the UK Government and its allies to ensure peace and stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina and to uphold the provisions of the Dayton Peace Agreement.

Conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not inevitable, yet today we find ourselves closer than ever to conflict in the Balkans. We see the rise of hatred, division, sectarianism and the ugly beast of nationalism. We see fears rising, and still-raw wounds being ripped open. That is why I have called for today's debate.

I believe that all of us in this place have one common responsibility as parliamentarians, to protect our nation, but we also share the responsibility to seek to prevent loss of life and to uphold human rights. With the resolve of once-stalwart partners now in question, now more than ever Britain, and we in this place, must stand up and be counted.

More than 26 years ago, the same hatred, sectarianism and nationalism brought bloodshed to Bosnia. More than 8,000 Muslim men and boys were massacred, women were systematically raped and the lives of more than 100,000 people were taken in a war led by greed and inhumanity. In that war, 57 British soldiers were murdered. I stand here today because that loss of life, those murders and attempted extermination of the Bosniak people, cannot be repeated, and because those whose voices were stolen deserve that we should learn from their silence.

We are here today because peace in Bosnia is under threat, but conflict is not inevitable, and this House can make a difference. Deterrence diplomacy can make a difference. Today we seek to raise our voices to help prevent loss of life, and to uphold human rights and peace, because Britain and this House have an opportunity to prevent history from repeating itself.

Some 26 years ago, the international community secured a fragile truce. The Dayton peace agreement was signed, and in Bosnia a shot has not been fired in anger since. Bloodshed gave way to peace—a fragile peace, but a peace that prevented further loss of life. Over the past few months, however, the leader of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, has put the Dayton peace agreement under enormous strain. He has long worked to systematically undermine the very instruments of stability that he is mandated, as the Serb member of the presidency, to protect.

Dodik has publicly repudiated the Office of the United Nations peacekeeper-in-chief, the UN High Representative, threatened to withdraw Republika Srpska from federal institutions and threatened to withdraw Bosnian Serbs from the armed forces, the judiciary and the police forces. Meanwhile he is significantly increasing military

[*Alicia Kearns*]

spending, militarising the police force and holding illegal independence day celebrations, showing off vast arrays of submachine guns.

What instigated the crisis we now see unfolding? Ultimately, it was Dodik's refusal to stop his shameful and insidious campaign of genocide denial and glorification of war criminals. In July, the then High Representative banned the denial of the genocide that took place at Srebrenica. The war crimes that took place during the Bosnian war, and in particular in Srebrenica, are the most heinous committed on European soil since the second world war.

Under Milošević, the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia was industrial and the motive clear: extermination. I believe that this House is united in agreeing that what took place was a genocide. It is important that we say so here in this place, the mother of all Parliaments, and that the UK and our Parliament give the High Representative our full support in ensuring any genocide denial law is implemented. Amid that backdrop, I hope it is already abundantly clear to Members why the Dayton peace agreement must be upheld.

Some have rightly noted that the Dayton peace agreement merely froze the results of the ethnic cleansing, and did not represent a true healing. We have probably all asked ourselves whether there should be a redrawing of the lines if that would bring down tensions, but it would be a grievous error. That would be to give ethno-nationalism, hatred, and ethnic cleansing a victory, to say that communities cannot co-exist, that we will reward division and hatred as forms of negotiation, and that the policies of ethnic cleansing in the '90s were not only successful, but are now being mandated. I am deeply concerned about reports that there is a growing view or opinion in Brussels, and even in America, that Bosnia and Herzegovina should be split, and the Republika Srpska allowed to secede. If that is true, it is entirely contrary to the Dayton peace agreement, and contrary to our principles that we share as members of the international community. It would, in effect, enshrine the results of 1990s ethnic cleansing.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate, and I agree with what she is saying about not redrawing boundaries that have now been established for more than 25 years. Does she recognise that one way that we can perhaps try to evolve the Dayton agreement is through trying to build up civil society in Bosnia, particularly on a multi-ethnic basis, and to encourage and support those voices to come together and try to create more of a shared vision for Bosnia in its entirety as a single entity?

Alicia Kearns: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, but I had a chilling conversation this morning with the UN High Representative, who joins us today from the Gallery. He said that civil society is not where it should be, that it is chilling how divided it is, and how it is not able to bring people together. But yes, the Foreign Office should be looking at exactly how we support civil society, as should all our allies.

There have been increasing noises that the EU will also accept negotiation on genocide denial and electoral law, accommodating Dodik's appalling undermining of

state institutions and stability. I hope the House will join me in condemning those sentiments without qualification, and that the Minister will make representations to her European Union counterparts that any such split would be unacceptable. No deal can be done as long as the threat of secession is used as a bargaining chip. I wish also to acknowledge that Dodik does not have unanimous support for his behaviour, and it is important that we do not internationally accept his position as representative of the will of Serbs and Bosnian Serbs. There is opposition. Only a couple of weeks ago he tried to pass laws that would undermine the Dayton agreement, and his majority unravelled.

Before I turn to my asks of the Minister, I wish to thank her, as well as my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary, for their engagement on this situation over the last two months, and I put on record the alacrity with which they have responded to the concerns raised. I commend them for inviting the High Representative, Christian Schmidt, to the UK, for putting Bosnia on the agenda at the NATO ministerial meeting in Riga this week, for arranging two ministerial visits to Bosnia just this week, and for announcing this morning a special envoy for the western Balkans. But I now turn to my further asks, and I urge the Minister to build on that track record urgently and raise the situation with her American counterparts who, only this morning for the first time, tweeted their concerns about this issue. Yes, it is just a tweet, but words and diplomacy matter.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an important point about international diplomacy. Does she agree that obviously we need to put pressure on our allies in America, but we also need to stand up to those in the wider world who are using the situation in Bosnia as a pawn or bargaining chip in a greater play? We must ensure that those countries hear the voice of this Chamber, and of all those in western Europe who would like to see stability maintained in the western Balkans.

Alicia Kearns: My hon. Friend puts it well, and I hope I can shortly make the same point as elegantly as he did.

Some 73% of Republika Srpska exports go to the EU, so the UK and our EU partners can work to impose multilateral sanctions in line with those of our American allies. Even minimalist sanctions would have an impact, because we cannot accept a situation where pro-integrity forces are told that efforts to undermine the peace will serve to further a negotiating position. Part of the reason we are where we are today is a lack of clear, unambiguous pushback against secessionist politics from the international community. If we do not push back now, Dodik and his enablers will be emboldened to escalate. The time for deterrence diplomacy is now. We talk about deterrence in terms of military interventions, but deterrence can be a diplomatic effort, and that is something the UK should lead on.

The UK is also one of the world's best conveners—I would say it is second to none when it comes to foreign policy—so I hope the Government will use the immense expertise in the Foreign Office to secure multilateral engagement and commitments to de-escalate, by convening the NATO Quint and G7 Foreign Ministers, and by raising the issue at the UN Security Council, to demonstrate that diplomacy can be an effective deterrent.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): I totally endorse what my hon. Friend is saying, but could I perhaps encourage her to amplify this point? I get a sense of *déjà-vu* from 30 years ago, when we looked the other way for too long, but involvement became inevitable. Will she emphasise that the timeliness and promptness of an intervention is all the more important?

Alicia Kearns: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, which is why this debate is so important. We as parliamentarians can raise the flare and ask the international community to sit up and take action now, not wait until the first shot is fired.

I ask that when the Minister convenes the Quint, the G7, or UN partners, we seek to secure an uplift to our personnel at NATO HQ Sarajevo. A joint exercise in the Balkans would also have much merit. As ethnic tensions rise, I ask that the UK activates the new conflict centre for which I lobbied and campaigned. It would map actors, identify those perpetrating identity-based violence, look at what multilateral activity is needed to prevent conflict, and act as an early warning system. I urge the Government to create a cross-Government, counter-atrocity strategy for what is happening in Bosnia, as well as in China and so many other places. Indeed, the Prime Minister has received an excellent letter about that from Protection Approaches, which is a fantastic charity. We need a strategy that would allow us to identify emerging tensions and early signs of human rights abuses, and trigger action before mass bloodshed.

One might ask why Dodik feels so emboldened to act in this way. When threatening the secession of Republika Srpska, Dodik stated:

“If anybody tries to stop us, we have friends who will defend us.”

Those friends—they say you should judge a man by his friends—are Russia, Serbia, China, and even a handful of EU member states. Dodik himself has named Hungary, Slovenia, and even, in his words, “the Brussels Administration” as having an understanding of his position. Some of those hostile states are using their influence to foment instability and ethnic tension, to distract from their own heinous actions at home, to secure their own territorial ambitions, or to feed instability in Europe’s near neighbourhood.

Dodik has stated publicly:

“When I go to Putin there are no requests. He just says, ‘what is it I can help with?’”

At this moment, Dodik is with Putin in Russia. I fear what he is asking, and clearly he will receive whatever he asks for. In the last few years, Putin has delivered semi-automatic weapons to Republika Srpska—2,500 to be exact, that we know of. He has sent his paramilitary motorcycle gang, known as the Night Wolves, to bring pro-secessionist messages to the streets of Bosnia. China has steadily increased its presence, and Bosnia’s international debt is now held by China. If we do not support Bosnia, it will find itself in the same situation as Montenegro—indebted, and facing the reality of China’s wolf warrior diplomacy as its loans become due next year. Dodik must learn that Bosnia also has friends, with none more committed to Bosnia’s stability than the UK. We must use deterrence diplomacy to demonstrate our resolve, and to stop autocrats making our neighbourhood their playground.

I ask the Minister to ensure that we engage with Serbia, and call on it to stop telling us behind the scenes that it wishes to prevent conflict and division, while in the same breath giving Dodik platform after platform. We must engage heavily with western Balkan nations to demonstrate that our eye is firmly on the region, and we must counter Russian and Chinese overtures towards them.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for her brilliant speech. In light of all the threats that Bosnia and Herzegovina is facing, would it help if we helped to facilitate Bosnia joining NATO?

Alicia Kearns: The hon. Gentleman will be unsurprised to know that I fully agree we should be doing that. However, we must also recognise that that is one of Russia’s greatest concerns and fears, and that is why it is acting to undermine in such a way. Yes, NATO membership is more achievable than EU membership, so let us stand and fight for that.

We know that as part of their support to Dodik, the Russians and even the Chinese and the Serbians are spreading disinformation in Bosnia. The UK is a world leader in countering disinformation, particularly that of Putin. During my time in the Foreign Office, we exposed his devious disinformation networks, knocked him off balance and countered his lies. As a result, I am on a no-fly list. I take that as success. We know how to counter Russia’s disinformation and we should be doing more of it, so I urge the Minister to consider establishing a NATO counter-disinformation capability at NATO headquarters in Sarajevo.

There is a cost to inaction. That cost would be felt in Bosnia, throughout Europe and most certainly here in the UK, and it would be felt by our veterans, who gave so much and witnessed appalling atrocities while serving in Bosnia. Were conflict to reignite between communities in Bosnia, I can think of no greater recruiting sergeant for the far right or Islamists across the world. As in the 1990s, bloodshed would displace thousands of people, and we would need to respond with boots on the ground. Peace in Bosnia is not just a moral imperative but a security necessity for all of us in this place.

I am heartened to see so many colleagues here today—we are united in our resolve—and I thank them all. I am grateful that so many took the time this morning to meet the High Representative to show our support for his office and the work of the international community.

In 1992, the world moved too slowly. Three years of bloodshed stained the western Balkans and our collective conscience. It was a failure of the international community then, and we cannot accept a failure of the international community now. As we establish ourselves as global Britain, let us make one of our great acts of foreign policy to de-escalate tensions in the Balkans. Let us prove what we as the United Kingdom can do. I hope that by speaking with a clear voice today, our Parliament is making it clear that we stand by our duty to the people of Bosnia, that peace in Bosnia will remain a priority for us, that the time for deterrence diplomacy is now, and that violence in Bosnia is most certainly not inevitable.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As colleagues will see, this is a very well subscribed debate. I would prefer not to introduce a time limit, but I urge contributors to take approximately six minutes, or slightly less, so that we can get everybody in.

12.32 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I take note of your suggestion, Madam Deputy Speaker.

In October 2013, I visited Bosnia and Herzegovina with the Inter-Parliamentary Union; my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) was with us. Before the visit, I travelled across the western Balkans from Dubrovnik to Sarajevo. The winding journey through the mountains was incredible—the scenery was spectacular—but the number of graves in every community we went through was really striking. It was truly horrific.

When I arrived in Sarajevo, I was met by a young woman Government official, who greeted me with some surprise because I was getting off a bus. She took me to the Government headquarters, and I was making polite conversation with her. I asked her simply what the civil war in the early 1990s meant for her. She showed me the wound on her leg and explained that she had been shot by a sniper when she was a small child. That is what the conflict meant for her. That illustrates better than anything I can think of just how horrific the situation was in the former Yugoslavia. As internationalists—as people who are concerned about justice, life and civility—we must make every effort possible to ensure that similar situations never happen again.

In recent times, the UK—unfortunately, in my view—has not been as proactive in the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina as it might have been. I am pleased to say, however, that things may be changing. I welcome the Government's announcement of the appointment of Sir Stuart Peach as special envoy. That is a positive statement and a real contribution to ensuring that many of the problems that the people of Bosnia currently face will be addressed. I am pleased that his brief appears to be wide—to support the civil institutions, to work with others in the area, and to make sure that the British Government give a firm commitment to do everything possible to stabilise and hopefully improve the situation.

There is no doubt that the challenges that the international community and the people of Bosnia face are huge. We must begin thinking about the situation with the Dayton agreement, which we played a significant role in helping to establish. It is clearly inadequate to take the situation forward, and we need to begin to think about how that agreement could be modified, possibly even going as far as a Dayton II agreement.

We also need to reinforce our commitment to practical peacekeeping in Bosnia. There is the European Union force—although we are not members of the EU any more, we still support EUFOR—but we really have to ask whether 600 to 700 personnel on the ground is sufficient, given the gravity of the situation we now face and bearing mind that at one time there were 30,000 soldiers from the western alliance on the ground.

We must realise, too, that the stakes are extremely high. If the situation in Bosnia deteriorates significantly, it will not just be bad for Bosnia itself; it will be bad for the whole of the western Balkans, and there will be repercussions elsewhere.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): As the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) said, Putin is the common factor in destabilising Belarus, Ukraine and Bosnia. Just as we support them, should we not also make it clear to the Serbs that if they continue to destabilise and to help Putin, EU membership will remain a distant dream for them?

Wayne David: Yes, I think we have to be objectively very critical of a number of players in the area. Russia is, of course, destabilising the situation for its own ends—as, indeed, it is doing elsewhere—and I think the House will be united in condemnation of its efforts. However, other countries leave a lot to be desired in their activities too; the hon. Member correctly refers to Serbia. We need to be determined in saying to our friends and allies that we do not expect that kind of behaviour, and we really have to work together as an international community to stabilise the situation and take things forward.

However, it is important to recognise that the main external disruptor is indeed Russia. We have to be very clear with Russia, in a whole host of ways and in different spheres, that its material efforts at destabilisation are totally unacceptable. We realise what is happening, we will not have the wool pulled over our eyes, and we must stand united against its destabilisation efforts.

It is extremely important that this debate is taking place today and that a powerful and united message is sent from all democrats and peace lovers in this House, right across the Chamber. But a debate is not enough; we need to make sure, dare I say it, that our Government are wholeheartedly involved and using their maximum diplomatic and material effort to stabilise the situation. It is important, too, that we do not see this as a one-off debate but that we maintain our interest and concern so that we have a genuine, long-lasting peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

12.38 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I deployed in September 1992 with 900 men and some women to save lives. We were neutral. We were cast into the middle of a war between three basic sides, not including the mafia. Bosnian Serbs were fighting Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims. Bosnian Muslims were fighting Bosnian Serbs and sometimes Bosnian Croats. Bosnian Croats were fighting Bosnian Serbs and occasionally Bosnian Muslims. We have to avoid that happening again. We were sent there to try to give Bosnia a chance. We managed to save quite a number of people, for example in April 1993 we led on pulling out about 2,000 people from Srebrenica three years before the disaster of July 1995, but we failed to save many others, so, in my view, it was not a success.

What is pertinent to this debate is the fact that I witnessed a political solution, the Vance-Owen plan, which the Bosnian Croats immediately tried to put into action by trying to take out a town called Gornji Vakuf. I watched as the Brigadier General of the Bosnian-Croat army tasked his tanks to fire one round at each house, one after the other, destroying the town piecemeal. I spent three weeks personally trying to stop that fighting, at some cost—my escort driver was killed. The lesson

for me was that having a political solution that starts dividing Bosnia is asking for real trouble, so it must not happen.

I left in May 1993, but the war ground on. There was political indecision and a lack of will among Europeans, the Americans and the United Nations. It ground on until that awful genocide of Srebrenica in July 1995, when 8,372 men and boys were murdered by the Bosnian Serb army—by the way, the same Bosnian Serb army that might want to split away. Srebrenica was the catalyst for Dayton. The Dayton peace accords—thank goodness it happened—achieved its primary end: it stopped the war.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), no one has been shot or blown up in Bosnia since—I am sure they have, but to our knowledge they have not—but it was lousy politics, because it set up a very weak country and a very weak Government, with three Presidents in rotation representing each side for eight months, and it did not work. Dayton was meant to last for only a short while. Look how long it has had to exist. Now, we have this Bosnian Serb, Dodik, who is threatening to take Republika Srpska out of Bosnia.

I was very friendly with the late Lord Paddy Ashdown. Paddy told me a story about having dinner with Franjo Tuđman, the President of Croatia, in May 1995 at the Guildhall in London. Paddy said to Tuđman, “How do you see the future of Bosnia in 10 years’ time?” Tuđman grabbed a menu, drew a map of Bosnia and divided it in half: half Serb, half Croat. Paddy asked, “What is going to happen to the Bosnian Muslims?” Tuđman said, “Well, maybe a small section in a Croatian area.” By the way, they are all south Slav. Everyone is a south Slav, but by religion they are 30% Serb, 15% Croat and over 50% Bosnian Muslim—1.8 million people. Bosnia matters to us, because if the Croats and the Serbs divide the country in half, guess what will happen to 1.8 million people. They are going to be on the road. They will not be looking east, but north and west. It matters to us what happens in Bosnia.

John Nicolson: As the right hon. and gallant Member knows, as a BBC presenter I interviewed him many times at that time. He mentioned a number of times the secession of the Bosnian Serb part of Bosnia. If they pull out their troops from the joint army and set up their own army, that surely takes us right back to the time that he was there. It is a clear breach of the Dayton accords. It arms them and makes them dangerous. That should be our line in the sand, surely?

Bob Stewart: I agree.

There are two lessons: dividing Bosnia will not work; and the only way to get a solution in Bosnia is by robust international actions. So what will we do? Let me finish by making four points.

First, we have to sustain Dayton at least until we get something to replace it or help it. Secondly, Mr Christian Schmidt, who is sitting here today, requires our absolute and unequivocal support. He must be given all the power we can provide for him to stop the country going backwards. We need another Dayton, which some have called Dayton II. We need the involvement of the United Nations, the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, Russia, which is playing hard to

get, and Serbia. And, of course, in any Dayton II we require the presence of the Bosnian Serbs, because they were not there at Dayton I. I expect—I hope that the Minister is listening to me carefully—the UK to lead on sorting this out.

My final point is this: we must be prepared to send in our soldiers to save lives. That is what we did before: save lives. Fifty-seven of our soldiers died. One of them, Lance Corporal Wayne Edwards, was my driver. That does not count Dobrila Kolaba, my wonderful interpreter who was killed. Minister, it is over to you. The UK must lead and sort out this problem. We can do it.

12.48 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I am delighted to follow the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who made an excellent speech, as did the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns).

I was the Minister with responsibility for the south Balkans back in the mid-’90s. The war had finished, but it was close enough to see the damage. I have one personal reflection. I travelled to Srebrenica with British troops, who were necessary as an escort because the situation was still fraught. When an elderly Bosniak Muslim couple returned to Srebrenica, the town of their birth where they had not been for some time, they needed British troops to make sure they were safe from those who could have done them harm. Anybody who travelled to Sarajevo and looked up to the hills, where Republika Srpska is, knew that Republika Srpska had the capacity to do damage to the people of Sarajevo on a daily basis. It happened, and the massacre of innocents was a regular event. My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) told the story of a woman who survived with injuries, but many died as well. We cannot go back to that kind of conflict, and the level of nationalism is dangerous.

In 1990, the beat of nationalism in the Balkans was strong—there was Tuđman in Croatia and Milošević in what became Serbia—but we ignored it, because we did not believe that we would see the conflict that ensued. The beat of nationalism is now coming very strongly from Banja Luka, from Prime Minister Dodik, who ironically—at the time when I knew him, years back—was a moderate looking for the movement of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the European Union. At that time, we were a member of the European Union and were able to offer the illusory prospect of movement towards central European institutions, but we have never been prepared, as Europe, to bring that into a transition.

Dayton was temporary; it was never meant to be permanent. The world lost interest in the western Balkans. We did as well—Labour, coalition and Conservative Governments—and, as the High Representative said recently, 10 years have gone by without our paying attention to the situation in Bosnia. We have to ensure that there is a medium and long-term strategy on Bosnia. The right hon. Member for Beckenham is right that we need to look at Dayton II, but that is not immediate. It has to happen, but we need to do the groundwork. That involves saying, “We are committed to a multi-ethnic state; we demand that that idea continues.” There can be no redrawing of the boundaries of Bosnia and Herzegovina. That cannot happen.

Bob Stewart: If we cannot have Dayton II soon, we must totally support the High Representative and his actions, and all countries should say that clearly.

Tony Lloyd: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; I agree firmly. Let us not rush into Dayton II. It has to happen and the participants on the ground have to be there, but let us do the groundwork. He is also right that we empowered Paddy Ashdown to operate as a powerful UN High Representative. We are not empowering the High Representative now and we have to return to giving that kind of power to him.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I completely agree with the points that my hon. Friend and the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) made. It seems that one of the problems, which has got worse since my first visit in 2003 and my second in 2013, is that much as we would want to create a multi-ethnic, multi-denominational constitution and structure, a lot of people's daily lives are spent in a separate silo. Their education, healthcare and so many different elements of their lives are effectively pulling them apart. That is why we need to recreate the whole of society in a multi-denominational way.

Tony Lloyd: I do not disagree, but look at the progress we have and have not made in Northern Ireland. This takes time, but it is a real issue. That is why we cannot let Bosnia and Herzegovina disappear off the radar again as other crises move in and out. Belarus matters—as the Minister knows, I am deeply involved in Belarus—and I can name conflicts all around the world, but this issue in the western Balkans also matters.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for the role he played as shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. In the light of the comparison that he is making, it is worth stressing that there are similarities with the Good Friday agreement, which did lock in identity back in 1998, and to some extent, has not evolved, as Dayton also has not. However, the key issue is how we build up the civil society and try to create the overall sense of a Bosnian identity and work on shared and integrated education and other areas that he supported Northern Ireland in during his time in post.

Tony Lloyd: I am grateful for that intervention because my hon. Friend leads me on to my next point, which is a simple one. The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton said, importantly, that Dodik is not the voice of every Bosnian Serb. We have to make sure that we speak to the majority of Bosnian Serbs and say, "There is a different future. It is not Russia—it is not with Moscow. It is not even with the mad voices coming from across the border in Serbia. It is something very different." But we have to give the incentives that we promised but never delivered on, and we have to think seriously about what that means. We cannot offer European Union membership—it is not in our gift—but we can think about NATO, which is certainly a possibility, although NATO cannot interfere in internal conflicts in any easy way. However, there has to be conversation with the decent people among the Bosnian Serbs to make sure that they can see a better future that eschews the kind of

nationalist rhetoric that will damage them and permanently lock Bosnia and Herzegovina into a past that is unthinkable and deny it a future that is possible.

There are big things to play for. This debate is an important part of that. Let us give the very clear message that we do care. We will not go away. We want the Bosnian Serbs to work with the Croats and the Bosniaks to guarantee that future. Yes, let us rethink the structure around Dayton in as short a time as we can. Let us make sure, if necessary, that we sanction the individuals, such as Dodik, who would do harm. And let us make sure that we simply do not let this disappear once again from the agenda.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I remind hon. Members that if we are going to get everybody in, we need to stick to six-minute speeches.

12.56 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I very much welcome the points made by the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), and I wholeheartedly agree with them, except for one: I think it is NATO's job not to interfere in the internal affairs of a state but, if invited to secure the security of that state—and we feel we can do that—to make an offer to it to save it from conflagration. I will come back to that. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) on securing this debate, on the very knowledgeable way in which she introduced the topic and on the passionate way that she spoke. I have wonderful words in my prepared speech, Madam Deputy Speaker, but in the interests of brevity, I shall cast aside my beautiful turns of phrase and say what I think needs to be said.

I think there are only three Members here this afternoon who sat through the 1992 to 1997 Parliament. We heard Paddy Ashdown every week at Prime Minister's Question Time—it was twice a week then—asking questions on what we were going to do about the Balkans crisis. I have to say, I am one of the guilty ones who sat on the Government Benches and thought that he had become obsessed with something that we could not do anything about or should not get involved with. But he was right. It was only when the bread queues in Sarajevo were being shelled by the Serbians that we began to realise that something terrible was happening in our own continent.

I happened to make a visit, I think with the armed forces parliamentary scheme, to NATO, and I heard the then Supreme Allied Commander of NATO describe this as the biggest security failure in the European continent since the second world war. We began to wake up to the fact that something terrible was happening. What had gone wrong? My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton said that we are repeating the same mistakes as we did in the early 1990s. Oh yes we are.

First, there is complacency. Secondly, there are different voices. We talk about the European Union, but the European Union has different voices. Different countries have different approaches. I am afraid that the German Government are pretty ambivalent at the moment about whether the Bosnian state should be secured permanently. The French have always had a stronger relationship

with the Serbs than with any other part of the Balkans. The United States now, as it did then, feel that this was a post-cold war European security problem that it should not get involved with. And then there was some precipitate action by an external actor, Germany—the recognition of Croatia, I think in 1990—that triggered the whole Balkan crisis. It took years before it was understood what we had to do—we tried an air campaign, which did not succeed, and we had to put troops on the ground to stop the fighting—but at least when we got in there and did it, we got an agreement.

We got the agreement with tacit Russian co-operation—Russia did not prevent it. This time, Russia is a player in the conflict. It is stoking the ethnic tensions and encouraging the separatists and the break-up of the state, because I imagine Putin regards it as in his national interest to see 1.8 million Bosnian refugees flooding into Europe when western Europe is already facing a refugee crisis. He would love that, and the Chinese are helping, too.

What are we going to do? Are we just going to carry on pussyfooting around? The solution is for EUFOR, which is a small European Union force, to be reinforced very substantially, now. I differ from the hon. Member for Rochdale on this point: I think that if the Bosnian Government requested that, NATO would have to respond. However, that would require persuading the United States' Mr President Biden, who has become far more isolationist and unhelpful to NATO. I have no brief for Trump, but at least Trump managed to get us all to spend more money; Biden looks completely disinterested from foreign wars. He has to become interested. Just as Clinton started from that position—

Alicia Kearns: I apologise for interrupting my hon. Friend, who is making a very good point. I just want to briefly make a point about wars. What we are saying, and what Biden does not appear to have an appetite for, is that we are trying to create a forever peace, not a war or a conflict. It takes guts, commitment and determination; I thank all hon. Members who have spoken so far and have shown that. That is a slight divergence from my hon. Friend's point, but it is important that this is about forever peace, not war.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: My hon. Friend is quite right. I was going to go on to the point that it was Madeleine Albright, bless her, who persuaded President Clinton that the Americans had to be involved. President Clinton nicknamed it Madeleine's war, but this time it has to be Secretary of State Blinken's peace. My hon. Friend is completely right.

The point is that we can pre-empt war if we get in there with sufficient deterrent force to deter those who are arming the separatists and encouraging their withdrawal from the Bosnian state institutions. The October mandate that Dodik issued that Republika Srpska elements should cease to operate as part of the Bosnian armed forces is an act of revolution, and it must be stopped. It is contrary to international agreements and it is contrary to the UN resolutions. The UN resolutions are still in force under which we can act—and we should act.

What if Russia objects? That is the question that I want to deal with.

Bob Stewart: I wonder whether my very good friend agrees that we could do something unilaterally: deploy a spearhead battalion under operational control of EUFOR now.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: We could. I do not know whether we should do that in order to help to secure international agreement and consensus, or whether we should do it after we have secured international agreement and consensus, but if securing agreement takes too long, that may be something that we should do. Brave nations need to act to prevent another conflagration on our continent—it need not be inevitable.

These are my final questions to the Minister. What happened at the Riga NATO summit? What was discussed? When will we have a statement from the Government about what has been decided and how we, as NATO, will proceed on the matter? I am quite certain that the EU cannot do it on its own. One of the myths created by the EU is that there is something called European defence and security, or a European army, or whatever it is. It cannot act. There must be much wider international agreement. The United Kingdom must support EU action and NATO action to do this together.

1.3 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I declare an interest as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Srebrenica. My interest in that part of the world arises from the fact that, from 2000 to 2002, I worked with the United Nations mission in Kosovo after the NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia. Kosovo was an autonomous province of the state of Serbia. Prior to 2000, the Serbians had come into Kosovo; I saw at first hand some of the atrocities that had been carried out by the Serbian Government in Kosovo. After I came into Parliament in 2010, I got interested in Srebrenica in particular and founded the group with a Conservative Member.

The name “Srebrenica” is associated with the dark days in July 1995 when thousands of men and boys were systematically murdered and buried in mass graves. The victims, who were Muslim, were selected for death based on their identity. Many of us will remember seeing images of the war in Bosnia during the 1990s, watching the horror of the footage of Sarajevo under siege and people being held in concentration camps, and slowly learning about the reports of the atrocities committed across Bosnia that culminated in genocide. The APPG was set up in 2013 with the purpose of commemorating Srebrenica and reminding us of those horrors. Until July 2020, when we stopped doing it because of the pandemic, we had a book of commemoration and remembrance to sign in this House.

After every conflict, we say “Never again,” but years later we have another. When the Dayton agreement was signed, it was not perfect, but it stopped the bloodshed for a number of years. It is important for us all to ensure that peace continues. We cannot return to the violence and destruction of the 1990s, so it is important for the United Kingdom to start working together with our European partners and with others in the world to ensure that they do not happen again.

The seeds of genocide in Srebrenica were planted after years of growing Serb nationalism and the spread of fear and hatred. Even now, there is genocide denial by Serbian leaders. They are trying to stoke the same fears again. Recently, Biljana Plavšić, a former President of Republika Srpska and a convicted war criminal, explained their dehumanising ideology and thinking:

[*Yasmin Qureshi*]

“It was genetically deformed material that embraced Islam. And now, of course, with each successive generation it simply becomes concentrated. It gets worse and worse. It simply expresses itself and dictates their style of thinking, which is rooted in their genes. And through the centuries, the genes degraded further.”

I hope that the Minister will agree that that is inflammatory language that should be condemned by all.

Given the history of atrocities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I hope that the Government will take steps to activate the conflict centre and adopt an atrocity prevention framework so that we do not descend into any more identity-based violence. We know that the current Serbian leader, Dodik, has pledged to withdraw from the federal institutions and form distinct entities, seriously threatening the stability of the nation and heralding fears of a return to violence.

If the international community allows this secession, it will be rewarding the Bosnian Serbs with their goal of creating a “Greater Serbia” by handing to them the very territory in which they committed a four-year campaign consisting of forced deportation, torture and mass murder. It would also be a risk to the most vulnerable returnees, who are based in places such as Srebrenica and Prijedor. Those survivors have already experienced suffering at the hands of the Bosnian Serb force and many of their loved ones have been killed. There is now a real danger that there will be a conflict again and it will happen to them.

The potential for a return to conflict on our doorstep is worrying. Will the Minister and her Department ensure that they share analysis of the current crisis across all Departments, including the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities? Members of the Bosnian-British community are reliving their trauma and fear for what an escalation of violence might mean for their loved ones in the Balkans. I ask the Government to proactively reach out and work with Bosnian communities here, so they feel that there is someone looking after them and that they will not be left alone as they were years ago. I also ask the Government to work with Remembering Srebrenica, led by Waqar Azmi and his team, so that we are reminded of what can happen if we do nothing.

We know that the first world war was started by a Serb nationalist who killed a king in Sarajevo. I do not want to see history repeating itself.

1.9 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I was a young captain in 1997, when I deployed on my very first tour to Bosnia. It was an amazing experience. I was a logistics officer based in Split in Croatia, but I spent most of my time in Gornji Vakuf, Šipovo, Kupres, and Tomislavgrad. I also spent time in Banja Luka, which was then the headquarters of the multinational division that was entrusted with enforcing the peace and the Dayton agreement. Enforcement is a theme to which I shall return.

As some may know, Bosnia is a beautiful country. I have been there many times, and I refer Members to my interests, having visited it recently. It is full of lovely people of all nationalities and religious beliefs. These are great people; these are humble people; these are hard-working people; and these are people who deserve the full support of the international community.

The awful war that lasted from 1992 until 1995 left an appalling legacy. An estimated 100,000 people were killed, 80% of whom were Bosniaks. In July 1995, Bosnian Serb forces killed as many as 8,000 Bosniak men and boys from the town of Srebrenica. I have been there a few times. Ethnic cleansing became part of our language at that time, which it had not been for many years. The legacy is pretty horrible, and it is a legacy of which we must remain mindful today.

The Dayton agreement was signed on 14 December 1995. It was signed by the Republic of Yugoslavia, the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Croatia, and the signatories in witness were the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia and the EU. That means that the UK, as a signatory, also has an obligation to uphold the agreement. The commitment has been there since then. My right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) deployed in 1992, in the act of peacemaking. His tour was much more kinetic; it was called Operation Grapple. I deployed in 1997. My tour was peace enforcement, under the Dayton agreement. I served in support of that agreement, so I have skin in the game.

In a report delivered to the United Nations Security Council earlier this month, Christian Schmidt, the international community’s high representative, suggested that Dodik had been persuaded by regional leaders to suspend his plans. That is very good news, but we cannot and must not take our foot off the gas. Why? Because Dodik’s rhetoric is separatist, and he has vowed to sever the legal and tax systems and the army in the Serb-run half of the country.

Bob Stewart: With reference to what was said by the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and my hon. Friend’s wonderful words, may I point out to the House that, if Republika Srpska were to split from Bosnia, it would be a bit rich if Srebrenica—which is in Republika Srpska—stayed where it is, after what has happened there?

James Sunderland: My right hon. and gallant Friend speaks very wisely, and I could not disagree with what he has said. I urge the Minister to heed those words.

As for the future, we know there is a problem, but let us not admire the problem too greatly. For me, this is about the solution. It is clear to me that a calm de-escalation of the crisis must be the current political goal and that, as a signatory, we must stand by the Dayton agreement. As was mentioned earlier, we must also give the high representative our unequivocal support. He knows what he is talking about, so let us get behind him. I agree with the suggestion that we should support the current headquarters in Bosnia with NATO troops, or even troops of support of the EU; it does not really matter, but an enhanced British presence in the headquarters and possibly on the ground is necessary to give us the eyes and the ears that we need.

I am pretty enthused by the progress so far. We are having this debate, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) for securing it. Baroness Goldie of the Ministry of Defence was in Sarajevo yesterday for the Bosnian Armed Forces Day. It was recently announced that Sir Stuart Peach would become the special envoy to the western Balkans. Let us recognise the good work that has been done so

far. Let us recognise the senior engagement that is happening, and let us also recognise the need for a much broader unity of purpose within NATO and the United Nations, so that all signatories can come together and do what is necessary.

I will end with three points. First, I have mentioned the military presence, and it is very important to get military planners on the ground. Secondly, I believe that new Balkans policy is needed, perhaps amending the structures of the current Dayton agreement and perhaps even creating something called Dayton II, encompassing the changes and the cultural developments. The divides are still there in that fantastic country.

My last point is a simple one. I deployed in 1997 to do peace enforcement; I think we now need to do political enforcement.

1.15 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland).

The recent political violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be of significant concern to the UK and the international community. Under the leadership of Milorad Dodik, there has been a return of ethnic conflict in the region. As we all know, in 1995 Srebrenica experienced a genocide on a scale not seen in Europe since the second world war. Eight thousand Muslim men and boys were murdered, women were raped, children were slain in front of their parents, and bodies were pushed into mass graves with the use of bulldozers. The scale of the crimes exceeds comprehension.

Following those horrific events, a peace agreement was eventually reached. The Dayton agreement is widely considered to be a holding operation, and with the situation rapidly worsening, the already fragile agreement is under immense strain. However, I welcome the appointment of Sir Stuart Peach as our new special envoy for the western Balkans.

Bob Stewart: Sir Stuart Peach is probably the most experienced and intelligent man to do that job. This is a wonderful opportunity to show leadership. We have shown that leadership; now let us give full backing to Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach and allow him to solve this problem from our point of view.

Afzal Khan: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman.

Does the Minister agree that there is an urgent need to reinforce the political will behind the Dayton agreement, and will she commit herself to working with the US, NATO and the EU to underline the agreement as the basis of peace in the western Balkans?

My journey with Bosnia goes back almost to the very beginning. While Yugoslavia was disintegrating, I was involved in organising demonstrations in my home city of Manchester against the persecution of Europe's Muslims. Seeing the Bosnian community flourish in Manchester and across the UK demonstrates the strength of humanity. Despite experiencing such atrocities, people were able to start a new life here in the UK and provide their children with a better future. The events of Srebrenica have always stayed with me, and they are part of the reason I dedicate so much of my work to challenging hate and division in society. Later, when I became a

member of the European Parliament, I had the opportunity to serve as a shadow rapporteur for Bosnia, which took me to that beautiful country on many occasions. I had an opportunity to meet amazing, warm, loving people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I am now involved in Remembering Srebrenica, a charity doing excellent work throughout the UK in schools and other community organisations, trying to learn the lessons and develop champions who can strengthen the communities.

The UK has a special duty to protect the peace and progress made in the region, not just as a signatory to the agreement but because our UK troops served there with distinction and 57 of them died securing the peace. We now know that the assaults on Bosnia's sovereignty, territorial integrity and constitutional order enjoy the full backing of Russia, China, and Serbia. Dodik has separately said that he has support from both Russia and China, with both countries opposing the role of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Given that Russia and China are state-based threats identified in the Government's integrated review, will the Minister condemn their attempts to undermine the High Representative's position and the influence of the UN in the region?

It is a tragedy that, to this day, minority groups around the world are still being persecuted. After the holocaust, we said, "Never again", yet what happened in Srebrenica and what is happening in Xinjiang, China, against the Uyghur Muslims, proves that words are not enough. They must be matched with action. As we mark 26 years since the harrowing genocide in Srebrenica, we must ensure that there is no return to the violence and suffering of the past and secure the gains made for the people of Bosnia. To echo the words of the High Representative, Bosnia

"is facing the greatest threat of the post-war period".

It is paramount that the global response now matches the gravity of the situation.

1.21 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) for the work she did to bring about this debate. Many excellent points have already been made on the importance of retaining the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I add my voice to those expressing concern about recent events. The western Balkans have contributed to the history of modern Europe; they have been a meeting point between east and west for centuries. They have struck a fine balance between competing demands, and have typically performed admirably against coercive and malign forces. Any change to that position is extremely worrying.

I first visited Bosnia and Herzegovina on a visit organised by my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who made an excellent and powerful speech earlier. Like the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), I found that the two most notable features were the beautiful countryside and, sadly, the scars of conflict. As the Prime Minister's trade envoy to the western Balkans, I approach this debate from a slightly different perspective and will focus on the main element of my brief. Trade is, after all, not simply a means of growing economies but a means of ensuring peace and harmony between and within nation states. As the trade envoy, I visited Bosnia

[*Martin Vickers*]

and Herzegovina and Serbia in October, when I held a string of meetings and visits to see for myself the fantastic partnerships that exist, as well as the numerous opportunities that we should be seizing upon.

Alicia Kearns: Those fantastic partnerships would not happen without fantastic, active individuals. Joining us today in the Public Gallery is the Bosnian ambassador to the UK, Vanja Filipović, and I want to tell the House how important he personally has been in ensuring that the things we want to talk about—trade, opportunity, partnership and friendship—are coming about. None of us wants to be having this securitised discussion about Bosnia, so I say thank you to him.

Martin Vickers: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. She has made a point that I was going to make in two or three pages' time, so I hope the House will forgive me if I repeat it.

On my recent visit, I visited a range of businesses. For example, the leading retailer in the country, Bingo, is seeking to cement existing partnerships and encourage new ones with UK suppliers. I also attended a reception hosted by the newly formed British Bosnian and Herzegovinian chamber of commerce, where I met around 50 local businessmen and women eager to do bilateral business. I met the Elnos Group and its UK partner Emico, which recently won a contract to deliver 13 prefabricated substations for HS2 and is planning to bid for more. I also met the Alfa Energy Group, one of the pioneers in energy sustainability; Riva, which is looking to introduce British fashion brands into Bosnia and Herzegovina; and Adriatic Metals, which is creating high-value jobs through a silver mine and also working to boost social cohesion through its charitable foundation.

That list is not exhaustive and I apologise to any organisation or business that I have left out, but I would be here all day if I went into more detail. In fact, there was so much to discuss that no sooner had I landed back in London than our embassy, led by our excellent ambassador Matt Field and his extremely capable team, requested that I return a couple of weeks later for further meetings—a request that I was happy to accept. The point I am trying to make is that there are endless opportunities for our two countries to co-operate further and deepen our partnerships.

The possibilities are endless, but only if we have a stable Bosnia and Herzegovina that is committed to the rule of law and the international agreements to which it has signed up. Yet decision making in the country is deadlocked and preventing it from functioning. The political blockade is damaging not only the internal dynamics of Bosnia and Herzegovina but the external ones as well. One key impact is on the trade continuity agreement that the Governments of the UK and Bosnia and Herzegovina are aiming to secure. After a slow start, we were finally making progress, but the blockade has stalled the process once again and this is unlikely to be resolved until the blockade ends, meaning that Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of just three countries we have not yet signed a TCA with. As a result, customs duties have come into force, hurting businesses and trade.

That is all the more disappointing given the fact that our trading relationship has been improving in recent years. Total trade is modest, but it is increasing despite

the impact of covid-19. In the four quarters to the end of the first quarter of 2021, total trade in goods and services was worth £117 million—an increase of 77% or £51 million on the previous year. This is an opportunity that the excellent chamber of commerce I mentioned is well placed to seize upon. I was pleased to play a role in the formation of the chamber earlier this year, but businesses will be aware that instability in the country will not be to their advantage. It is hoped that Bosnia and Herzegovina will gain membership of the World Trade Organisation in the near future, but this will be very much in doubt if the country is divided.

Those who seek to undermine the integrity of the country need to recognise that the High Representative's use of his executive powers to amend the criminal code was not an attack on any ethnicity, and the country as a whole needs to acknowledge the past so that it can move forward. A political blockade prevents this. The Dayton peace agreement, and the constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina that resulted from it, ended the 1992-95 conflict. It may not be perfect, but it has been for some time the strongest guarantee against conflict in the region. Without it, EU accession talks would not be possible. Calls for the dissolution of Bosnia and Herzegovina are contrary to the Dayton agreement. The UK stands ready to support Bosnia and Herzegovina in protecting its territorial integrity and will support political and democratic reforms that safeguard social cohesion, the rule of law and the safety of its people.

We are committed to tearing down barriers to co-operation, not putting them up, and so long as Bosnia and Herzegovina maintains the same commitment, it will have the full support of the UK as a steadfast ally. I know from my visits and from discussions with politicians and diplomats across the region that there are moderate voices to be heard. We need to work closely with them and develop not only our political links but our trading and economic ties, which can lead to peace and prosperity. We must do all we can to urge those moderate voices to engage with us and to deliver the peace and prosperity that is within their grasp.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. There will now be a six-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

1.29 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I thank the Backbench Business Committee and the hon. Members for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald for arranging this debate on such an important topic.

The current situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is difficult and highly political both in the region and internationally. We have heard how some EU countries have suggested sanctions against the state, while Dodik purports to have other EU leaders firmly on side. We have heard him declare that they will

“defend ourselves with our own forces”

if EU sanctions are implemented, and we have heard his thinly veiled threats to involve Russia and China if NATO gets involved. All that must, of course, be considered and addressed, but I wish to use my time to focus on the humanitarian side of this fast-unfolding crisis.

We are all aware of the dangerous and divisive rhetoric running unchecked throughout the region and, as I mentioned last month when the Minister came to the House to answer an urgent question, I am deeply concerned about where it could lead if it is not stopped in its tracks. The Srebrenica massacre of 1995 was an atrocity. The genocide of thousands of Muslim men and boys—the most horrific of events—is now being dismissed and genocide-denial sentiments are rising among Republika Srpska factions. It was only 26 years ago—not nearly long enough for it to slip from our consciousness. Letting it do so is incredibly dangerous.

That massacre was not the only atrocity of the war in the '90s: there were many instances of what can be described only as crimes against humanity. There was the murder, torture and systematic rape of Bosniak Muslims throughout the region because of their ethnic and religious identities. That is why the charity Remembering Srebrenica has dedicated so much over the past eight years to educating young people on the lessons to be learned from such events so that they are never repeated.

There are people in the region who will be terrified, because they have not forgotten. Those on the receiving end of the growing hate speech know all too well what could happen if nobody is willing to intervene. Right now, they have no assurance that this is not the path that Bosnia and Herzegovina is on. Genocide and widespread crimes against humanity do not happen by accident or chance; they are well planned and organised. The seeds are sown early, from creating division throughout a society to manipulating citizens and playing to their fears.

As a signatory of the Dayton agreement, the UK has a responsibility to the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, so will the Minister commit to developing not only a strategy to prevent any further escalation of the divisive discourse in the region but country-specific approaches for other regions of concern? Will she commit to ensuring that such work will be properly funded and resourced?

Although another war is not inevitable, we have seen how similar conflicts have led to the criminalisation and persecution of human rights activists and civil society. That is why those groups were among those prioritised in the evacuations in Afghanistan, and we have seen how Palestinian groups have been proscribed recently too. Such people and organisations can have a tangible impact in deradicalising extremist views and protecting vulnerable minorities, but they need the opportunity to do their job safely and without fear for their lives. Will the Minister confirm that a plan is in place to protect civil society in the region?

There has been and will be much talk of sanctions, military presence and national security—not just in today's debate but in conversations everywhere. Every option should be given due consideration, but only so long as the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina remain at the heart of much-needed intervention. That must be the priority. As the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton said, we who are here today are friends of Bosnia and will continue to demonstrate that friendship.

1.33 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) for securing this important and timely debate. She asked the Minister a number of important questions, on which I concur.

I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I visited Bosnia and Herzegovina in September as part of the delegation of the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces. I am grateful to my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) for making the trip so successful. I am also grateful to the excellent ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Matthew Field.

It was an extremely useful visit, as I knew little about the country, apart from having followed the war in the 1990s. Such trips are essential if we are to understand what is going in other countries. We met Members of Parliament from Bosnia and Herzegovina and assured them of our support for future trade and diplomatic links. We were aware of the tensions, but they were well hidden during our meeting. Twelve UK Members of Parliament, I think, took four days out of their recess to visit the country to learn more about it. We learned about the Bosnian war, and I hope that that reveals the seriousness with which we take the events and people of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

We visited two sites of genocide, at Ahmići and Srebrenica—and it was genocide, despite the denial of Mr Dodik. We talked to local Muslim people about what they had seen, and heard some very moving testimonies from the mothers and wives of those who had been murdered. The UK Government have sponsored an excellent museum at Srebrenica that shows the atrocities in full. One harrowing video showed a man calling his son and others down off the surrounding wooded hills, as he had been assured by the Serbs that they would be safe. It was not so. The Serbs filmed everything and the language they used while tracking people in the woods through their sniper rifles was that of hunting animals.

Eight thousand men and boys were massacred in three days. The Serbs moved the bodies they had buried in mass graves, so that they would not be spotted and the numbers of those murdered would not be known. That means that their body parts are now in different graves and families still do not have a whole body to grieve over.

We met people who had been teenagers in Sarajevo during the war. Previously, there had been no issue with the different religions or ethnicities and everyone had mixed happily. One day they were all in nightclubs being teenagers; two days later they were hiding in basements, where they spent three long years during the siege, not able to venture out for fear of being shot by snipers. Bullet holes are on practically every building.

Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot go back to those dark ages. We have heard from others about the importance of the Dayton peace agreement and of the compromise that has led to so many years of peace. Mr Dodik appears to want to tear that up by withdrawing Republika Srpska from key state institutions.

What of those Muslim families we met in the state, whose families have lived there for generations and are keen to work with others from all religions again, as before the war? Schools there are segregated and named after Serbian war criminals, and there are statues of those people too.

The 1992 war started by the Serbs was well planned. They dominated the armed forces and used army exercises to train Serbians and establish bases around Sarajevo

[Mrs Flick Drummond]

and beyond. Genocide was well planned. The actions of Mr Dodik as he builds up allies like President Putin should not give us confidence that they are not doing the same again.

A war in Bosnia Herzegovina will destabilise the region and threaten UK national security. Bosnia is on the crossroads of east and west and is a centre for criminal gangs—ironically, they work seamlessly across ethnic divides within the gangs—as well as drugs and people traffickers. President Putin would like to disrupt any chance of Bosnia and Herzegovina's joining the EU or NATO, which should be fast-tracked as soon as possible.

The US has asked us to lead in this area, alongside the EU, and we must shoulder that responsibility immediately, alongside the UN special representative. With my co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on women, peace and security hat on, I say that we must enable civil society, and particularly the many women who are working towards establishing relationships with other religions, to flourish. We must help them to get back to the pre-1992 situation, when everyone worked together regardless of religion or ethnicity.

Alicia Kearns: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. One thing that most strikes me—she will know this from her leadership of that group—is that when we meet the widows of Srebrenica and the women of Bosnia, the systematic rape of these women is a silent issue. People do not speak up about what these women went through and what they see when they look into their children's faces. It is important that we talk about that and do not force them to feel ashamed, as they do, about what they went through. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for touching on the importance of women in this situation, because so often when we talk about Bosnia that has been silenced.

Mrs Drummond: Absolutely, and it makes it even more remarkable that they want to move forward and start to form new relationships with their neighbours from different religions and ethnicities, despite what they have gone through.

Too many young Bosnians are leaving the country because they feel it is unsafe. Like others, I would really like to see more international troops on the ground to reassure the Bosnia and Herzegovina Government that we are there to deter any internal conflict or destabilisation by Russia or internal forces.

I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton for securing this timely debate. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

1.39 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I thank the hon. Members for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) and for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this important debate, which is very close to my heart. We have had an excellent debate this afternoon. The House should be united on this issue, and I think it is. This debate has shown our close links with Bosnia and Herzegovina and, without a

doubt, it has shown the urgent need for action. I am delighted to have seen the Minister in her place throughout the debate, listening carefully.

I declare my interest as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on prevention of genocide and crimes against humanity and vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Bosnia and Herzegovina. I was a humanitarian aid worker during the war, living in Serbia and Bosnia, and four years later I returned with my small family to head Christian Aid's Bosnia office, rebuilding villages in north-west Bosnia and supporting the return of refugees.

I saw how a country that seemed to be peaceful and communities that seemed to be ethnically diverse and happily co-existent could slide into conflict, and I saw how devastating that is for everyone. I lived in communities and spoke to the relatives of elderly people who fled with an hour or two's notice and never returned to their home. They died, devastated, in another part of the country. I spoke to people whose education and dreams for the future were shattered, whose families were separated and whose husbands were killed. The country suffers that deep trauma still.

I will never forget standing in a village with some returning refugees when my translator froze in terror as he recognised the voice of someone who had been a sniper, firing into the town night after night, during the siege of Bihać. Despite those deep traumas and differences, I pay tribute to everyone in Bosnia who has worked hard to rebuild their beautiful country and who looked at atrocities and killing in the face and did not let it define their community forever—to everyone who has consistently chosen peace over hate for many years.

This month is the 26th anniversary of the Dayton agreement, to which the UK is a signatory. We need to reassert our support for the agreement and for the integrity of the national borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The trigger for the current crisis has been genocide denial. We stand together to condemn that genocide denial and the rise of divisive identity-based politics. The UK and international response to the increasingly divisive politics of the leader of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, has been quiet for too long, but I sense a turning of that tide, and I hope this debate will hasten it.

We must learn from what happened in the 1990s and in Srebrenica. When we say "never again," we must mean it. A return to violence in Bosnia is not inevitable, and I will focus on two things. First, civil society has an important role. We have talked about troops on the ground, which I hope not to see. If we work well with civil society now, we can stop it.

We have learned lessons about peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, and that peace was built not just through diplomatic agreements or military action but through community groups, brave individuals, women's groups, teachers and young people. It was supported by other countries, too. For example, a stream of parliamentarians from South Africa repeatedly went to Northern Ireland and lent influential encouragement and expertise during the peace process. Let us learn from that.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I emphasise the hon. Lady's point about the role of women and the empowerment of women in conflict prevention, which has also been

raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) and for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond). The women's peace movement in Northern Ireland was instrumental in helping to end that conflict, and men should be supporting women's peace movements.

Fleur Anderson: I absolutely agree. There are voices of peace, especially women's voices, within Republika Srpska, but it is not easy to work with them. Earlier we heard from the High Representative that it is difficult to be in civil society, to be those voices and to be those women who speak out. We need to seek out those groups and find where they are. I have been asking about this for quite a long time, and I do not know the groups with which we should be working. We in the UK face a challenge in what we can do not only to prevent genocide and conflict now—that is clearly value for money—but to build a lasting peace for the future. That has to be done in conjunction with civil society.

Secondly, we need an atrocity prevention strategy. The United States has one. The Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocity Prevention Act 2018 commits the US Government to pursuing a Government-wide strategy to identify, prevent and respond to atrocity risk. We need that across all the countries in which we work, but we need it in Bosnia right now. Such a strategy would include improved communication between desk officers and London and proper training on spotting the signs early and on what to do, and it would put in place a better early warning system to spot the signs of genocide. According to the UN framework, we can see 21 of 80 warning signs right now. What is happening in other countries? Do we spot them? Are we ready? Without a genocide prevention strategy across all our work, we will not be ready in Bosnia or elsewhere.

Finally, what can the UK do now? I echo many earlier points. I welcome today's announcement of a special envoy to the Balkans. Will the Minister join me in condemning genocide denial and remembering the 8,000 people who died in the Srebrenica genocide? Will she work with the US, NATO and the EU to impose sanctions on countries that undermine the Dayton peace agreement and to assert the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina? Will she provide unequivocal support for the UN High Representative, Christian Schmidt? And will she look into the peacebuilding and civil society support we need to give to groups, communities and individuals in Republika Srpska now?

A co-ordinated, coherent and well-implemented atrocity prevention strategy can save countless lives, stop the need for military intervention and complement diplomatic support.

Bob Stewart: I speak as someone who was very close to an atrocity. I love the idea of an atrocity prevention strategy but, when it happened within three miles of my camp, I knew nothing about it until it happened. There were no indications whatever. It went bang and 100 people were dead.

Fleur Anderson: Atrocities and crimes against humanity happen in different ways in different countries, but the experience from many other countries and other conflicts around the world shows—not always but in many cases—that there are indicators that can be spotted and acted upon before there are military personnel on the ground.

I take the right hon. Gentleman's comments, and I understand there is some scepticism among Conservative Members about an atrocity prevention strategy, but I urge them to look to the experience of its implementation in America and in many African countries. A co-ordinated atrocity prevention strategy can stop history repeating itself. It needs to start with Bosnia, and it needs to start today.

1.48 pm

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) and the hon. Members for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on securing this important debate.

The tone of this debate has been grave, and it has been one of concern. If Bosnians are watching, I hope it will be understood that the motivation is one of love and affection. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a beautiful country of rivers, valleys and mountains, with a vibrant and friendly population. Bosnia could be a great southern European country, if its great potential can be exploited.

In saying that, I do not dismiss the obvious challenges that Bosnia and Herzegovina faces. It has faced the worst atrocities in post-war Europe, and after the civil war it has weak governmental structures, having what has been called a "flat tin roof" of central Government covering two statelets, and there is still a strong international presence in the High Representative. I thank Mr Christian Schmidt for taking the time today to brief parliamentarians on his work. Bosnians should take pride in the fact that for more than two decades there has been peace in that country. As we have heard, no harm has been caused to peacekeepers during that time either.

As a result of those achievements in the past two decades, I share the serious concerns about talk of secessionism; attempts made to weaken central structures even further and to undermine the role of the High Representative; the great deal of political uncertainty; and the weakness of civil society structures. Those concerns build a picture of a lost opportunity to build Bosnia into a strong country. I do not have the experiences that other right hon. and hon. Members have voiced this afternoon, but my small experience came from visiting Ježevac, where there is a refugee camp about 12 miles from Tuzla. It is remote and off the beaten track. I visited in 2000 as a young undergraduate doing some charity work. It is a pretty village of white buildings built by a Norwegian non-governmental organisation, but it is a village of women, girls and boys—an entire generation of men from about 17 onwards is missing there, as they were murdered at Srebrenica. In this remote village were survivors of Srebrenica who were eking out an existence, having been abandoned by the world. In my preparation for this debate, I wanted to know what happened to Ježevac, and I found a report in *The Guardian* from just last year that showed it was still there. Some 20 years later, the people in Ježevac are in this small remote village outside Tuzla eking out an existence on the hillside in their little huts. That just shows that although great progress has been made, there has been a big lost opportunity to build the country that Bosnia could be. So there is a great deal of work we can do.

[Tom Randall]

I appreciate that only the people of Bosnia can build that strong Bosnian nation, but I add my voice to the calls we have heard this afternoon for Her Majesty's Government to be that friend of Bosnia that it needs, to support the Dayton structures, including the role of the High Representative, and to take on the malign forces that are seeking to undermine the nation. As we have heard, we have seen twice in the 20th century that Bosnia has been a flashpoint for great violence, and I hope that we can start to take the action that we need today to make sure that Bosnia will not become the headline in the 21st century, as it has been previously.

1.52 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak on this issue. I commend the hon. Members for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) and for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for leading today's debate. All debates are important, but this one is particularly important to me as I am a huge advocate for human rights globally, and it is a pleasure to be here today to address the ongoing issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I wish to commend the hon. and gallant Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland), and, in particular, the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for his courage and leadership. I have had many discussions with him, and in this House he is held in very high esteem. We have a friendship and a personal relationship that has been enhanced by being here, but I just want to say to him that when I think of him I know why his men followed him—

Bob Stewart: Out of curiosity!

Jim Shannon: No, it is more than that. It is because he gives them leadership and courage—that is the issue.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has been experiencing intensified political and ethnic tensions, which could potentially break the country apart and slide it back into war once again. Bosnia has seen ongoing political violence since the early 1990s, and long before the Bosnian war of 1995. The violence stemming from the discrimination and inequalities is political. I speak as chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, and I speak up for those of an ethnic or religious minority who run for public office in that country—it is almost impossible for them to do that. So I find it astonishing that the constitution has still not been amended, as there is a need for it to be changed. Why should anybody be subject to discrimination and persecution just because they have a different religion or are from a different ethnic minority?

The human rights abuses occur many ways. First, Bosnia and Herzegovina is faced with thousands of migrants and asylum seekers wanting somewhere to live. Between January and August 2019, the state service for foreign affairs registered some 11,292 irregular arrivals and only 185 submitted an asylum application. No one received refugee status. So we have to look at that issue as well.

Secondly, the levels of domestic and gender-based violence are rife—others have mentioned that but I want to state it as well. Human Rights Watch stated that violence against women increased to significant

levels in Bosnia during the pandemic, as it did in many parts of the world. However, in this case, in 2018-19 only 1,223 of the 2,865 reported cases of domestic violence resulted in a court decision—those figures worry me, as this is less than half. In the remainder of the cases, the victim had changed their statement or had withdrawn the allegation, ultimately dropping charges against the perpetrator. I always like to make it clear that when we look at such figures, they are the “reported” figures. Therefore, I suspect—I do not have any evidential base to prove this, but I do not think I am far wrong—that many hundreds, if not thousands, more women are probably suffering at the hands of abusers but are too frightened to report it, given the ongoing human rights abuses.

I was not aware that the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) had done work in Bosnia, but I commend her for that. We were at a Christian Aid thing last night and I saw her there, but I did not realise that she had personal experience of this—I just want to put my thanks to her for that on the record. Intervention from our Government and others is the way to help tackle this problem. We cannot sit back and expect stability and peace to occur if we do nothing to help. This debate is about what we can do and the leadership to which the right hon. Member for Beckenham referred. This country must lead and be at the front. We are accountable for assistance, although I have to say that the human rights abuses by way of a restricted media are prominent. For example, it has been stated that journalists continue to face interference to their work, including lawsuits, and verbal and physical attacks. There have been at least 51 documented violations of media freedom.

Many right hon. and hon. Members have spoken about the peace process in Northern Ireland. As a Unionist, I am very pleased that we have the peace process and that many parts of the world—the USA, the EU and other countries—took the time and effort to make that happen. But do Members know why the peace process delivered at the end of the day? It was because the people of Northern Ireland wanted it to happen. So for it to happen for the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, they need to make it happen. The leader of our group here, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), was in South Africa, along with others, to look at the peace process there and how to move forward.

Alicia Kearns: The hon. Gentleman absolutely makes the point: this has to be about what the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina want. Again, this goes back to the point that Dodik does not have the support he claims he commands. Poll after poll, meeting after meeting of civil society groups, interventions and meetings involving the High Representatives have shown that people do not want secession. The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the Republika Srpska and in every other part of it, just want peace, stability and opportunity. So when we talk about what people want, it is important that we keep that in our mind: they do not want secession.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that, as it is good to have it on the record. She is absolutely right about where we are in this position. As a Unionist, I changed my position when we looked at what we wanted

for Northern Ireland. We could not always depend on the Unionist majority and so we needed to have a relationship with those of a nationalist persuasion and we needed to work together to make that happen. So it does come from within. It came because the majority of the people—that is her point—wanted it to happen.

I wish briefly to discuss a topic on which I like to encourage conversation, as this happens all too often and more times than enough it is ignored: the persecution of religious groups in Bosnia. In particular, I refer to the Bosnian genocide, which has had a prolonged effect on the Bosnian culture. It was estimated that some 23,000 women, children and elderly people were put on buses and driven to Muslim-controlled territory, while, as others have said, 8,000-plus battle-age men were detained and killed. Many Bosniak residents were driven into concentration camps, where women were abused in a horrific way and other civilians were tortured, starved and murdered.

In the wider struggle for stability and peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I give encouragement to and call upon the FCDO. I look to the Minister, as I always do, as she is the person who is going to answer and give us the answers we want—no pressure there. We must offer our support to her to give the direction that we all wish to see. As the right hon. Member for Beckenham and I have said, we want our United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to lead on this, and therefore we look to our allies in NATO, the EU and, further afield, in the US, to come to do that. We need to uphold the provisions of the Dayton peace agreement that was signed in November 1995. It is not too late to adhere to that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): In response to the comment about why his troops followed him, Colonel Bob Stewart shouted from a sedentary position, “Out of curiosity”. I should hate that quip not to make *Hansard*.

1.59 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Speeches in this important debate today, so successfully led by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), have reflected the wide range of contributions made at the time—whether military, in the media, charitable or parliamentary—by Members both in Bosnia and indeed elsewhere. Above all, what comes out of this debate is the huge amount of shared interest, concern and goodwill for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. All of us can remember where we were during some of the most horrific events from a generation ago, particularly the massacre in Srebrenica. All of us today wish to see this newish nation continue to succeed.

I come to this debate partly as chair of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which was born out of those events. The then Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, created the foundation with huge cross-party support from individuals such as George Robertson and Margaret Ewing. It was not just a Conservative venture, but a parliamentary venture to help build and support the new democratic parties and institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thirty years on, a few months away from that anniversary, it would be a horrible irony if this effort, among all the efforts made by people in this country and elsewhere, including in Bosnia itself, were

to come to a horrible return to the nationalistic and secessionist events of a generation ago. All of us stand in support of the work of the High Representative, the ambassador here and also our ambassador out there, and the Minister and her colleagues to try to play our role in preventing that from happening.

Tony Lloyd: The hon. Gentleman is making a fine contribution. Let us just think how cheap the work of the Westminster Foundation is, or other measures designed to maintain peace, compared with the enormous cost of refugees flooding across Europe and of conflict once again in the heart of Europe. It is a cheap deal and we should grab it.

Richard Graham: The hon. Gentleman is right, although, by mentioning that, he tempts me to stray into the territory of budget resolutions for the WFD and other such issues—but I will not do so today. He is right that what is absolutely crucial is maintaining peace, continuing stability, building on an imperfect agreement—the Dayton accord—and trying to encourage all the political institutions in Bosnia to work more closely with civic society to build a country in which the young, above all, have confidence and can see a future. That is precisely what the WFD is doing there today, and what we have been doing across the west Balkans, which, above all, includes, as the Minister knows, trying to build more inclusive societies where both the young and women feel that they have a critical role to play. This is perhaps particularly so in a society that was so dominated by war and by male nationalism not that long ago. It is interesting, for example, that following the programme that we ran there in 2020, 30 female councillors were elected at local government level. That is an encouraging step in the right direction.

However, all of these efforts will come to nothing if, as has been rightly said, we somehow allow the country to slide back potentially towards civil unrest and even civil war. That is the theme of today. There will be other themes to come. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) will no doubt allude to the very successful campaign run by Baroness Helić, now in the Lords, when she was working as special adviser to the then Foreign Secretary, Lord Hague of Richmond, while I was a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Foreign Office, to highlight some of the unbelievable atrocities done in that conflict and elsewhere in the world. All that good work risks being unravelled by some in Bosnia and Herzegovina who wish to return to a different nationalistic world of division and conflict.

We have seen plenty of evidence of the commitment of the Minister and our Government. I know that the Minister has seen the High Representative. Her colleague, the Defence Minister, was in Bosnia yesterday for Armed Forces Day, and we are beginning to see the right signals coming through social media from the US, the EU, NATO and the UN. They are all coming together and not sounding a slightly different note and tone about their approach to secessionist moves. Ultimately, if we start redrawing maps in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we risk unravelling maps all across central and eastern Europe with horrible consequences. I am talking about the 1.8 million Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina who will surely find their way in that situation towards other parts of Europe and towards our own shores,

[Richard Graham]

rather than being able to build their current and future lives in their own country. We do know of the ghastly consequences that could come from this.

The appointment of Sir Stuart Peach is an encouraging step forward. All sorts of discussions are to be had, as my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) suggested earlier, about what role we could play in EUFOR and the UN forces as a stabilising and protecting mission with a clear purpose of saving lives and preventing war. There must be no doubt about what that goal should be. Perhaps, above all, we should try to make sure that this country continues to play our role in the issues in Europe, which matter to all of us here, for that is the goal not only of this debate, but much more widely, of our role in Europe and in the world as a force for good.

2.6 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) for opening this debate so powerfully. I also thank those Members who have spoken today who have direct experience of the conflict and of the subsequent peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For me, the conflict then was a horror unfolding on the nightly news, and has seldom been mentioned since in the news. However, in the past week, I have received a number of personal and moving messages from constituents who came from Bosnia and Herzegovina, telling me just how worried they are about the current situation.

The Dayton agreement was a key diplomatic achievement in post-war Europe; it was not a perfect agreement, but it stopped the bloodshed and provided nearly 30 years of peace. It showed that peace was possible and that the international community, including the US and the UK, could be a force for justice, a force for good and a force for peace. It sent a powerful message, while also bringing peace for so many families.

The 1995 horrors of Srebrenica are a painful reminder that genocide and crimes against humanity are not merely something from the distant past. The legendary writer and holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said that, after the holocaust, the words, “Never again” became more than a slogan; they became “a prayer, a promise, a vow.” That vow should underpin the work of our Government—and indeed of all Governments—on the world stage.

One constituent who lived through the conflict wrote to me of

“the large number of concentration camps where people were tortured in many inhumane ways, subjected to torture, hunger and thirst.”

He told me that these horrors had a particular impact on children, as they had

“their carefree childhood interrupted, and many were left without one or both parents and lived in orphanages or in foster care.”

Those in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the diaspora across the world are really worried about the situation. A constituent told me that citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina

“want to enjoy peace, freedom and democracy, and to preserve their integrity and sovereignty. They want to progress and have a better future...They deserve happiness and prosperity as any other human being.”

Those words echo the central point of this debate: they deserve happiness.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) has written to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and rightly called on the Government to take urgent action, as others have done today. The UK has a special role to play and should be leading on this situation. We hear much from the Government about global Britain. Surely this is the type of issue where we need to see the whole Government playing a larger role, not only as a signatory to the Dayton agreement, which underpins peace, but because of our duty to the memory of the 57 members of the UK forces who died while securing peace.

We have heard serious concerns about the current situation from the UN High Representative, Christian Schmidt, and from the EU and NATO. Our Government need to work with our European partners in France and Germany, along with the US, to ensure that the EU’s peacekeeping operation has the necessary support. We have a moral duty to find a solution to this crisis, to work with our allies and to lead. I hope that we will hear from the Government about just what they are doing.

2.10 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): As has been mentioned by the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), I am privileged to chair the all-party parliamentary group on the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative, which was set up by the then Foreign Secretary, William Hague, and Baroness Helić, who sits in the other place. The APPG and the initiative have recently been relaunched, and I understand that Stuart Peach is to have a remit and a role. The initiative shows the significance of ensuring that women are included in the peace discussions, and that we can push for justice, support, and action against the perpetrators.

At this point in the debate, there is little else that I can say that has not already been mentioned. This is the second significant debate that we have had in this House on Bosnia in about three weeks. It is important that we continue this momentum and pressure to ensure that Bosnians, Bosniaks and people of the western Balkans understand that we will continue to discuss and debate this issue, and that this House is united and the Government are listening, because today’s call for action is unanimous.

There is no doubt that we need to recognise the genocide that has gone on in the western Balkans and in Bosnia, but it is also important to understand that Bosnia might be the first domino that will fall, and if it falls we will see action in Kosovo and issues in Montenegro, and we will give up the ghost in the western Balkans as a whole; the spread of fear and intimidation is being used to divide people. Of course, after Afghanistan we have seen that the west’s response has been somewhat subdued. We need to use this as the opportunity for the west to regain its confidence and to act and intervene where necessary. Bosnia is a case in point, not just because of our history or the extraordinary service of our soldiers and the UN peacekeeping forces, but because it is in our backyard and it is the playground of Russia, and of Serbia and Croatia, where they are trying to ignore international rules.

So much has been said about Dodik, but we know his playbook. It will be to use a small riot or some security issue, and then areas will go into lockdown and police forces will arrive. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) said, we are already seeing it. Those are the tactics that will be used; we have to expect them, but we have to expect a robust response.

We should have two focuses. The first is on the short term. Today we need a commitment from the Foreign Secretary to respond. If Dodik takes action and there is intervention, we need to be able to say with confidence that we will react and encourage others to do so. We need to ensure that sanctions and travel bans are implemented. I do not know whether the UK will unilaterally put sanctions and travel bans on individuals, but we should have no fear or hesitation about publishing a list of those we want to target; that should be absolutely no problem for us. Of course, this short-term focus must also be about reaffirming territorial integrity. We made this point during the last urgent question on this issue, but we need this reaffirmation conclusively, and we need it to be repeated again and again and again.

The second perspective is the long term. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, we need to reform annexe 4 of the constitution to ensure that there is democratic accountability, and to give that confidence to people in the region and area. As so many Members have said, the Dayton accord needs to be modernised and updated.

Russia and China are meddling and disrupting in the region. Russia is arming police forces in the Republika Srpska. China is trying to encourage a debt-trap scenario in Bosnia. Those are two of the outside players, but we must ensure that there is accountability towards Croatia and Serbia, because, frankly, they must be held to account for their actions. If they want to see entry into the EU or other organisations, we must hold them to account on this issue.

Today's announcement about Sir Stuart Peach is particularly welcome, but would the Minister inform the House on what his remit will be, when he will be reporting back on what is going on, and what his powers will be, because this morning's announcement was very broad?

We have seen EU intransigence, NATO inaction and US indifference. I am sorry to put it like that, but the United Kingdom seems to be the only country right now that is standing up and talking about this issue. As other Members have said, we have a duty to lead. Let us lead and let us restore the confidence in the international rules-based order, and support an extraordinary country.

2.15 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) for securing this incredibly important debate.

My interest in this matter is connected to two things. First, I have not really spoken about this, but my academic background is in Russia, and Russian and eastern European history. If I have any international knowledge, it is connected to that. I also had the great privilege of going to Bosnia only about two months ago, on a delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina led by my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who gave a fantastic tour.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall) said, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country and a nation with, in some respects, so much going for it: the great, unique beauty of the physical environment; by and large, lovely, interesting people; a culture and a history that is unmatched; and a capital city that is probably one of the most fascinating that I have ever had the privilege of visiting. It is slightly disappointing that we are now at a point where we cannot fly direct to Sarajevo. I hope that that changes at some point in the future, and that many of my constituents and those of every hon. Member in this place can go and see the wonders in Bosnia and Herzegovina that a lot of us have had the benefit of seeing.

It is sad that so long after the Dayton agreement, the political lines remain very narrow. We do not see political parties that transcend the particular ethnic and religious groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and that has been made more difficult by the self-interested behaviour of various political actors there that have held back the process. I do think it is possible that Bosnia and Herzegovina can be a sustainable nation, if given the chance to do so by those who have the ultimate responsibility for making that happen and for ensuring that the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina can live together in peace and harmony.

During my visit to Bosnia, I went to Ahmići, which is in the north of the country. My right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham was at the heart of witnessing the horrors that happened there. Of course, it was Bosnian Croats who committed that genocide; and it was a genocide, and it was right that it was called that.

Srebrenica will stick with me forever in terms of what I saw there and the graves. Although more than 8,000 people died, there are nowhere near that many graves there, because a lot of the remains have not been found. But they continue to be found, and when I was there, I saw new, fresh graves being dug.

We also had the great privilege of meeting the mothers of a lot of the boys and young men who were massacred, and the women whose husbands were massacred. That will stick with me perhaps more than anything. It was probably the most depressing thing about the visit, because I have been to a similar place where such horrors happened, and that place was Auschwitz. My visit there will also stick with me for the rest of my life, but there is something particularly depressing about a visit to Srebrenica, because not all the lessons have been learnt. In fact, most of the lessons have not been learnt by those connected to and close to the horror that took place.

We should listen to the mothers of those who were massacred explain how, to this day, they see in their communities those linked to the people who carried out the evil that happened, how they are a victim of abuse in the streets, and how they know that within schools in the Republic of Srpska revisionist history is taught and the mayor of a local town has not even bothered to visit the cemetery. This is happening on our doorstep and any country that supports the individuals involved in this should be ashamed.

What do we know would happen if we were to say that the Republic of Srpska can succeed? What message would that send in giving in to the tactics of many people who do not see this for what it was—a genocide—and who are not apologetic for the evil that happened? What message does that send?

Alicia Kearns: The importance of going to Bosnia must not be understated. I thank my hon. Friend for sharing that because I remember visiting the Srebrenica memorial in 2015, and two Serbian young men driving past in their car with music blaring, throwing bottles of urine into the memorial. I remember attending the funerals of people whose body parts had finally been pulled together because the Serbians went in with diggers and dug up the mass graves to try to deny and hide how many people they had murdered. I remember people screaming, “The deaths are made up—they are not real, what is going on?” and people picketing these funerals. Does he agree that it is vital that as many Members of this House as possible visit and learn, because it is only through seeing the visceral pain that was there in 2015, and is there now, that we can truly understand how much of a tinderbox Bosnia is?

Tom Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for that fantastic intervention. I think any Member who has the opportunity to go there should go there. Anyone outside this place who has the opportunity to go there should go there. I admit that before I went I was quite blind to the reality of the present-day situation and the extent to which many of the problems still exist. I probably naively thought, “That was a little while ago now. I assume it’s all moved forward and the lessons have been learned.” The most depressing thing about all this is the extent to which, in many ways, that is not the case.

I use that comparison: that visit and my visit to Auschwitz. That is a relevant comparison because the scale is not the same, but the brutality, the genocide and the evil intentions are the same. The difference is this. We know that antisemitism still exists in our country and in the world and we should not stop until it is completely eradicated, but, other than a few fringe conspiracy theorists, nobody denies the brutal evil reality of what happened in the holocaust. But, to this day, not far away from where we stand, there are many people, and many countries backing people, who do deny what happened in 1995. That should cause us all great concern. I do not profess to be an expert on international affairs or that country, but I am an honourable Member in this place who was incredibly moved by what I saw on my visit, and it has shaped my thinking in a way that I doubt many visits will ever do for me as long as I am a Member in this place.

In terms of what we do now, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton because, at the very least, this will raise awareness and that is good and an end in itself. But in terms of concrete actions, I would like to share the views expressed by the vast majority of hon. Members about what we need to do. We do need to stand tall because so often this great country is relied upon to do so and we must not let the people of Bosnia down.

2.23 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow all the speeches in this debate and to wind up for the SNP. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) on bringing this important issue before the House and on an excellent speech that I very much enjoyed.

A number of excellent points have been made throughout the debate, so I will focus particularly on outcomes and action points because it is important that we take stock

of what is happening in Bosnia. The price of peace is eternal vigilance and that has never been more true than with what is happening in Bosnia and Herzegovina just now. There is a wider context as well. We are seeing a pattern of behaviour. We are seeing it in cyber-attacks in the Baltic states, in the odious use of refugees to create a crisis on the Polish border, and in the continued illegal annexation of Crimea and continued instability in eastern Ukraine. Russia and its proxies will test, and are testing, the limits of the rules-based international order, and the Dayton accords are fragile and under threat because they are also testing the resolve of the international community to defend that international order and those accords. So international solidarity and co-ordination have never been more vital.

In terms of action points and what we can do, I will not repeat the excellent points that have been made from all points of the compass in the House. There are a number of things that we can and should be doing more of. I commend the work that the UK Government have done but I would like to see further action. First, on focus, we need to make everyone aware in the region that we are paying attention to what is happening there, and it is relevant to us in our countries and to what is happening here. We need to give vocal support to the high representative, as a number of colleagues have said. He needs support in his job and full-throated support in the international forums where he is trying to win his arguments.

Secondly, it is surely past time that Magnitsky sanctions were imposed on individuals within the region, but also that wider sanctions were set out as there will be consequences to infringements of the Dayton accords. We must ratchet that up to make sure that people are in no doubt that there will be consequences to malfeasance.

Thirdly, on NATO, the establishment of a counter-disinformation centre in Sarajevo is a wonderful proposal. It would be useful in countering the blizzard of disinformation and lies that is trying to muddy the water and confuse people within the region.

Fourthly, I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) about an atrocity prevention strategy. This is very close to the SNP’s heart as well. In the coming weeks we will be putting forward our proposals for the protection of civilians. I warmly commend the paper by Dr Kate Ferguson from Protection Approaches to the House. She sets out a number of very practical ways in which this could be taken forward. It would boost the efforts of global Britain to be the force for good that various Members hope it can be. If the UK Government took steps in that direction, we would support that. It would be a common effort. We think that atrocity prevention should be far higher up the agenda within the FCDO.

The protection of civilians is crucial within Bosnia and Herzegovina. As we have heard, violence is not inevitable, but surely history tells us that it is very far from impossible either. So we must see higher action on this. The price of peace being eternal vigilance, we remember Srebrenica each year as a humanitarian tragedy, but we also need to remember it as a collective failure. Let us not be the generation that looks back on this point and says, “We could have done more.”

2.27 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): This really is Parliament at its best, when we are united and speaking with one voice on the importance of saving lives, because this is where we could end up with this very grave debate and the situation in Bosnia Herzegovina. I thank the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), who clearly has intimate knowledge of the subject and a real passion to deter what could be a terrible outcome if we do not get moving, as the international community, in preventing further conflict, in-fighting and hatred, which so many humanitarians around the Chamber have mentioned. I also want to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who in this House has a history of stopping violence against women and girls, both domestically and internationally, and the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald). I thank them for securing the debate.

Parliaments have a real role in sparking these debates and in galvanising Governments. We have seen that today. This morning we had the meeting and the briefing from Christian Schmidt, who has a background not just in the defence brief in the German Parliament but in the friendship group with the UK. It is fantastic that he made it such a priority to be here—at the invitation of the FCDO, the Minister, the influential Back Bencher, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton, and all those who were there, including my hon. Friends the Members for Caerphilly (Wayne David), for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), who all have a strong history in this area—to counter the beat of nationalism, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale said. Mr Schmidt warned of a potential return to violence and fragmentation. We had a long discussion about the importance of keeping Dayton alive and going, but also of refreshing it, as it was 20-odd years ago.

I briefly want to put on record my background as a visitor to asylum seekers and refugees from the area, mainly young Kosovans, in the late 1990s. That is how I met my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and then came into politics myself—visiting youngsters in bed and breakfasts in London boroughs. When we visit children in our own constituency, we might have helped their parents as asylum seekers and refugees in the late 1990s.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Nationalism can be toxic, but there is another crucial ingredient in this potential catastrophe: the interference by other sovereign states, such as Russia and China, and the benign neglect by states that should know better. That is what creates the catastrophe. Will the hon. Lady address that a little in her remarks?

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Member for making that point, because the role of the US has come up in the debate. We call the agreement the Dayton peace accords for a reason. I hope that the US will join us and put on record its commitment to maintaining the Dayton legacy.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: What about Russia?

Catherine West: I was coming to this, but I am happy to bring forward my bullet points for the Minister. Will she condemn the sale of arms to the Serbian police

forces, which has been discussed? Will she condemn the role that Russia is playing in the wider picture, given that it was around the table originally for the Dayton peace talks? Can she give us her current assessment of the danger Russia poses in this situation?

We know that widespread bigotry and hatred can snowball into violence, destruction and ethnic cleansing. Through the international actions that we can all take now, rather than waiting for things to worsen, we can have a real impact, because we know that 26 years ago is but a blink of the eye when the feelings still run high. I was particularly moved by the comment of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that he had changed his position during the debates on the Irish question we had here in the 1990s and into the 2000s. He said that he had changed, and I wanted to emphasise our own experience of that conflict—I know that the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) has experience of that conflict, too. We can change and we can hope to be the conveners of change.

My second challenge to the Minister is to ask what is the UK's role? As the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), who is no longer in his place, asked, what will Sir Stuart Peach's remit be when he arrives in Bosnia? How will he support the work of Christian Schmidt, so that we can lead with the UN High Representative and not be undermined by players such as Russia? Will she respond to the question on sanctions? Are sanctions being considered in the effort to use every single tool available to us?

Tony Lloyd: If a sanctions regime is appropriate, does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that the sanctions be finely targeted, so that they do not hit the people of Bosnia and even those in the Republika Srpska, but are directed at the authors of this nationalism, which is so unacceptable?

Catherine West: I agree with my hon. Friend and with the excellent approach he takes on Belarus. I know the Minister is aware of that. My hon. Friend has led in a number of the debates on sanctions in Belarus, and it is the same actor there. I say to the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), who challenged on the role of Russia, that this is the same sort of undermining of international action as we are seeing in Belarus. The sanctions response from the Government has been good and cross-party. I hope to see that in Bosnia, if the assessment is that sanctions are necessary.

I have two more challenges, and then I will conclude. What increased engagement and proactive work are being undertaken to prevent the slide into the rhetoric and violence of the past? At civil society level and at the economic level, what role can international partners play, both in promoting trade, which the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) talked about, and in promoting the role of civic society, which my hon. Friend the Member for Putney emphasised? Will the UK Government be prepared to continue to act as a convener to bring together the international community, given the tragic past? The right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham left us with the image of his interpreter and driver being assassinated during the conflict and he himself being at risk.

[*Catherine West*]

Let me conclude by saying that the world is watching us. My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) reminded us of the immortal words of Elie Wiesel. We know that with Holocaust Memorial Day just a month or two away, the work that is done to prevent further loss of life is crucial. Now is the time to act. We must step up. We must, throughout all civic society, as well as through the use of our armed forces and others, put this on record: never again.

2.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Wendy Morton): I start by thanking right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House for their clear interest in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the western Balkans and for their often powerful and personal contributions to the debate.

James Sunderland: Will the Minister give way?

Wendy Morton: I would like to make a bit of progress first. I have a huge number of questions to try to get through, but I will happily come back to my hon. Friend.

As this debate has highlighted, political developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina are of significant concern to the UK Government. I will endeavour to address all the points raised during my speech. The views expressed by Members of this House in relation to peace and security in the region do have an impact. The urgent question of 9 November and the discussion that followed were widely reported in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

After the devastating conflicts of the 1990s, Bosnia and Herzegovina has lived in peace for 26 years. This has allowed the country and the region to build stability and prosperity. The late and much-missed Lord Ashdown described the Dayton peace agreement as “the floor, not the ceiling.”

It is a base upon which to build progress on issues of concern to citizens. Sadly, politicians who are more focused on maintaining their own positions have exploited that agreement.

As the system that underpins stability is undermined, we see tension spreading across the region. Milorad Dodik, a Bosnian Serb member of the tripartite presidency, has threatened to withdraw the Republika Srpska, one of two constitutional entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, from important state institutions. The High Representative, Christian Schmidt, has called that an attempt at de facto secession. The situation is as serious as we have seen in a long time.

President Dodik’s plan, which is clearly dangerous and deliberate, would undo much of the hard-won progress of the past two decades. It would isolate the Republika Srpska, increase instability and reduce opportunities for all citizens. We must not be complacent about the risk posed to peace and the long-term future of the country. The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina deserve a better future in a stable and prosperous state with strong institutions, and the UK is committed to helping them.

To address these challenges, the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary have today appointed a UK special envoy for the western Balkans. I am pleased that Sir Stuart

Peach, well known to many in this House as a former Chief of the Defence Staff and then chairman of the NATO military committee, will take on the role. Members, including the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), have asked what his work will entail. It will involve promoting strong democratic institutions and open societies, helping to tackle serious and organised crime and other joint security challenges, and encouraging resolution of legacy issues such as war crimes and missing persons. The UK will also continue to lead work to advance gender equality and to implement the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative. I am sure his appointment will be welcomed across the House—I sense that it has been welcomed this afternoon. It demonstrates the UK’s strong commitment to stability and prosperity in the region and to deepening our bilateral relationships.

As a demonstration of our commitment, my ministerial colleagues Lord Ahmad and Baroness Goldie were both in Sarajevo yesterday. They discussed with ministerial counterparts how together we can safeguard Bosnia and Herzegovina’s sovereignty and state integrity. Baroness Goldie marked Armed Forces Day to show our support.

On EUFOR, we worked hard with our allies in the UN Security Council to renew the mandate for the EUFOR stabilisation force, and we welcome EUFOR’s ability to continue its ongoing work. The mandate is an important deterrent against those with malign intent who would seek to damage regional stability.

Tony Lloyd: For the record, there has to be a strong EUFOR presence, but it has only 750 people at the moment, so it is too small. It is not up to this country alone, but what can we do to ensure that we empower EUFOR to act as a real deterrent?

Wendy Morton: The most important thing to recognise is that we have renewed the mandate and we welcome the ongoing work that EUFOR can continue. We recognise that it is an important tool and an important deterrent against those with malign intent.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: As I mentioned, I sat through those debates and questions in the 1990s, and I am not prepared to sit through more months and years of prevarication. My right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) proposed that we should simply make an offer of British armed forces to pump prime the whole of NATO to make a considerable enlargement to the force, because that is what is necessary. The force needs to be moved into the Brčko corridor, which is the main enclave that we need to protect, and to deter the detachment of Republika Srpska armed forces. Otherwise, it will happen—it is happening. It is being encouraged by Russia and we are not doing enough to deter it. We just want a deterrent force; we do not want to start a war.

Wendy Morton: Okay. As I explained, I believe EUFOR is an important deterrent, but I recognise that Members of both sides of the House are keen to understand and learn more about what the UK is doing, so let me make some progress.

On the position of the High Representative, we are fully committed to supporting the High Representative as he works with people in-country to implement the

civilian aspects of the peace agreement. We support the use of his executive powers, should the situation require it. As Members are aware, he is in London today and I know that he spoke with many Members this morning. I also met him, as will the Foreign Secretary, and our embassy team in Sarajevo remain in close contact with him. That visible and vocal support for the High Representative is essential. We will not allow those who wish harm on that country to undermine his authority.

Many right hon. and hon. Members raised NATO and asked about the meeting in Riga this week. NATO must play an enhanced role in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the western Balkans. At the NATO foreign ministerial meeting in Riga, the Foreign Secretary focused attention on Bosnia and Herzegovina and encouraged greater engagement from the alliance. She called on allies to contribute personnel to the NATO headquarters in Sarajevo and to support work to counter disinformation and strengthen defence reform. The UK will do its part. The UK also offers defence assistance to Bosnia and Herzegovina's armed forces in support of capacity building efforts and their partnership for peace goals.

On Russia and disinformation, we are seeing a worrying pattern of Russian behaviour aimed at stopping Bosnia and Herzegovina moving closer to Europe and NATO. The UK takes that extremely seriously and will continue to call out aggression. We are also backing projects to counter disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider region, including giving support to independent media organisations.

Bob Stewart: Regarding Russia, when I was in Bosnia as part of the United Nations protection force, a Russian man called Victor Andreev was very much part of the headquarters. I suggest that we invite the Russians to send people, and possibly even forces, to join any units that we deploy there, because that might be a way forward.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful for my right hon. and gallant Friend's suggestions, and those of other Members on both sides of the House, which I will consider.

I will touch on Serbian language that is seen as provocative elsewhere in the region. We wholeheartedly condemn that divisive and inflammatory rhetoric, just as we condemn deliberate attempts to destabilise the region. We have consistently urged Serbia and its neighbours to play a constructive role in the region.

I am conscious of time, so I will crack on and try to answer as many questions as I can. Many Members rightly raised the danger of genocide denial and glorifying war criminals. The UK has consistently urged all political leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region to reject hate speech; to condemn any glorification of the perpetrators of genocide and war crimes; and to respect the verdicts of international and domestic courts.

My visit to the Srebrenica Memorial Centre earlier this year, and my meeting with some of the mothers there, is an occasion that will stay with me forever. We cannot allow such crimes to be repeated anywhere in the world. We are working with the Srebrenica Memorial Centre to establish a centre for genocide research, prevention and reconciliation. In the UK, we support the work of Remembering Srebrenica, which works tirelessly to raise awareness.

Many Members raised sanctions, which are an important part of the UK's toolkit for the western Balkans to address corruption and destabilising activities. Obviously it would not be appropriate to speculate about future sanctions targets, as to do so could reduce their impact, but we are in close contact with our partners and we discuss all aspects of our response to the challenges.

I assure Members that preventing sexual violence in conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a priority through our strategy. We are supporting a number of successful projects. There are many other areas that I would have liked to cover, but I will follow up in writing to any specific questions.

The citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina want and deserve security, peace and hope for the future, yet divisive rhetoric and escalating intercommunity tensions threaten those dreams. There is no short-term solution, but as I have set out, the UK has a vital role to play alongside a co-ordinated and focused international response. We remain committed to the success of Bosnia and Herzegovina and all its people.

James Sunderland: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Earlier in the debate, when reading from awful notes, I made an assertion about the perpetrators of the Srebrenica massacre. In the interest of absolute balance and objectivity, noting current sensitivity within Bosnia, I would like to state for the record that that is contested. I therefore pay tribute to all those across the whole region who have done so much to maintain peace since 1995, and I defer to the position of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

2.48 pm

Alicia Kearns: I, too, start with a slight correction, as I should have declared in my opening speech that I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Bosnia and Herzegovina. I apologise for that absence of mind.

I am humbled by and grateful to every Member who has spoken today, and I am proud of the unified voice with which we have spoken. I thank the Minister for her comments and commitments. I am sure that there are more conversations to be had.

We have sent an undeniable message that we stand united with Bosnia; we stand behind the Dayton agreement and the High Representative; we stand against hatred and division; and we want an uplift in our NATO HQ deployment in Sarajevo. We believe that there is hope and that violence is not inevitable.

I hope that our voices are heard in Bosnia and the Balkans, and I damn well hope that they are heard in Moscow. We can do more and we have a duty to do more. Today, we have started to live up to that duty. I hope that we will not divide on the motion, so that we can send a unanimous message to the world that we stand with our friends in Bosnia.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): As Catherine West said earlier, this debate has been Parliament at its best. The UK Parliament remembers Srebrenica today, and not just today—we remember Srebrenica every day.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the concerning political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina; expresses its support for institutions set out in the Dayton Peace Agreement, and the office and work of

[Mr Deputy Speaker]

the High Representative, Mr Christian Schmidt; and supports continued efforts by the UK Government and its allies to ensure peace and stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina and to uphold the provisions of the Dayton Peace Agreement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we come to the motion on economic crime, I will pause momentarily as people leave the Chamber and others come in.

Economic Crime

[*Relevant Documents: Oral evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on 25 January, 14 June, 8 July, 22 September and 29 November, on Economic crime, HC 145.*]

2.50 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House recognises the devastating impact economic crime has on individuals, businesses, families and society; considers it unacceptable that the cost of money laundering alone exceeds £100 billion a year according to the National Crime Agency; is concerned that in the wake of the Pandora Papers leak there is inadequate transparency, regulation and resources in place to effectively tackle this severe problem; and calls on the Government to bring forward legislative proposals to tackle economic crime as a matter of priority, integral to which are provisions to introduce a criminal offence for failure to prevent economic crime, reform Companies House and introduce a beneficial ownership register for the overseas owners of UK property.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for selecting the motion for debate. I am also grateful to all those who supported the application, and I particularly thank the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for working with me on it. The reason why we have secured such wide support for our debate is the growing recognition, concern and understanding of the enormous problems we are facing as a result of economic crime.

The Government produced an economic crime plan in 2019, but as the period it covers comes to an end next year, I think we should all reflect that that plan has not resulted in a successful crackdown on economic crime, but instead we have witnessed frightening and real growth in such crime. Far from bearing down on such wrongdoing, we have seen it mushroom across our economy, infecting our society, our security and our public sphere.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I put on record my tribute to my right hon. Friend for her work yesterday on the Finance (No. 2) Bill, dealing not just with the bigger subject, but with the detail of the Bill's clauses. Does she agree with that, although it is our economy, in a globalised environment we should worry about economies abroad, including the Russian influence? I refer specifically to the recommendations of the Russia report, which deal with a number of financial instruments.

Dame Margaret Hodge: One of my growing concerns is that economic crime and the laundering of money into the country—particularly, one suspects, of a lot of Russian money that has probably been stolen from the Russian people—is having an influence right through society, and I will reflect on that later in my contribution.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I congratulate the right hon. Lady. I just want to say that this money is not all from Russia; it is closer to home. I make this point because it is important to do so. I am sure that the right hon. Lady is aware that Northern Ireland has paramilitary groups that have become experts in money laundering. Does she not agree that information sharing UK-wide—it is no different here or in Scotland, Northern

Ireland and Wales—is imperative if we are to stop those terrorist, criminal, evil thugs living the high life, which they do while the communities that they live in live in fear?

Dame Margaret Hodge: I completely concur with the sentiments expressed so powerfully by the hon. Member.

We are now, sadly, one of the jurisdictions of choice for money launderers, criminals and kleptocrats. We do not just tolerate, but—unwittingly, perhaps—facilitate economic crime. Our Moody’s credit rating has fallen a notch, specifically because of the

“weakening in the UK’s institutions and governance”.

Fraud, an important element in economic crime, now affects one in 15 adults, and it too often destroys the lives of innocent victims who are just normal, trusting citizens.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I have a constituent who had a dormant company that was taken over by criminals and used to defraud others, but Companies House says that it cannot do anything about it. LinkedIn is colluding, with a whole lot of false company information, which helps to undermine the situation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Companies House should be able to do more, and that it is damaging its own reputation?

Dame Margaret Hodge: One of the specific areas on which we make a recommendation in our motion before the House is the reform of Companies House. The situation of my hon. Friend’s constituent is just the sort of situation in which Companies House ought to be able at least to verify and possibly to pursue the wrongdoers.

Economic crime is often the facilitator of other crimes—from people trafficking to drug smuggling, and from terrorism to corruption. It does not just enable other crimes; it impacts on our national security. Dirty Russian money laundered into the UK is spreading like a spider’s web through our society. It is used to buy influence and to control our football clubs, our vital infrastructure and, more recently, our politicians and our politics. Today, we want not just to lay out the problem, but to put forward three pragmatic reforms that the Government could adopt—not tomorrow, but today. These are three oven-ready policies that together could have a significant impact in both preventing economic crime and punishing its wicked perpetrators.

We have become the destination of choice for a number of reasons. First, we have a very weak regulatory regime after decades of deregulation. Introducing reforms to our corporate liability regime would start to address the inadequacies in the regulations we have inherited. Even where we do have clear laws—this is my second point—our enforcement agencies are both inadequately resourced and risk averse in their policing of our system. Lack of money and fear of failure drive their decisions, and unlike America, we let criminals get away with it. Reform of Companies House would constitute the start of creating a tougher enforcement regime. Thirdly, we still allow a lack of transparency to flourish, giving wonderful cover to ne’er-do-wells and making it difficult to follow the money. If we cannot follow the money, dirty money triumphs.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on arranging

this very important and very timely debate. I am only sorry that I cannot stay for the whole thing because I am due to speak elsewhere.

I want to pick up on the point the right hon. Lady was just making, and ask whether she would agree that it is not enough to improve the three things she is talking about to come up to some sort of international standard. Because of the existence of the City of London—a huge economic asset in Britain’s economy—we actually have to be better than almost anybody else, given not just the benefits but the risks that that creates.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I completely agree with the important contribution that our anti-corruption tsar has made in the House today. I think it is a really short-term view to believe that our British economy can flourish on the back of dirty money. We will flourish if we clean up the act in the City of London and it again becomes a trusted institution.

I just wonder how many Panama papers, Paradise papers, Pandora papers, FinCEN—Financial Crimes Enforcement Network—leaks, laundromat leaks, Falciani leaks and Luxembourg leaks we need for our Government to wake up, stop mouthing warm words, which they do a lot, and start acting with tough measures to bear down on this dangerous crime and this terrible trend.

A proposal to toughen up the regulatory framework was included in the 2015 Conservative party manifesto. The party pledged—I hope I am quoting accurately—to create a criminal offence where companies

“fail to put in place measures”

to prevent economic crime. The Government launched a consultation that lasted four years, and then parked the issue in the long grass by referring it to the Law Commission. I understand that the Law Commission is about to report, but we need and want corporate liability reform, and we want it now.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a delight to work with the right hon. Lady on this particular issue. As part of the Law Commission consultation, there is talk that, instead of there being a criminal liability for failing to prevent economic crime within a corporation, it may be downgraded to a regulatory offence. Does she agree that that would not create the deterrent we need for these corporations, such as NatWest, which is facing a fine of £340 million for not properly monitoring money laundering in this country in a Bradford jewellery company? Does she agree that there must be a serious sanction, such as a criminal offence, where individuals could be locked up for not doing the right thing in these areas?

Dame Margaret Hodge: Again, I am pleased to see such unity across the Chamber today. I completely agree that if it is not made a criminal offence and there is no direct liability on the individuals concerned, it simply becomes a business cost and will not change the behaviour or conduct of those big corporations. I concur with the hon. Gentleman.

I was going to use the example, although I probably do not need to, of the Serious Fraud Office’s failure to successfully prosecute the Barclays bank case. As many observed at the time, that case showed that under our existing law the bank could not be held accountable for the actions of its employees, and the chief executive

[*Dame Margaret Hodge*]

could not be held to account for the actions of the bank. Nobody could be held to account. These reforms would change that by introducing a vicarious liability condition and bringing in a “failure to prevent” clause. The Americans do it; they have much tougher laws that hit the corporations with criminal, civil and regulatory penalties, and they secure many more resources.

Our second ask is about starting the work to strengthen our enforcement by reforming Companies House. Creating a public register of beneficial ownership was an important move when David Cameron was our Prime Minister, and a huge step forward. In one year, the register was accessed more than 2 billion times, but the data, as we all know, is often inaccurate or incomplete. Global Witness did an analysis in 2018 that showed that 10,000 companies declare a foreign company—mostly linked to a secrecy jurisdiction—as the owner of the company, 335,000 companies had no beneficial owner and 9,000 companies were controlled by beneficial owners who each controlled more than 100 companies, so they were nominee beneficial owners.

It takes £12 to set up a company—it is ridiculous. That is why so many UK companies keep appearing in all the leaks we get of wrongdoing. Our lax enforcement leads to tragedies worldwide, and we need to do something about that. That is why these reforms could be funded by raising the fee. If we quadrupled the fee and charged 50 quid to start a company, we would raise a huge amount of money that we could put into reforming Companies House and ensuring that it had unique identifiers for the beneficial owners, and powers to investigate and interrogate.

My third proposal, which I will deal with very quickly, concerns the introduction of a property register. Buying a property through a shell company registered in the British Virgin Islands is the easiest way to launder money into the UK. There are very few good reasons for maintaining anonymity, but plenty of bad ones: not just money laundering, but avoiding stamp duty, inheritance tax and other taxes.

It is difficult to put a number on that, although many people have tried, but I will share one fact with the House. All London boroughs have had an increase in their electoral register over recent times; the only borough that has not is the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the reason being that such a large number of properties there are bought through shell companies by foreign owners that there are fewer residents there today than there were 10 years ago.

Catherine West: Does my right hon. Friend agree that that distortion of the London housing market is to the detriment of all our constituents? I note there are other hon. Members present who represent London seats. Across the UK, but particularly in London, where we see such extreme homelessness and overcrowding of children, that really needs to be addressed.

Dame Margaret Hodge: Absolutely. That is another really important point; hiking up the prices at the top of the market obviously has an impact right through the housing market here in London. Some terrible instances have been uncovered in the various leaks. The Crown Estate, for example, sold 120 of its properties to companies

registered in 14 different tax jurisdictions, demonstrating again the way in which the system is abused. Those are people such as Vladimir Chernukhin, who owns a residence in Regent’s Park through a company registered in the British Virgin Islands, or James Ibori, a Nigerian governor who was prosecuted here for fraud and money laundering, and who had property in Hampstead and Dorset. In the recent Pandora Papers, the Crown Estate bought a £67 million property from the Aliyev family, who are the well-documented abusers of their rule in Azerbaijan.

In 2015 we were promised a register of beneficial ownership for properties owned abroad. There was a consultation in 2016 and a draft Bill in 2018. It was mentioned in the Queen’s Speech in 2019, and again in the G7 meeting in Cornwall in 2021, but we still have not got a Bill, although it is my understanding that such a Bill has been written and is literally gathering dust on the shelf. The problem is enormous, and if we fail to act robustly it will overwhelm us. Economic crime is costing us our international reputation as a trusted and respected jurisdiction. If that trust goes, our ability to develop and grow our economy will be fatally curtailed.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is talking about the amount of resource we commit to this, but has she seen the statistic that the National Economic Crime Centre put to the Work and Pensions Committee, which is that fraud now accounts for a third of crime in the UK, but for 1% of police resources?

Dame Margaret Hodge: Throughout this, when we talk to the enforcement agencies, they all minimise their expenditure on economic crime and have other priorities. That statistic is very frightening, and I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for bringing it to the attention of the House. I think it can be reflected in all four or five agencies that do a similar job.

We will never achieve sustainable prosperity on the back of dirty money. With the economic crime plan drawing to a close, this is the perfect opportunity for the Government to put the proposals in our motion before the House, so that we can debate and enact them, and embark on that long and difficult journey of ridding this country of the cancer that is growing in our economy and society. Across the House we will then all feel that we are not just debating, but that we are acting to expel economic crime from the Britain we all love and seek to serve.

3.7 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate, and to follow the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), who is such a champion in this area. I add my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important and timely debate. This debate is urgent, particularly since, as the right hon. Lady said, the Government promised and intend to bring forward legislation in the form of an economic crime Bill. All we are asking for are things the Government have promised to do in the past, so we are pretty much on the same page. We must ensure that the Bill is brought forward quickly, because it is so important, and that it is brought forward in the same form. I am disappointed that there are not as many speakers as I might wish on the

Government Benches, but it is wrong to think that this is not a political priority for many of my colleagues, and for Members across the House. It is good that 40 parliamentarians signed a recent letter on the issue to the Prime Minister, urging action in this area.

Perhaps some parliamentarians, and perhaps the public at large, do not feel that economic crime affects them. Perhaps in many people's eyes it is a victimless crime, but nothing could be further from the truth. For evidence of that, we should look at the 27 victims—men, women and children—who drowned in the channel only a few days ago. They were victims of economic crime. Of course, the reasons people want to come to this country are manifold, including fear of persecution, or for a better life—whatever those reasons may be—but those journeys are enabled because they are facilitated by economic criminals, and people who benefit from economic crime. These are organised criminals.

If someone steals a little bit of money—£200 in cash, say—they can go down the pub and spend it or do something else with it. If someone benefits from a huge amount of money—these organised criminals are benefiting by millions of pounds from the business of people trafficking—how do they use that money? They cannot simply buy a house, which the right hon. Lady referred to, or a yacht; people cannot spend their ill-gotten gains in any way these days because there are checks and balances—some checks and balances. If a person goes to buy a house, somebody will say, "What's the source of your moneys?" However, they do not check too far, and we cannot follow the money as far as we need to follow it.

If we want evidence of the importance of this, we should listen to the people who really understand economic crime. Paul Stanfield, the head of organised crime at Interpol, said recently:

"It's all about the money. If you want to tackle organized crime, you have to go after the money."

The small boats crisis is probably the No. 1 domestic political priority in the UK. It is a humanitarian crisis and it is an economic crime. In fact, there are two levels of economic crime in this area. One is the fact that organised criminals are taking huge amounts of money—thousands, or tens of thousands of pounds—from desperate people to cross a continent. That is an economic crime in itself, but that money is then laundered, and much of it is laundered through this country.

For evidence of that, we should listen to the Prime Minister's corruption tsar, my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), who said exactly this in an intervention a few moments ago. This country is used because of some of our lax regulations, as the right hon. Member for Barking mentioned, but also because of the concentration of advisers in this country, be they lawyers, accountants, consultants—these other people who facilitate the rabbit holes that this money goes down so that it can then be used for legitimate purposes. That is what happens with this money, but the starting point is these terrible crimes.

Of course, we are talking not just about huge international organised criminals, but about domestic organised criminals. Recently, a Yorkshire "businessman" called Manni Hussain had an unexplained wealth order made against him by the National Crime Agency for £10 million. He presented himself as a bona fide

businessperson, but he has connections with some of the worst organised criminals in this country. Murderers, drug dealers—all these people are facilitating crime in this country, and we are leaving open loopholes that we could close and clean up our economy.

Of course, there are lots of vested interests in this whole argument. Some would say, "Oh my God, all this dirty money will stop coming into the UK. It'll damage our economy." In my view as a businessperson, nothing could be further from the truth. What businesspeople need is a clean economy. That is the foundation of our economy—a clean framework that investors have confidence in. The more our law upholds that framework, the more successful our economy will be. But even if that money was good for this country, we are not interested in it; it can go somewhere else. We must show leadership in this context on the world stage.

And this is about the world stage. If anyone wants to look at how these rabbit holes work and how pernicious this activity is for billions of people on our planet, they should read the wonderful book "Moneyland" by Oliver Bullough. It is a fantastic book. He starts off with a very interesting story about former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich and talks about this huge house he has—one of many palaces that he built around Ukraine, all from the expropriation of moneys from the Ukrainian people. He diverted money that was supposed to be there for health services and many other public services into his own coffers, and he eventually ended up in exile in Russia. He is a very brave man, Oliver Bullough, and he explains how this all happens. He explains very clearly how it could not happen without the rabbit holes that are enabled in this very country. It is not just the UK, to be fair. Some are enabled by our overseas territories and Crown dependencies—the Government are bringing forward, after a lot of pressure from people such as the right hon. Member for Barking, open registers of shell companies in those jurisdictions—and by many other countries, too. The US is very guilty, with places such as Dakota allowing similarly lax regimes. We want other countries to do the same. Such opportunities are facilitating some of the worst crimes known to humanity: people trafficking; drug dealing; organised crime; terrorism, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned; the expropriation of public money; and the impoverishment of nations.

A report from Oxfam in 2000 talked about how money was being stolen by kleptocrats in developing nations around the world to the tune of £50 billion a year. We have big debates in this House about our international aid budget and whether it is used wisely. Significant amounts of money—our taxpayers' money—are put into developing nations. In that year, internationally £50 billion went into developing nations. Can we guess how much money was moved out of those very countries by kleptocrats, officials and politicians? It was £50 billion—so, in one door and out the other. We are facilitating that and we can close it down.

Whether it is £10 million for the smaller scale organised criminal or billions of pounds for international kleptocrats, we have the opportunity to close those things down. The money is no use to anybody unless they can spend it. To spend it, they need to be able to salt it away and legitimise it. That is what our shell companies do under the lax regime of Companies House, where £12 sets up a company with no checks and balances, no identity

[Kevin Hollinrake]

checks and no requirement to check who is the beneficial owner. Trusts are not included, so money can go into trusts. There is no oversight of trusts in the UK or UK property. The Government, rightly, say they will bring forward a register of overseas entities. The City of London—its knowledge, its power, our legal firms and our accountancy firms—facilitates this stuff to the tune of £100 billion a year in the UK. As the motion sets out, £100 billion a year is money laundered in the UK. That figure is directly from the National Crime Agency and that is not even the full extent of economic crime—it is that big.

Paul Stanfield says that we have to follow the money. The point, ironically, is that our system stops us from following the money. That is what we need to address. The key to all of this is transparency. Everything needs to be more transparent. That is the point about Companies House. Companies House should become not just a register but a regulator, with checks and balances to make sure that the people setting up companies are the beneficial owners of those companies. It is quite straightforward: as the right hon. Lady the Member for Barking said, a simple levy on top of the £12 would provide the resources to do that. We need a register of overseas entities, so we can see who is buying UK properties—again, the Government have committed to doing that.

I want to come on to transparency in other contexts. I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I was involved in a business until March this year when it was sold. Last year, when things looked pretty tough, we took on quite a significant coronavirus business interruption loan. We never drew it down. We repaid it without touching it when we realised that the recession was not going to be as hard as we thought on our business, but it was a significant amount of money.

Whether we are talking about CBILS or the bounce back loan scheme, the Government decided that it would not make these loans subject to public scrutiny—loans which were providing Government support, effectively enabled by taxpayers' money. If I, as a businessperson, had taken taxpayers' money, I would have no problem with that being open to public scrutiny. It is good if it is subject to it—what is wrong with that level of transparency? The Government decided not to make that transparent, but we had to provide some level of transparency because of our association with the European Union.

Bloomberg got hold of this issue and scraped the data on 45,000 companies—hon. Members can read its report, which was in the paper last week—and there were some very startling cases. One included a £4.7 million loan that was drawn down by a company that existed only two days prior. There are lots of different concerns about those programmes. Some of that loan may be legitimate, although it seems unlikely that it was bona fide, because the company would have had to be a viable trading company before that time. However, if all this stuff is open to public scrutiny, it could be looked at by people such as us and those who have more time to do it, such as journalists, who do a fantastic job in this area by highlighting these issues—where would be without the investigative journalists who look at this kind of stuff? That would deter people in the first place from

drawing down a loan in such circumstances and, because people would know that they would be pursued, it would reduce the level of fraud. This is a key issue for the Government in relation to the furlough scheme, the bounce back loan scheme and other areas. I cannot see how it would be detrimental to our economy to have more transparency in these areas. I am thinking particularly of Companies House reform and the register of British overseas entities.

My final point on the motion is about the offence of a failure to prevent economic crime. That is so important. This is an extension of the “failure to prevent” offence that exists, for example, for bribery—so if an organisation does not put checks and balances in place to make sure that its staff are not bribing other people or customers to try to get work, for example, it is breaking the law. That is a criminal offence, and it relates to tax evasion as well.

We want to extend that offence to cover economic crime. That means—I spoke about the NatWest example—that if a company does not put measures in place to prevent money laundering, so there are not checks and balance throughout an organisation to prevent that, it has corporate criminal liability. As I said, I would like to see that as individual criminal liability, because that would provide the biggest deterrent for senior executives and mean that they clamp down on the wrong kind of behaviour in their organisation. We can look at the construction sector for an example. This is a bit tangential, but the number of accidents and deaths on building sites dropped markedly only when directors suddenly had personal criminal liability over health and safety on their construction sites. Personal liability makes a big difference. Otherwise, this is seen as just a cost of doing business.

The “failure to prevent” offence does not just cover money laundering, and that is key. If we spoke to the banks about this, they would say, “We have that covered already under money-laundering rules”, but this is not just about money laundering. The corporate criminal offence is a tougher penalty and is available to the Serious Fraud Office rather than just the regulator, the Financial Conduct Authority, and it covers other crimes.

As many people know, in the all-party group on fair business banking we have dealt with the fall-out of the financial crisis in relation to RBS, the Global Restructuring Group, Lloyds, and HBOS Reading in particular. Let us look at the HBOS Reading scandal. For 10 years, Lloyds and HBOS denied any wrongdoing and that a fraud was happening in their organisations before it was proven in court in 2017, and four people went to jail for 47 years. It is the only case in the history of fraud ever proven against a bank in this country, and we know there has been more than that. Nevertheless, there was denial for 10 years.

Over that 10-year period, going back as early as 2007, victims were saying to Halifax Bank of Scotland and then to Lloyds bank, “There is fraud going on in your bank.” They were ignored; it was denial after denial. When an individual within Lloyds, its senior risk manager Sally Masterton, wrote a report on it and gave it to the bank, it sacked her. It shut her down for five years, saying that she was not a cogent witness and that she was acting for her own reasons rather than on a company instruction. That turned out not to be the case, and the bank had to retract the claim and compensate her in

2018. If we had the “failure to prevent” offence, that could not happen. People in those organisations would be accountable at a senior level, and that would clamp down on such behaviour. It would be a tremendous deterrent. It would also work with lawyers and accountants, because they too have responsibility to prevent economic crime. Instead of being facilitators, they would be required to stop this stuff happening.

We are currently having plenty of conversations in debates about how we can prevent scams such as push payment fraud, particularly on platforms including social media. The “Online Harms” White Paper refers to user-generated content rather than corporate-level scams. The Government are talking about expanding the Online Safety Bill to include those, but a requirement to prevent economic crime could work for Facebook, Google and the rest of them as well.

At present, platforms such as Google can simply take money from the highest bidder. They accept “pay per click” for companies to advertise investment opportunities, without checking whether they are bona fide companies. They do not check whether a company is Standard Chartered or someone posing as Standard Chartered; they simply take the money and let the company advertise on their sites, with no checks and balances and no requirement for them. If there were a “failure to prevent economic crime” provision, they would not be able to do that. They would have to put in place those checks and balances to ensure that the companies concerned were the companies that they were purporting to be, which, as we all know, is not beyond the wit of those platforms. This would tackle many different hugely important issues at the same time.

I have spoken for far too long, Madam Deputy Speaker, but all these matters are so important. The Government could introduce the necessary measures very quickly, and I urge them to do so. I believe that they will, and when we see that legislation, Members on both sides of the House will be championing them from the rooftops.

3.27 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), and I welcome his collaboration with my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge). They both advanced powerful arguments in opening the debate.

I want to focus briefly on one specific point. I mentioned, in an intervention on my right hon. Friend, the Work and Pensions Committee’s inquiry into pension scams, which reported a little while ago. This is an important area of economic crime, and our report highlighted in particular the menace of online scams, which the hon. Gentleman has just mentioned. As he said, the Online Safety Bill presents a unique opportunity to address this menace. The Prime Minister has said that tackling online fraud is one of the Bill’s main aims, but the current version, which is undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny, leaves out the major part of the problem. That must be changed.

The campaigner Mark Taber gave evidence to our inquiry. He found the compare-uk-bonds.co.uk fake comparison site on Google, and reported it to Google in May last year. An elderly woman who had recently been bereaved contacted him after losing more than

£200,000 to that scam site on Google in September. Google finally took it down in December. People think that if they find something on Google, somebody must have vetted it, but of course they have not. Google gets paid by scammers, and then also gets paid by regulators to warn about the scammers people find on Google. It is a pretty good business. I have no idea why Google did not take that scam down in May. Was it because the company was disorganised? Was it because it wanted to keep the advertising income coming in? Google will not say, and I do not imagine that we will ever know. What this shows us is that the law must be changed. If it is not changed, crooks will continue to ruin the lives of thousands by advertising scams online. That would be an unforgivable failure of Government.

Last year, the Pension Scams Industry Group estimated that £10 billion had been lost to pension scams by 40,000 people since the pension freedoms were introduced by George Osborne in 2015. I welcome some of the recent changes that have been made to help. The new Pensions Schemes Act 2021 will restrict the statutory right to transfer, which was given in the pension freedoms, where there are signs of a scam. The High Court recently ruled that the fraud compensation fund could be used to compensate pension liberation scam victims. Those are both welcome steps, but we need to do more. In particular, we must tackle the menace of online scams. The insurer Aviva told the Work and Pensions Committee that in the six months before it gave us its evidence it had found 27 scam websites purporting to be Aviva. Having found them, it takes quite a lot of effort to get them taken down, and there are always victims before the sites are removed.

In the Online Safety Bill, the Government are tackling user-generated scams, but not paid-for scam adverts. That needs to be changed, because it is the scam adverts that are the heart of the problem. That is not just the view of my Committee and the Treasury Committee; it is the view of almost everyone outside Whitehall who has looked at this, except for the internet companies. The Governor of the Bank of England told the Treasury Committee that the risk to consumers from online fraud

“could be tackled through the Online Harms Legislation, but the experience so far...is that there is strong resistance in other parts of the official sector to extending the legislation to financial services. This is a serious problem.”

He is absolutely right.

The City of London police wrote to the Work and Pensions Committee in May that the exclusion of advertisements and cloned websites from the Online Safety Bill

“leaves a gap in the protection provided for the public”.

The City of London police went on to call for

“legislation requiring a duty to protect and/or corporate criminal liability for failure to prevent across all online and telecommunications enablers.”

The Financial Conduct Authority told us in evidence to the Committee that

“financial harms should be included in the Online Safety Bill to ensure that online platform operators take responsibility for the material which they disseminate which could cause consumers financial harm.”

[Stephen Timms]

That is absolutely right as well. The Prime Minister told the Liaison Committee in July that

“one of the key objectives of the Online Safety Bill is to tackle online fraud”.

I welcome and applaud that pledge, yet the Bill as it stands entirely misses the major problem of online fraud, which is paid-for advertising.

Martin Lewis of MoneySavingExpert.com, Sir Richard Branson and Dawn French have all had their name or image used in online scams. They all wrote to the Prime Minister last month calling for the Online Safety Bill to tackle scams, pointing out that the current Bill will penalise someone who posts a scam, but not someone who pays to post the same scam. They went on to say that the

“Government has said it wants to eventually tackle scam adverts through changing advertising regulation—but this will have to go through a lengthy process of legislating in the face of fierce opposition from a powerful advertising industry.”

We understand that work to address the problem of scam advertising is going on somewhere—the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, I think—but on a much longer timetable. If that is the track we go down, it will be years before anything changes, and thousands more people will lose their life savings in the meantime.

Kevin Hollinrake: That is a really interesting quote. Who is in the “powerful advertising industry”? The only people I can see benefiting from scams posted in the paid-ads section of Google are those at Google, not those in the advertising industry.

Stephen Timms: That hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. I know that Ministers have been looking into this issue. As I understand it, there is now a very complex infrastructure around advertising. Google is at the end of the chain, but there are all sorts of agencies and intermediaries—a whole industry—in the middle. I imagine that letter is referring to the fact that all those people in the middle would say, “No, don’t touch this because it’s working very well.” It is working well for them, but I am afraid that for the public it definitely is not. If we wait in the way suggested in the letter, it will let crooks and scammers continue to ruin people’s lives for years to come. That would be a catastrophic Government failure. My plea is for Ministers to change course now, face up to the undoubted technical challenges, and legislate in the Online Safety Bill.

Finally, I agree with a point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking in opening the debate: this is an existential threat to the UK economy. Financial services account for a big part of our economy, and we have a worldwide reputation and provide a great deal of expertise and high-quality services. If people conclude that they can no longer trust our financial services sector because fraud is being allowed to run rife, that is a massive threat not just to that industry but to our entire economy. We really do need to tackle economic crime, face it head on, and make the kind of changes that my right hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton have argued for, to protect not just the customers of these services but the entire economy.

3.36 pm

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I shall try to hobble on one leg, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for securing this important and timely debate. Frankly, it is time that we addressed some of these issues for once and for all.

Before I begin, I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. For 10 years before I was elected, I worked in fraud and financial crime with some of the largest institutions—banks, insurers, telecoms companies, charities and, in fact, the Government—trying to bear down on fraud and financial crime. I seconded members of my team to the national economic crime command and the joint money laundering and intelligence taskforce, and the organisation that I worked for chaired the joint fraud taskforce.

During that period working in fraud and financial crime, I learned that there is huge willing on the part of the industry, the Government and law enforcement to work together to tackle some of the issues at the heart of this debate. I think those in the industry are willing to go a lot further in putting time, resource, money and energy into tackling some of these issues, but in return they want their investment to be backed by action from the Government and law enforcement. They want to feel heat and to see people’s collars being felt.

Let us be absolutely clear: without peril, this is just a game of whack-a-mole in which one rogue actor—one criminal—can simply shut down their activity and start again. They collect their money, move on and make liquid their funds until that route closes, and then they just open another. That is the game they are currently playing—and it is a game to them. We should be dismayed that it is happening and being allowed to happen. As Members have already said, funds are being raised through serious and organised crime. They are the result of scams and low-level frauds, of insider information leaks, of hacks, of the exploitation of breach data, of corporate espionage, and of people deliberately exploiting the state. As my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton pointed out, stopping the money flows is essential to stopping this activity full stop.

I recall a meeting about three years ago with the NCA, which had mapped an organised crime group and how it enabled and then laundered the proceeds of economic crime and of very human crimes. The OCG was linked to people traffickers. As my hon. Friend mentioned, those same groups are now exploiting vulnerable people and transporting them across the channel in dinghies. It was linked to low-level scams in which a vulnerable grandmother might get a phone call and suddenly have her life savings emptied out of her bank account. It was tied to complex financial marketing activity on the dark web, where credit card breach data is sold for criminals to exploit. It was also linked to drug imports and county lines drug running. The chain ran from grandmothers’ houses, across the channel, across the dark web, into the property market and all the way to the poppy fields of Afghanistan.

I make it clear that this is one group, and there are many of them. It is not a ragtag bunch of criminals trying their hand but a deeply successful, multimillion-pound business—a tax-avoiding business, too—and there

are many of them out there. These people sought and exploited every single opportunity to enrich themselves, with no care for the misery or economic cost they left behind.

These criminal gangs result in real challenges for people. Insurance premiums are higher, delivery costs are inflated, public funds do not reach those who need them the most, small businesses are cratering and life savings are stolen. They also overinflate the property market, which is important. I recall sitting in the office of the NCA's director of economic crime in Vauxhall. He pointed out of the window to the shiny new skyscrapers opposite and said, "Not a single one of them has curtains or a kettle in the kitchen, yet they change hands on an almost weekly basis for millions of pounds." This is forcing people out of the property market. If we hope to ensure that some of our cities are ever again affordable for families to live in, we need to bear down on this activity.

These organised crime businesses are hugely complex. They run as cells, and they are intelligent. If part of the business is shut down, they know how to get up and run again. As reprehensible as they may be, I am slightly in awe of how clever they are and how they operate. But the reality of these businesses is wrought in the ruined and damaged lives they leave behind. I come back to my first point: without peril, we will simply not be able to act against them. The current whack-a-mole approach means that, for every snake's head we chop off, another one appears.

As the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) said, fraud is the No. 1 volume crime in the UK. It is epidemic and completely out of control. We simply do not have a grip on it. It is all well and good for the City of London police to run a day of action and pick up the 10 most-wanted fraudsters in the UK, but there are 4.6 million cases of fraud each year. Where is the peril that will stop the behaviour? When the industry, the biggest banks, insurers, charities and the Government pull together to share information to bear down on those fraudsters, why are collars not being felt more regularly?

The Department for Work and Pensions ran 11 raids this morning to shut down an OCG's £4 million benefit scam. I am glad to see there is some work happening in this area, but there is plenty more to do. We should be considering the economic equivalent of antisocial behaviour orders—economic crime prevention orders—to put those who commit fraud on notice by putting a mark against their name and saying there will be serious consequences if they do it again.

We should be looking again at how we can better empower information sharing and action against those responsible for these crimes. Taking away the ability to launder their funds would remove a good part of the incentive of people who run small boats, and taking away a county lines drug operator's ability to trade out their earnings will do exactly the same. We need to look more closely at enablers. Thankfully, Companies House now restricts the amount of personal data available to the public on its website, which was a key enabler of fraud, but I join other colleagues in saying that we have to tread a fine line between encouraging entrepreneurship by making it easy to set up a business and making the UK a dynamic place in which to operate, and creating an easy entryway for criminality and allowing criminality to disguise itself with a veneer of acceptability.

The other key point on enablers relates to online safety and education, which will be key. Young people are sharing information right, left and centre on social media without a care for how it is going to be picked up and used against them. The point about advertising that was mentioned earlier was also spot on. The online harms Bill is absolutely where we need to be addressing this issue; to add to the layer cake of voices calling for the change that colleagues have mentioned, the director of the national economic crime command has also suggested that fraud should be included in that Bill.

In drawing to a close, I wish to thank the right hon. Member for Barking and my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton for calling this incredibly important debate. The measures they are calling for in an economic crime Bill are proportionate and fair. We need to inject not only as much transparency as we possibly can into the system, but peril, too; we need to be making sure that criminals feel that heat. I believe the reforms they have suggested will get us there, and I very much look forward to hearing the Minister's views.

3.45 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) for speaking and giving his expertise on this. I, too, have a bit of a gammy ankle, so I will try not to fall over. He will find that if he sits on the Front Bench and leans against it, he will get a wee bit more support and will not have to wobble so much. That is a top tip from my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who has had a similar affliction recently.

This debate is incredibly important and timely, and I am very grateful to the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for securing it. I feel as though this has almost been economic crime week for me in this place, because our Treasury Committee took its final evidence from Ministers on this issue on Monday. The Economic Secretary to the Treasury and the Minister for Security and Borders were very clear that not enough is being done. That is probably the biggest understatement in this House this week. It is very evident that not enough is being done, because these crimes are going unprosecuted, victims are increasing in number and it feels as though nothing very much is happening to address it. It is incredibly worrying, as we see when we look at the figures, which indicate the scale of this. It can only indicate the scale of it because, by its very nature, economic crime can be very difficult to count; that money is gone—it is disappeared and it vanishes, never to be seen again.

I very much support the suggestion that all Members who have spoken so far have made of an offence of a failure to prevent economic crime. That is crucial, and I would tie it in to the online safety Bill that is coming, because that is a golden opportunity. The evidence we have had from almost every person who has come before the Treasury Committee to talk about this has been, "You have to get this in the online safety Bill." They do not believe another good enough opportunity will come along quickly enough to deal with this issue. The Government are very good at saying, "Oh yes, when parliamentary time allows—we will look at this soon. We will do this in good time." But we need to see it now, as this has been drifting long enough and action needs to be taken on it.

[Alison Thewliss]

The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) mentioned that the Governor of the Bank of England, every other financial institution that has come before us and sent in evidence, independent experts, journalists and organisations such as the Royal United Services Institute—all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds—have said that more needs to be done, that there is an opportunity here and that it would be huge neglect on the part of the Government if they failed to take the opportunity that is in front of them right now. It is an opportunity that they have presented to this House in the form of this Bill. If they miss this chance, it will be a matter of significant detriment to all our constituents.

The biggest barrier is the lack of enforcement. The Government will point to very good laws that they have on money laundering, and things that they feel are useful to tackle financial and economic crime more broadly, but enforcement levels are woeful. The figure of only 1% of police resource going to something that is an increasing problem in our society is part of that. The enforcement agencies are doing their best, but they are a hotchpotch; they are a patchwork of different agencies all working away in their own wee world and not managing to connect all of these different things. People are drowning under suspicious activity reports, while those who ought to be filing them are not even bothering. There is a huge gap in enforcement.

As I have said ad nauseam in this place, in Bill Committees and everywhere else, Companies House is the front door to this. Graeme Biggar, the director general at the National Economic Crime Centre, spoke to the Treasury Committee on 25 January—I cannot believe that it was that far back, but it was—and said:

“It can be too easy to set up companies here, as we have seen repeatedly over the years. We have done some analysis recently on some of the laundromats that have come out of Russia and the former Soviet Union, and a disturbing proportion of the money that comes out of those laundromats—not much shy of 50% in one case—were laundered through UK corporate structures.”

He pointed out that not all of that money will have been in the UK or will have touched the UK, but it is the corporate structures themselves that have been facilitating this economic crime.

The Royal United Services Institute has said:

“The ease with which a company can be formed in the UK—within 24 hours, without showing any ID and for a mere £12—has contributed strongly to the UK corporate structures emerging as the money-launderers’ vehicle of choice over the past decade.”

It says the “vehicle of choice” for “money launderers”. This Government have proposed Companies House reform, but, while welcome, it does not go nearly far enough. It makes no sense to me that, if I want to apply for a driving licence or a passport to do my self-assessment tax return, I have to go through a whole gamut of Government verifying schemes. That is not the case, as I understand it, for setting up a company. All it will cost me is £12. The information that I put into the Companies House register may be complete and utter guff, because it has no one checking that information; it is just a repository of that information.

Some statistics were given in the reading material that has been pulled together. Four thousand beneficial owners are listed in the persons of significant control register

who are under the age of two. I am sure that there are many prodigious under two-year-olds out there, but I do not think that they really should be beneficial owners of companies. There are five beneficial owners who control more than 6,000 companies. Again, there should be some kind of limit to the number of directorships that beneficial owners can hold, because it is very clear that these people can have no real role in the running of those companies, because there are far too many of them.

Even more worryingly, some of this has been facilitated through Facebook. A recent “File on 4” programme showed how people were being recruited as company directors via Facebook. Again, they had no role or responsibility in the company, but were being brought in as a means of making money. I ask the Government what they intend to do about this kind of fraudulent behaviour.

That is before I get to Scottish limited partnerships, which, again, I have talked about at length in this place. I pay tribute to Richard Smith, David Leask and Roger Mullin—my colleague who was in this place until 2017—for their constant plugging away on the subject of Scottish limited partnerships. The Government will say, and they would be correct to say, that since they brought in the reforms, the number of Scottish limited partnerships has reduced. However, as the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness pointed out, what has happened is a bit of a whack-a-mole strategy. As my good friend, colleague and employee Councillor Alexander Belic has said, the point of whack-a-mole is the increasing frequency of moles rather than an effective mole eradication effort. That is very true of financial crime and SLPs.

Many of those involved have moved to Northern Irish limited partnerships, English limited partnerships, trusts, other obscure company formations, or, as Colm Keena of *The Irish Times* has pointed out, Irish limited partnerships. There is therefore a wider consequence of this Government’s actions. I doubt very much that they informed the Irish Government that this was going to happen, only to leave them saying, “Oh, gosh, this is now on our doorstep. Now we have to deal with this international financial crime”. Some of those Irish limited partnerships had Scottish limited partnerships as their people of significant control, so it becomes a nesting doll of different companies, and we can never get to the centre of it and find out who really is in charge.

At the very heart of all that is this: if we reform Companies House, it will slam the door in the face of all of this. If we give Companies House an anti-money laundering supervisory role, if we tighten up the registration process, if we make it that a person has to prove that they are a real person before they can register a company, and if we put up the fees, we will take away a lot of this crime. The Government really should be looking at that very urgently, and the lack of urgency remains a significant concern to me.

I sat on the Bill Committee when the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill came through this House. The Government had a lack of interest in a great number of things, but it was funny how quickly they got interested in dirty Russian money when the Salisbury attack happened during the course of that Committee. All of a sudden they were very interested in doing something about that.

I also sat on the Joint Committee on the Draft Registration of Overseas Entities Bill. We made very good recommendations and the Government replied, but they did not accept all of them—and now, tumbleweed. Nothing has happened; there is no urgency. When I questioned the Economic Secretary to the Treasury on Monday, I asked, “Are you actually going to bring it forward urgently?”. It does not feel urgent in the slightest, because there is nothing happening and nothing is changing.

The longer it goes on, the more I wonder who benefits from this delay. Is it the oligarchs and those to whom they donate? There are wider political implications of this delay—not just here, although there is an implication here for transparent structures such as unincorporated associations, which are set up in Scotland and fund parts of the Conservative party and the no campaign in Scotland.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): My hon. Friend clearly shares my concerns and those of the Electoral Commission about unincorporated associations. Among a number of other troublesome characteristics, those that meet the threshold for registration with the Electoral Commission are not required to conduct permissibility checks on a relevant donation—a donation meant for political activity. Presumably, she would like to see those very much tightened up.

Alison Thewliss: I would; we should have strong registration requirements for donations to political parties, and there should be no ways of circumventing them.

Whether the money turns up as millions of pounds in Conservative party coffers, leads to the House of Lords in the end, or is just laundered from Russia, Uzbekistan, Ukraine or any number of other countries involved in SLPs and money laundering, we should be worried, because this issue goes to the very heart and fundament of our democracy. If we cannot guarantee where the money goes, who it influences, where it ends up and who it benefits, we are in real trouble as a democracy, as well as an economy.

It is really important that the online safety Bill deals more with frauds, scams and misleading info. As the right hon. Member for East Ham pointed out, if people take out paid advertising that costs a penny, they will get away with a lot more than if they generated it themselves and did not pay for it. That seems fundamentally wrong.

There is a lot of information being put about out there. Google, Facebook and some other companies have all appeared before us in the Treasury Committee, and they really did not do much by way of accounting for the behaviour of people using their platform for activity such as allowing others to register as company directors, trying to sell goods online and defrauding our constituents, or offering financial advice—that is a regulated sector, which makes that very serious behaviour. No one should be giving financial advice unless qualified to do so, but if hon. Members were to look at Instagram, they would find all number of accounts offering this advice or that advice, saying “Take these shares out” or “Do this and put your money here”. All this activity puts people at risk, whether it is user-generated or advertised, and it should be regulated properly so that people cannot use such platforms to defraud others and profit for themselves.

The nature of this world is changing. Lots of people are conducting their business on Instagram now, including lots of entirely legitimate people and businesses, many of which suffered when Instagram went down because they could no longer sell their pizzas or whatever they were selling online. We need to be mindful that the platforms have a responsibility to the people who use them to ensure that they cannot easily part with their money and be defrauded. Although faster payments are great in a number of ways in facilitating financial transactions, once that money is gone, it is very hard to get it back.

At the moment, the banks often get the money back for people, but there is no consequence for the platforms that facilitate the fraud. They do not have to pay anybody their money back. They allow this to happen and they get to just hold their hands up and say, “It’s not our fault. People should know better”. That is not good enough. The platforms are facilitating a good deal of this fraud. The Government will be failing in their duty to all our constituents if the online safety Bill does not address those levels of transactions where people are doing lots of business that way nowadays—if it does not hold to account those big, wealthy providers and platforms, both the ones that exist just now and those that will emerge in future, and make sure that they take responsibility for their actions.

I urge the Government to listen to everybody who has given evidence on this matter to the Treasury Committee, to the Work and Pensions Committee, and to our APPGs—to listen to those experts and not miss this opportunity to take action to protect our constituents, our economy and our democracy.

4 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for securing this very important debate. I thank them for all the work they have done over the years on these issues, and indeed on wider issues of fairness in the economic industry. I have had great cause to be grateful to the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton for the assistance he has afforded some of my constituents through his expert advice from his experience on the all-party parliamentary group on fair banking.

The right hon. Member for Barking spoke very powerfully about the problem of money stolen from the Russian people being laundered in this country, saying that it impacts on our national security in a number of ways because it is spreading its tentacles through our society. She was intervened on by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who drew attention to the problem of money laundering through paramilitary, which unfortunately we still have as a result of the legacy of the troubles in Northern Ireland. The right hon. Lady made the very important point that that enables other crime, and that, in her words, if you cannot follow the money then dirty money triumphs.

There was an important intervention on the right hon. Lady from the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), who told us that one third of crime in the United Kingdom is now economic crime but only 1% of police enforcement time is spent on that. I certainly know from my time as an advocate depute in

[*Joanna Cherry*]

the Crown Office in Scotland that there were often not really adequate resources for us to prosecute economic crime properly. It is decades since I was a prosecutor, but I know that a huge amount of work has been done in Scotland to give the Crown Office more powers to do that. Prosecuting economic crime is very challenging, and Government need to put a lot more investment into making sure that it is done effectively.

Importantly, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton explained why economic crime is not a victimless crime. He cited the tragic death of the 27 people who drowned in the channel trying to reach our shores last week as a good example of organised crime and economic crime taking a terrible toll on its victims.

The right hon. Member for East Ham outlined the need to tackle online fraud. He was absolutely right in identifying the online safety Bill as a missed opportunity to do that. He rightly took aim at Google for its failure to take down a scam when it was well aware that it was there. As he said, that shows that the law must be changed. We are all well aware of the problem of the huge power of organisations such as Google, Facebook and Twitter, and it is really important that the Government put real teeth into legislation to make sure that they do not facilitate crime—particularly, in this case, economic crime. I was interested to hear that the Financial Conduct Authority has said that financial harms should be included in the online safety Bill.

It was also interesting to hear from the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell), who speaks from a career of some length in the regulation industry and therefore with some authority about what needs to be done and the challenges of doing it. He made a powerful point about the damage that has been done to our great cities as a result of the overinflation of the property market. In my own home city of Edinburgh at the moment, most people can no longer afford to be a first-time buyer. I know that is a huge problem in the great city of London as well. Tackling economic crime is one way that we can bring house prices down.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) spoke knowledgeably from her lengthy experience in relation to these matters and drew our attention to the fact that, ultimately, Companies House is the front door to this problem, and existing corporate structures facilitate economic crime. She gave very good examples of the hoops we have to go through to do things such as getting a driving licence, but how easy it is for people to tell a pack of lies and misrepresent themselves in setting up a company. She raised again the issue of Scottish limited partnerships, which have been raised over the years by a number of Members of this House, most notably my friend and former colleague, Roger Mullin.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central put the question succinctly for the Minister to answer this evening: where is the urgency in dealing with these matters? We have had many debates about these issues in the six and a half years I have been in this House, and I know they have been going on for much longer than that. The Government have made a number of commitments, but why are they not honouring them? Where is the urgency?

Then there is the troubling question of who benefits from the delay to the Government tackling these issues. We know that some pretty dodgy Russian money has found its way into the coffers of the Conservative and Unionist party. As my hon. Friend said, there are wider political implications here. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) continued in this debate to raise the matters of concern that she has raised previously about the failure to properly regulate political donations.

Although we have had a short debate, it has been very knowledgeable, and the Members who have contributed have done so from a position of strength and of knowledge of this matter. The helpful briefing prepared for this debate basically tells us what needs to be done. It has three big asks for an economic crime Bill: creating a register of overseas companies that own UK property; reforming Companies House to ensure it can monitor, verify and investigate suspicious companies; and reforming corporate criminal liability laws to ensure that enablers are held to account. The question for the Minister is: when will that economic crime Bill be brought forward?

4.7 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and all the all-party parliamentary groups that are responsible for securing this debate today. What a great warrior my right hon. Friend has been on this issue over the years.

This issue matters particularly in the United Kingdom because we have one of the biggest financial sectors in the world. That is not only a great asset to the country in terms of wealth, employment, tax revenues and so on, but it gives us an opportunity and a responsibility. It is an opportunity, because how we regulate that can set an example around the world, but it is also a responsibility, because if our standards are too lax, and we allow the UK to be an easy home for illicit finance, that also sends a signal of a very different kind around the world.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, said, every day our constituents are assailed by fake texts, emails and scams trying to con them out of their own money. It is extremely difficult for our constituents to know what is genuine and what is not when receiving such communications. That is why it is essential that we act and use the opportunity of the online harms Bill to crack down properly on this kind of consumer fraud. At the moment, that is not the plan. There is a gaping hole in that Bill, and the first thing I want to put to the Minister is to accept the strength of feeling across the House that it has to be strengthened.

With the release of caches of documents, such as the Pandora papers and their predecessors, the UK and its overseas territories are far too often mentioned as a place where illicit funds can find a home.

We are about to go into a winter in which people will face not only rising prices but rising taxes, but time after time, we see reports that billions of pounds of illicit funding are washing through our country. The contrast between the obligations of those who struggle to make ends meet and those who see our property laws and institutions as vehicles for laundering money could not

be more stark. It is an issue not just of financial probity and tax revenue—though it is certainly that—but of national security and should be treated as such.

If we are a welcome home for the proceeds of looting and kleptocracy, what does that say about the rule of law or our standing in the world? The Prime Minister's recent performance on the issue of standards in this place suggests that he has scant regard for rules and responsibilities, but we already knew that. We know what he thought of the rules last Christmas when he told the rest of the country that they could not gather, as there are now reports of one Christmas party, maybe more, while the rest of the country was trying to obey the rules. The fight against money laundering and fraud is too important to be let down again by the belief that there is one rule for them and another for everyone else.

It is not an easy battle, because we are dealing with very rich people who will employ the most expensive lawyers in town to intimidate those who criticise them and try to silence them through financial exhaustion. We should pay tribute to the brave investigative journalists who have written about such things to expose what is happening, knowing that they will be aggressively pursued by legal actions designed, at best, to silence them and, at worst, to bankrupt them. But however rich the people involved are, we in this House can still act. We can decide not to sit back and let it happen. The measures advocated in this debate command strong cross-party support, so why are the Government not making more use of that support? Where is the urgency that hon. Members have called for?

Let us consider some of the individual measures that have been discussed. The Registration of Overseas Entities Bill has been on the stocks for years, but it sits in the sidings, not moving. We are approaching the fourth anniversary of when it was first promised, and it is more urgently needed now than then, yet when asked about the timescale, Ministers still wheel out the time-honoured bromide of “when parliamentary time allows”. They have had four years of parliamentary time, which is more or less a whole Parliament.

The legislation could play an important role in revealing the true nature of asset ownership, particularly the expensive London properties beloved of those who want to store their wealth here. Why will the Government not bring forward the Bill? Why does it keep being put on the back burner? Who in Government keeps saying no to it?

Shell companies are at the heart of mechanisms to hide the true nature of wealth—or perhaps more accurately, layer on layer of shell companies whose sole purpose is obfuscation. We have heard some figures about the registration of companies, including that there are 4,000 owners under two years old and that five beneficial owners control more than 6,000 companies. Companies House is a registrar that lacks the powers to do any serious policing or regulating of who registers companies. Plans for reform have been announced, which the Minister will no doubt go through in a few minutes, but they have not been implemented.

The aim should be clear: to ensure that Companies House is a guardian of propriety, rather than simply a library of data where there are no real checks on the quality of that data. No legitimate business owner has anything to fear from that kind of reform, but the people registering thousands of companies for the purpose

of obscuring real ownership do. I urge the Minister not only to say what is planned for Companies House but to ensure that it is actually implemented. The sponsors of today's debate rightly put Companies House reform at the heart of the fight against money laundering and fraud.

What of the Intelligence and Security Committee's report on Russia? Where is the Government's response to the measures advocated in that? Here there is not even a pretence of action. In fact, the report said, “If you're determined to look in the opposite direction, then perhaps it's not a surprise that you haven't found anything.” The Government keep looking away in the hope that this issue will go away, but it will not.

Two weeks ago, the shadow Security Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), wrote to his opposite number asking what checks there had been on the almost £2 million of funds from Russian donors to the Conservative party. Does the Conservative party ask any questions at all when receiving this money? Why do Conservative Members think that their party has been such an attractive destination for this money, and what is it doing to Government policy? For example, who is there left in the Business Department who can still take a decision on the Aquind pipeline? How many Ministers have had to recuse themselves either because they have been funded or because they have already pronounced on the impending decision?

The third element called for today is greater corporate responsibility when it comes to money laundering and fraud. This already exists for tax evasion, for example. A company could not get away with saying, “Well, we were looking the other way—we didn't know” when it comes to tax evasion. This was debated during the passage of the Financial Services Act 2021, which went through the House this time last year. Of course, any new corporate liability laws have to be carefully thought through, but the law should not act as an incentive for chief executives and senior executives in companies to claim ignorance about what is happening in their own organisations. We saw that time after time during the LIBOR scandal when these titans of the finance industry testified one by one that they had no idea what their traders were up to. The question facing the Government is: if corporate responsibility is right for tax, why should it not be right for fraud?

Underlying these specific points is a broader issue that should focus our attention. A number of times the Chancellor has said that he wants to put competitiveness at the heart of post-Brexit financial regulation. Having hung the financial sector out to dry when negotiating the Brexit deal, the Treasury now dangles the consolation prize of deregulation in front of it—the “Crackerjack” pencil for cutting off market access from the European Union—but at what price? Regulation was changed in the wake of the global financial crisis right across the world to protect the public in different countries, and the consequence of the Chancellor's post-Brexit search for a consolation prize for deregulation should not be to put the public at greater risk. What kind of signal is it to send around the world to say, “Come to Britain because we want to make the referee weaker”? That is not even a signal the financial sector itself wants.

New fields are emerging. Cryptocurrencies have grown hugely in recent years. That has not been discussed much this afternoon, but it is hugely important. Their

[Mr Pat McFadden]

growth poses a genuine challenge to regulators and central banks right around the world. Where do the Government stand on the regulation of cryptocurrencies? Is it the case that crypto exchanges are being encouraged to base themselves outside the country so that we do not have to face up to these regulatory questions and responsibilities? Washing our hands of this issue is not good enough if the result is that those exchanges are based abroad and are beyond our reach in regulatory terms, without its making any difference to their ability to operate in the UK market. We have to be alive to the dangers of fraud and money laundering through new methods and innovations, and regulation has to keep pace with these market innovations. Can the Minister assure the House that the Government are telling the financial regulators that crypto exchanges that operate in the UK should be regulated in the UK? Is that the Government's position?

This is an important debate, and it has shone a light on the inadequate efforts being made to protect the country from being seen as an easy place to store or to launder illicit finance. Despite the persistence of the problem and all the words said about how serious it is, the Government have dragged their feet on implementing measures that could command cross-party support. This is too serious an issue for that approach to continue because, as I have said, it is not just a matter of money; it is a matter of national security. It should be treated as such, and that is certainly the approach the Opposition take to the issue.

4.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lee Rowley): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate; it has been a good and constructive one and I am grateful to all those who have contributed. In particular, I congratulate the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), who has done extraordinary work in this area for so many years, first on the Public Accounts Committee—I had the privilege of sitting on it a few years after the right hon. Lady, but her reputation went beyond her time there—and now in the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax that she is pursuing. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for the extraordinary work he continues to do for so many people, referred to by other hon. Members today, through his all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking. I thank them both for securing this important debate.

I have heard many important points today underlining the evils and dangers of all forms of economic crime—fraud, corruption, tax evasion, laundering, terrorism, potential people-trafficking, organised crime, drugs and the expropriation of public money. I agree with them. Economic crime is every bit as insidious as hon. Members have so cogently argued today. I reiterate that the Government are committed to continuing to build a framework that will deter such crimes and provide the genuine accountability that hon. Members have so accurately outlined through this short debate.

Several hon. Members have outlined some of their own personal experiences from their constituencies, and I know and accept that economic crimes not only

represent a significant cost to the economy, but have real-life implications for individuals out there. That is something we must not forget about. I have seen it in my own constituency; just a few months ago I dealt with a gentleman from one of my towns, Killamarsh, who had had £20,000 taken from him in a telephone-based scam. We had to struggle to get that money back from the bank in the first place, but it should not be the responsibility of the individual, and the individual should not have to engage with their Member of Parliament, to get that money back through those processes. The money should never be taken in the first place, and we should prevent such problems before they happen.

On that basis, I accept the challenge here but, without taking anything away from the valuable and important points made today by all hon. Members, I highlight that it is important that the Government pursue a targeted and proportionate level of enforcement, focusing on achieving compliance from companies. I do not think anyone here today would disagree with that in principle. We must seek to counter financial crime, but we must also seek to protect the dynamism of the UK's business environment.

The overwhelming majority of the UK's 4.5 million companies contribute productively to the UK company, abide by the law and make a valuable contribution to society, and our responsibility to them is as important as the absolute requirement to crack down on the small minority who misuse the system. We must not undermine the strengths of our current systems nor overburden the law-abiding majority.

Notwithstanding that, the Government are committed to increasing the transparency of business so that those behind the abuse of companies can be identified and our law enforcement bodies can access the information to support their investigations. I know the main question today is one of timing; it is a question of how quickly we get there, and I appreciate the exhortations from hon. Members across the House. I assure them that both the Department I represent and the Government as a whole are working hard to bring forward appropriate measures as soon as we are able. We are taking it seriously, and further information will come forward on that as soon as possible.

I highlight that because it should be clear, based on things we have already done, that the intention is moving in the direction hon. Members want. Consultations were published a couple of months ago, and the Department has published responses on limited partnership reform, increasing transparency, and reforming the powers and role of Companies House—something the right hon. Member for Barking has highlighted throughout the debate. Members have seen a draft Bill to increase the transparency of overseas companies that own property in the UK, as referenced throughout the debate. As Members will know—many Members in the Chamber have been here longer than I have—by convention, the Queen's Speech outlines the point at which the legislative programme comes forward, and we will do that in due course. I assure the House of the Government's commitment in that regard.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Minister is making a good and important speech. His Department is looking at a review of whistleblowing regulations and legislation. We have heard evidence from across the House that fraud now accounts for something like a third or even 40% of all

crimes, and around 40% of those crimes are identified only because of the work of whistleblowers. It is widely acknowledged that whistleblower legislation is falling behind that in other countries. Does the Minister agree that we must focus on that issue in the context of this debate? Whistleblowers are key to finding the information, so that we can crack down on crimes that are facilitated within these organisations.

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting that important point. Whistleblowing is a vital part of an ecosystem that works and has appropriate checks and balances. He correctly highlights the need to ensure that our frameworks are appropriate for that, and I know that Ministers responsible for that area of policy are listening to this debate and will take his points on board.

Let me take a moment or two to talk about context. Context is important because, even in a good-natured and constructive debate such as this, it is important to acknowledge some of the work that has been done, while also recognising that Members are keen for us to move further and quicker. In 2015, the Government legislated to ban bearer shares and create a public register of beneficial owners of UK companies, and that register has been a template for countries across the world. Indeed, a number of years on, we still get requests from other parts of the world about it. Since 2016 the Government have made significant changes to the way they tackle money laundering, particularly through new powers in the Criminal Finances Act 2017, which include unexplained wealth orders, new seizure and forfeiture powers for bank accounts, and new protections for the sharing of information.

Dame Margaret Hodge: We welcomed moves such as the introduction of unexplained wealth orders, but that is the point we are making: they came in with a great bang, we had one successful one, there was then a failure, and since then there has been almost silence and the power has not been used. There is also a fear of failure, which is related to the fear of having to carry the costs of that failure. The Government could legislate on that, as the Americans have done, so that people cannot claim those massive £2 million or £3 million costs if they succeed in the courts. There is also a lack of resources within the enforcement agencies properly to prepare for such cases. After the case that we lost, investigative journalists showed clearly that falsehoods were told in the courts that led to the failure of that provision. Unexplained wealth orders are a great idea, but they are not being used.

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, who is an expert in this area. I hope we all agree that having such legislation in place is a step forward, and that the opportunity and ability to use it is a positive thing. As she has outlined, such measures have been used in some instances, but there have also been challenges. I hope that that use will continue to be made in appropriate areas, and I will certainly pass back her comments to the Ministers who are reviewing this issue.

In 2018, the UK's anti-money laundering regime was reviewed by the Financial Action Task Force, and the UK received the best rating of any country assessed in that round of evaluations. None the less, there is an

acceptance that more needs to be done, and as a number of Members have said, a number of months ago we published the economic crime plan. Progress was updated on top of that, with 52 actions to tackle economic crime, and the Government are on track to deliver 49 of those.

There have been achievements as well, including the commencement of reforms to the suspicious activity reporting regime, with £172 million frozen or removed from potential criminals in a recent reporting year, and the creation of the National Economic Crime Centre, which a number of Members referenced. Its work in the fusion cell in April 2020 highlighted potential criminality, potential challenges and potential investment fraudsters. We are also legislating in the current Finance Bill for the economic crime levy. I hope all hon. Members have seen the action to secure a unified position in the G7 on international anti-corruption efforts, including an agreement to implement and strengthen beneficial ownership registers.

Stephen Timms: The Financial Conduct Authority, which reports to the Minister's Department, has made the case for the Online Safety Bill to be widened to include online fraud. Does he accept the strength of that argument?

Lee Rowley: I am just coming to that point, so the right hon. Gentleman pre-empted me, but I am grateful for the opportunity to do so.

We have heard some very good speeches in this afternoon's debate. The right hon. Gentleman highlighted that point about the Online Safety Bill and the importance of tackling online fraud, which was also referenced by the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) and—albeit, if he does not mind me saying so, once he got through the cheap shots—the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden). It is an important point to highlight.

Obviously, a specific Department is pursuing that legislation at the moment. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central, who sits on the Treasury Committee, heard on Monday that there is a variety of views about how best to deal with online fraud and which part of the legislation it should go in; I know that there was an active discussion about that in the Committee a few days ago. I will certainly pass back the comments made by the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). I understand the importance of the matter that he highlights. I think all of us in the House agree about the challenge; the question is what it is appropriate to do and where it is appropriate to do it, but I absolutely heard what he and other Members said about the importance of trying to make progress in that area.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) brings to the House a wealth of knowledge and experience in this area, which his very good speech highlighted. He highlighted the extensive work that has been under way for many years, notwithstanding the requirement for more to be done, and, again, the important point about the real impacts on real, ordinary people. This is not a theoretical crime; it is one that has real impacts in all our constituencies, which we will return to this evening and tomorrow.

[Lee Rowley]

I know hon. Members are keen to talk about where we are going. The spending review announced just a few weeks ago highlighted a significant amount of taxpayer spending specifically to reform Companies House, to improve the accuracy of the register, to clamp down on fraud and to strengthen the register in the long term. I hope that that announcement and the real money associated with it demonstrate the Government's intention to make progress in this regard. On top of that, next year the Government will publish a fraud action plan and an updated economic crime plan, we will report on the review of UK money laundering regulations and the supervisory regime, and we expect to receive a corporate criminal liability options paper from the Law Commission. Officials continue to work on the three consultations from the start of 2021.

A constant theme throughout the work on reform has been a mantra from business and transparency organisations alike that the reforms are important and supported, but that they want to get them right. That does not mean we should delay unnecessarily, but we want to make sure that whatever we bring forward—I accept the challenge from hon. Members that they wish to see that happen quickly—we do it in the right way and as quickly as possible.

Let me spend a few minutes on the specific reforms and proposals that have been outlined today, particularly by the right hon. Member for Barking and my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton, who secured the debate. The Government will legislate to expand the function of the registrar of companies to include a new function to maintain the integrity of the register of companies and the UK business environment. The registrar will be equipped with new powers to carry out that function, including powers to query suspicious appointments or firings, and in some cases to request further evidence or reject the filing. Companies House will have more extensive legal gateways for data sharing with law enforcement, other Government bodies and the private sector. That will result in more efficient sharing of information on suspicious activity with law enforcement, and the establishment of feedback loops with other Government bodies and the private sector. It will make anonymous filings harder and discourage those who wish to hide their company ownership through nominees or opaque structures.

Alongside the legislative changes I have outlined, Companies House will change. The combination of legislative reform and the transformation of Companies House will help to ensure that the UK is the best place to start and to grow a business, and that companies on the UK register are run responsibly, transparently and with accountability. Hon. Members have noted the draft Registration of Overseas Entities Bill, which has already received prelegislative scrutiny. That legislation will ensure the transparency of ownership and control of overseas entities that own property in the UK, about which concern was expressed.

The right hon. Member for Barking talked about proposed new corporate criminal liability offences. That is still under consideration. As hon. Members will be aware, the call for evidence a few months ago did not prove to be conclusive, so the Government have asked the Law Commission to undertake an in-depth review of the laws around that and to consider recommendations on proportionate opportunities for reform.

I recognise that hon. Members are keen for us to make progress—that desire was expressed very clearly today—but I hope they recognise that much work has been done. This debate has been a timely reminder of the view of this House on an important area and on the desire to make progress. I thank Members who have spoken today and the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to discuss this issue. I look forward to making further progress in the months and years ahead.

4.36 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge: Very briefly, I want to start by thanking saying a big “Thank you” to all who participated in today's debate for the issues they raised.

I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). It is a joy to work with him. He raised important points on developing countries, which we did not come back to. It is true, however, that developing countries lose three times as much through tax avoidance and corruption as they gain from international aid, so if the Government want to cut the international aid budget, they could take action there that would be hugely beneficial.

All Members talked about the importance of transparency. We are all at one with my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) in wanting to include paid-for advertising in the online harms Bill. We are working across the House and I think there is huge agreement, certainly on the Back Benches, on that matter.

The contribution from the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) was excellent. He has some great ideas and I do hope he will join our all-party parliamentary group. We are always looking for new ideas that will help to strengthen the fight against tax avoidance, tax evasion and economic crime, so that would be terrific.

I am hugely grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for her constant support. She is dogged in pursuing the issues that are of importance to her. I am also very grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), who gave such an eloquent speech.

I just want to say three things in response to the Minister. First, of course most businesses and individuals behave well, but if we do not work to rid ourselves of criminals, kleptocrats and money launderers who infect our economy, we do a disservice to those who want to work legitimately. That was a point made by the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), our anti-corruption tsar. The point is not, therefore, that this is the exception. If we do not deal with the exception, we break the rule. I hope the Minister will take that away. Secondly, while we welcome the Government's general support, we will keep pushing. The proposed legislation is there and we want it on the statute book. Those are choices that the Government can make, and I hope they will make them. Thirdly, such things as paid-for fraudulent ads affect millions of people across the country in every constituency, and we have all had such cases. That is about individuals, but there is also the behaviour, for example, of the Aliyev family from Azerbaijan and the way they launder their money here and buy their privileges in our communities. That has to be stopped. That is not the sort of Britain that any of us wants to live in.

Weak regulation, poor enforcement and lack of transparency have an impact not just here in Britain, but elsewhere in the world. I will finish with this story. We all remember too well the terrible explosion in Lebanon, when ammonium nitrate killed a lot of people and destroyed that country. I was amazed to get a call a few weeks after it occurred from someone who told me that the company that owned the ammonium nitrate in the warehouse at the port in Lebanon was UK-registered. I gave a usual quote to demonstrate the lack of proper regulatory controls here. I was then inundated with phone calls in which I was told that not only was the company owned here, but it had a nominee beneficial owner based in Portugal or Spain—somewhere like that. The company said that it was dormant and had therefore not filled in HMRC returns. Further investigation by the Lebanese Bar Council and journalists in Lebanon demonstrated that, actually, the ammonium nitrate was not destined to be used as fertiliser in Mozambique; it had been brought by Russian Syrians to be given to Assad in Syria for barrel bombs to be used on the population in Syria. That is outrageous. We are facilitating that, and the tragedy it created is what makes it so important—so imperative—that the Government take action.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House recognises the devastating impact economic crime has on individuals, businesses, families and society; considers it unacceptable that the cost of money laundering alone exceeds £100 billion a year according to the National Crime Agency; is concerned that in the wake of the Pandora Papers leak there is inadequate transparency, regulation and resources in place to effectively tackle this severe problem; and calls on the Government to bring forward legislative proposals to tackle economic crime as a matter of priority, integral to which are provisions to introduce a criminal offence for failure to prevent economic crime, reform Companies House and introduce a beneficial ownership register for the overseas owners of UK property.

Digital Image Abuse

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

4.42 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this Adjournment debate. There can be few things more harmful, traumatising or abusive than for an individual to have a nude or sexually explicit image shared without their consent with thousands or even millions of people online. It is a horrific invention of the online world and an act of sexual abuse because it is done without the consent of the victim.

Technology is being used every day to invent new and even more grotesque ways of inflicting abuse, particularly sexual violence, especially against women and girls. I have secured this debate on deepfake and nudification image abuse because they are yet more forms of abuse against women and girls, their impact is not understood, and they continue to be largely unrecognised, especially in law and the legal sanctions that are available. It is a great pleasure to see the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice on the Front Bench, underlining the Government's understanding of the need to address this issue.

For those who are unfamiliar with the term “deepfakes”, they are pornographic images that are created by merging existing pornographic content with the image of an individual—usually a woman—who has not given her consent. The resulting pornographic material is often violent, including illegal depictions of rape. In a similar way, nudification software takes everyday images—again, usually of women without their consent—and uses an extensive database of pornographic images to create a new image that makes it appear as though the original subject of the photo is nude.

The decision to create and share a deepfake or a nudified image is a highly sinister, predatory and sexualised act undertaken without the consent of the person involved. It has been a growing problem for the past 10 years, along with other forms of intimate image abuse. Reports of such abuse have grown by almost 90% in the past 12 months, coinciding—not coincidentally—with the lockdown, the pandemic and the changes in behaviour that are leaving many people at home for longer periods.

All forms of intimate image abuse have a significant and long-term impact on their victims, but I believe that deepfakes and nudification are particularly pernicious because the images are almost completely fabricated, causing psychological harm, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder—the list goes on. Some people experience an impact on their physical health or damage to their relationships. There may also be damage to their financial situation because of the need to take time off work or perhaps withdraw altogether from the online world, which we all know is a fundamental part of most people's jobs in modern society. In some cases, there have been reports of self-harm and even attempted suicide among those who have been a victim of this heinous act.

I would like to turn specifically to the impact on individuals. This horrific abuse can happen to absolutely anyone, as a constituent of the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) discovered in 2019 when she learned that her image had been uploaded to a pornographic website—an ordinary image from her social media that

[Mrs Maria Miller]

was then manipulated with software to make it appear as if she were in something completely pornographic. She was only alerted to the existence of the photos by an acquaintance after the images had been in circulation for years. The original images were taken from her social media, including photographs from her pregnancy.

I commend the hon. Member's constituent, because she has had the courage to speak out about something that many cannot or feel unable to speak about. We can understand that much more closely when we hear her words explaining how she felt. She said that the images were "chilling" and that she still experiences nightmares. Speaking of the experience, she said:

"Obviously, the underlying feeling was shock and I initially felt quite ashamed, as if I'd done something wrong. That was quite a difficult thing to overcome. And then for a while I got incredibly anxious about even leaving the house."

That reaction is typical; it leaves many women frightened to seek the help that they need.

Another victim—I will call her Alana, although that is not her real name—was identified by Professor Clare McGlynn in her work on "Shattering Lives and Myths", a report on the issue. Alana also had faked intimate images widely circulated without her consent. Her testimony is equally harrowing; I will quote from it, because her words are powerful and the Minister needs to hear them if he is to bring the right solutions to this place. She said:

"It has the power to ruin your life, and is an absolute nightmare, and it is such a level of violation...because you are violated not only by the perpetrator but you also feel violated because society doesn't recognise your harm. It is a very isolating experience, it is a very degrading and demeaning experience, it is life-ruining."

Those are words that we should all listen to as we move forward, hopefully, to some solutions.

At the moment, deepfakes are not against the law, and people who use nudification software are not recognised as sexually abusing others. Deepfakes have been a shocking development in violence against women online. Let us be clear: this technology is almost exclusively used to inflict violence against women. Indeed, the cyber research firm Sensify found that 96% of all deepfakes are pornographic and that all the pornographic deepfakes it detected—100%—targeted women.

Offline, non-consensual sexual acts are recognised in the criminal law through the crimes of sexual assault, sexual abuse, rape—the list goes on, yet those responsible for developing and using technology in the online world and through artificial intelligence have been allowed to operate perniciously and with impunity, inflicting online sexual attacks on women and girls without criminal consequences. We cannot allow the online world to be a continuum of the offline world where women and girls experience even further new forms of sexual abuse and violence, which is why we need a new law to criminalise the taking, making and sharing of nude and sexual images without consent, including deepfakes and nudification. Those, surely, are some of the worst forms of such activity.

This technology is no longer the reserve of movie CGI experts. Image manipulation can be incredibly technical, but nowadays creating content of this kind is dangerously easy. With the development of nudification apps that can be downloaded on to a phone, anyone can

create an indecent image of somebody without their consent in seconds. Apps and websites like these are not hidden in the recesses of the dark net, undiscovered; they are receiving millions of visitors. In the first seven months of 2021, one nudifying app received a staggering 38 million hits. This service has an interesting slogan: it is to

"make all men's dreams come true".

I am sure that is not the case, because I know that many of my hon. Friends would find this as abhorrent as I do. The app allows users to undress thousands of women without their consent, and runs an "incentive program" for users who share the links to their deepfakes, so users who get clicks on their deepfakes can nudify more pictures faster. It is disgusting, but it is not against the law. We have to act.

Deepfakes are widely regarded by academics as the future of violence against women online, but the existing law is woefully behind and largely redundant. Section 33 of the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015, the so-called revenge porn legislation, in whose drafting I was involved, was a good step in the right direction, but it specifically excludes altered or photoshopped images and videos; and there are shortfalls in the current law because it does not adequately capture all motivations for non-consensually taking or sharing an intimate image. Although motivations such as sexual gratification and causing distress are covered, if the image that is being nudified was not originally private or intimate in nature, and if it was not shared directly with the individual in the photograph, it can be interpreted by law enforcement agencies as not having the intention of harassing or causing distress, even if it is shared with thousands of people on the internet. That is clearly an absurdity that needs to be changed.

Threats to share images have now been included in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, and the Government are to be applauded for making that change, but if no threat to share is made, there is the potentially ridiculous scenario that the image could be legally shared if the motivation to share it was a joke, because such motives are not recognised in the current law.

I hope I have explained why it is so critical for the Online Safety Bill to effectively mitigate violence against women and girls online by introducing new criminal offences—and I would say that they should be sex offences—of the taking, making and sharing of intimate images without consent. I know that the Online Safety Bill is very popular—we heard about that in the previous debate—but perhaps the Government should be thinking of a set of Bills to be introduced together, rather than trying to put everything into one Bill. There might be a suite of Bills to tackle all the different issues, to prevent the risk of making one Bill so expansive that it becomes what is commonly known as a Christmas tree Bill. It is an innovative approach, which I am surprised that the Government do not take more often when dealing with highly complex areas that are interrelated.

In the tackling violence against women and girls strategy, the Government have committed to root out offending online as well as offline. They cite the forthcoming Online Safety Bill as the instrument in their efforts to do this, but reform of the laws on intimate image abuse is not yet included in the Bill. This oversight needs to be addressed before the Bill comes back to this House for debate, which we hope will be in the very near future.

The current law is not fit for purpose. It is a patchwork of different elements based on defined motivations that can make prosecutions more difficult and that fails to recognise the nature and impact of image-based abuse online. If we have an Online Safety Bill that does not tackle the gaps in the criminal law, it will be a Bill that falls well short of what our constituents need.

The Law Commission has already developed a wide range of recommendations for legal reform in this area that are widely supported by industry stakeholders and experts, so I urge the Government to fast-track those recommendations through the Online Safety Bill, in recognition of the fact that we cannot wait any longer for legal reform. We need deepfake and the use of nudification apps to be outlawed in a comprehensive new law to criminalise the making, taking and sharing of intimate sexual images without consent. This change is long overdue, and I know that this Minister understands that point. I look forward to hearing his response to the debate.

4.56 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on bringing forward this incredibly important subject for debate. I know that she has long championed the victims of online abuse, and I would like to thank her for her efforts, which have contributed greatly to the Government's thinking in this sensitive area and indeed to the reform of the criminal law itself. I shall try to summarise how I feel on hearing her speech and the contribution she has made by saying that she has an enduring passion for protecting society, especially women and girls, from the dark side of digital. I think that is the best way to describe what is so powerful about the way she speaks on this subject.

Turning to the specifics, deepfake is a term used broadly to describe software or processes used to splice or superimpose existing images on to source photographs or videos. My right hon. Friend has explained that this technology is now being used to create fake pornography, often without the agreement or knowledge of the victim. The images, though in themselves fake, can appear realistic, and their sharing can understandably cause deep distress. She rightly used the word “grotesque” to describe this practice, and she spoke movingly about the real-world impact that it has. She referred to the cases of constituents, and let me express my sympathy for every one of them. This must be harrowing and distressing for them, and we need to tackle it and stamp it out.

I should like to begin by assuring the House that the existing criminal law is fully equipped to deal with instances where the manipulated images depict children, who of course are the most vulnerable. These pseudo-images can cause real-life harm, as I said. They can be created from real images where a child was abused, and viewing the images creates a demand for those pictures, which leads to further abuse. I realise that my right hon. Friend did not primarily talk about children, but because of the issue of vulnerability, I think I should put this on record.

The Protection of Children Act 1978 criminalises the making, taking, sharing and distribution of indecent photographs and indecent pseudo-photographs of children.

A pseudo-photograph is an image, whether made by computer graphics or otherwise, that appears to be a photograph. This offence carries a robust maximum 10-year prison sentence. Similarly, section 160 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 captures the mere possession of such images, and that offence is subject to a five-year prison sentence. Section 62 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 created a new offence of possession of a prohibited image of a child, punishable by up to three years' imprisonment. In addition, it created a new criminal offence to make illegal the possession of non-photographic visual depictions of child sexual abuse, including cartoons and computer-generated images of child abuse, with a three-year maximum prison sentence.

Although it is right that there are specific and robust provisions in relation to faked indecent images of children, I share my right hon. Friend's concern at the distress that the non-consensual creation and sharing of deepfake images can cause to adult victims. I assure the House that a person who shares such images of adults may—I stress may—in some circumstances be committing an existing offence.

5 pm

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

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Alan Mak.)

James Cartlidge: As I was saying, a person who shares deepfake images of adults may in some circumstances be committing an existing offence. For example, against a background of domestic abuse, the posting or sharing of faked images could be captured under section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015. That offence was created specifically to target controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship, including when the victim is an ex-partner. We are aware that deepfake images are being used for such disturbing and cruel purposes.

In addition, section 1 of the Malicious Communications Act 1988 prohibits the sending of an electronic communication that is indecent, grossly offensive or false, or that the sender believes to be false, if the purpose, or one of the purposes, of the sender is to cause distress or anxiety to the recipient. Furthermore, section 127 of the Communications Act 2003 makes it an offence to send or cause to be sent through a

“a public electronic communications network a message or other matter that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character”.

The same section also provides that it is an offence to send or cause to be sent a false message

“for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety to another”.

Such behaviour may also amount to harassment, which is also already an offence.

There has been a successful conviction in which a person was found guilty of harassment after uploading images of a colleague, fully clothed, alongside images on a porn site of women of a similar shape and build as the colleague. Additionally, those who encourage others to commit an existing communications offence may be charged with encouraging an offence under the Serious Crime Act 2007.

I stress, though, that the Government recognise the concerns, set out so eloquently and clearly by my right hon. Friend, about the existing communications offences.

[James Cartlidge]

The Law Commission considered the specific offences I have set out as part of its “Modernising the Communications Offences” review, to understand whether they needed to be reformed to better tackle abusive and harmful behaviours online. The Commission has now published its final report and recommendations for reform, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has indicated that she is minded to adopt the harm-based offence, the false-communications offence and the threatening-communications offence.

Alongside the use of existing and established criminal sanctions, there is a major role for the websites that host the images. It is encouraging that sites such as Pornhub, Twitter, Reddit and several others have all announced bans on deepfake images. Such images already violate community standards on major social media platforms such as Facebook. Some sites are already beginning to turn to artificial intelligence to police the images, rather than rely on users reporting them—an example of the determination to find effective and new ways to restrict the practice. For example, Facebook uses machine learning and AI to detect near-nude images or videos shared without permission on its platforms. Bumble, a dating app, has its own “Private Detector” safety feature, which automatically blurs a nude image shared in a chat. These are important steps to protect user safety and ensure that the images are tackled head on.

I hope that my right hon. Friend is satisfied that the law can, in most scenarios, deal with this behaviour, and that non-criminal interventions are developing all the time, but it is of course crucial that the criminal law keeps pace with new technologies as they emerge. We continue to keep these issues under review and when we see a problem with the criminal law, we act.

This Government have a strong record when it comes to protecting the public from the abuse of private, intimate imagery. For example, much as a result of my right hon. Friend’s assiduous campaigning, as she said earlier, in 2015 we created the so-called revenge porn offence at section 33 of the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015, and only recently, during the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, we listened to the voices of victims of image abuse and supported provisions to extend that offence to capture those who threaten to disclose private sexual images with an intent to cause distress. That change has now been implemented and I am sure that my right hon. Friend, having fought so hard for the creation of the original offence, welcomes that significant extension of the protection of victims from image-based abuse. In addition, after listening to the victims of upskirting and the excellent campaign for change headed by Ms Gina Martin, we created new criminal offences in the Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019 specifically to address that intrusive and distressing behaviour. Offenders now face up to two years behind bars, and the most serious among them will be subject to sex offender notification requirements. We do listen and we do respond.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend has clearly gone through the shopping list of laws that can be used to try to guard against the misuse of intimate images, but in having a shopping list we have created a lot of gaps, too. For instance, upskirting may be unlawful but down-blousing is not. It

is very difficult when we have law that is so prescriptive. Does he have sympathy with the need to have something more encompassing so that we can capture all forms of intimate image abuse and not have to play whack-a-mole by outlawing the latest devious way in which people try to abuse women and girls online?

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and once again she highlights her incredible expertise on these matters. She will be aware that the way Parliament often works is that individual campaigns generate momentum and become specific offences—I would not use the phrase “ad hoc,” which is almost demeaning to those campaigns, which are incredibly important and powerful. That is the reality of how this place makes law at times, but she is right that we need to consider the broader picture. I know where her focus is, and I will be coming to the Law Commission, which will feed into that point.

My colleagues in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport are busy preparing the online safety Bill, which will include provisions to tackle illegal and legal-but-harmful content, including criminal deepfake pornography, sexual harassment and abuse that does not cross a legal threshold. Under the Bill all companies will need to take action against illegal content and ensure that children are protected from inappropriate material. Major platforms will also need to address legal-but-harmful content for adults, which will likely include online abuse. Ofcom will have a suite of enforcement powers to deal with non-compliance, including fines of up to £18 million or 10% of qualifying annual turnover.

The Joint Committee that is scrutinising the Bill is due to report before recess—by 10 December. We will table the Bill as soon as possible, subject to the parliamentary timetable, but we must not rest. I assure the House that we do not take concerns in this sensitive area lightly.

It was with those concerns in mind that the Government asked the Law Commission to review the law on the taking, making and sharing of intimate images without consent, to identify whether there are any gaps in the scope of protection already offered to victims. Importantly, the review has considered the law on manipulated images such as those created by deepfake technology and the protection that the existing law affords.

On 27 February 2021 the Law Commission published the consultation paper on its review, and the consultation ended on 27 May and put forward a number of proposals for public discussion. I understand the Law Commission is due to publish its final recommendations by spring 2022.

Although I welcome this opportunity to discuss the nature of developing technology and the production and sharing of explicit manipulated images and other offences, this is a complex area and it is right and proper that we should take time to consider the law carefully before deciding whether to add further to the raft of existing legislation that already addresses these issues. It is important, therefore, to allow the Law Commission to finish its work and to consider in detail and with care any recommendations it produces. The Government await the Law Commission’s findings with interest and will consider them carefully.

I believe my right hon. Friend has previously met the Law Commission but, if it would be of interest, I would be more than happy to arrange for her to do so again, based on its latest position.

Mrs Miller: I am slightly taking advantage of the fact that we have a little more time this evening. The Minister will know that the Law Commission has made its recommendations, which have gone out for consultation. That consultation finished a month or two ago, so it is not that the Law Commission will finish its deliberations in the spring; it has already finished its deliberations. Those recommendations, subject to any input from the consultation, should be available shortly. I still do not understand why he is not able to bring these recommendations forward at the same time as the online safety Bill.

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. I wish to clarify this, as a lot of Law Commission reviews are taking place over time. There are two in this regard. The one I believe she is referring to is the one I mentioned earlier, which is the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport one. I believe that has reported and that the Department is now considering it, and it concerns malicious communications and other offences

to which I referred earlier. The review on taking, making and sharing is ongoing and will report in spring next year. The point I was making to her was that if she wanted to contribute to that and meet the Law Commission—

Mrs Miller *indicated assent.*

James Cartlidge: My officials have noted her positive nodding of the head, and so I would be more than happy to set that meeting up, because she has great expertise. I can assure her that her concerns, and the views and issues raised by this House, will be taken fully into account when the Government consider those findings and the issue of whether reform to the criminal law is necessary.

Question put and agreed to.

5.10 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 2 December 2021

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Tokyo Nutrition for Growth Summit

1.30 pm

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I remind Members that the House authorities request people to wear face coverings, except when they are speaking in the debate. I am also asked to remind Members to have a covid lateral flow test twice weekly if coming on to the parliamentary estate—that may be done either at the testing centre on the estate or at home—and to space yourselves out. Clearly, we have spaced ourselves out nicely already.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the 2021 Tokyo Nutrition for Growth summit.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for affording me the opportunity to propose the motion.

It is almost exactly a year since we last gathered in Westminster Hall to debate the role of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in tackling global malnutrition. At the time, I, the all-party parliamentary group on Nutrition for Growth—which I co-chair with Lord Collins of Highbury—and the Members present at the debate urged the FCDO to make an early Nutrition for Growth commitment at an event co-hosted by the Governments of Canada and Bangladesh. Indeed, the UK was represented at that event. Of course, it took place because the Nutrition for Growth summit had been postponed for a year because of covid. The summit is finally scheduled to happen in just a few days.

On 7 and 8 December, the Government of Japan will convene Governments, philanthropists, non-governmental organisations and business leaders in an online summit to commit finances and to make policy changes that will help to end malnutrition. It will be the fourth Nutrition for Growth summit since the initiative was launched by David Cameron and the UK Government in 2013. The focus of the Nutrition for Growth APPG had obviously been on the Tokyo summit, but the delay because of covid has allowed us to continue to press the issue at every parliamentary opportunity. I thank our secretariat, Results UK, and Tom Guha in particular, for their help and support in doing so.

I also took the opportunity to meet the Prime Minister last week to discuss the issues and to reaffirm the prime ministerial support that Nutrition for Growth has always enjoyed. I know, therefore, that he will be taking a significant interest in the summit and its outcome, and he wants to see the continuation of the global leadership that the UK has demonstrated to date.

Before I get on to the summit itself, I will lay out why malnutrition is a problem that demands our urgent attention. I will start with one very grim statistic: in 2019, more than 5 million children under five died. Malnutrition was linked to 45% of those deaths. That is a staggering number, and the reason for it is that malnutrition during critical periods of growth—for example, during pregnancy or the early years—stunts the growth of the immune system, making children more likely both to get ill and to die as a result.

The problem does not stop there. In 2020, 149 million children worldwide suffered chronic health conditions due to stunted growth. That number is more than double the population size of the UK. In some regions, such as central Africa, stunting affects 40% of all children. Malnutrition not only has dire health consequences, but malnourished children are 13% less likely to be in the correct school year for their age. Moreover, the World Bank estimates that malnutrition costs some countries up to 11% of GDP annually through productivity losses and healthcare costs.

Nutrition is a foundational investment in people. It prevents ill health, rather than treating it, it ensures that children learn at school rather than simply attend, and it sets children up to realise their future potential in adult life. It is for this reason that Nobel economists describe nutrition as

“the most effective development investment that could be made, with massive benefits for a tiny price-tag.”

Whatever the Government’s position on the overseas aid budget, I am sure that we all agree that taxpayers’ money should be spent as impactfully as possible. Therefore, we must prioritise nutrition and use summits such as Nutrition for Growth to co-ordinate our approach with other countries to maximise its impact even further.

There is some good news. Although the problem of malnutrition is all too prevalent, the number of under-five deaths worldwide has more than halved since 1990 and the number of stunted children has decreased by 11% in the past 20 years, from 203 million to 149 million. The figure is enormous, but that is still a monumental achievement that shows that action and global co-operation to address malnutrition have worked.

Progress is now under threat. Covid has closed health centres, and pushed food prices up and wages down. As a result, it is predicted that an additional 283,000 children under five will die from malnutrition between 2020 and 2022, which is a shocking equivalent to 225 more children dying every day. In the same period, it is predicted that an additional 3.6 million children will become stunted.

We cannot stand by as years of progress unravel in this way. I have the following calls on the Minister today. Will she confirm that the UK Government will make a pledge at the Nutrition for Growth summit next week? Will the UK Government commit to reach 50 million women, adolescent girls and children with high-impact nutrition interventions by 2025, which would be consistent with the commitment they gave at the last Nutrition for Growth summit? Will she ensure that her Department has the funding required to meet that target? NGOs estimate that roughly £120 million per year is required for nutrition-specific programmes, but that accounts for just 1% of official development assistance. Will the FCDO increase the impact of other UK aid spending by adding nutrition objectives to £680 million of programming in other areas?

[David Mundell]

That is not an ask for new money; it is about targeting other programmes, such as agricultural or social protection schemes, on areas with a high prevalence of malnutrition. Will the Government and the FCDO commit to implement the OECD's policy marker for nutrition at programme design phase, to ensure that the Minister's Department proactively considers how nutrition can be woven into programmes? These are not just arbitrary requests or calls for more money. Each commitment would make a real difference to the lives of millions of malnourished women, children and adolescent girls.

To conclude, let me give just one example of the difference that such commitments can make, by speaking about Halima. Halima was 17 months old when she was admitted to hospital in Mogadishu. She was dangerously underweight and had peeling skin, swollen limbs and brittle hair. As a result of UK funding, Halima was given ready-to-use therapeutic food at the hospital, and her mother, Fatuma, was supported with a cash transfer scheme that enabled her to provide her daughter with a healthy, balanced diet. I am sure we are all pleased to know that after five months, Halima was bouncy, bubbly and healthy. As a direct result of decisions made in this place and by the UK Government, Halima survived.

Let us grasp the opportunity that the Nutrition for Growth summit next week affords, to ensure that there are more positive outcomes like Halima's. I look forward to the debate and to the Minister's positive response.

1.41 pm

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for securing this debate on the very important Nutrition for Growth summit in Tokyo next week, and for such a thoughtful opening speech.

Since I have been chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the human microbiome, I have been furthering my knowledge about the fundamental role that diet plays in everyone's health and its ability to change the gut microbiome for better or worse. I raise the issue of the gut microbiome because it plays a crucial role in nutritional uptake. The composition of the bacteria in the gut is implicated in a vast array of illnesses, conditions and infections that affect physical and mental health. Around 70% of the immune system is derived from the gut microbiome, so the stronger it is, the stronger our immune system and overall resilience—that is particularly pertinent in this time of covid-19.

The remarkable thing about our gut microbiome is that, unlike our genetics, it can be altered throughout our lives—deliberately, and for the better—most easily by the foods we choose to eat, among other things. Our gut microbiome needs to have many of the positive types of bacteria that are beneficial to health, which are collectively called probiotics. We can ingest those bacteria in the food we eat, especially fermented foods such as live yoghurts, and in any approved supplements that we may take. The positive bacteria then need food of their own so that they can produce the compounds that support our health and resilience. One of the reasons we are encouraged to eat a wide variety of plant foods is that they feed the positive bacteria that we all need to

make for our health to be more robust, with better resistance to infection. Food that targets specific types of positive bacteria can be taken in the form of supplements called prebiotics.

At a recent meeting of the APPG on the human microbiome, we had a talk by Professor Gregor Reid of Western University in London, Ontario, in Canada. He spoke about a truly transformative programme that is already operational in Africa, called Fermented Food for Life, which is pertinent to the ambitions of the summit. The programme provides affordable, good-tasting foods that improve the gut microbiome, nutritional intake and health. It uses local people, local resources and a very simple production method that ferments milk, fruits, cereals and vegetables. It starts with an affordable sachet containing 1 gram of two food-grade beneficial bacteria that can produce 100 litres of probiotic fermented food. A cow or goat will then provide milk that is fermented with the bacteria in order to make yoghurt. Fermented fruit juices, vegetables and cereals, all of which are highly nutritious, can also be made. By making such foods with some of those types of probiotic bacteria, we are adding to the health-promoting properties of these organisms.

Scientists in Canada and the Netherlands have shown that communities in Africa can purchase the sachets and minimal equipment to produce those health-promoting probiotic fermented foods—supplemented if desired with local moringa leaves, which are considered to be nutritional treasures in themselves—and create a value chain that brings economic and health gains.

Research has shown that probiotic yoghurts can confer health benefits such as preventing and treating gastrointestinal infections, increasing birth weight in babies and improving the mother's health, helping to remove toxins such as mercury from the body, strengthening the immune system, and improving general health and nutrition. Such effects are particularly pronounced in areas with high rates of malnutrition and for individuals who are immunocompromised. Many peer-reviewed research papers back that up.

There are now hundreds of yoghurt kitchens in east Africa, run by women affectionately known as yoghurt mamas. In 2019, the programme reached some 260,000 consumers. As well as the production, there is a distribution network providing employment. By improving the microbiome, the Fermented Food for Life programme is improving nutritional uptake and the health of people in low-income African countries. If such a programme can work in Africa, it can work across the world. It is easily replicable, low cost, sustainable, uses local resources and contributes to meaningful employment and community health.

With a little external investment, many more yoghurt kitchens can be set up. There is a model to follow, and we know it works. The people behind the programme know that it can be transferred to other countries where malnutrition is prevalent—it could even be transferred to Britain and other developed countries. When we talk about malnutrition, we have to link it to poverty, unemployment, low levels of education or lack of accessibility to good, affordable food. We all know that those factors affect regions in our own country.

If such a programme can work in Africa, it can work across the world. Micro-enterprises anywhere in the world can follow the same model as in Africa to produce

probiotic fermented foods to improve health outcomes through the gut microbiome. These cost-effective solutions have been shown to work, and this sustainable programme of recognising the gut microbiome as an integral element of human health fits perfectly with the three key pillars of the Nutrition for Growth summit: health, food and resilience.

I know that the Government are considering whether to renew their commitment to reach 50 million people with nutrition interventions by 2025 at the summit next week, as recommended by the International Coalition for Advocacy on Nutrition, which includes Save the Children, UNICEF and other important non-governmental organisations. Now that the spending review is over, perhaps the Minister could update us on the progress of that decision. As part of such a renewed commitment to the Nutrition for Growth summit, would the Government explore supporting programmes like the one I have described?

1.48 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) on securing this debate, which is timely given the summit next week, and because yesterday was World AIDS Day, and nutrition is crucial in helping people infected with HIV/AIDS—as well as those with covid and many other diseases, as we have heard.

I am struck by the link between this debate and one that we had on Tuesday in Westminster Hall on the wellbeing economy approach to measuring success and what matters. That debate was particularly about our response to climate change, but it is at the heart of the issue of nutrition for growth as well.

Katherine Trebeck, a constituent of mine, is a leading thinker on wellbeing economics. She talks about how we can reframe the kind of goals we want to achieve and the measures that we make of society. One of her cornerstone indicators is how many girls in a country cycle to school. That can be applied in the United Kingdom and in sub-Saharan Africa. A range of things have to come together to increase that number, and the benefits of that increase are so important for so many other things across society.

Nutrition is absolutely at the core of that. Any of us who wants to expend energy—in fighting disease, paying attention in class, working in heavy industry or talking in Westminster Hall—has to be adequately fed. We recognise that in our country. One of the biggest political debates during the covid crisis was free school meals. The Government had to respond to the national outcry led by Marcus Rashford, who knows from experience that sustenance and adequate nutrition are the foundation of everything a person might want to do in daily life. The series of Nutrition for Growth summits are recognition of the centrality of good nutrition to human development. The summit in a couple of weeks will build on previous summits. We recognise that they were started under the Conservative Government of David Cameron, but of course that Government reached the 0.7% target and increased the amount of money that the UK was spending on international development. I will come back to that, because sadly that is not what this Conservative Government are doing.

Nutrition is the underlying driver of, and essential to meeting, 12 of the 17 sustainable development goals, and it is absolutely crucial to the second sustainable development goal of ending hunger in all its forms by 2030, which is not very far away at all. Again, I pay tribute to David Cameron's work to mobilise global opinion behind the SDGs. People questioned whether 17 SDGs was enough or too many. It is the right number, because those were identified as the goals that we need to meet in order to build a more sustainable and just world for everybody.

The fact that the goal on hunger is the second SDG is recognition of how important it is to achieving everything else that we want to achieve. I pay tribute to the work of the University of Nottingham, and particularly Professor Nicola Pitchford; at a recent meeting of all-party parliamentary groups, they gave a presentation on a very impressive study they are doing in Malawi to monitor, prove and demonstrate the significance of nutrition for all the other wellbeing indicators. The right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale is vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Malawi, and we share a deep interest in that country. That study will use big data from across the whole country; 4,500 mother and infant pairs will be studied over the long term to see what difference different kinds of intervention can make. Crucial to that will, of course, be the kind of food and the adequacy of the nutrition that they are able to access.

The latest FCDO annual report states that Malawi is to experience a 50% cut in the aid it receives from the United Kingdom. This has to be addressed. I know it is uncomfortable. Ministers do not like it, and Conservative Back Benchers do not like it very much either, but the reality is that the United Kingdom is set to make one of the biggest cuts to its overseas nutrition work in history. The aid budget as a whole faces a cut of roughly a third, and aid for nutrition is set to be slashed by 70%. That is the finding of the International Coalition for Advocacy on Nutrition, which produced a thorough report with some important recommendations, some of which the right hon. Gentleman echoed.

The difficulty, which we were warned of when the cuts came forward, is that they are not being applied equally across the board. It is almost impossible to apply them equally across the board, so the Government are having to pick and choose between priorities, whether that is priority issues or priority countries. As soon as they do that, other projects and programmes that have been supported by the Department for International Development and the FCDO suffer disproportionately.

The reality of the cuts is that the money will not turn back on like a tap in a couple of years' time when the Chancellor says, "We're going to get back to 0.7%." That will be of no use to programmes that are closing now, for experience that is being lost now, to staff who are moving to other projects or moving elsewhere, and for the progress that has been made with cohorts who are not receiving inputs now. That will have a long-term consequence, even if the budget is brought back up to 0.7% in a couple of years' time—and we will wait to see whether that is what happens. I have to contrast that with what the Scottish Government are doing. They have increased their international development fund, despite the pressures on their budget as a whole. When Scotland becomes an independent country, we absolutely

[Patrick Grady]

want to meet 0.7%. We have recently offered £250,000 to help with the hunger crisis in Sudan, and another £250,000 to Afghanistan because of the approaching catastrophic winter famine.

As the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) said, this issue affects countries all around the world. We are particularly focused, in the summit and in the debate, on Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and developing countries in the least developed category, but the issue affects so many people. As I said at the start, it affects us here at home as well. That is why I warmly welcome the Scottish Government's commitments on free school meals. Over many years now, that has been rolled out to increasing numbers of primary school children. The Scottish Government are going further, faster, because they recognise the difference that it makes to the wellbeing of children, their educational opportunities and closing the attainment gap. If it is good enough for us here in Scotland and the United Kingdom, it should be good enough for all the countries that we work with around the world.

I hope that the Minister will recognise the foundational importance of nutrition for all the other development goals that we aspire to reach, and that the UK Government will find a way to show leadership when it comes to requests made by stakeholder groups and by the Members in today's debate. If we do not do that, it will put all the other goals at risk, because of the foundational nature of this topic.

I know things are difficult for the Minister; first of all, half the ministerial team are off because of various commitments and self-isolation. They have been working very hard this week, between Westminster Hall and the Chamber. Also, it is difficult because it is an uncomfortable decision that has been made. However, we have to be honest about the reality of the impact of the cuts. We need to work together in order to find the best way to act to make the best of the situation, and to use the resources as effectively as possible, so that they make as big a difference as possible.

1.57 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I look forward to contributing under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) on securing this timely debate, and on his brilliant contribution.

As an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on population, development and reproductive health, and as a member of the Select Committee on International Development, I have always had a passion for this subject. I will join my colleagues next week at the summit online; we will be there from the IDC.

Next week, this Government have the opportunity to continue the work that they have done promoting good nutrition. In 2013, this Government led the world at the first Nutrition for Growth summit, and we can do it again. Truly it is an opportunity to fundamentally change the lives of the poorest in the world for the better. This is possibly the most important time to tackle malnutrition since the 1983 to 1985 famine in Ethiopia.

Covid-19 has ripped through the most deprived parts of the world in ways inconceivable to us. It has left swathes of already vulnerable children on the very edge

of starvation. This year, 225 more children will die every day because of malnutrition. An additional 3.6 million children are predicted to become stunted, and 13.6 million children are predicted to become wasted by 2022 because of malnutrition arising from covid-19. This is not intangible. It is real children whose lives are blighted.

Nutrition is the single simplest, most effective way to improve lives across the globe, yet this year we are turning our backs on the malnourished. This Christmas—supposedly a time of good will—while the aid budget as a whole is facing a cut of roughly a third, ODA for nutrition is set to be slashed by 70%, despite the relative affordability of nutrition, the efficiency of spending it represents, and the impact it has. Nutrition cuts across every single target the FCDO has. It meets targets and it changes lives. Money spent on nutrition delivers an average return of 16 times the investment and supports future generations; it does not have a one-off impact.

With this in mind, and with the legacy of the first Nutrition for Growth summit as a role model, I hope the Minister will answer the following questions. There might be some repetition of other Members' suggestions; I tried to cut it out, but then I thought, "I must add my voice to theirs, and endorse and support what they said." Will the Minister attend the Nutrition for Growth summit, make an ambitious pledge there, and commit to renewing the commitment to reaching 50 million children, women and adolescent girls with nutrition programmes by 2025? Will the Minister commit to adding nutrition indicators to roughly £680 million of aid in other areas, to maximise the effectiveness of the aid budget? What work is the Minister's Department doing to ensure that other Government Departments and other Governments around the world take nutrition seriously? Finally, will she commit to reading the International Coalition for Advocacy on Nutrition's latest document, "Time for Action", and respond to its recommendations?

2.3 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) not only for securing this debate, but for making very eloquent and powerful arguments in the run-up to the Tokyo Nutrition for Growth summit next week. I thank all Members who have spoken. It seems that we are breaking out into consensus, and I hope to hear a consensual reply from the Minister.

For many of us, our first and fundamental understanding of international development, and our moral obligation as global citizens to provide assistance to the poorest and most vulnerable in the world, will have been shaped by stories and images of children who did not have the well-nourished, healthy life that we took for granted. We see pleas, both on television and in newspapers, almost every day for support from our citizens for those most in need. Those of us old enough remember the horrific images from the mid-1980s of many children starving to death, which led to an international outcry. We all watched the Band Aid concert, which raised hundreds of millions worldwide to help people in Ethiopia.

The simple fact is that a healthy diet is a fundamental human need—in fact, it should be a right. That is something even the youngest child can understand, but

as we debate this issue today, halfway through the United Nations decade of action on nutrition, the UN has sombrely concluded that the world is not on track to achieve sustainable development goal 2, which is zero hunger by 2030, or on track to meet global nutrition targets. Sadly, it is not on track to meet some of the other sustainable development goals, either.

In fact, the number of undernourished people has increased by over 50%, from 633 million to 957 million—almost a billion—in the past three years alone. Pause to consider that number for a second: that is one in seven people on Earth. Let us be in no doubt: this is a global crisis. That increase should shame us all, and today this Chamber is clearly sending the Government the message that they must reaffirm their commitment to global nutrition—not through vague platitudes from the Minister at the end of this debate, but through concrete and evidenced action at next week's summit.

Nutrition has a fundamental impact on the life chances of a child, even before they are born. We all know that well-nourished women have safer pregnancies and deliver healthier babies, yet one third of women of reproductive age suffer from anaemia—the leading cause of complication in pregnancy and childbirth—which increases the likelihood of miscarriage, stillbirth, low birth weight and maternal mortality. Sadly, Governments are not on track to reach the World Health Organisation target of reducing anaemia in women by 50% by 2025, despite the fact that providing iron supplements costs less than \$5 per woman. Well-nourished infants and children are healthier and have stronger immune systems, making them more able to resist infection and disease. Without sufficient nutrition, children, particularly those under the age of two, are at high risk of wasting, which causes them to be too thin and to have weak immune systems. That results in development delays, disease and, ultimately, death. Tragically, as was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale, malnutrition is still linked to 45% of all under-five child deaths.

Similarly, in 2019, 144 million children under the age of five were affected by stunting—being too short for their age. They, too, are more susceptible to disease and infection, and are unlikely to develop their full cognitive potential. Adults who are stunted earn about 20% less than their peers, and mothers who are undernourished are more likely to have children who are subsequently stunted, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and undernutrition. If there is a point to be made here about lifting people out of poverty around the world, it is this: we are talking about a simple and affordable investment that will ensure that nations around the world can grow out of a situation in which they are regularly in need of international development. That argument, I would think, would work for even the most libertarian Conservatives in this Government.

Furthermore, good nutrition is critical to brain development and educational achievement. Well-nourished schoolchildren are more likely to stay in school, but malnourished children are, at age eight, 20% less likely to be able to read simple sentences and 13% less likely to be in the correct school year for their age. Once again, if trade is to be a key part of our development work—which I fully support—we need to make sure that young people have good access to health and education. Food will be a key part of that. Only then will they be able to

trade their way out of their current situation and be prosperous like those in other nations in the western world.

Ensuring good nutrition is therefore critical to preventing disease, reducing unnecessary death, and enabling people to reach their full potential. Nutrition is recognised by Nobel economists as the most effective development intervention. That makes it all the more regrettable that it has been neglected, and that malnutrition is on the rise. It is therefore fundamentally vital—I cannot emphasise this enough—that the UK Government recommit to reaching over 50 million children, women, and adolescent girls with nutrition-relevant programmes by 2025. Those in this Chamber have said that with one voice. The Department for International Development was able to exceed that commitment between 2015 and 2020, so there should be no reason why the FCDO could not do likewise.

Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on global nutrition, with rates of malnutrition soaring due to the pandemic. The disruption to economic, health, development and educational systems has meant that livelihoods have become more fragile, and has exacerbated existing inequalities. How can someone provide a broad range of food for their family when lockdowns and economic instability have meant that they have lost their job and income? How can they receive nutritional supplements when their country's healthcare system is overwhelmed with covid patients, or when aid workers cannot reach them because of border closures? How can they receive their one healthy meal a day when the school that they go to is closed?

The impact has been catastrophic. Between 2020 and 2022, an additional 3.6 million children are predicted to become stunted, and 13.6 million children are predicted to become wasted. This will cause over a quarter of a million more children under five to die from malnutrition. That is 225 children dying every single day—these could be our children. Will the Minister commit today to conducting an impact assessment on how covid-19 has affected, and will continue to affect, rates of malnutrition in FCDO partner countries?

Nutrition is even more important in the context of covid-19, as good nutrition is essential to maintaining a strong immune system, as was noted by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). Conversely, malnutrition is the leading cause of ill health and death worldwide, increasing the risk of developing severe covid symptoms, and therefore possibly reducing the efficacy of covid vaccines. The impact of covid should have made the UK's investment in nutrition more important, not less—the impact of covid should have made all of the UK's aid spending more important.

However, what did we see from this UK Government in response? We saw the very opposite. We saw the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Cabinet abandon their obligation to leave no one behind, abandon any notion of building back better, and abandon the UK's role as a leader—let us be clear—in international development by renegeing on the cross-party manifesto commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income on ODA. The term “global Britain” would be funny if it was not so tragic.

Rather than step up to help the world's poorest and most vulnerable when they needed it the most, the Government stepped away and made an ideologically

[Chris Law]

motivated death-sentence cut. The pandemic forced hundreds of millions of people into hunger and malnutrition, but at a time when people needed strong immunity more than ever, UK aid for nutrition-specific programmes plummeted by—wait for it—70%, from £118 million in 2018 to just £37 million this year. Despite nutrition being central to the FCDO's development priorities, less than 1% of the UK budget is spent on nutrition-specific programmes. Withdrawing support from these life-saving nutrition programmes severely compromises the effectiveness of UK aid, including in priority areas such as covid, global health security and, fundamentally, girls' education. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated the importance of good nutrition for human immunity and vaccine efficacy. Well-nourished girls are more likely to stay in school, succeed in their studies and delay their first pregnancy.

The tragedy of the “global Britain” approach is that the Government knew that they would be undermining this work. Their own equalities assessment concluded that these cuts would negatively impact girls' education, harm wider efforts to advance gender equality, disrupt disability-inclusive development and diminish the ability to reach those furthest behind. It was not done without knowledge in advance. Nevertheless, they pressed ahead with this callous cut regardless. Let us be clear that these cuts have consequences: they kill. Therefore, this UK Government have blood on their dirty little hands.

I will demonstrate an example of this. In evidence given to the International Development Committee, of which I am a member, along with my colleague from the Labour party, the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), witnesses from UNICEF spoke of their UK aid-funded nutrition programme in South Sudan, which was cut this year by 75%, from £20 million to £5 million. What does that mean on the ground? It means that an additional 73,000 children with severe wasting may not be reached and now face the highest risk of death. These cuts stand in stark contrast with every other G7 country, which have increased their aid contributions over the past year. It is no wonder that they have done this; we have been living through covid and we all know what that has meant. It is something that every country on earth is experiencing—we are not unique. It is the Scottish Government who have pledged to increase their international development fund by 50%. Let me be crystal clear: Scotland wants no part of the UK Government's abdication of responsibility, and sees international development very differently.

This Conservative Government have abandoned the UK's role as leader in international development in favour of following the manifesto commitments of the UK Independence party and the Brexit party. The upcoming Nutrition for Growth summit cannot fall short in the same way that the Education for Development summit did this summer. Rose Caldwell, chief executive of Plan International UK, said that the UK had failed in its duty as co-host after the summit failed to reach its target by a staggering \$1 billion.

As the host of the original Nutrition for Growth summit in 2013, which was supported by cross-party unanimity when David Cameron brought it forward, the UK should have tremendous convening power. If the UK Government wish to restore their credibility on

the world's stage in any shape or form, they must deliver a strong pledge next week to catalyse commitments from other donors. It is essential that the UK increases aid for nutrition-specific programmes and, at the very least, returns to the original 2015-20 levels and commits the necessary £120 million per year over the next five years.

The Nutrition for Growth summit is a rare opportunity for ambitious change. It is not too late. The UK Government, and Governments across the world, cannot let down those most in need yet again.

2.15 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for securing this timely debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) for all the work that she does in her APPG. I also thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), and the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), who is the Front-Bench spokesperson for his party.

I will perhaps repeat some of the points that my colleagues have made, but this issue is so important that they need to be repeated again and again. As has been said, hunger and malnutrition are one of the world's most serious but least addressed development challenges. Although the proportion and absolute number of chronically undernourished people has declined worldwide, the progress has been uneven among developing countries. The challenge we face in the international community is to build on that progress and accelerate the processes to improve nutrition.

Malnutrition affects lifelong development and contributes to half of all child deaths. Millions of children around the world are affected by the life-limiting outcomes of poor nutrition. In many developing countries, only one third of children under two are fed what they need for healthy growth; no progress has been made on improving their nutrition over the past decade.

A recent UNICEF report found that a combination of crises, from covid-19 to conflict and climate breakdown, had stunted progress on children's nutrition in 91 countries. The report sets out that half of children aged from six to 23 months across a range of developing countries were not fed the minimum number of daily meals, and even fewer had a diverse diet that met minimum requirements.

Until recently, the Government regularly reminded us of their objective to ensure

“12 years of quality education for all girls”

—a very noble aim. However, such objectives cannot be met unless we also support nutrition. Nutrition has implications for a child's employment prospects and therefore the economic success of their country. Good nutrition relies on food and agricultural systems that deliver healthy and diverse diets at a cost that people can afford.

It is estimated that undernutrition in childhood reduces an individual's earning potential by 10% and has the same impact on GDP rates, with a total global economic cost of \$3.5 trillion. Progress can only be made through joint global action to build, strengthen and transform

food systems, so that children can get the nutrition they need to survive and then thrive. This underlines exactly why we need our Government to tackle this problem and invest in more nutrition.

However, the Government seem to be considering doing the opposite. Earlier this year we discovered that they are planning to spend 70% less on vital nutrition services, by cutting £100 million from the aid budget. They are aware that such a move would leave tens of thousands of children hungry and even at risk of starvation. Is that what we are now coming to? Are we now looking at the near collapse of British help for hungry children in some of the world's poorest and most dangerous countries, including Yemen, Somalia and Sudan?

Ending preventable child deaths will never be achieved if we ignore the role that prolonged malnutrition plays in a child's development and future quality of life. It is simply not credible for the Government to claim global leadership in tackling hunger while slashing aid. That amounts to nothing more than a hollow "global Britain" slogan with nothing tangible behind it.

Perhaps what makes this situation most sad and self-defeating is that Britain has been a genuine global leader in this area for the past decade, saving lives and gaining a huge soft power benefit as a result. I implore the Minister to recommit to reaching out to over 50 million children, women and adolescent girls with nutrition-relevant programmes by 2025. That is a target that the Department for International Development made and even exceeded between 2015 and 2020.

We all know that next week the Tokyo Nutrition for Growth summit will take place. The first Nutrition for Growth summit in 2013 was, of course, hosted by the United Kingdom. It mobilised some £17 billion in new investment, with the UK contributing massively to that sum. Since 2013, the number of children whose physical or cognitive growth has been stunted by malnutrition has been reduced by over 13 million.

Despite the progress that I have just mentioned, nutrition remains one of the most pressing issues in global development. If progress is to continue, we must see the UK leading once again in Tokyo by taking steps to ensure that nutrition is embedded within the UK aid's portfolio and pledging funds that are at least at the same level as those pledged since 2013. Ideally, of course, it would be great to have an uplift.

When the Minister responds to the debate, can she say whether the Government will commit to making such a pledge at Tokyo? Will they commit to fund nutrition-specific services to a level that is roughly equivalent to that between 2015 and 2020, which was about £120 million per year or roughly 1% of the ODA budget? That small increase would reflect inflation, the UK's economic growth and the global shortfall in funding for nutrition.

Can the Minister also tell us who will represent the United Kingdom at the Tokyo summit? Ensuring that there is high-level ministerial attendance at the summit, drafting ambitious policy commitments, considering a match funding scheme and co-financing and supporting the implementation of countries' national nutrition plans would all send a strong message that our Government take nutrition seriously.

Nutrition is so paramount in human life that it intersects with almost all aspects of development policy and is therefore fundamental to delivering on our goals.

Therefore, I hope that the Minister who attends the Tokyo summit will make a powerful case for the importance of nutrition and address the issues that my parliamentary colleagues and I have raised this afternoon.

2.24 pm

The Minister for Asia (Amanda Milling): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Bone. I start by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) on securing the debate. I know that he tirelessly champions the cause of nutrition—that most basic human need—as chair of the APPG. From the discussion that we have had this afternoon, I know that Members of different parties welcome his commitment to this really important agenda. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to the debate.

The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), is responsible for global health policy. She would have been delighted to be present but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale suggested, the ministerial team are in quite a few different places this week. My ministerial colleague is currently in the main Chamber for another debate, so it is my pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government. As I say, I am grateful to all Members for their contributions.

Six years ago the international community pledged to end malnutrition by 2030. However, despite progress in some areas, we face an ever greater challenge. Malnutrition is increasing, with huge consequences for people, the economy and society, and the pandemic and climate emergency have only made things worse. I hope that the Tokyo Nutrition for Growth summit next week will mark a renewed global effort to prevent malnutrition in all its forms, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is working closely with the Government of Japan to build the foundations for a successful summit.

The UK Government have made a commitment to end preventable deaths of mothers, newborns and children by 2030, and addressing malnutrition is fundamental to this endeavour. Malnutrition lies behind nearly half of all child deaths and one in five maternal deaths. Poor nutrition leaves millions of women and girls suffering from anaemia. Meanwhile, with 2.2 billion overweight people, it is fuelling obesity-related diseases and making people more vulnerable to covid-19.

The Government are determined to ensure that people around the world benefit from improved nutrition. Since 2015, we have supported more than 55 million women, children and girls in this regard. Through our special envoy on famine prevention and humanitarian affairs, we are tackling malnutrition in countries where conflict and covid-19 make our job harder. We will deliver on our financial commitments in the G7 famine compact by the end of the year, and we have announced new funding to address increasing needs.

In Ethiopia, the UK has provided £76 million in humanitarian assistance since the start of the conflict, including for work to support nutrition. In Afghanistan, we are doubling our humanitarian and development assistance, with £50 million committed for life-saving support since the Taliban takeover—again, that includes food assistance. However, this is not just about money.

[Amanda Milling]

We will also scale up our action to anticipate and avert crises before they happen. That is why our humanitarian funding will do more to integrate food assistance with other support, including for nutrition, health, clean water, hygiene and sanitation. We will focus, as ever, on the most vulnerable, particularly women and girls.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale and other Members have called on the Government to make fresh commitments to Nutrition for Growth, including on spending. As Members are well aware, and as has been discussed, the seismic impact of the pandemic forced us to take the tough but necessary decision to reduce our official development assistance temporarily. However, the ODA budget is growing, and the Chancellor confirmed in the recent Budget that we are scheduled to return to spending 0.7% of GNI on official development assistance in 2024-25. We will continue to improve the nutrition of those who need it most, as we will set out in our approach paper on ending preventable deaths, which will be published on 14 December.

Meanwhile, we are working to ensure that our ongoing investments have the greatest possible impact. Our spending on women and girls' health is designed to achieve World Health Organisation targets, including on reducing anaemia. We are also strengthening food systems so that nutritious diets become more affordable, accessible and sustainable in the face of climate change. We continue to invest in research and development, including in projects to increase the availability and affordability of nutritious vegetables in areas affected by changing weather patterns. We are also encouraging the private sector to produce more nutritious foods.

I want to pick up on the comments made by the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott). I listened carefully to her update on the work of the all-party parliamentary group on human microbiome, for which I thank her. The nutrition-specific interventions we provide are developed based on rigorous evidence, and we will consider evidence on the microbiome, too.

A number of colleagues mentioned the policy marker. My right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale and others have asked us to adopt the OECD Development Assistance Committee policy marker on nutrition across the FCDO portfolio at the programme design phase. I am delighted to be able to confirm that we are committed to doing that across the Department and are encouraging all our international partners to do likewise. We are in the final stages of agreeing our spending plans on nutrition, and I will share further details as soon as possible. I, or my ministerial colleagues, would be more than happy to write to my right hon. Friend with more information in due course.

I once again assure right hon. and hon. Members of our commitment to nutrition as we work to end the preventable deaths of mothers and children. We will continue to deliver on this commitment through to the Tokyo summit and beyond. In the light of the challenges we face, we must see a renewed global effort and we must all play our part.

2.32 pm

David Mundell: I thank everyone who has contributed to this thoughtful debate in which many interesting and relevant points have been made. When I have raised this issue in the past, the arguments about the 0.7% target have inevitably been rehearsed, but that is not really the focus of this particular discussion, which is about value from interventions—that is a point that everyone has made.

The hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) said that people who might be at the most sceptical end of the development spectrum must realise that interventions in nutrition offer the best value. The relative sums involved for the outcomes are unquestionable, and indeed, if those interventions are not made, the huge amounts of money put in elsewhere—in girls' education, for example—lose their value. Numerous statistics and studies show that if girls are at school but cannot pay attention to what is going on, the value of their presence there is lost. I think that argument is unchallengeable, and I am glad that there was consensus on it.

I was very interested in what the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) said about the microbiome and yoghurt kitchens. That example demonstrates that we must have, at the heart of our approach to development, more local initiatives that help people in their communities and do not require vast amounts of outside resource. I was fascinated by that and heartened by Minister's positive response on the microbiome.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) is a seasoned campaigner on development issues, and he authoritatively said that 12 of the 17 development goals are underpinned by nutrition. It is not a side issue—it is right at the heart. Last week, I was very pleased to become co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS, and he was also exactly right to highlight the impact of nutrition on HIV/AIDS. In fact, as he will know, one group of people that need the most support on AIDS is women, particularly in Africa.

Patrick Grady: On nutrition, we would be remiss to go through the entire debate without paying tribute to the work of Mary's Meals, a well-known Scottish charity that puts providing nutrition and school meals right at the heart of its work, because of the impact of that on education, particularly for girls. It also works with other organisations to produce nutritious food in the first place. Frankly, I am just taking advantage of the spare time in the debate to put that on the record.

David Mundell: Absolutely. If we had video facilities in Westminster Hall, I would be able to show the hon. Gentleman when I joined Mary's Meals volunteers in not only making a healthy porridge but having a good old singsong about it as well. He is right. Many similar organisations do a really important job.

The hon. Member for Ealing South always takes an important interest in these matters. I was pleased to hear that he would be participating, through the IDC, in the summit. It is important that it is not only governmental, and that interested and relevant parties play a part. Obviously, I did not agree with everything that the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) said: I sort of agreed with the start and the end. The contribution of the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Bolton

South East (Yasmin Qureshi), was thoughtful and underpinned the core asks that we put to the Minister. I was pleased that the Minister was able to confirm at least one of those asks, and I think everyone following the debate will be pleased that the OECD policy markers will be adopted at an early stage. The other issues that everyone raised are as relevant, and we hope to see a positive response to them.

Mr Sharma: This is just a correction. My constituency is Ealing, Southall, not Ealing South.

David Mundell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. I am not as familiar with the geography of London as I might otherwise be.

To return to the point I was making, it is clear what the asks are. I hope that the Government will look favourably on them. As I said when I met the Prime Minister, to come back to the initial point, this represents the best value of any intervention or spend that the UK Government could make. The summit is an opportunity to reaffirm global leadership, and I hope that that opportunity is seized.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the 2021 Tokyo Nutrition for Growth summit.

2.39 pm

Sitting suspended.

Pet Travel

[RUSHANARA ALI *in the Chair*]

[Relevant documents: e-petition 587165, Let airlines allow pets in the airplane's cabin to and from the UK, e-petition 593806, Seek to rejoin the EU pet passport scheme, e-petition 565677, Seek common travel area between GB NI & ROI for Guide dogs & Assistance dogs, and e-petition 560549, Let airlines allow pets under 10kg in the airplane's cabin to and from the UK.]

3 pm

Rushanara Ali (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when they are not speaking in this debate, in line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. I also remind everyone that Members are required by the House to have covid lateral flow tests twice a week if they are coming on to the parliamentary estate. This can be done either at home or in the testing centre.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered pet travel.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ali, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this important debate. I declare an interest: I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cats. I thank Cats Protection for its assistance in acting as secretariat to the APPG and its help in so many cat matters. I would also note that I own—if that is the right term when it comes to cats—two cats, Milly and Louie. Neither plans to travel, especially Milly, as she does not travel well and sings all the way. Louie, my other cat, was a rescue through Cats Protection, and I hope he is now happy in his forever home. I know that there are many cat-owning Ministers: the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has Gus, and my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), another DEFRA Minister, has Midnight. Cats are a great interest for all of us.

Moving to the substance of the debate, I first welcome representatives of Cats Protection and thank them for their detailed briefing, on which my speech largely relies. I am supportive of the proposals for changes to travel legislation for dogs. The increased minimum age limit, the restrictions on numbers, and the ban on importing heavily pregnant dogs and dogs with mutilations such as cropped ears will make a big difference for dog welfare and help to combat the increasing illegal trade in puppies. I am, however, concerned that a lack of focus on cats by DEFRA could result in a missed opportunity to stop the illegal trade in cats and kittens before it reaches the scale and cruelty of the illegal puppy trade.

The estimated population of pet dogs in the UK is 9.6 million, with 26% of adults owning a dog. A very similar proportion of UK adults—24%—own a cat, with an estimated 10.7 million pet cats in total. Cats Protection's 2021 "Cats and Their Stats" UK report has made significant findings regarding changes to the commercial market for cats and consumer behaviours that put cats at greater risk of exploitation by unscrupulous

[*Mrs Sheryll Murray*]

sellers and, potentially, pet smugglers. Cats Protection has found that consumers are buying, rather than adopting. More recently obtained cats are more likely to have been bought, as opposed to adopted or taken on. Some 34% of cats obtained in the past year were bought—up from 24% for cats obtained more than five years ago.

Cats Protection has also pointed out that consumers are going online to find cats to buy. Those buying cats are increasingly going online to find a cat, 68% of purchased cats having been found online in the last year. It has also found that high-value pedigrees are in demand. According to their owners, more recently obtained cats are significantly more likely to be pedigrees: of those cats obtained in the past year, 36% were pedigrees, compared with just 16% for those obtained over five years ago. With more high-value cats being sought, there is a risk of even more unscrupulous sellers looking to exploit cats and consumers for profit. An analysis by tech4pets for Cats Protection found skyrocketing cat prices across three pet-selling websites, with an increase of around £150 in June 2021 compared with June 2020. That equates to an increase in price of around 45%. The analysis also found that the number of online adverts more than doubled over the same period.

There is no doubt that people want cats. I know that animal welfare charities are currently concerned about the consultation on the commercial and non-commercial movement of pets into Great Britain. In the consultation, DEFRA proposes to increase the minimum import age for puppies from 15 weeks to six months. It also proposes to ban dogs with non-exempted mutilations and the importation of bitches that are more than 42 days pregnant. Those are all sensible and proportionate measures that will safeguard the welfare of dogs. For cats, however, DEFRA is proposing to maintain the current requirements, leaving welfare threats unchecked.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, on which I serve, has produced a report on the movement of pets across borders and recommended that the Government ban the importation of pets, which would include cats younger than six months and heavily pregnant pets, including cats. The Committee also recommended the banning of importation of pets that have been subjected to poor welfare practices, such as the cruel and unnecessary declawing of cats. The recommendations are fully supported by animal welfare charities.

I would like us to raise the importation age of cats. It is true that cat imports do not currently take place on the same scale as dog imports. However, according to the “PDSA Animal Wellbeing Report 2021”, an estimated 48,000 cats acquired between March 2020 and May 2021 came from abroad, accounting for 5% of overall cat acquisitions during that period. Similarly, Cats Protection’s “Cats and Their Stats” report of 2021 estimated that 5% of overall cat acquisitions between March 2020 and March 2021 were from an overseas source. That equates to around 70,000 cats.

Although cat and kitten importation is less widespread than that of dogs, it is clearly a route to satisfy demand for pet cats in Great Britain, and there is no reason to suppose that cat welfare is respected any better than dog welfare by people who import illegally. The increased demand for kittens, coupled with the rapidly rising cost of cats in the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic, has

the potential to make cat importation a more tempting prospect for illegal importers. Cats Protection volunteers found evidence of kittens being advertised for sale with worldwide shipping as an option. It is clear that there is an international trade in cats.

A freedom of information request carried out by Cats Protection found that the number of cats seized at the UK border more than doubled between 2019 and 2020, and the majority were high-value breeds such as Scottish Folds, Maine Coons and Bengals. The breeding of some of these breeds—for example, Scottish Folds—has its own welfare concerns. There has also been a large increase in the number of cats being seized because of non-compliance with the Trade in Animals and Related Products Regulations 2011 between 2019 and 2020. Providing parity with the proposed dog legislation changes—at the same time as welcome changes are being made for dogs—would safeguard feline welfare against any opportunity for cats to be exploited in a similar way to dogs, particularly given the equivalent surge in demand for cats over the last 18 months.

I will move on to the importing of pregnant cats. As territorial animals, cats choose their environment. Transport can therefore be a stressful experience, as I know from the behaviour of my Milly when she goes to the vet, and it can be especially stressful if they are pregnant—although I hope she is not pregnant. Not extending the provisions proposed for dogs to cats threatens their welfare by risking having pregnant cats imported to meet increased demand. It is essential that the importation of pregnant cats is prohibited in the last 50% of gestation.

Public communications from DEFRA on banning the importation of mutilated animals have had a clear focus on dogs, with tail docking and ear cropping. While that is welcome, mutilation is not a concern only for dogs. Cats can be affected too, such as through the practice of declawing, which is illegal in the UK under section 5 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Under the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, all animals that have mutilations under the 2006 Act should be banned from importation. It is essential that there is a prohibition on importing cats with mutilations, such as declawed cats.

Effective, targeted and robust enforcement is crucial for the success of the new proposals and in order to halt pet smuggling for good. Increased spot checks—including visual checks of animals by Government agencies, which can significantly disrupt the movement of goods and people—are essential if puppy and kitten smuggling is to be tackled effectively. There should also be adequate staffing during weekends and evenings to reduce opportunities to circumvent spot checks, which should be accompanied by increased and sufficiently resourced cross-border and cross-agency collaboration, sharing intelligence and information on suspected smugglers and routes into the UK. It is disappointing that the Government consultation did not include more proposals and questions on an issue of such importance.

From 1 July 2022, commercial imports will have to enter Great Britain via a border control post. Despite that requirement, such posts do not cover all potential points of entry into the UK. It is unclear what steps will be taken to ensure that illegal importers cannot subvert the system simply by surreptitiously landing their animals at a non-designated port which may have less stringent checks. Greater clarity would also be welcome on the process following an illegal landing, as there is significant

concern over the consequences if animals were given back to their owner and required to complete a harrowing return journey to their point of origin.

Thank you for chairing the debate, Ms Ali. I also thank the Minister for hearing the debate and I look forward to her response.

3.14 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to be able to contribute to the debate and I commend the Backbench Business Committee for making time for it. I want to mention some of the petitions that have been included as background papers to today's debate because, although none have reached the 100,000-signature threshold to guarantee a debate, some of them raise important issues that deserve to at least be given an airing.

I commend the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) for her contribution and for her well-informed and well-researched comments, specifically on the laws that relate to the import of cats and how their welfare can be protected. Unlike the hon. Lady, I have never owned a cat in my life; I have been owned by a succession of mogs for a continuous period of about 25 years, although not recently. Something that always struck me was that every one of them was its own person. We have to accept that some animals have feelings, have emotions; they are intensely intelligent and intensely sentient. Sometimes I think they are a bit more emotionally intelligent than us humans.

Sadly, there are parts of the world, and there are people in all parts of the world, that regard all animals as simply objects to be bought and sold for money. Let us face it: there are people who think that their fellow human beings are little more than objects to be bought and sold for money. Therefore it is essential, in any legislation that this Parliament is competent to enforce, which in effect means the way animals are treated in the United Kingdom and all the rules about bringing animals into the United Kingdom, that we always impose our standard, the standard that would be accepted by the vast majority of people in these islands, which is that animals deserve to be treated humanely, to be well treated. They should not be transported halfway around the world in appalling conditions just because somebody thinks that having a cat or a dog of a particular breed will give them a bit of bragging rights at their local club.

In that context, I have to say that I do not get pedigree animals. All our cats were mogs, and proud to be so. I have some friends who get very touchy if their cat or dog is described as the wrong breed. I understand that that is a vital thing for a lot of people. I do not fully understand it myself—I don't get it. I wonder whether we need to recognise that the belief that certain breeds are intrinsically more valuable than others is perhaps part of the problem. I know that that starts to open up very difficult questions—first, for those who have businesses responsibly and humanely breeding very specialist pedigrees, whether it is cats, dogs or any other animals. However, as somebody who is not really into the pedigree aspect of animals, I sometimes wonder whether it is part of the problem—if the reason why people are able to make money out of the cruel and unlawful treatment of animals is that somewhere, either in the UK or elsewhere, there is somebody who will pay an exceptional amount of money for a dog or cat just because it has a certificate that attaches it to a particular breed.

Dogs Trust has provided a very helpful briefing for today's debate. It highlights some of the loopholes in the existing legislation and gives examples of how irresponsible breeders and irresponsible importers in the UK will find ways around legislation almost before the ink is dry on the Act. That means that the legislation has to keep being updated. We have to give powers to those with enforcement responsibilities so that they are able to adapt to whatever the latest dodge is.

For example, relatively recently, we have seen a big increase in the number of heavily pregnant dogs being brought into the UK, because the Government tried to help people to avoid buying illegally imported puppies by saying, "Don't buy a puppy if you don't see it with its mum." What happened was that the importer would bring in a heavily pregnant female, show the puppies with their mum as soon as they were born, and then send the mum back to wherever she came from to start the whole horrible process again. The people buying the puppies in those cases thought that they were following the guidance; they had no idea that they were being duped and that the puppy would be with its mum for a few hours, if it was lucky, and that that would be the last it would see of her. I give that as just one example of how legislation has to keep pace with the worst examples of what we see either in the UK illegal pet import industry or in some of the worst examples that we see overseas.

I want to come on to the different petitions. There are two petitions about allowing pets to travel in airplane cabins. Neither has enough signatures to generate a debate, although one of them certainly has enough to merit a formal response from the Government, which it has received. If I am looking at petitions, my eyes are always drawn to the bit of the map that says "Glenrothes and Central Fife", because how much support a petition has from my constituents is clearly relevant to me; and when I speak on behalf of the Scottish National party, I will always look to see what support it has elsewhere in Scotland. Neither of those two petitions, 587165 and 560549, has any significant support in Scotland. One of them got seven signatures from my constituency, and the other got one. Interestingly, the more heavily subscribed of them seems to have a lot of support in London. I do not know what the reason for that is, but the Government may want to look at why the question of how pets travel in aeroplanes is obviously important to a significant number of people in London and the surrounding area.

I can understand the sentiments behind that petition, because I can appreciate that it is upsetting for an owner to be separated from their pet for a long time while they are travelling and that the owner might think that it is also distressing for the pet. However, I am not convinced that I could support such a petition, although neither am I convinced that I would oppose it; I suppose that I am a bit of a "don't know" on this issue.

That is partly because I am not an expert and so I cannot answer the question of whether it is in the best welfare interests of an animal to be in the cabin of a plane, where the owner can potentially hear it if it gets upset, but cannot do anything about it, or whether it is better to have pets in a designated part of the hold with a professional welfare officer there to look after them. I do not know the answer to that, but I think the petition possibly overstates the point a bit by suggesting that it is always in the interests of a pet to be kept in the cabin with its owner.

[Peter Grant]

We also have to realise that even if the law was changed, what happens in practice would not necessarily change, because a lot of airlines flying in and out of countries where they are allowed to carry pets in the cabin choose, as a matter of their own policy, not to permit that, or they permit it only in certain circumstances. Thankfully, most airlines allow registered assistance dogs into the cabin, but a lot of them do not go any further than that. Although I can sympathise with the intention behind this petition, I am not convinced that changing the law in the way that is being asked for would have as much benefit as the petitioners perhaps think it would.

I can understand why the Government do not want to introduce any legislation on that just now; I can understand that they might not be convinced of the benefits, but can the Minister point to any clear evidence that changing the law as requested would cause any harm? If changing the law will not do a lot of good, but will not do any harm, why do we not allow airlines to do something that might benefit some of their passengers, unless there is clear evidence that harm would be done?

I have a great deal more sympathy for the other two petitions. First, petition 565677 seeks a common travel area between Great Britain, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland for guide dogs and assistance dogs. It received just under 6,000 signatures, which is not a lot, but in Northern Ireland it received over 3,800 signatures. This petition is about an issue that has little or no impact on mainland Great Britain, but clearly is significant for people in Northern Ireland: 3,800 signatories from a population of 1.9 million is equivalent to about 138,000 signatories in the whole of the United Kingdom. We would clearly see that number as meriting time for a debate, either here in Westminster Hall or even possibly in the main Chamber.

I have a particular interest in making the guide dog service as widely available as possible, because my grandad, Arthur Grant, went blind in later life as a result of cataracts. Then he got Punch. He had Punch for about two or three years, and Punch changed his life. Unfortunately, Punch was quite a bit younger and fitter than my grandad, and too often Punch took grandad for a walk instead of the other way round. So Punch was taken and retrained for a younger owner, and Kirsty arrived. Kirsty was with my grandad for her entire working life. My grandad died the weekend after Kirsty was retired and I will always believe that he just decided that it was time to go.

For all that time, Punch and then Kirsty were my grandad's eyes, but they were more than that; they were his constant companions. They were his best friends in a way that a dog or a cat that is a best friend to somebody who can see for themselves cannot possibly be.

My grandad had 12 active and independent years at the end of his life, which would not have been possible without those guide dogs, so I can never sufficiently thank the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, as it was called then. I can say with some feeling that any obstacle that gets in the way of this life-changing service in any part of these islands must be removed, if at all possible, and I urge the Government to look very seriously at this petition and to do what it takes to deliver what is being asked for.

It is tragic if anyone in Northern Ireland is either unable to receive the support of a guide dog or has to wait for a guide dog to arrive because of bureaucracy related to Brexit. As this part of the debate focuses almost entirely on Northern Ireland, it is perhaps worth pointing out that grandad Grant was of Ulster descent, which, of course, means that so am I; in fact, I can claim Ulster descent on both sides of my family.

The final petition that we are considering—petition 593806—calls for the UK to join the EU pet passport scheme. Again, there are not a huge number of signatories, but I know that the people who have signed this petition love their animals—their pets—and get really distressed at the additional bureaucracy and additional cost that is now imposed on them if they want to do what they used to do quite easily, which is to take their pet on holiday with them.

What this petition tries to undo is one of the downsides of Brexit that people were not told about before. I am hoping that today's debate can be consensual, so I will not labour the point too much, but it is one example of a consequence of Brexit that might not have looked like it was very high up the list of issues to be addressed at the time. It simply was not addressed until it was too late.

While the Government will no doubt talk about their efforts to persuade the European Union to improve the UK's position from part 2 to part 1 listed, the unavoidable truth is that on the day that the Government unilaterally set out for EU exit, they handed that decision over entirely to the European Union. The petition asks to undo some of the damage done by Brexit. I suspect those who signed the petition, even those who voted for Brexit, had no idea of the impact that Brexit was going to have.

Are the Government aware of any harm that would be done if the petition on allowing pets into aircraft cabins was accepted? On the petitions for a common travel area for guide dogs and assistance dogs, and on rejoining the EU pet passport scheme or giving pet owners benefits as close to those granted under that scheme as possible, I urge the Government to do what is requested as soon as possible.

3.26 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Ali—I think it is the first time I have done so. I congratulate the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) on bringing the debate to the Chamber. I follow the work of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs very closely. It produced an excellent report, which the hon. Lady referred to extensively. Some of the issues are under consideration during the passage of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill and I had the pleasure of being on the Bill Committee and will comment on some of those points.

Of course, the debate is also about pet travel in general. I start by following up on some of the comments of the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), who spoke for the SNP. In my part of the world, huge numbers of people travelled freely to and from our neighbouring countries in the European Union over many years, not just for holidays, but for work. For thousands and thousands of people in and around Cambridge, the changes that were introduced at the start of this year had implications that were perhaps not entirely foreseen, exactly as the hon. Member for Glenrothes has said.

As ever, the House of Commons Library briefing on this was very useful. As it explains, when we left the EU, we were treated as a third country. Now, the new scheme requires pet owners to obtain an animal health certificate for their pet every time they travel to the EU. That certificate must be produced in the 10 days before travel—not exactly always very convenient, when people are busy working. It is valid for four months, and the costs charged vary between an estimated £100 and £150 a time.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Does the briefing that the hon. Gentleman refers to note what other measures EU member states are imposing on people who want to visit the UK and bring their pets? It would be interesting to see what the like-for-like situation is.

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Member raises an interesting point. Sadly, we are exactly in that tit-for-tat situation, so it does not work for anybody, which, of course, is what many of us rather feared.

My constituents now face considerable inconvenience and considerable costs. Frankly, it gets worse. As the hon. Member for Glenrothes said, the Government have negotiated for part 2 listed status, and believe that we should qualify for part 1 listed status, but it is of course part of a wider negotiation, which is the problem we have entered into.

I was quite shocked to read about the situation with Northern Ireland, which effectively means that animal health certificates are needed for trips in and out of Northern Ireland. When asked about the costs, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) said, in reply to a written question, that the cost of AHCs is

“a private matter between individual practices and their clients”.

That is a statement of truth, but no consolation for people who face those very high costs. It is a very unsatisfactory situation. Obviously, we hope that it can be improved in the future.

Mrs Murray: I am sorry to intervene again, but when I worked as a GP receptionist before I came to this place, suggested charges were circulated to all GPs on all sorts of things that they would term “private work”, including diving medicals, signing letters and so on. Does the hon. Gentleman have any information on what the BMA recommends GPs should charge?

Daniel Zeichner: I am slightly confused by the question because I think we are talking about animals and pets.

Mrs Murray: The hon. Gentleman was talking about charges.

Daniel Zeichner: I am talking about pets, and the situation is very clearly different from what it was last year. The hon. Member for Glenrothes said that he hoped for a consensual debate—he is absolutely right to—but I am just laying out the facts. Pet travel is more difficult, and although it may be a difficult question to answer, I hope to hear from the Minister about progress on that.

The hon. Member for South East Cornwall raised a whole series of absolutely appropriate questions around pet smuggling, and I will address those.

Mrs Murray: To clarify, I should have said the British Veterinary Association and veterinary practitioners.

Daniel Zeichner: Ah, that is a different issue entirely. I have looked at the BVA policy position on pet travel, and it has a whole series of detailed recommendations. I am not sure that I want to take the Minister through all the various forms of tapeworm and rabies so late on a Thursday afternoon. Clearly, expert advice on how we might be able to improve the position is available to the Government, and I am sure that they will be mindful of it.

I will be brief, as I am sure you will be pleased to hear, Ms Ali, because many of the points have already been well made by both speakers so far. I very much agree with the hon. Member for South East Cornwall about cats—I am a cat person myself. In the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill Committee, we had considerable back and forth on whether the legislation treated cats fairly. I had representations from Cats Protection, and it is fair to say that we would like to strengthen that Bill. I am sure that the Minister will reflect any comments and observations made this afternoon back to her ministerial colleague,

The good news is that the Bill will be back with us on Report and there will be some exciting amendments for people to support. I hope that the hon. Member for South East Cornwall will be with us on those points as we try to strengthen the Bill on behalf of cats. In Committee, there was considerable consensus—sadly, not with the Government, but with some Government Back Benchers—in two or three areas in particular, including whether five or three pets should be checked at the border, and of course, the EFRA Committee had a view on that. The consensus led to a historic tied vote in Committee, which was carried for the Government by the Chair’s reluctant casting vote—the Chair was a Labour Member but he did the decent thing. That matter will, I suspect, be an issue on Report.

Similarly, there was consensus on the age of animals that are being imported, pregnancy and, in particular, fashion-based mutilation. I think we all find it extraordinary that anyone would want to do those horrible things to dogs, or that anyone would want to buy a dog with cropped ears, but it seems, sadly, that people do and that there is a market for that, although I note that many of those poor animals are now being dumped post pandemic, which shows how difficult some of this stuff is. We would also like the legislation to be strengthened in the same way to protect against the declawing of cats, which I think most of us find extraordinary but which is being done, particularly in America. As the hon. Lady said, there are some implementation issues for border checks, because we would need visual checks rather than the current processes to make that work.

Although there are perhaps one or two points on which we cannot agree, we can agree on a lot. I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to respond on pet travel. We all know that pets are part of people’s families. We want to ensure that our country is protected, particularly against rabies and other diseases, and to crack down on those who pursue the vile trades that have been mentioned. Provided that pet owners can travel with their pets safely, we want them to be able to do so in the smoothest and most efficient way.

3.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is a pleasure to have you in the Chair, Ms Ali—I do not think I have had that pleasure before. What a lovely subject to be debating: cats. I do not know whether you are a cat owner, Ms Ali.

Rushanara Ali (in the Chair): No.

Rebecca Pow: You are not; but a lot of us here are. Those who are not are missing out, I think—hands up for cats. I did not get the name of the shadow Minister's cat.

Daniel Zeichner: I am afraid my cat has been 25 years gone, but I and the Minister's colleague the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) have frequently mentioned Brian, who unfortunately was a female cat—I was not entirely accurate in my identification.

Rebecca Pow: And we are still talking about Brian, the female cat, 25 years on, which is pretty good, isn't it?

Mrs Sheryll Murray: If anybody were tempted to adopt a cat, I am sure they could approach Cats Protection. When I adopted Louie, I did it virtually. The adoption of cats did not stop during the pandemic, and they make such wonderful companions.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend. While we are talking about how wonderful they are, I have to mention my two cats, Mr Tipps and Raffa. The lovely lady who goes into my house to feed them when I am not there has literally just sent me two pictures of them so that I know they are okay—I think they are basically in command when I am not there, having a great time.

We are a nation of dog lovers and cat lovers, are we not? I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) for securing this debate. She is a great champion for cats, being chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on cats, and she has a lot of in-depth knowledge of this subject, so I thank her for securing the debate. I personally take all issues relating to the welfare of animals—particularly things such as puppy smuggling, other illegal importations and low welfare movements of pets—extremely seriously. There is an abhorrent trade going on out there. I believe that, as a Back Bencher, I worked with my hon. Friend; indeed, I was co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for animal welfare. Interestingly, as I think the shadow Minister will agree, a lot of the measures in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill relate to the issues we talked about up to five years ago. Those things, which are a manifesto commitment, are now coming forward in that Bill, cracking down on these ghastly practices, particularly puppy smuggling and low welfare issues. I am very pleased that we are seeing that action happen now.

My hon. Friend will be familiar with the significant changes that I am proposing we make to the existing rules on the non-commercial movement and the commercial importation of cats, dogs and ferrets—do not leave out the ferrets, Ms Ali. We know that there is evidence that traders abuse our pet travel rules, illicitly using them to bring in lots of puppies at once to maximise profit. The

welfare of those puppies is frequently compromised—we have all seen some really ghastly footage of what is going on. Indeed, I have friends who have brought a dog without any idea at all that they came through illegal channels, so that definitely needs cracking down on.

The Bill aims to tackle the issue by reducing the number of pets—dogs, cats and ferrets—that can travel in one non-commercial movement from five per person to five per vehicle, or three per person if people are travelling on foot or by air, to prevent unscrupulous traders from exploiting our pet travel rules. Air travel was raised by the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), who does not have a cat—although I think that, having heard this debate, he might be going home to get one.

Peter Grant: I could not honestly tell the Minister how many cats have owned me in the past. When the last one went to the big cattery in the sky, the reason we chose not to get another one was precisely that we were not happy at having to impose on neighbours to look after them when we were away and did not feel it was fair on the cat to take it with us. It is not that I would not like to have a cat; it is just that we thought it was not fair on the cats to be left to look after the house on their own when we were not there.

Rebecca Pow: That is a really important point for pet owners, and it is why I do not have a dog—it simply would not be fair to leave it. I think that cats are rather more independent, although I have to rely on a neighbour to come in and out, so the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Even though people can now get self-feed mechanisms and watch on their phone to see whether the cats have taken the food, I want a human to come in and see my cats every day, because I think they like it. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point.

The hon. Member for Glenrothes was talking about air travel. Obviously, all pets travelling into GB have to be checked for compliance with the necessary health and documentary requirements prior to entry. To facilitate those checks, all pets entering GB airports must be transported safely and securely to the pet-checking facility. In practice, that means that most pets are required to travel by air to GB as manifest cargo, and we do not have any immediate plans to change the process by which pets—cats, dogs and ferrets—may enter GB by air. I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware of that. Interestingly, when one was allowed to travel freely, my daughter travelled to Majorca with a friend's dog. The dog was next to her on the plane, in a proper bag, which I find extraordinary. I have never seen that before, but it was all totally legal and had all the right paperwork. The dog was literally sitting on the seat next to her.

Back to the Bill. As I have said, it aims to tackle these issues by reducing the allowed number of pets from five per person to five per vehicle, and to three per person if one is travelling on foot. We completed extensive research and engagement with various stakeholders to determine a suitable limit that would disrupt the illegal trade while diminishing the impact on genuine owners travelling with their pets under the pet rules. The Bill also includes an enabling power to make regulations about the importation of pet animals in Great Britain, for the purpose of promoting animal welfare. That will enable us to go further in the future and explore measures such

as increasing the minimum age at which animals can be moved for non-commercial purposes or commercially imported into Great Britain, prohibiting the importation of heavily pregnant dams and animals that have been subjected to mutilations, such as ear-cropping and tail-docking. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall welcomes all the measures in the Bill, as she said. The Bill has completed its Committee stage in the House of Commons, as we have heard, and we are now awaiting a date for Report.

In August, the Government launched an eight-week consultation on our proposed restrictions to the commercial and non-commercial movement of pets in Great Britain. The consultation focused largely on dogs and included proposals to prohibit the commercial importation and non-commercial movement of puppies under six months, dogs that have undergone non-exempted mutilations such as cropped ears and docked tails, and dogs that are over 42 days pregnant. We have proposed a limited number of exceptions to the measures that were laid out within the consultation, which also sought views on the enforcement regime, the process for seizing and detaining animals that are suspected of being illegally imported, and whether the maximum penalty should be increased.

The consultation has now closed, and we have received an incredible 14,000 responses from a wide range of stakeholders and members of the public. We are analysing all the responses to the consultation and will publish a summary in due course. That will allow us to take on board the views of the public and interested groups, such as Cats Protection, to shape future policy. We will continue to work closely with all the stakeholders before the introduction of the legislation to ensure that the final measures are well considered and led by the latest evidence.

We are finally getting to cats. I fully acknowledge the concerns that have been raised about extending the measures to cats, and I am also aware that a number of stakeholders are calling for us to raise the minimum age at which kittens can be imported and to ban the importation of heavily pregnant and declawed cats. I absolutely agree with hon. Members who have mentioned that horrific activity, which is illegal in the UK. We did not propose those measures in the consultation because there is limited evidence of a significant illegal trade in cats, or significant numbers of low welfare movements.

Going into some of the stats, the number of movements of cats into Great Britain is much lower than for dogs. In 2020, cats made up 9% of the total commercial movements of cats, dogs and ferrets to Great Britain, although that was a 2% increase from 2019 and I acknowledge the point made about cat ownership rocketing during lockdown. Dogs travelling by the same rules made up 91% of the total movements. Non-commercial movements of cats are also much lower than those of dogs. In 2020, 12% of the corresponding non-commercial movements into Great Britain were of cats, while dogs made up 88% of the total movements over the same period. We are also not seeing the same issues with young kittens and pregnant cats being imported. In 2020, only 17 kittens under 15 weeks—and zero pregnant cats—were seized and detained.

The consultation obviously sought views on whether that was the right approach. I note the comments made and will definitely pass them to the Minister who is

bringing forward the Bill, particularly about pregnant cats, the specialist breeds, and that de-clawing mutilation issue.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: There is a possibility for an amendment in the other place to ensure that we are not back here in five years' time because the situation with dogs has been addressed, but the situation with cats has escalated to the level that we now see with dogs. We perhaps need to prepare for the future.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for that very clear point. Obviously, the details of the consultation will be analysed. A lot of views were put forward, and I obviously want to give reassurances that the issue will be fully considered and the response will be published.

One or two Members mentioned enforcement, and the Animal and Plant Health Agency works collaboratively with Border Force and other operational partners at ports, airports, and inland, sharing intelligence to enforce the pet travel scheme, disrupt illegal imports and seize non-compliant animals. The enabling power in the Bill allows the Government to make provisions about the enforcement of any new prohibitions brought in under the power. In addition, APHA has the ability, under existing legislation, to undertake checks on pets, including documentary, identity and physical checks.

We do not propose to make fundamental changes to the enforcement regime as we believe the network of agencies and stakeholders who work on puppy smuggling are doing a good job. We operate one of the most rigorous and robust pet-checking regimes in Europe, and all non-commercial dogs, cats and ferrets entering Great Britain on approved routes—every route other than via the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Crown Dependencies—under the pet travel rules undergo 100% documentary and identity checks by authorised pet checkers.

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall is correct that commercial movements of cats, dogs and ferrets into Great Britain from the European Union must soon enter Great Britain via a designated border control post. Under the Government's phased border strategy, post-import checks on commercial cats, dogs and ferrets from the EU are due to be replaced with border control post risk-based checks when sufficient capacity allows. All third-country—so non-EU—shipments are currently checked at the border control post prior to entry. That will continue. As I mentioned, APHA will continue to work collaboratively with Border Force and other operational partners to share intelligence to disrupt this illegal trade.

Daniel Zeichner *rose*—

Rebecca Pow: I will take the intervention, but first I want to say a little more that might answer the question the hon. Gentleman is about to ask. He raised the issues—as did our SNP colleague, the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant)—of the part 2 third country status. The UK has been formally listed as a part 2 third country for the purposes of the EU pet travel scheme, which means that new rules post the transition period now apply to pet movement from Great Britain to the EU and Northern Ireland. These rules are set out in the EU pet travel scheme.

[Rebecca Pow]

We are committed to simplifying pet movements. As set out in the July '21 Command Paper, we seek a new balance with the EU that would allow pets that meet UK standards to move more freely. DEFRA recognises the undue impact that these changes are having on many people, including pet owners and assistance dog users. DEFRA has been clear that there are no animal health or biosecurity justifications for those additional rules for travel to the EU, and we seek agreement with the EU Commission on awarding GB part 1 listed status and recognition of the UK's tapeworm-free status. Achieving them would obviously alleviate the most onerous pet travel rules for all travellers. We see no valid animal health reasons for those not to be granted.

Daniel Zeichner: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Rebecca Pow: I will give way now. I hope that I have already answered the impending question.

Daniel Zeichner: I am very grateful to the Minister. Does she agree that these extra burdens—the £150, the 10 days—make life much more difficult for many of our constituents?

Rebecca Pow: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. That is why DEFRA is working hard on the issue. We already have one of the most rigorous pet-checking regimes, to protect our biosecurity. We have submitted a detailed technical case setting that out. We continue to engage with the EU to come up with a much more workable situation.

You will be pleased to hear, Ms Ali, that I am going to wind up my speech. I reassure hon. Members and my hon. Friends that the Government's commitment to protecting and enhancing the welfare of animals is

uppermost. I believe we have already achieved a great deal, but we want to go further, hence the introduction of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. We want to ensure that all animals are afforded the care, protection and respect that they deserve. I am proud of the work going on through the Bill and the measures that the Government have already taken. I reassure Members that officials are working hard behind the scenes. That consultation is being analysed and will be published shortly.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for scheduling the debate and my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall for introducing it. I think we all agree that we are a nation of pet lovers, and cat lovers in particular. Once the debate is over, I will be heading for the train to get back to see my two cats.

3.53 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray: I will not delay us any longer either, because I am going to hit the car to get back to Milly and Louie. I thank the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), for attending the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) had intended to attend, as a real expert on veterinary matters, but unfortunately he had another engagement. I thank the Minister for her answers. I hope she will be able to make sure that the Bill, when it finally becomes an Act, is welcomed by our cat friends as well.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered pet travel.

3.54 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 2 December 2021

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agricultural Transition

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We are almost one year into the agricultural transition. Farming in England is moving away from the arbitrary land-based subsidies and top-down bureaucracy that epitomised the EU era, towards schemes that recognise the work that farmers do as stewards of our natural environment. Our reforms will support productive and profitable farming and food production alongside environmental, climate and animal welfare outcomes.

Since January, we have increased the money going to countryside stewardship and seen a 40% increase in applications compared with the previous years, launched the farming in protected landscapes scheme, consulted on a voluntary exit scheme, launched the farming investment fund to boost farm profitability and started a pilot of our new sustainable farming incentive.

I would like to update the House on the progress that we have made, working with English farmers to co-design our new systems and support the choices that they make for their own holdings. By the end of the transition, we expect spending to be evenly split across farm-level, locally tailored, and landscape-scale investment.

Sustainable farming incentive

The sustainable farming incentive will fund sustainable farming activities alongside food production, and it will eventually be open to all farmers. It will open in 2022 with the first payments being made before the end of the year. Today I am publishing more detail on how it will operate in 2022 and how the offer will be expanded from 2023 to 2025.

Local nature recovery

Local nature recovery is the improved and more ambitious successor to the existing countryside stewardship scheme. Its focus will be on making space for nature in the farmed landscape and the wider countryside. As with countryside stewardship, it will comprise a menu of options. The options will be broader and more ambitious, focusing on biodiversity, climate, water quality and other co-benefits alongside food production. It will fairly pay farmers for using perhaps less productive areas of their farms for those purposes. We will support collaboration between farmers such as in the way that cluster farms currently operate.

Landscape recovery

Landscape recovery will create at least 20,000 hectares of wilder landscapes, habitats, rewetted peat and afforestation at a landscape scale, and we are ambitious in going even further in harnessing our landscapes for the natural environment. This option will reward landowners or managers who want to take a more radical and large-scale approach to producing environmental and climate outcomes on their land. Industry engagement

has confirmed that there is demand for this scheme, and we will launch the application process—and further details of this and the local nature recovery scheme—in the new year.

While we roll out our new schemes, we are encouraging farmers to enter into countryside stewardship. Today I am also confirming that we will be updating countryside stewardship payment rates from January 2022, which will be published in the new year. We will help farmers in countryside stewardship and other schemes make the transition to our new schemes from 2024 onwards.

We are also investing in animal health and welfare. The animal health and welfare pathway will drive continual improvement in farm animal health and welfare across our national flocks and herds.

I also want to set out the high-level environmental priorities for our programme: climate change mitigation and adaptation; species abundance; water quality; and soil health. Farmers and land managers are central to delivering these priorities, to reach our commitments in the net zero strategy and the statutory targets that will be set under the Environment Act 2021, including to halt the decline in species abundance by 2030.

We will set out high-level priorities and design incentives for actions that will contribute to them. Within this overall framework, it will be for farmers to choose how they want to get involved, whether that is by sparing small areas of unproductive land, changing to a more regenerative approach, or pursuing more radical land use change.

We will pay farmers for the actions that they take in these areas, and activities that provide co-benefits in other areas, such as building the resilience of the environment to climate change, improving air quality, natural flood management and coastal erosion risk mitigation. We will also continue to pay for heritage, access and engagement through our existing schemes and we will consider how to maintain investment in these areas as part of future schemes.

[HCWS437]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Acquired Brain Injury

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): The Government are committed to supporting all people living with an acquired brain injury (ABI) and those living with other neurological conditions and seek to prevent acquired brain injuries wherever possible.

The Government recognise the strength of support for a more collaborative and cross-departmental approach to ensuring that people with ABI receive the support that they need from statutory services. I would like to express my gratitude to both my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for continuing to champion this important cause and recognise their significant contributions to improving services for people living with an ABI. As the Prime Minister announced on 24 November 2021, the Department of Health and Social Care will be leading work to develop a cross-Government strategy on ABI. I am pleased to confirm today some further details regarding the strategy.

The content of the strategy will be informed by a call for evidence which will be launched early in 2022, inviting stakeholders nationwide, including healthcare professionals, people living with an acquired brain injury, their families and carers, to put forward their views about what should be prioritised within the strategy. These priorities could include guidance on action to prevent acquired brain injury, including through concussion in sport; on research into the societal, congenital, medical and environmental causes of ABI; on the provision of relevant services for the purpose of diagnosing ABI, including in prisons, schools and the armed forces; on the identification of adults and children with ABI; on the assessment of their needs; and on the planning of relevant services. We will also ask for feedback on whether there are other related neurological conditions which should be considered for inclusion.

Development of the strategy will be overseen by a dedicated programme board, which, in my capacity as Minister for Care and Mental Health, I will co-chair with the hon. Member for Rhondda. Senior officials in all relevant Government Departments will be invited to join the board to ensure that the strategy addresses the wide range of issues that affect the day to day lives of those living with an ABI. This will include representatives from the Welsh Government and other devolved Administrations, as appropriate.

Following publication, the strategy will be kept under review and may be revised periodically to ensure that it continues to reflect the priority areas and actions needed to best support people living with ABI and their families.

[HCWS438]

PRIME MINISTER

Machinery of Government Change: Boycotts, Disinvestments and Sanctions

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I am making this statement to bring to the House's attention the following machinery of government change.

The Government have committed to legislation to ban public bodies from imposing their own direct or indirect boycotts, disinvestment or sanctions campaigns against foreign countries. Responsibility for this will transfer from the Cabinet Office to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. This change will take effect on 8 December 2021.

[HCWS439]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 2 December 2021

EDUCATION

Budget Resolutions

The following is an extract from the debate on Budget Resolutions on 2 November 2021.

Nadhim Zahawi: We are investing £2.7 billion of capital funding to improve provision for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities.

[Official Report, 2 November 2021, Vol. 702, c. 772.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi).

An error has been identified in my speech.

The correct information should have been:

Nadhim Zahawi: We are investing **£2.6 billion** of capital funding to improve provision for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities.

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