

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT

Welsh Grand Committee

## STRENGTHENING THE UNION AS IT RELATES TO WALES

*Second Sitting*

*Tuesday 18 January 2022*

*(Afternoon)*

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:***Chairs:* †GERAINT DAVIES, SIR CHARLES WALKER

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| † Antoniazzi, Tonia ( <i>Gower</i> ) (Lab)  | † Jones, Mr David ( <i>Clwyd West</i> ) (Con)               |
| † Atherton, Sarah ( <i>Wrexham</i> ) (Con)  | † Jones, Fay ( <i>Brecon and Radnorshire</i> ) (Con)        |
| † Baynes, Simon ( <i>Clwyd South</i> ) (Con)                                      | † Jones, Gerald ( <i>Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney</i> ) (Lab) |
| Brennan, Kevin ( <i>Cardiff West</i> ) (Lab)                                      | Jones, Ruth ( <i>Newport West</i> ) (Lab)                   |
| Bryant, Chris ( <i>Rhondda</i> ) (Lab)  | † Kinnock, Stephen ( <i>Aberavon</i> ) (Lab)                |
| Cairns, Alun ( <i>Vale of Glamorgan</i> ) (Con)                                   | † Lake, Ben ( <i>Ceredigion</i> ) (PC)                      |
| † Crabb, Stephen ( <i>Preseli Pembrokeshire</i> ) (Con)                           | † McMorrin, Anna ( <i>Cardiff North</i> ) (Lab)             |
| † Crosbie, Virginia ( <i>Ynys Môn</i> ) (Con)                                     | † Millar, Robin ( <i>Aberconwy</i> ) (Con)                  |
| † David, Wayne ( <i>Caerphilly</i> ) (Lab)  | † Morden, Jessica ( <i>Newport East</i> ) (Lab)             |
| † Davies, David T. C. ( <i>Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales</i> ) | Roberts, Rob ( <i>Delyn</i> ) (Ind)                         |
| † Davies, Dr James ( <i>Vale of Clwyd</i> ) (Con)                                 | Saville Roberts, Liz ( <i>Dwyfor Meirionnydd</i> ) (PC)     |
| † Davies-Jones, Alex ( <i>Pontypridd</i> ) (Lab)                                  | Smith, Nick ( <i>Blaenau Gwent</i> ) (Lab)                  |
| † Doughty, Stephen ( <i>Cardiff South and Penarth</i> ) (Lab/Co-op)               | † Stevens, Jo ( <i>Cardiff Central</i> ) (Lab)              |
| † Edwards, Jonathan ( <i>Carmarthen East and Dinefwr</i> ) (Ind)                  | † Tami, Mark ( <i>Alyn and Deeside</i> ) (Lab)              |
| Elmore, Chris ( <i>Ogmore</i> ) (Lab)   | Thomas-Symonds, Nick ( <i>Torfaen</i> ) (Lab)               |
| † Evans, Chris ( <i>Islwyn</i> ) (Lab/Co-op)                                      | † Wallis, Dr Jamie ( <i>Bridgend</i> ) (Con)                |
| † Griffith, Nia ( <i>Llanelli</i> ) (Lab)   | † Williams, Craig ( <i>Montgomeryshire</i> ) (Con)          |
| † Harris, Carolyn ( <i>Swansea East</i> ) (Lab)                                   | † Williams, Hywel ( <i>Arfon</i> ) (PC)                     |
| † Hart, Simon ( <i>Secretary of State for Wales</i> )                             | † Winter, Beth ( <i>Cynon Valley</i> ) (Lab)                |
|   | Huw Yardley, <i>Committee Clerk</i>                         |
|   | † <b>attended the Committee</b>                             |

## Welsh Grand Committee

Tuesday 18 January 2022

(Afternoon)

[GERAINT DAVIES *in the Chair*]

### Strengthening the Union as it Relates to Wales

2 pm

*Question again proposed,*

That the Committee has considered the matter of strengthening the Union as it relates to Wales.

**The Chair:** I advise the Grand Committee that, given the number of speakers, people will need to confine their speeches to five minutes in order to get everybody in. It is a great pleasure to ask David Jones to resume his speech—I am sure he will not take all his five minutes.

**Mr David Jones** (Clwyd West) (Con): Thank you, Mr Davies. You will recall that just before the Adjournment I was mentioning the difficulties the Welsh Government were having in delivering medical and educational services. I made the point that devolution should not mean operating in a silo, but should mean sharing best practice and trying to benefit from the experience of others. Frequently, in Cardiff Bay, that is not the case. There is a sort of constitutional teenage angst and some stubborn reluctance to co-operate with other partners in the Union, which, frankly, should have disappeared now that devolution has matured. I hope that will change.

There is cause for hope that it will, with the publication last week by the Government and the devolved Administrations of the review of intergovernmental relations, which notes that the four Administrations of the United Kingdom will work collaboratively. We are told that it is

“built on principles of mutual respect and trust, respecting the reserved powers of the UK Government and Parliament and the devolved competences of the Scottish Government, Welsh Government, Northern Ireland Executive and their legislatures.”

That is extremely encouraging. These new structures

“will provide for ambitious and effective working, to support our COVID recovery, tackle the climate change crisis and inequalities, and deliver sustainable growth.”

This seems to herald a new relationship of mutual respect of one another’s competencies.

As the Welsh Government have just signed up to that review, and that the constitution is a reserved competence under the Wales Act 2017, I find it hard to understand why the Welsh Government have set up a commission under the joint chairmanship of no less a figure than the right reverend and right hon. Lord Williams of Oystermouth, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, “to consider and develop options for fundamental reform of the constitutional structures of the United Kingdom, in which Wales remains an integral part.”

Quite frankly, under the terms of the devolution settlement as we have it, the constitution of the United Kingdom is no business of the Welsh Government. It is firmly a reserved matter. One really has to wonder how the Welsh Government would react if Her Majesty’s Government, having regard to the deficiencies in the delivery of medical services and educational services in

Wales, decided that they would set up a commission into the delivery of those services by the Welsh Government. There would be absolute horror and outrage. The Welsh Government would be affronted. There would be a violent and adverse reaction.

It is clear that the Welsh Government are doing very well out of the Union, as indeed are the people of Wales. It is also clear that the Welsh Government have acknowledged, by signing up to the review of intergovernmental relations, that there are limits to their devolved competence. I strongly urge the Welsh Government, in the interests of good relations with the other nations of the United Kingdom, to confine themselves within those boundaries. The review is a sound basis for future co-operative relations within the Union. I hope that it will be adhered to by all parties that have signed up to it, and that it heralds a new chapter in inter-governmental relations within the United Kingdom.

2.4 pm

**Anna McMorris** (Cardiff North) (Lab): Rwyf wrth fy modd yn cymryd rhan yn nadl yr Uwch-Bwyllgor hwn, y cyntaf mewn pedair mlynedd.

Dydyn ni erioed wedi gweld gwahaniaethau mor ddwys rhwng Lloegr a Chymru. Fel Aelodau Seneddol, rydyn ni yma yn San Steffan ar ran ein hetholwyr, pobl Cymru, a fy etholwyr i yng Ngogledd Caerdydd: y bobl hynny sydd wedi dioddef torcalon, trafferthion ac anobaith dros y ddwy flynedd ddiwethaf fel nad ydyn ni erioed wedi eu gweld o’r blaen, wrth i bob un ohonom ni geisio ymdopi â’r pandemig hwn.

*(Translation) I am delighted to take part in this grand Committee debate, the first for four years.*

*We have never seen such profound differences between England and Wales. As Members of Parliament, we are here in Westminster on behalf of our constituents, the people of Wales, and my constituents in Cardiff North: those people who in the past two years have suffered heartbreak, struggle and despair never experienced before as we have all tried to cope with the pandemic.*

It has been heartbreaking for so many—having to say goodbye to loved ones over an iPad; forced to live with the fact that a parent, a husband, wife, brother or sister died alone, looked after by our incredible NHS, but nursed by someone behind a mask and a visor; and not being able to hold their hand, stroke their head or kiss them goodbye. Those are the realities of this dreadful pandemic that we have all been touched by in some way. And this pandemic has not gone away.

The difference in how our Welsh Labour Government continue to respond to the pandemic is stark. It is no surprise that *The Sunday Times* declared the First Minister of Wales

“comfortably the most popular UK leader”,

while the Prime Minister’s approval ratings drop to their lowest ever. Our First Minister followed the science. The Prime Minister ignored it. Worse, he parted, and No. 10 became the most popular venue in England for illegal parties. While people made unimaginable sacrifices, lost loved ones, isolated themselves from family and friends and did not see people for months on end, No. 10 sent someone out with a suitcase to get more wine. That the Prime Minister did not know or did not participate is nonsense. The contrast with our Labour Government in Wales is stark.

In October 2020, Wales was put into a firebreak lockdown, as the science advised, but the Prime Minister decided against it for England, leading to a longer lockdown starting in November that year. In December 2020, the Welsh Government announced the most generous business support package in the UK. By May last year, the Welsh Labour Government had spent £2.3 billion on covid grants and reliefs to businesses—£400 million more than England.

Mark Drakeford repeatedly called for a four-nation approach to covid, which the UK Government continually undermined. Instead, they have made it impossible to work together, not least because they are simply not a functioning Government right now. Excluding the devolved nations at every opportunity seems to be the default.

The Joint Ministerial Committee, where the four nations come together, is supposed to be the vehicle to make crucial decisions, but it has not met once during the pandemic, and not once during the Prime Minister's leadership, if we can call it that. It is clear that the Government's priority is to dismantle the democratic powers given to the devolved nations and instead demonstrate a blatant power grab for themselves.

Owing to the pandemic, the whole of the UK has witnessed the contrast in approach. We have all been able to see Mark Drakeford's careful, measured approach, his quiet consideration of questions and his full and honest answers, even when they have not been easy or palatable.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I totally endorse the points that my hon. Friend makes. I pay tribute to Cardiff and Vale health board. My hon. Friend and I have spent many hours on phone calls, with Members from all parties and people from this Parliament and the Senedd, being transparent and having open discussions with officials and getting the information that our constituents need. Does my hon. Friend agree there is a contrast with what we have heard from colleagues in England, who have not been getting that information from their health boards, in some cases, perhaps because the Department of Health and Social Care encouraged them to hold back that information?

**Anna McMorrin:** I thank my hon. Friend for making that brilliant point. Cardiff and Vale health board has been exemplary in its handling of the pandemic. All its staff across the health board have gone the extra mile, as they have done in rolling out the vaccine quickly and efficiently.

The people of Wales are truly grateful. They rewarded Mark and his Government with the biggest mandate for Labour in the Senedd elections last year. Unfortunately, it is always a fight with Westminster. "You will get what you are given" is a concept that Wales has become all too familiar with, after more than a decade of Tory Governments.

**Dr Jamie Wallis** (Bridgend) (Con): The hon. Lady takes the view that the Conservative Westminster Government are on a power grab and that they undermine devolution at every turn and do not respect it. How does she reconcile that view with the fact that the Senedd has never been given more powers than it has under Conservative Governments, since 2010—including a referendum in 2011, which we respected?

**Anna McMorrin:** I thank the hon. Member for his point, but we are undermined at every opportunity in making those decisions. That has been evidenced throughout the pandemic. We face a huge cost-of-living crisis as a result of this Tory Government's disastrous decisions. It seems that, at the very heart of their decision making, the Government's intentions have been to undermine our democracy and underfund our services. The community renewal fund and the levelling-up fund excluded the Welsh Government, so that the funding can be controlled entirely by UK Government Ministers. It is clear that they are trying to strip powers away from the Welsh Government and level down Labour Wales.

And what of Brexit, that great promise from this Prime Minister? Let us just say that honesty has never been his strong point.

**Craig Williams** (Montgomeryshire) (Con): On the levelling-up, shared prosperity and the community renewal funds, does the hon. Lady share the sentiments of the leader of Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, which was incredibly successful in the levelling-up fund? Does she share my view that this is actually proper devolution, in that it is asking local authorities what they might want from the schemes, rather than a diktat from the centre?

**Anna McMorrin:** I think the majority of local authorities would agree that they work very well with the Welsh Government and that this is a taking away of powers.

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): Is the hon. Member surprised that one of the constituencies that has done less well out of levelling up from poverty is one of the poorest in Wales?

**Anna McMorrin:** Indeed, that does not surprise me at all; that is symptomatic of a Tory Government that only seem interested in themselves.

We were assured that Wales would not lose a single penny of EU funding after Brexit. Fast forward, and Wales is set to receive just 5% of the community renewal fund, which equates to around £450,000 per local authority. If we had remained in the EU, Wales would have received at least £375 million each year for seven years from January 2021. It is yet another lie. *[Interruption.]*

**The Chair:** Perhaps you might want to rephrase that.

**Anna McMorrin:** No.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies):** Perhaps I can respond and give a brief explanation.

**Anna McMorrin:** No.

**The Chair:** You do not want to give way.

**Hon. Members:** Withdraw!

**Anna McMorrin:** Our businesses and communities—

**Craig Williams:** On a point of order—

**The Chair:** Order. I know that, as a point of fact, we do not actually know whether the money will eventually arrive, but obviously you have used the word “lie”. I am in the Chair and you are putting me in a very difficult position. I would be grateful if you would withdraw that.

**Anna McMorrin:** Okay: this seems to be yet another lie. Our businesses and communities right across Cardiff North and the whole of Wales are buckling under the pressure from the truly appalling—

**The Chair:** Order. Will you just withdraw that for the record?

**Anna McMorrin:** I will withdraw that for now from the record, but I think the record will show that this will have been a lie.

**The Chair:** Order. We are trying to have a grown-up debate. Carry on.

**Anna McMorrin:** Thank you, Mr Davies.

This Tory Government are punishing Wales and our communities, and it is the people of Wales who pay the price. Thankfully, we have a radical Labour Government in Wales who are able to mitigate the worst of this UK Government. In June 2021, a new climate change super-Ministry was established to help Wales to meet its legally binding target of reaching net zero by 2050. All the while, the UK Government’s own climate advisers warned that the UK Government were failing to deliver on promises to cut the UK’s greenhouse gas emissions dramatically. The UK Government are talking the talk, but failing to act.

I am proud that, as a special adviser in the Welsh Labour Government for six years, I was able to bring forward legislation on the environment and on climate, and to create the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, a groundbreaking Act that puts sustainability at the heart of decision making in the public sector.

In November 2021, it was announced that all primary schoolchildren in Wales would be given free school meals. In that same year, the UK Government stopped similar measures being brought forward in the School Breakfast Bill, which was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck).

I am proud that Wales has become a world leader in the treatment of refugees. As a nation of sanctuary, we ensure that refugees who have been displaced by the trauma of war or division can find a home in Wales. That is in stark contrast to the UK Government’s Nationality and Borders Bill, which increases the risk of discrimination and human rights violations.

I am also proud that in Wales we have our own Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015.

**Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con):** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Anna McMorrin:** I do not really have time.

Seven years later, the UK Government have still not followed suit and there is still not a legislative commitment to ending violence against women and girls. That is heart-breaking. Most women who I speak to say that they would not repeat having to put themselves through this broken justice system. This UK Government are failing women and girls—failing victims—everywhere. Far too many of them are let down and treated as an afterthought. Unless we put victims and their experiences at the centre of justice, we will not get anywhere. If the UK Government are unable to do that, then give us the powers to do it ourselves.

It is clear that this UK Government have failed, and continue to fail, to understand or support devolution. As a result, they fail the people of Wales. This Tory Government are probably doing more to break up the Union than any of our nationalist parties. How much longer do we put up with this chaos impacting our communities in Wales as a result of this shoddy, corrupt Westminster Government?

Mae’n bryd cael gwared ar y Prif Weinidog hwn a sicrhau bod pobl Cymru bob amser yn dod yn gyntaf.

*(Translation) It is about time we got rid of this Prime Minister and ensured that the people of Wales will always come first.*

**The Chair:** The last speech took about 13 minutes. Speeches need to be nearer to four or five minutes in length—and with HS2 in mind, I call Jamie Wallis. *[Laughter.]*

2.18 pm

**Dr Wallis:** Thank you very much, Mr Davies; it is a genuine delight to see you in the Chair today; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I believe this debate is one of the most important that I have participated in since being elected to Parliament. I stood for Parliament precisely because I am unashamedly a staunch Unionist and I believe that Wales and specifically my constituents benefit immensely from being part of the United Kingdom.

The Union ensures greater prosperity and security for Wales while also being representative of our shared culture and history, which is far greater than political divisions. Yet it angers and saddens me that the Welsh Labour Government, propped up by their nationalist coalition allies in Plaid Cymru, have no interest whatsoever in strengthening the Union. Instead, they remain focused on pursuing a reckless separatist agenda. When the First Minister of Wales stated that his support for the Union is “not unconditional”, it proved that he cannot be trusted to value and protect our United Kingdom.

There is also the grave constitutional damage that the First Minister caused when he failed to support delivering Brexit, even when 52.5% of the Welsh public voted to leave the EU—more than those who voted for the formation of the Senedd in 1997. Welsh Labour and Plaid ignored the will of the Welsh people, instead painting Brexit as a ludicrous venture. Labour and Plaid, ignoring the largest democratic mandate in our country’s history, continued to show their disdain for the Welsh people through their demonstration to break up Britain. A separate and politically isolated Wales would benefit neither my constituents, nor the wider Welsh population.

Under the current First Minister, a vocal supporter of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and his bid for the national leadership of the Labour party in 2015, we have been given a taste of the illogical and authoritarian measures that we can expect from a separate Wales. Here are some examples: banning the purchase of non-essential items in supermarkets, which led to mass confusion and cases of women being unable to obtain sanitary products; proposed curfews on men; and a focus on taking performative, woke actions on statues and street names, rather than a focus on important issues such as health and the economy. Because of Welsh Government inaction, one in four people wait more than 52 weeks to be seen for non-urgent treatment. Even Lee Waters, the Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport, admitted that they

“don’t really know what we’re doing on the economy.”

Yet even while the Welsh Government continue to undermine our vital Union, the UK Government continue to make the positive case for strengthening it. For example, the UK Government agreed to the largest funding settlement since devolution was implemented in 1998. Now that we have taken back control of our own laws, thanks to the UK Government delivering Brexit, the global trade deals that we have done are helping to increase Welsh exports and direct growth for companies in my Bridgend constituency.

The UK Government’s freeport scheme has been enthusiastically welcomed across the whole of Wales, and it is my firm belief that freeports will bring economic growth and job creation to the whole UK—another clear benefit of our Union. I welcome the fact that the UK Government continue to pledge to establish at least one freeport in Wales as soon as possible, despite the Welsh Government at times acting as an obstacle to this. I suggest once again that the Port Talbot and Bridgend area could lend itself fantastically to the establishment of the UK Government’s first freeport in Wales, creating up to 15,000 jobs in the process.

Crucially, the Union has ensured that we can effectively respond to the greatest public health crisis in over a century. The most successful elements of our response have been when the four nations have worked together. It has enabled us to secure vaccines for the whole United Kingdom. Without it, we would certainly have been unable to deliver the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe. At the same time, our political Union protected the NHS across all of the UK and ensured that it could cope with the additional strains that the pandemic created, with the UK Government providing £34 billion of emergency support this year alone.

Lastly, the UK Government’s swift and decisive action mitigated the virus’s impact on the economy, with £400 billion of support, protecting more than 14.6 million jobs through the furlough and self-employment support schemes. Many of those are my Bridgend constituents.

I urge my political opponents to cease this dangerous separatist agenda. I am proudly British, but I am also proudly Welsh. We must be proud of our shared history and culture. Wales plays a vital role in our United Kingdom. Indeed, we are more than just a Union; we are four nations united as one country.

2.23 pm

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Mae’n bleser cyfrannu i’r ddadl yma yn yr Uwch-Bwyllgor Cymreig ac i wneud hynny yn y Gymraeg.

Mae testun y ddadl heddiw yn un diddorol, am ei fod yn amlygu paranoia’r pleidiau Unoliaethol am ddyfodol y wladwriaeth Brydeinig. Yn y degawd diwethaf, mae dau ddigwyddiad seismig wedi gosod bom niwclear o dan gyfansoddiad y wladwriaeth Brydeinig, sef refferendwm annibyniaeth yr Alban ac wrth gwrs, Brexit.

Cyn hyn oll, roedd Cymru a’r wladwriaeth Brydeinig ar daith gyfansoddiadol esblygiadol. Roedd pwerau cynyddol yn trosglwyddo o’r lle yma i lawr yr M4 i Fae Caerdydd ac roedd y ddadl yn troi o gwmpas pa mor gyflym y dylai hyn ddigwydd, yn enwedig wedi refferendwm 2011. Roedd gwleidyddion fel finnau am weld y trosglwyddo yn digwydd ar raddfa fwy cyflym, gydag Unoliaethwyr yn cefnogi proses fwy araf.

Mae Brexit wedi newid y cyd-destun yma yn llwyr. Bellach, mae’r garfan sydd yn cefnogi datblygiad gwleidyddol cenedlaethol Cymru yn gorfod amddiffyn y pwerau i ni ennill dros y degawdau diwethaf, ac yn wir datganoli ei hun. Mae hyn yn digwydd oherwydd bod athroniaeth Brexit am lawer mwy nag ail-rymuso San Steffan trwy adennill pwerau o Frwsel.

Mae’n amlwg bellach bod Brexit yn cael ei ddefnyddio i ailsefydlu goruchafiaeth San Steffan dros Gymru a’r Alban. Yn ystod refferendwm Ewrop, roedd cefnogwyr Brexit wedi gwneud pob math o addewidion am fwy o bwerau newydd i Gymru os oedden ni’n pleidleisio dros adael yr Undeb Ewropeaidd. Yr addewid oedd i drosglwyddo pwerau yn uniongyrchol i Senedd Cymru o Frwsel. Beth sydd wedi digwydd, wrth gwrs, yw’r gwrthwyneb yn llwyr gyda Llywodraeth Prydain yn dwyn pwerau Cymru heb unrhyw fandad democrataidd Cymreig i wneud hynny. Yn gynyddol, rydyn ni’n symud at setliad datganoli mewn enw yn unig, gyda Llywodraeth Cymru bellach yn etifeddu’r teitl dirmygus Gweinyddiaeth ddatganoledig yn hytrach na statws cenedlaethol.

Yn y Britannia Brexit, dim ond un Llywodraeth genedlaethol sy’n cael bodoli. Ar ôl canlyniad refferendwm Ewrop a phenderfyniad Llywodraeth Prydain i ddilyn llwybr Brexit eithafol gan rwygo Prydain allan o’r farchnad sengl, roedd angen creu marchnad ar gyfer Cymru, Lloegr a’r Alban gyda fframweithiau a rheoliadau newydd.

*(Translation) It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate in the Welsh Grand Committee this afternoon, and indeed to do so in Welsh.*

*The title of today’s debate is interesting, as it brings to the fore the paranoia of the Unionist parties regarding the future of the British state. During the past decade, two seismic events have placed a nuclear bomb under the constitution of the British state: the Scottish independence referendum and Brexit. Before all that, Wales and the British state were on an evolutionary constitutional journey. Increasing powers were being transferred from this place along the M4 to Cardiff Bay and the debate turned around how quickly that should happen, particularly following the 2011 referendum. Politicians like me wanted to see the transfer happening at a faster pace, with Unionists supporting a slower process.*

*Brexit has changed the context entirely. Now, those who support Wales’s national political development have to defend the powers that we have gained over the past decade,*

[Jonathan Edwards]

*and indeed devolution itself. This is happening because the philosophy of Brexit is about far more than simply re-empowering Westminster by regaining powers from Brussels.*

*It is clear that Brexit is being used to re-establish Westminster's supremacy over Wales and Scotland. During the referendum on Europe, Brexit supporters made all manner of promises about new powers for Wales if we voted in favour of leaving the European Union. The promise was of powers being transferred directly to the Welsh Senedd from Brussels. What has happened, of course, is absolutely the contrary, with the UK Government stealing Wales's powers, with no democratic Welsh mandate to do so. Increasingly, we are moving towards devolution in name only, with the Welsh Government now inheriting the sardonic title of a devolved Administration rather than national status.*

*In Brexit Britannia, there can be only one national Government. After the outcome of the European referendum and the UK Government's decision to follow an extreme Brexit route, tearing Britain out of the single market, a market needed to be created for Wales, England and Scotland with new frameworks and regulations.*

**David T. C. Davies:** Ar y pwynt am Brexit eithafol, yr unig reswm rydyn ni wedi cael Brexit clir ydy oherwydd bod Aelodau Plaid Cymru a'r blaidd Lafur wedi pleidleisio yn erbyn y cytundeb gan fy Nghyfaill gwir anrhydeddus yr Aelod dros Maidenhead (Mrs May). Ydy'r Aelod anrhydeddus yn credu y dyldid dangos yr un parch tuag at ganlyniad refferendwm Brexit yng Nghymru, fel mae Aelodau'r blaidd Geidwadol yn ei ddangos tuag at y ffaith fod pobl Cymru wedi pleidleisio o blaidd y Senedd a'r Cynulliad?

*(Translation) On the point about an extreme Brexit, the only reason we had a clear Brexit is because Plaid Cymru and Labour Members voted against the agreement by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). Does the hon. Member believe that we should show the same respect for the outcome of the Brexit referendum in Wales as Conservative Members showed for the fact that the people of Wales voted in favour of having the Senedd and the Assembly?*

**Jonathan Edwards:** Rwy'n ddiolchgar iawn i'r Bonheddw'r anrhydeddus am yr ymyriad yna a'r ymgais i ailysgrifennu hanes. Roedd fy safiad i, ac yn wir Plaid Cymru, yn hollol gryf. Fe fydden ni wedi pleidleisio o blaidd Brexit pe byddai polisi Llywodraeth Prydain i aros o fewn framweithiau economaidd Ewrop. Y rheswm mae hynny'n bwysig, wrth gwrs, yw oherwydd y cysylltiadau economaidd cryf a phwysigrwydd allforion i economi Cymru. Mae hynny'n dod â fi'n ôl at sefyllfa Gogledd Iwerddon. Fe fyddai i'n siarad lot mwy am hynny wrth i'r araith fynd yn ei blaen.

O fewn cyd-destun dyfodol y cyfansoddiad Prydeinig, dim ond dau ddewis oedd ar gael wedi gwneud y penderfyniad i adael y farchnad sengl Ewropeaidd. Y dewis cyntaf oedd ar gael i Lywodraeth Prydain oedd creu marchnad newydd ar sail cyfartaledd rhwng Llywodraethau Cymru, yr Alban a San Steffan—model aml-begynol yn debyg i'r Undeb Ewropeaidd, gyda phob aelod yn gyfartal ar sail strwythurau rhynglywodraethol clir—gyda pherchnogaeth ar y cyd dros y farchnad ac unrhyw

gyrff rheoleiddio. Byddai strategaeth o'r fath wedi cryfhau'r Undeb o ran y perthynas ar ynys Prydain Fawr, ond penderfynu ar yr ail drywydd wnaeth Llywodraeth Prydain, sef canoli grym, pŵer a dylanwad yn San Steffan.

Yr athroniaeth yw ail-ddyfeisio ynys Prydain fel gwladwriaeth unedol a throi cefn ar ddegawdau o gynnydd gwleidyddol Cymreig ac Albanaidd. Mae deddfwriaeth ôl-Brexit, megis Deddf Marchnad Fewnol y Deyrnas Unedig 2020, Bil Rheoli Cymorthdaliadau a chynlluniau fel y gronfa ffyniant gyffredin yn dwyn pwerau Cymru. Mae hyd yn oed deddfwriaeth megis y Bil Iechyd a Gofal, y Bil Etholiadau, Bil yr Heddlu, Troseddu, Dedfrydu a'r Llysoedd, y Bil Cymwysterau Proffesiynol a'r Ddeddf Amgylcheddol 2021 i gyd yn tanseilio pwerau Cymru. Yn wir, tybiaf fod Llywodraeth Prydain bellach yn defnyddio unrhyw ddeddfwriaeth i danseilio ac erydu sofraniaeth wleidyddol Cymru.

Cyn Brexit, y confensiwn clir oedd na fyddai'r Llywodraeth Brydeinig yn deddfu mewn maes datganoledig—confensiwn Sewel. Cyn 2018, ble roedd San Steffan yn cydnabod bod y maes yn ddatganoledig, ni phasiwyd unrhyw ddeddfwriaeth gan Lywodraeth Prydain heb ganiatâd Senedd Cymru. Yn ystod y cyfnod yma, byddai gweithredu heb ganiatâd wedi arwain at argyfwng cyfansoddiadol. Bellach, mae Llywodraeth Prydain yn diystyru yn llwyr yr angen i dderbyn cydsyniad cyn ymyrryd mewn meysydd sydd wedi eu datganoli i Gymru a'r Alban.

O ystyried yr holl rethreg am gryfhau'r Undeb, y gwirionedd yw bod cytundeb Brexit Llywodraeth Prydain wedi rhannu'r wladwriaeth Brydeinig yn ddau barth economaidd, gyda chwe sir Gogledd Iwerddon i bob pwrpas yn aros yn y farchnad sengl a'r undeb tollau Ewropeaidd. Tra roedd yr Aelod gwir anrhydeddus dros Maidenhead yn Brif Weinidog, gwrthododd rannu'r wladwriaeth Brydeinig yn economaidd er mwyn cael cytundeb Brexit. Cam cyntaf y Prif Weinidog presennol oedd cytuno i safiad negodi gwreiddiol yr Undeb Ewropeaidd—sef gosod ffin yn y môr Celtaidd.

Ers arwyddo'r cytundeb, wrth gwrs, rhwyfo'n ôl fu strategaeth Llywodraeth Prydain, a dyna pam rydyn ni'n parhau i wynebu'r holl helynt dros brotocol Gogledd Iwerddon. Mae gan Unoliaethwyr Gogledd Iwerddon bob rheswm i feddwl eu bod wedi cael eu bradychu. Mewn dadl ar gryfhau'r Undeb, felly, mae'n bwysig nodi bod Llywodraeth Prydain wedi cyflymu'r broses o ailuno Iwerddon yn sylweddol.

Ond yn ôl i Gymru. Rwy'n tybio fod rhai ar y Meinciau Ceidwadol yn brolio am agwedd ymosodol Llywodraeth Prydain tuag at sefydliadau democrataidd Cymru. Oond strategaeth tymor byr yw hi. Yn yr hir dymor, yn enwedig wrth edrych ar ddatblygiadau ar ynys Iwerddon ac yn yr Alban, gwanhau'r Undeb yw canlyniad agwedd Llywodraeth Prydain. Yn ddi-os, mae mwyafrif clir yng Nghymru o blaidd datganoli, ac wrth i Lywodraeth Prydain danseilio'r setliad presennol, maen nhw'n gorfodi dewis rhwng annibyniaeth a rheolaeth uniongyrchol o Lundain. Mae twf rhyfeddol mewn cefnogaeth i annibyniaeth dros y blynyddoedd diwethaf yn dyst i hynny, yn enwedig ymysg pleidleiswyr y blaidd Lafur. Tra bod egni gwleidyddol y blaidd Lafur yn cael ei sugno gan drafod modelau fel 'home rule' neu 'datganoli radical' mewn ymgais i roi sgwâr ar gylch, mae pobl Cymru yn canolbwyntio ar y gwir ddewis a fydd yn eu hwynebu yn y dyfodol. Felly, i gloi, megis dechrau mae'r frwydr dros Gymru.

*(Translation) I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and the attempt to rewrite history. I was completely clear, as, indeed, was Plaid Cymru, that we would have voted in favour of Brexit if UK Government policy had been to remain within the European economic frameworks. That is important because of the strong economic connections and the importance of exports to the economy of Wales. That brings me to the situation in Northern Ireland, and I will say a lot more about that as I proceed.*

*In the context of the future of the British constitution, there were only two choices available when leaving the European single market. The first choice available to the UK Government was to create a new, equitable market between the Governments of Wales, Scotland and Westminster—a multi-polar model similar to the European Union, with all members equal on the basis of clear intergovernmental structures, with joint ownership of the market and any regulatory bodies.*

*I think such a strategy would have strengthened the Union from a Great Britain point of view, but the UK Government chose the second option: to centralise power, force and influence in Westminster. The philosophy is to re-engineer the island of Britain as one state and disregard decades of political progress made in Wales and Scotland. Post-Brexit legislation, such as the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and the Subsidy Control Bill, and schemes such as the shared prosperity fund, are stealing Wales's powers. Even the Health and Care Bill, the Elections Bill, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill and the Environment Act 2021 all undermine Wales's powers. Indeed, I surmise that the UK Government are now using any legislation to undermine and erode Wales's political sovereignty.*

*Before Brexit, the clear convention was that the UK Government would not legislate in any devolved area—the Sewel convention. Before 2018, when Westminster acknowledged that an area was devolved, no legislation would be passed by the UK Government without the consent of the Welsh Senedd. During this time, acting without consent would have led to a constitutional crisis. Now the UK Government are wholly disregarding the need to gain consent before intervening in areas that are devolved to Wales and Scotland.*

*Despite all the rhetoric about strengthening the Union, the truth of the matter is that the UK Government's Brexit agreement has divided the British state into two economic zones, with the six Northern Irish counties to all intents and purposes remaining inside the European single market and the customs union. While the right hon. Member for Maidenhead was Prime Minister, she refused to split the British state economically just to secure a Brexit agreement. The first move made by the current Prime Minister was to agree to the European Union's original negotiating position of placing a border in the Celtic sea. Of course, since signing the agreement, the UK Government's strategy has been to back-pedal, which is why we continue to face such a to-do over the Northern Ireland protocol. Northern Ireland Unionists have every reason to think that they have been betrayed. In a debate on strengthening the Union, therefore, it is important to state that the UK Government have significantly accelerated the process of reunifying Ireland.*

*Returning to discussing Wales, I imagine that some on the Conservative Benches are gloating about the UK Government's aggressive attitude towards Wales's democratic*

*institutions, but it is a short-term strategy. In the long term, particularly as we look towards developments on the island of Ireland and in Scotland, the outcome of the UK Government's approach is to weaken the Union. Without a doubt, a clear majority in Wales is in favour of devolution, and as the UK Government undermine the current settlement, people have to choose between independence and direct control from London. The incredible increasing support for independence over recent years is testament to that, particularly among Labour voters. While Labour's political energy is being depleted by discussions about home rule or radical devolution models, in an attempt to square a circle, the people of Wales are focusing on the real choice they face and the choice they face in the future. To conclude, the battle for Wales is merely beginning.*

**The Chair:** I now call Craig Williams. Craig, keep to four minutes if you can.

2.30 pm

**Craig Williams:** It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies—mainly so that I can mention a couple of subjects such as Brexit and perhaps, through your impartial chairmanship, you will not be triggered. It is none the less a great pleasure to take part in this debate and to see you there.

It is also a great pleasure to follow the opening remarks from the Secretary of State and those of several Opposition Members. It is worth reflecting on the fact that since the last Welsh Grand Committee, four years ago, the world has changed a little bit. It has changed in terms of not only our relationship with the European Union, but our dynamic in public discourse and the fact that we have been living through a pandemic; now, arguably, we are at the start of an endemic phase. We move to a different place and there will be different reactions.

What has stabilised during the pandemic crisis, from a constitutional point of view, is that there is no doubt that there are four Governments within the United Kingdom, but clearly the UK Government, throughout this crisis, have had the depth, strength, forward thinking, agility and ability, and not just through the vaccination programme—[*Interruption.*] If the hon. Member for Aberavon would like to interrupt from a sedentary position, so be it, but I cannot hear him through his mask, luckily.

In going through the process of thinking about what the UK Government have been able to achieve throughout this crisis, Members may reflect on the fact that nigh on 18 months ago we were fearful of huge unemployment and a huge recession. We now sit in this Chamber reflecting on the labour shortage. We are having this debate in the context of huge pressures in terms of getting people into work, and historic employment. Those are terrific challenges to have. I dare say that if we had had a Welsh Grand Committee two years ago, they would not have been the challenges that those on the Opposition Benches would have been charging us with.

We are also looking at the strength of the Union and at what the new relationship means, now that we have left the European Union. We can also look at the mid-Wales growth deal fund. It was a great pleasure to see the leader of Ceredigion, from Plaid Cymru, and the leader of Powys, an independent conservative, agreeing

[Craig Williams]

with the UK Government and the Welsh Government on how great it is to sign the mid-Wales growth deal. It was a pleasure to see the Minister committing significant amounts of money to mid-Wales, which is often a completely forgotten part of Wales. It is hugely overlooked by a very Cardiff-centric Welsh Government. It was a great privilege to watch multiple different parties, colours, and two different Governments—the Welsh Government and the UK Government—get together and deliver a significant investment.

There is also the levelling-up fund, which is the new iteration, the new way of getting what used to be the European funding—well, normally into some revenue-driven job-creation scheme in the valleys that added very little to gross value added over the long term but allowed short-term press releases that we all remember certain Members crowing about. The levelling-up fund is not an attack on devolution at all. I do not know how anyone can call it that when local authorities have carte blanche and are working with their local businesses, their local communities, their county councillors, their community councillors and their third parties to put together bids into a funding pot that is really and truly delivering for the whole United Kingdom.

I took great delight in the wins in Powys, because Powys missed so many times, and mid-Wales missed so many times, any opportunities of getting any structural funds. Now, for the first time ever, we are seeing real opportunities to—I can see, Mr Davies, that you are already indicating that I should probably think about shutting up. I cannot do so before I mention the Montgomery canal, of course. There will be huge regenerative opportunities if Powys County Council comes to the table with us and puts a master plan on the back of that huge public sector injection of cash.

To finish, there are great opportunities for Welsh lamb out there. Randall Parker, one of our biggest abattoirs for Welsh meat, has just been bought by Pilgrim's UK. That will see a new ramping up of investment and ability. I am extremely excited by the sanitary and phytosanitary changes, and I hope that I finish in a consensual fashion by saying that, of course, those SPS checks would probably have happened had we still been a member of the European Union. However, it is extremely welcome that we have managed it on our own, to deal with our US counterparts. With other trade deals in the Gulf, we will see a regeneration in Welsh lamb around the world. I am excited, my constituents are excited, and businesses and farmers are excited. I will let other Members speak.

5.35 pm

**Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): Rwy'n falch iawn o gael cyfle i siarad, Mr Davies, a chyfle i siarad yn Gymraeg i ddechrau ac yn Saesneg wedyn.

Mae perthynas ar unrhyw safon, rhwng aelodau'r un tîm, neu gymdeithas, neu ar safon ryngwladol rhwng gwledydd gyda safbwyntiau hollol wahanol, yn dibynnu ar ddadl, ar gonsensws, ar ymgynghori ac ar gyfaddawd.

Roedden ni'n deall wrth gwrs, ar ôl i ni adael yr Undeb Ewropeaidd, y byddai pwerau oedd gan yr UE i benderfynu egwyddorion ar sut i wario arian, yn dod yn ôl i'r Deyrnas Unedig. Yn ôl addewid y Llywodraeth Geidwadol, byddai Cymru yn dal i gael yr un swm

o arian. Dim o gwbl. Addewid sydd wedi cael ei dorri. Beth ddigwyddodd i “ddim ceiniog yn llai”? Roedd Cymru yn arfer cael 24% o gronfeydd strwythurol yr Undeb Ewropeaidd sy'n dod i Brydain, ond ar ôl datganiad y Canghellor, rydyn ni'n cael dim ond 7%.

Beth sy'n od iawn yw pam mae Llywodraeth Doriaidd y Deyrnas Unedig wedi penderfynu osgoi siarad a chydweithio gyda Llywodraeth Cymru i benderfynu sut i wario'r arian yma. Mae gan Lywodraeth Cymru flynyddoedd o brofiad o ddelio ag arian Ewropeaidd, o ddatblygu cynlluniau strategol gyda chynghorau lleol i benderfynu blaenoriaethau gyda'n gilydd.

*(Translation) Thank you for the opportunity to speak, Mr Davies, and in particular to speak in Welsh to begin and then in English.*

*Any worthwhile relationship, between team members or in society, or internationally between countries with completely different viewpoints, depends on debate, consensus, consultation and compromise.*

*We understood that, having left the EU, the EU decision-making powers on how to spend money would pass to the UK. The Tory Government promised that Wales would continue to receive the same amount of money—but not at all. It is a broken promise. What happened to “not a penny less”? Wales used to have 24% of EU structural funds but, after the Chancellor's announcement, we receive only 7%.*

*What is strange is why the UK Tory Government have decided to avoid talking to or collaborating with the Welsh Government about how to spend that money. The Welsh Government have years of experience of dealing with the European funding and of developing strategic plans with local authorities to prioritise jointly.*

**David T. C. Davies:** Ydy'r Foneddigos anrhydeddus yn cytuno ein bod ni wedi trafod y ffordd rydyn ni'n mynd i wario'r arian gydag awdurdodau lleol? Ydy hi'n croesawu'r ffaith ein bod ni'n gweithio nawr yn agos iawn gydag awdurdodau lleol ledled Cymru?

*(Translation) Does the hon. Lady agree that we have already discussed how we to spend the money with the local authorities? Does she welcome the fact that we now work closely with local authorities across Wales?*

**Nia Griffith:** Rwy'n meddwl ei fod e'n bwysig iawn ond y ffaith yw y dylai fe fod rhwng cynghorau lleol, Llywodraeth Cymru a Llywodraeth y Deyrnas Unedig. Dydw i ddim yn deall pam mae Llywodraeth y Deyrnas Unedig yn osgoi y bobl yn y canol, Llywodraeth Cymru, achos maen nhw wedi gweithio'n agos iawn gyda chynghorau lleol trwy'r pandemig. Dyna beth sydd wedi digwydd. Mae'r berthynas yn arbennig o dda, nid yn unig gyda chynghorau dan arweinyddiaeth Llafur ond hefyd dan arweinyddiaeth o farn gwleidyddol arall.

Yn ogystal, yn Lloegr doedd rhai cynghorau ddim yn gwybod beth oedd yn digwydd yn eu hardaloedd nhw y noson cyn iddyn nhw fynd i mewn i gyfnod clo—dyna beth ddigwyddodd yn Lloegr. Mae'r contrast yn llawn gyda beth ddigwyddodd yng Nghymru lle mae'r berthynas rhwng y cynghorau a Llywodraeth Cymru yn gryf. Fe ddylai fod yn dîm—Llywodraeth y Deyrnas Unedig, Llywodraeth Cymru a chynghorau lleol.

Does dim sgwrs o gwbl wedi bod rhwng Llywodraeth y Deyrnas Unedig a Llywodraeth Cymru ynglŷn â'r gronfa adfywio cymunedol a'r gronfa codi'r gwastad, er bod yr arian yn mynd i gael ei wario mewn meysydd

sydd wedi cael eu datganoli. Dyna'r pwynt. Dylai penderfyniadau ar sut i wario'r cronfeydd yma gael eu gwneud gan Lywodraeth Cymru.

O leiaf gyda newid agwedd oddi wrth Lywodraeth y Deyrnas Unedig, ac ymrwymiad diffuant i ymgynghori ac i gydweithio gyda Llywodraeth Cymru ar gamau nesaf y gronfa codi'r gwastad, fe allem ni gael defnydd llawer mwy effeithiol a gwerth am arian.

Mae dau gwestiwn i'r Ysgrifennydd Gwladol. Beth am sicrhau yr un safon o ariannu y mae Cymru wedi ei dderbyn o'r cronfeydd Ewropeaidd—dim ceiniog yn llai—i drïo gwneud iawn am fethiant hanesyddol ei Lywodraeth ef i fuddsoddi'n ddigonol yng Nghymru? Mae siawns nawr gyda fe i wneud hyn. Yn ail, beth am ddechrau'n awr i gydweithio gyda Llywodraeth Cymru o ran cynghorau lleol ar sut i ddefnyddio'r gronfa codi'r gwastad, i adeiladu ar ei phrofiad, i adlewyrchu'n well barn cymunedau ar draws Cymru ac i ddefnyddio'r gronfa yn fwy strategol?

Yn anffodus, rydyn ni wedi gweld yr un peth gan Lywodraeth Doriaidd y DU gyda'r Ddeddf Marchnad Fewnol y Deyrnas Unedig 2020. Wrth gwrs, rydyn ni i gyd yn moyn hyrwyddo masnach ar draws y Deyrnas Unedig. Byddai wedi bod yn bosib creu strwythur i roi mwy o barch, mwy o werth, mwy o lais i'r gwledydd datganoledig, yn lle mynd yn ôl ar y cytundebau datganoli.

*(Translation) It is important, but the reality is that that should be between local authorities, the Welsh Government and the UK Government. I cannot understand why the Tories avoid the people in the middle, the Welsh Government, because the Welsh Government worked closely with local authorities throughout the pandemic. The relationship is excellent, with not just Labour-led councils, but those led by other political parties.*

*Also, in England some authorities did not know what was happening in their areas the night before they went into lockdown—that is what happened. There is a huge contrast with what happened in Wales, with the strong relationship between the local authorities and the Welsh Government. They should all be a team—the UK Government, the Welsh Government and the local authorities.*

*There was no conversation at all between the UK Government and the Welsh Government on the community renewal fund and the levelling-up fund, for example, even though the funding will be spent in areas that have been devolved. That is the point. Any decisions on how to spend the money should be made by the Welsh Government.*

*If there was a change of thinking from the UK Government, with a strong commitment to consult and collaborate with the Welsh Government on the next steps of the levelling-up fund, we could use it in a much more effective way, with value for money.*

*There are therefore two questions for the Secretary of State. First, how about ensuring the same level of funding as would have been received from European funds—not a penny less—to make amends for is Government's historical failure to invest adequately in Wales? He now has the opportunity to do that.*

*Secondly, how about starting to work with the Welsh Government and local authorities on using the levelling-up fund to build on their experience and better reflect the views of communities across Wales, using the formula more strategically? Unfortunately, we have seen the same thing from the UK Tory Government with the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020. We all want to*

*promote commerce across the UK. It would have been possible to create a structure to give more respect, more value, and more voice to the devolved countries, rather than reneging on the devolution agreement.*

It may seem ironic, but in order to create a stronger Union we need a clearer, more firmly embedded devolution settlement that cannot easily be torn up at the whim of Government. Much has been written about this, with ideas set out by the Welsh Labour Government, starting with “Reforming our Union”. Most importantly, it is a matter of having respect between the UK Government and the devolved Governments.

The paper proposed that the UK Government should not normally seek to legislate in areas that are devolved to the Welsh Government without the Welsh Government's consent. That concept of “not normally” should be entrenched and codified by proper definition. It also references the importance of developing

“common frameworks, shared delivery mechanisms and joint governance arrangements...developed on a collaborative and consensual basis.”

Of course, where there are reserved matters with significant impact on Wales, there should be the opportunity for proper consultation, as indeed there should be with trade negotiations. Instead, we have seen the absolutely appalling betrayal of Welsh farmers in the Australia deal.

**Mr David Jones:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. It appears to me that she agrees with much of what I was trying to say in my contribution—on the need for collaboration and co-operation between the two Administrations and respecting the devolved competences. How does she feel about the Welsh Government setting up a commission into the constitution of the United Kingdom? Does she not believe that that is a breach of the constitutional settlement?

**Nia Griffith:** The point is that, in any constitutional debate, we would want to have views from all levels. The issue is how Wales relates to the United Kingdom, and I think that is a very valid point for the Welsh Government to have a view on. It is certainly something that we need to explore further. As I said, it is part of the discussion that has already been started in previous documents from the Welsh Government. Let us try to get that relationship right, so that we do not see the devolution settlement being rolled back.

Returning to the Australia deal, how on Earth can Welsh farmers possibly compete with the huge farms in Australia, with their lower environmental standards, which we certainly do not want to go down to? I feel that, with the trade deals, there is a real danger that the Government will just open doors to imports that flood the country and leave our farming and industrial base in a very difficult position.

We are already seeing that with steel, where the Government have been very slow and selective in renewing trade remedies—namely limits—on the dumping of Chinese steel. At the same time, they have been slow to get the US to lift tariffs, whereas the EU has managed to get steel tariffs lifted and will obviously have a competitive advantage over us now.

We could discuss the technical detail of how these mechanisms should work, but it is really the feeling—it is about preserving the Union. We want to feel secure

[Nia Griffith]

and not have our Government threatened. We want to feel respected and valued by the UK Government. Wales has contributed a huge amount to the UK over the years. We have fuelled the UK with our Welsh coal, helped to fill the coffers and provided a strong industrial base, and we continue to do so. That is why, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent mentioned this morning, the Government now should honour the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee report and look again at the 50:50 split of the mineworkers pension fund. They should split it more favourably for the pensioners who have contributed so much to that fund, especially given that the BEIS report indicates that the 50:50 split for the privatisation fund was an arbitrary decision.

Moving on, we have innovation in our industries. We have world-leading research in our universities. We also have generosity—from helping out in the pandemic to very recently with the 10 million tests. We very much recognise the value of working collaboratively across the UK. We have huge resources to share across the UK. There is the potential for wind, wave, tidal and—do not laugh—solar energy, but we need the UK Government to strengthen the grid to ensure that our vast energy resources can get to the centres of population when needed.

I want to talk about the railways. You know as well as I do, Mr Davies, that we definitely need better investment in the railways, particularly in electrification. It is not just about speed. There are environmental reasons, such as combating climate change and air pollution, and we need to deal with noise. It is important that we feel very proud to be Welsh, proud to be British and also proud of our local communities. We need to ensure that devolution means doing the right thing at the right level, throughout the United Kingdom.

**The Chair:** We need to reduce speech times to about four minutes, which is about half of the previous length. Over to you, Virginia Crosbie.

2.46 pm

**Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): Prynawn da—good afternoon. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

Mae'n fraint gen i siarad yn y ddadl hon. Mae'n fraint gen i fod yn Aelod Seneddol dros Ynys Môn. Dwi'n falch o ddysgu Cymraeg, hybu'r iaith Gymraeg ac annog pobl i ddefnyddio'r Gymraeg.

*(Translation) It is a privilege to speak in this debate. It is a privilege to be the Member of Parliament for Ynys Môn. I am proud to be a Welsh learner, to promote the Welsh language and to encourage people to use it.*

I would like to say how proud I am to be the Parliamentary Private Secretary for the Wales Office at the first Welsh Grand Committee since 2018. I am thankful for the opportunity to speak. I am proud to serve my amazing constituency of Ynys Môn. Our unique island community plays a pivotal role in the Union, with the port of Holyhead at the end of the A55 expressway transporting freight and passengers between England, Wales and Ireland.

You might be expecting me to talk about Wylfa Newydd, Mr Davies. I was delighted that the Secretary of State said it is potentially one of the best nuclear sites in the world. You may also have expected me to talk about my campaign for Anglesey to be Wales' first freeport. However, today I want to speak about a really local issue that has demonstrated why being part of a strong United Kingdom is so important to my constituents. One of the most rewarding parts of my job is helping local people who are facing challenging situations. Like others in this place, my team and I deal with hundreds of emails, phone calls and letters every single week. They come from residents, businesses, charities and community groups across Anglesey that need help. Their issues range far and wide.

In recent months, I noticed an increase in people concerned about long ambulance waiting times. A survey I carried out highlighted significant problems. I received harrowing descriptions of those in pain, waiting hours for an ambulance. I was alarmed to find that 93% of my constituents were worried that they would not be able to get an ambulance if they needed one urgently on the island. I must stress that local frustrations are in no way a reflection of the professionalism of our ambulance staff. I know that our local crews work exceptionally hard and have just been through two extraordinary, stressful years. I wanted to understand what was at the root of the problem.

I spoke to Jason Killens, the head of the Welsh Ambulance Service, not long before Christmas. He explained that the service was under extreme pressure. Covid measures in hospitals meant delays getting ambulance patients into wards, and staff sickness was running at twice the normal level due to covid and stress. There had been a 25% increase in 999 calls. However, Jason told me that the one thing that was making a huge and tangible improvement to response times was the help that the Welsh Ambulance Service had been getting from MACA—the military aid to civil authorities—since October 2021. At the time I spoke to him, 129 military personnel had been deployed to help. As a result, the service had taken 19 minutes off its longest response time. Jason said that more help is desperately needed, so I wrote to the Ministry of Defence to make his case.

Recently, the Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey), wrote to me to confirm that an additional 184 personnel had now been deployed. The total number of armed forces personnel now supporting the Welsh Ambulance Service is 313. I cannot tell you how many of those are working in my constituency, because our local health authority, Betsi Cadwaladr, straddles the whole of north Wales. What I can tell you is that I have already seen a decrease in my mailbox.

I would like to thank the military personnel who are supporting our ambulance service at this critical time. I want them to know, on behalf of my constituents, that we are grateful for their intervention and for the support of the Union. It is a team effort.

2.50 pm

**Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): The world has certainly changed since the previous Grand Committee debate in February 2018. If nothing else, we have realised that while we are all from different backgrounds and live in different circumstances, we ultimately face the same potential risks and difficulties when it comes to our health.

Health, and in particular women's health, is something I have a special interest in. Over the last nine months, I have lived and breathed the menopause. I have probably lived and breathed it a lot longer than that, but publicly, it has been the last nine months. I am very proud to stand up for the 51% of the population who will eventually directly experience this stage of life, and to work with colleagues across the House in a bid to change the narrative. As I have said time and again, there should be no politics in women's health.

When I first published my private Member's Bill, the Menopause (Support and Services) Bill, ahead of its Second Reading last October, I imagine there was some confusion over its key ask, which was for the cost of NHS hormone replacement therapy prescription charges in England to be slashed. I count my blessings every day for the good fortune to have been born in Wales—don't we all? We are so lucky in Wales, as are those living in Scotland and Northern Ireland, because we do not pay for prescriptions, and I wanted to level the playing field for women across the UK trying to access HRT treatment. However, that is only one part of a much bigger picture.

The other aim of my Bill was to totally transform menopause support and services for women across the UK: to improve diagnosis, treatment and pathways; to ensure that women have the understanding and support of their doctors, families, friends and employers; and to develop our school curriculum so that the next generation of girls and boys are better educated and do not face the same barriers as those of us who came before. I was very pleased when the Government took it seriously and introduced a taskforce to look at a wide range of issues and take an holistic approach to menopause care.

I am also delighted with the reaction and response from the Welsh Government. I have lost count of the number of emails, phone calls and Teams and Zoom meetings I have had since we put the menopause high up on the political agenda, but two of the first people I spoke to were very well-respected colleagues and friends in the Welsh Government—Eluned Morgan, the Minister for Health and Social Services, and Jeremy Miles, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language. Both made an instant commitment to ensure that the Welsh Government are on board and make the necessary changes in healthcare and education so that women in Wales are able to access the support and services they need when it comes to menopause care.

I have always believed that working together is how we achieve great things, whether that is cross-party in this place or by uniting with devolved Governments. Nothing that I have accomplished has happened without doing that—be that the children's funeral fund, changes in gambling legislation or menopause care. We are better and stronger together and we make the greatest impact by working alongside those around us. The people we represent elect us to work in their best interests, to lead by example and to make the right decisions for the greater good, and this is when we earn their respect. Unfortunately, not all politicians deserve respect. I would respectfully say that we should always put people before party, regardless of the kind of party.

Our combined efforts on the menopause have earned us respect. I am thrilled that the new taskforce is aiming to revolutionise menopause care right across the UK and to keep women wonderful, which I know that all hon. Members agree with. I am delighted that I get

to work alongside some fantastic Welsh Government colleagues who will ensure that all our constituents are better served and supported to access the care and services they need. Our Union is strengthened by us—by our commitment to work together and our ambition to make a difference and achieve common goals. I hope it will not be another four years before we attend the next Welsh Grand Committee. While we may not always have this arena, I know that we all have the best interests of Wales at heart.

**The Chair:** Four minutes—well done. I call Fay Jones.

2.54 pm

**Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con):** It is an honour to be called in this debate, Mr Davies, and to have the chance to talk about levelling up as it relates to the Union. The levelling-up agenda should be something that we all work towards and I endorse the comments of the hon. Member for Swansea East.

Last week, I was very proud to be the first person to use the word “cwch” in the House of Commons. It is the first time it has ever been recorded in *Hansard*. Cwch is hard to translate, but it is easily understood for Welsh people, much like the word “hiraeth”, which means a longing for one's home. Although it does not have an easy counterpart in English, hiraeth is something that many people recognise, as so many who grew up in Wales end up leaving. After years away beginning their careers, many then come home to Wales to raise their families. That is absolutely to be welcomed, but would it not be wonderful if there was no need to leave Wales in the first place—if Wales had the academic institutions, the connectivity, the job opportunities and the infrastructure that prevented a drain of talent to England and further afield? That, to me, is what levelling up really means.

My constituents are proud Unionists. They want their Governments working together, in partnership, not in adversity, as has been so often demonstrated by the Welsh Government. During the coronavirus pandemic, the wool that the First Minister has tried to pull over people's eyes has a familiar pattern. Any success is the personal achievement of the Welsh Labour Government; any failure is the fault of the Conservative party—all the while ignorant of the enormous financial interventions from the UK Government, which have protected thousands of jobs in all our constituencies.

Both Governments should have tackled the pandemic together, making changes when they were truly required—not pursuing difference for difference's sake, which motivated issues such as the five-mile rule, the banning of parkrun and the nonsensical ban on non-essential retail. As we exit the pandemic, I urge the First Minister in Cardiff to put down his weapons and engage with the UK Government for the benefit of everyone in Wales; to be honest about his own shortcomings; and to introduce a specific Wales-wide inquiry into the pandemic.

I warmly welcome this debate. I believe there are a number of ways in which the UK Government are working to level up rural Wales. I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire that we in rural mid Wales are often forgotten about. My constituency is predominantly rural; although you may well be forgiven for thinking, Mr Davies, that our future is solely agricultural, I am optimistic about the future of the green economy in my constituency.

[Fay Jones]

I was delighted that in the 2020 Budget the Chancellor confirmed that the UK Government would fund the Global Centre for Rail Excellence in Nant Helen near Coelbren in my constituency. I was further delighted when the Welsh Government rode in behind with a loan. The centre will see up to 120 skilled jobs at the new rail infrastructure testing facility, in a part of the world that is at risk of being forgotten.

More green jobs is exactly what my constituency needs, whether in Coelbren or at Riversimple, a hydrogen fuel-cell car manufacturer in Llandrindod Wells. These are the jobs of the future that will enable mid Wales to level up and join other parts of the United Kingdom in offering a future to our young people.

The Global Centre for Rail Excellence will set itself up in a part of my constituency where we have a large number of Welsh speakers, and I would like to make a point about the Welsh language. My grandfather was a first-language Welsh speaker, whose tendencies lay more with the hon. Members from Plaid Cymru. That he had both a son and a granddaughter who have become Conservative MPs is probably still unsettling for him, even in the afterlife.

My grandfather inspired in me a great affection for the language, which I still try to learn, albeit badly. It is by no means an easy language, but one with great poetry built in. I commend those in my constituency who use the language frequently, down in Ystradgynlais or Llanwrtyd Wells, and up in the north in Rhayader. I often wonder what my Welsh-speaking, Plaid-supporting grandfather would have made of the fact that it was a Conservative Government who introduced the Welsh Language Act 1993 and created the Welsh television channel S4C. I am sure he would have welcomed the extremely favourable settlement announced yesterday for S4C.

Next month marks St David's Day, the annual celebration of our language and culture. I am delighted that, for the first time, Parliament will fly y ddraig goch above Parliament. Mr Speaker has kindly agreed to host the first ever parliamentary eisteddfod and I hope all colleagues will attend. However, as much as I am keen and proud of the Welsh language and want to keep it thriving, I am ambitious for Wales. I want to see our nation lift up its eyes around the world. The Welsh Government sensibly have a target for more Welsh speakers, but where is their target for more Mandarin speakers, more French speakers, more Farsi speakers? It is really important that we give our young people as many opportunities as possible, so I warmly welcome the Government's introduction of the Turing scheme.

I am getting the wind-up sign from Mr Davies, so I will conclude as quickly as I can. I will end by emphasising my constituency's military links: I am deeply proud that we have managed to maintain Brecon barracks and overturn the Ministry of Defence's decision to close it. However, as co-operation has been a theme of our debate today, I urge greater co-operation from the Welsh Government on this issue. The Secretary of State for Wales has announced the intention to create a veterans' commissioner, and the Treasury has confirmed that it will fund that role. All we need now is for the Welsh Government to announce that they will work together with us.

**Stephen Doughty:** I understand the point that the hon. Lady is making, and of course I welcome those steps to support our veterans. She has made this argument before in a debate in Westminster Hall, but in fact the Minister for the Armed Forces praised First Minister Mark Drakeford for the co-operation he has given to the Ministry of Defence. Indeed, the Welsh Government have put huge amounts of extra resources into, for example, NHS Veterans Wales, so will the hon. Lady welcome what the Welsh Government have been doing for veterans, not just criticise them? I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

**Fay Jones:** I will absolutely do so. I should probably have declared my interest as well, in that my partner is a serving soldier.

**Stephen Doughty:** Me too.

**Fay Jones:** However, I think that the Welsh Government could go further. I recognise that they are taking steps and that they recognise the severity of this issue, but we stand ready to create a veterans' commissioner. That role would ensure consistency right across Wales, but the Welsh Government have not quite crossed the line yet. I would be very grateful for any help that the hon. Gentleman is willing to give me in that area.

I have plenty more to say about Operation Rescript, but I will end on that plea for co-operation from the Welsh Government.

3.1 pm

**Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Davies. It is appropriate that we are having this Grand Committee meeting today, because this is an important time for us to take stock and perhaps learn some lessons from what has happened over the past couple of years. There have been plenty of negatives—let us be honest—but there have also been some positives. One of the greatest positives is the work that has been done by the Welsh Government and the First Minister, Mark Drakeford. By common agreement across Wales, Mark has been calm and consistent, has always followed medical advice, has always put the needs of the Welsh people first, and has always done the right thing.

What a contrast with the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom! The right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) has been extremely economical with the truth. Some would say that he has been a downright liar, but only some would say that. He has dodged, deceived—inadvertently, I am sure—and behaved in a reprehensible manner. That has been consistent throughout much of the pandemic, but as we all know, it has been highlighted over recent weeks. What a contrast with Mark Drakeford! The Prime Minister attended a “bring your own booze” party, inviting some 100 people. Warned that this was not allowed under the rules that his own Government had introduced, he nevertheless proceeded with it and attended it.

**David T. C. Davies:** To clarify, is it correct that the hon. Gentleman is basing that statement on the words of that well-known truthful person, Dominic Cummings?

**Wayne David:** That is correct, but already we hear that two witnesses have come forward to corroborate what Mr Cummings has said. It will be very interesting

to get to the truth of this, and we all know that for any Minister who lies to the House and tells untruths to the country, there is only one honourable thing to do: resign. We will have to see whether that is the case or not.

As I say, that is a sharp contrast with Mark Drakeford. What was Mark Drakeford doing at the time? When the Prime Minister was attending his parties, the First Minister of Wales was isolating in a building at the bottom of his garden in order to protect his shielding wife and mother-in-law. That is a contrast that all people will see, across the length and breadth of this country.

We also need to reflect on the fact that the pandemic has brought certain things to the fore. It has highlighted the gross inequalities in Wales today. The way the Westminster Government have responded to the pandemic has made the situation much worse for many ordinary people in Wales. I recently read the Bevan Foundation report, "A snapshot of poverty in winter 2021", written last December. It concluded:

"Nearly four in ten Welsh households...do not have enough money to buy anything beyond everyday items"

and

"are denied access to a decent quality of life."

It is important that we should not forget how difficult life is for many Welsh people today. That is for a multitude of reasons, but certainly exacerbating the situation is the fact that, last November, central Government reduced a universal benefit by £20 per week, hitting thousands of families across Wales, leaving them much worse off. We also see the emergence of inflation, which is hitting hard the price of household goods, and rising fuel costs, which are likely to get much worse in the very near future. We have to ask what the Government here in Westminster are doing. Sadly, very little. I sincerely hope that the Government will follow the advice of the Labour party and at the very least reduce VAT, and pretty quickly.

Mr Speaker, after the events of the last few months and the last couple of years, when I look towards the future I come to the unavoidable conclusion that things will improve only when we get rid of Boris Johnson as Prime Minister. I am sure many Members are coming to that conclusion. However, that is not enough. We need a fundamental change of direction from the Government, and a change of Government as well. We had an excellent result at the Welsh Senedd elections last year. I believe we will have a general election pretty soon, and that there will be a good result at that election as well.

**The Chair:** I could have offered you an extra minute after you called me Mr Speaker.

3.7 pm

**Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): This is only the second Welsh Grand Committee that has been held during my four years as a Member of Parliament, and the first at which the use of the Welsh language has been facilitated.

Mae'n bleser cael gwasanaethu o dan eich cadeiryddiaeth heddiw, Mr Davies, ac ymarfer fy Nghymraeg llafar. Dwi'n mwynhau fy ngwersi Cymraeg wythnosol yn fawr iawn efo'r Aelod anrhydeddus dros Ddwyrain Casnewydd a fy Nghyfaill anrhydeddus yr Aelod dros Aberconwy.

*(Translation) It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and to practise my spoken Welsh. I very much enjoy my weekly Welsh lessons with the hon. Member for Newport East and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy.*

I was lucky to be born in the city of St Asaph, in the heart of my constituency. I am proud of my north Walian identity. I believe—no doubt like other Members in this Chamber—that I understand my local communities inside out. That belief has only been strengthened during the time I have served as an MP and in the preceding 11 years when I had the pleasure of representing my home ward in Prestatyn on Denbighshire County Council. I know how important it is to my constituents to see a thriving north Wales within a strong United Kingdom. They are far more interested in bread-and-butter policy than separatism and wrangling over yet more powers for Cardiff Bay.

For north Wales especially, our links with other parts of the UK are vital. Many of my constituents travel to the north-west of England daily to shop, work and meet friends and family, while those living in north-west England and the west midlands, in particular, come to north Wales for our beautiful coastline and welcoming hospitality. The covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of a strong United Kingdom, particularly in relation to the immense financial support that has been required and our enviable vaccination and testing programmes. A further financial boost is set to be made available to the Welsh Government, who will now receive the biggest block grant since the start of devolved government.

Just over a month ago, the Prime Minister appointed the right hon. Baroness Hallett as chair of the forthcoming public inquiry into the covid-19 pandemic. While there can be great benefit to a UK-wide inquiry, I have already written to Baroness Hallett to ask that her independent inquiry fully scrutinise all decisions taken in Cardiff Bay. All too often, the performance of the Welsh Government is considered in isolation, but we stand to learn so much more if that performance can be put into context with comparison with other parts of our country, so I hope that will be the case.

As a GP, I have a good understanding of local health services and how important the Union is to patients in north Wales. Hugely valued NHS provision for north Wales is provided elsewhere in the UK including at the Walton centre, the Liverpool Heart and Chest hospital, Alder Hey Children's hospital, the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic hospital, the Royal Stoke University hospital and so on.

NHS clinicians in north Wales look to offer high quality care based on British health care standards, but again, comparison with other parts of the UK is often valuable to ensure our constituents are receiving the services that they deserve. I raised the issue of Carol Ridgway with the Prime Minister last week. She had been faced with a lengthy wait of more than eight weeks following a suspected cancer referral. In England, she would likely have been offered an appointment within 14 days. I receive similar concerns on a regular basis and other hon. Members will no doubt acknowledge that they do also. Only last night, I heard from a constituent who would rather not be named whose husband had a suspected mini-stroke earlier in the day. She was advised that the ambulance wait was five hours

[Dr James Davies]

and that she should take him to A&E herself. She did so, but had to turn away and return home with him when she was told there was a 12-hour wait. She says:

“My daughter and granddaughter both work in the Sheffield hospitals and certainly don’t have the problems we have—in fact they just don’t believe what I tell them sometimes.”

My constituent asks:

“What is the Welsh Government doing to address this dreadful state of affairs?”

I hope that one of the outcomes of today’s debate will be to send a strong message to the devolved Administrations that our constituents are desperate for them to focus on competent management of the areas that they oversee, such as health and education.

I did want to speak about the levelling-up fund, the community renewal fund, the shared prosperity fund, the Mersey Dee North Wales all-party parliamentary group and the Union connectivity review, but there will be other opportunities.

3.11 pm

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): I will be speedy, but I am not as brave as the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd.

I am very pleased to take part in this debate because as speakers from the Opposition have said repeatedly, the Union, far from being strengthened, is being weakened by the antics of this Government, and by the events of the past weeks. That lack of integrity and trust, particularly in the Prime Minister, is damaging confidence in the Government.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central said, we believe the Union is strengthened when we co-operate across the UK and share wealth according to need. All the energies of the Government, of all Governments, must be spent on recovering from the pandemic, tackling climate change and tackling the cost of living crisis, which is only set to get worse in April when national insurance contributions are cranked up to record levels. We should remind ourselves that Conservative Members here supported that measure.

Many of us will not recognise the rosy picture and rosy list painted by the Secretary of State. I want to focus on some practical examples in Newport East, where the Government could perform much better by co-operating and working collaboratively with the Welsh Government for our communities. After all, that is what we are here for. That is particularly true for rail. Many of my constituents commute across the border, and many people from Bristol have moved into Newport East and Monmouthshire. There has been an historic under-investment in cross-border services, which is under capacity and unreliable. However, bizarrely, the UK Government continue effectively to block the Welsh Government from providing more cross-border rail services into Bristol and beyond. As a result, passengers on both sides of the Severn are losing out.

A new station for Magor could help traffic congestion in our area, yet there is still no news of the Restoring Your Railway funding from the Government. As the Burns commission and the Hendy review note, we need to upgrade and reconfigure the relief rail lines, which is a job for the UK Government too, but no news on that.

Those are all local examples of UK rail under-investment in Welsh rail. We have 11% of the rail network but just 2% of the rail enhancement funding, and no share of HS2 funding.

It is time that the UK Government got fully behind the Western Gateway. It is a cross-border, pan-regional partnership, representing a region of around 4.4 million people between Swansea and Swindon. Newport is at its heart. Despite the potential for economic regeneration to create jobs, the Western Gateway has yet to receive the same level of recognition and visibility in Government as other pan-regional partnerships, such as the northern powerhouse and the midlands engine. The year 2022 should be when the Government get to grips with this, including appointing an assigned ministerial champion in Government. I hope that the Ministers present will get moving with the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities.

**David T. C. Davies:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Jessica Morden:** I will not on this occasion, because other Members want to speak.

On levelling up, we all await the White Paper. We are all aware that there is no definition and no plan. Whatever levelling up really means, and it is clear that no one in the Government knows, we know that we will get less and that we will have less of a say. Wales will receive only £46 million this year, compared with the £375 million we would have received through EU structural funds. It is always worth remembering that we were promised that we would get not a penny less.

Steel was noticeably absent from the Secretary of State’s opening remarks. While the Welsh Government use the levers they have to help our steel industry, this Government have failed repeatedly to address sky-high energy costs, unlike other countries such as Spain and Italy that have stepped in to help. The Government have failed to come up with an industrial policy: we get warm words on procurement, little in terms of helping our industry transition and no news on what the Government will do to lift tariffs. The world cannot decarbonise without steel. Other Governments can step in to help industry—why won’t ours?

What makes this all the more galling is that all the while, week on week, there is a succession of revelations about Government waste, which was the subject of another urgent question only today. The Treasury lost billions in relief scheme fraud, having written off £4.3 billion in an announcement that it slipped out on Friday. That is half the UK policing budget—money that could be spent to help people with fuel poverty or to help our NHS, but yet again this Government have the wrong priorities. Our communities deserve better.

3.16 pm

**Robin Millar:** Dwi’n croesawu’r cyfle i siarad Cymraeg heddiw, ond dwi’n credu bod Aelodau anrhydeddus yn gwybod fy mod yn ddysgwr, felly mae’n rhaid i mi siarad Saesneg yma heddiw.

*(Translation) I welcome the opportunity to speak in Welsh today, but I think hon. Members know that I am a learner, so I will speak English from now on.*

I welcome the chance to speak today. I am a proud Welshman—Cymro balch ydw i. It has been a fascinating experience for me to be in this place over the last two years considering the matters that affect my home, where I was born and raised, in north-west Wales. As many will know, the Union has become a real point of interest to me, so I welcome the debate and I am grateful to the Secretary of State for securing it.

I have always felt that we, as Welsh politicians, are quite a collegiate bunch: we get on, we have a laugh, and we enjoy each other's company from time to time and we can try to get things done. I hope that that spirit can continue through this debate, but it surprised me that every effort I made to intervene on Opposition Members today was rebuffed. That is out of character for our general debate and for the way we are in Wales.

I wondered what a resident of Aberconwy would think of the debate's title, "Strengthening the Union". I will be really honest. I think that they would say that we all need to do better. It is a source of regret that the debate has contained many personal attacks, merited or otherwise, because they are tangential to the question before us of how to strengthen the Union. It is a genuine source of regret to me that we have gone down that route at times in this debate.

I would like to make one suggestion to each of the parties represented here today about how each of us can strengthen the Union. Because we are in the context of the pandemic, I will start with the question of what an inquiry into the pandemic would count. It would say that there have been more cases, more hospitalisations and more deaths per 100,000 in Wales than in other parts of the UK. Those are the numbers, which I checked at lunch time between our sittings. It would also say that we had more days in lockdown in Wales than in other parts of the UK.

In my constituency, we spotted early that while Blaenau Gwent has a population density per square kilometre of 641, in Aberconwy it is just 104. The covid death rate in Aberconwy was just one quarter of what it was in Blaenau Gwent. I make that point because the same restrictions were applied across the whole of Wales without differentiation or distinction. In Aberconwy, we were subjected to exactly the same restrictions as a part of the country that had a death rate four times higher and a population density six times higher. That really hurt businesses and many residents in Aberconwy.

My point is not to make an attack, but to respectfully suggest to the Welsh Labour Government that to strengthen the Union, they could own their decisions. More money has been poured into Wales than ever before, but the decisions that have been made are affecting the outcomes. Health outcomes in Wales are among the worst in the UK. The hon. Member for Caerphilly shakes his head, but that is what the numbers show and, as a result, we have to own those decisions, not least because health in Wales has been the responsibility of the Welsh Government for the last 22 years.

**Wayne David:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Robin Millar:** I will move on, as time is short.

**Wayne David:** But you just criticised me!

**Robin Millar:** I will give way.

**The Chair:** I call Wayne David, but we do need to get to the next speaker.

**Wayne David:** It is ridiculous what the hon. Member suggests about the sheer money coming into Wales from this Government. We have seen cuts for a decade under austerity and now we have the issue of European funding. We have had no clarity whatsoever about how much money is coming forward, so how on earth can he make such a grand statement?

**Robin Millar:** I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, but he deflects. The facts stand as I cited them.

**Wayne David:** They don't!

**The Chair:** Order.

**Robin Millar:** To our colleagues in Plaid Cymru, I am grateful for the approach they took with their comments. As a proud Welshman, I listen hard to the party of Wales and what it has to say to me as a Welshman. I am really interested and genuinely want to engage with that. I put it to Plaid Cymru Members that the Secretary of State made the point about taxation and how, with a deficit approaching 20%, an independent Government could form. I mention independence because it was raised as a manifesto position in the local elections in May; incidentally, they resulted in a reduced representation and vote share, so there is a question there. It is not so much about the finances, but about the Government's moral duty to look after the weakest and the most vulnerable. That is why Plaid Cymru must come forward with an explanation of how it would fund things. It has a moral duty to explain how it would look after the weakest and most vulnerable in an independent Wales.

Finally, I turn to my own party, the Conservatives. I remind colleagues that the turnout for the general election was 71%, in contrast to the turnout of the last Senedd elections, which was 47%. The people of Wales are looking to this Government to help them in their problems every bit as much as they are looking to the Senedd, and we have that responsibility. For that reason, I thank this Government for what they have done with the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, and the ability to spend locally. We know that of the European funding decisions made in Wales, just 9% were passed to the local community and authority. The rest were held by the Senedd. I contrast that with England, where over 35% of such decisions were made by local authorities. Trust in localism is vital, and I welcome what the UK Government have done to restore it. I finish with an encouragement to all to strengthen the Union.

3.22 pm

**Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies. Today I speak as both a proud Welshman and a proud Brit. These two identities are not incompatible; rather, the ability to identify as both Welsh and British is one of the strengths of our Union. Whether someone is Welsh, Scottish, English, Cornish or a Yorkshireman, they can be any of those and still be British.

Nationalists would have us believe that we cannot be both and that we must choose between being Welsh or British, but that is because nationalism is, by its very definition, divisive. While nationalists paint a seductive image of an independent Wales that tugs on the heartstrings,

[*Stephen Kinnock*]

their arguments tend to boil down to “us versus them” rhetoric, and they do not address the fundamental questions around national security or the economy. National pride is deeply rooted in national prosperity and security. Economic strength is a foundation stone of national pride. The fact is that this economic strength can be achieved only if the four nations of the UK club together and pool our resources.

**Craig Williams:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Stephen Kinnock:** Yes.

**The Chair:** You have only four minutes, remember.

**Craig Williams:** I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman on the point he is making. His party in the Senedd is in a coalition, by any other name, with the nationalists and has started a commission that is looking at independence. Will he reflect on that?

**Stephen Kinnock:** It is not a coalition—that is the first point. The second point is that we are delivering a progressive agenda for the country under the leadership of a Welsh Labour Government.

Together, we are so much more than our component parts. Being patriotic and acting in the national interest is very different from nationalism. Nationalists do not have an answer for how they would plug the funding gap if Wales were to leave the UK, or for how Wales would protect itself from external threats. Nationalism does not automatically mean decisions being made closer to the communities on which they have an impact, as we have seen with the Scottish National party, which has centralised power in Edinburgh, leaving Holyrood one of the most centralised Administrations in Europe.

Britain remains a significant economy and world power, and Wales benefits from being part of that. It gives us a much stronger voice on the world stage, and it allows for money from wealthier parts of the UK to be redistributed to Welsh communities—in principle, if we had a Government in Westminster who were actually delivering on that. As we live in an era of great power competition, with increasing threats, Wales is safer and more secure as part of the UK, protected by UK-wide national security organisations and our armed forces, which include Welsh regiments.

To overcome the forces that want to break up the Union, we need a positive and patriotic vision for Britain—one that does not take reckless risks with economic and national security but instead promotes reciprocity, co-operation and solidarity across our nations and regions. Over the last few years, we have seen how Wales being part of the Union is good not only for Wales, but for the Union. The NHS is one of the great examples of this—an institution with Welsh roots that has benefited the whole of the UK. It has been at the frontline of the pandemic, and the vaccine roll-out has been a resounding success in Wales, which is a testament to the hard work of our NHS staff. However, let us remember that they have also been able to call on the support of the UK armed forces to help with the roll-out, when needed.

**The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart):** This speech is so good that I am worried that the hon. Gentleman might get in trouble with his own side, but may I ask a further question? Does it worry him as much as it worries us that Adam Price, the coalition or co-operation bedmate of Mark Drakeford, describes the arrangement in Cardiff as a “down-payment on independence”, leading to an independent Wales sooner rather than later?

**Stephen Kinnock:** I have a great deal of respect for the Secretary of State, but I am afraid his intervention has encapsulated the problem with this whole debate, which has been about a blame game and throwing mud. I am making a case for the value on which our Union is founded, and it is the responsibility of us all in this room to stop the blame game and to work together in the national interest. As I have already said, we have a Government in Wales who are delivering a progressive Welsh Labour agenda. That is absolutely clear, and it is based on the resounding victory that we secured at the last Welsh Senedd election.

When the UK Government recently ran short of lateral flow tests, it was the Welsh Government who came to their aid, providing 4 million tests. The UK Government should never have run short, but that is how co-operation should work within the Union. The Union is far from perfect, and Brexit and the pandemic have exposed the cracks in our constitutional settlement. They have revealed a central Government in Westminster who have not been listening enough, and nations and regions feel that they are, at best, not consulted and, at worst, ignored. The relationship between the four Governments should be based on a partnership of equals and mutual respect, and it should be fair. The United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, which seeks to prevent the emergence of unwanted barriers to trade within the UK, ended up undermining powers devolved to the Scottish and Welsh Governments. This may seem like a political argument, but it goes to the heart of what many see as what is wrong with the Union: a sense of unfairness and inequality.

The inequality runs much deeper. Despite the UK Government’s talk of levelling up, there remains an economic divide in the country that is continuing to grow. With wealth and power concentrated in London and the south-east, many people in Welsh communities feel that they have been left behind and that the system does not work for them. It has led to growing disillusionment with Westminster, which is seen as being out of touch with large swathes of the country. In turn, that plays into the hands of the nationalists. If the Union is to continue, it needs to modernise. It must mean something tangible to people now and in the future.

The Union needs to reflect the desire to have power closer to the people. It should encapsulate common beliefs and ideals, and it needs to celebrate the rich histories and identities of different nations and regions, because Britain cannot have a shared future without having shared values. We need to build a positive and patriotic narrative about what it means to be both Welsh and British—now, and in the future. It must reflect the values, aspirations and experiences that we all have in common, while also recognising and celebrating the uniqueness of being Welsh.

A well-functioning Union must include everyone, with no one person or group left behind. The future of Wales is best served by having strong devolution, so that decisions about Wales are made in Wales, and by being an equal partner in a strong and revitalised United Kingdom. Belligerent behaviour by the UK Government, disparaging comments from Ministers about the nations and regions, and a Prime Minister who has described devolution as the “biggest mistake” of the last Labour Government are doing much to damage and undermine the Union, while nationalists cheer from the side lines.

Like other proud Welsh men and women, I will cheer on Wales when the Six Nations begins next month; I will be right behind the Welsh football team when they take on Austria in their bid to qualify for the World cup; and I will cheer on Welsh athletes competing in the Commonwealth games this summer, as I cheered them on at the Tokyo Olympics last summer, when they represented the United Kingdom. I will also proudly wear a daffodil to mark St David’s day. None of this makes me any less British, and being British does not make me any less Welsh.

George Orwell said that patriotism

“is a devotion to something that is always changing and yet is felt to be mystically the same. It is the bridge between the future and the past.”

If we cherish the Union, then we must be willing to change and modernise it.

**The Chair:** I have time for a couple of minutes of Sarah Atherton.

3.31 pm

**Sarah Atherton** (Wrexham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Davies. Diolch.

It is an honour to be speak in this Grand Committee as the first Conservative woman elected in Wales, followed very swiftly by my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn and then by my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire.

I will follow on the theme laid out by my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd. I trained as a nurse in the hospital that I returned to 30 years later to support the fight against covid. Thirty years ago, the health service in Wrexham was the envy of all, especially our neighbours across the border, but over the past 10 years I have seen, as have my constituents, the healthcare provision in Wrexham crumble. That is why I will focus on what I and my constituents consider to be the biggest shortcoming of the Welsh Labour Government—healthcare.

We know that money in itself will not improve services, but it is part of the solution. Last year alone, the UK Government provided £3.8 billion under the Barnett formula to the Welsh Labour Government, which was in addition to the £5.2 billion that the Welsh Labour Government received to fight covid. Moreover, the UK Government secured 6.5 million doses of the vaccine. And I need to mention that it was Wockhardt, in my constituency of Wrexham, that made the AstraZeneca vaccine jab ready and that it was Her Majesty’s Government who created the environment that enabled Wockhardt to act swiftly, benefiting not only Wales and the UK but the world with the COVAX programme.

Despite that funding, the Welsh Labour Government have failed to deliver even an acceptable level of healthcare. In the past five years, NHS Wales has made 29 military aid to the civil authorities requests—29 cries for help—to the UK Government. There were eight MACA requests for the ambulance service alone, with five being approved to the sum of £2.8 million. That demonstrates the UK Government’s commitment to Wales and our Union, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South has detailed previously.

For the past 20 years, the Welsh Labour Government have blamed the UK Government for the poor services and poor health outcomes across Wales because “they don’t get enough money”. We know that they do get enough money, but instead of spending it where it is needed, they choose to save it, presumably for a rainy day, or to spend it on grandiose white elephants, such as Cardiff airport and Pinewood Studio Wales.

In 2012, under the ministerial responsibility of the Senedd Member for Wrexham, the Welsh Labour Government reduced the healthcare budget, meaning that it has now been underfunded to the tune of £400 million. They are the only Government in Britain ever to have done this, and we can see the results today. The 95% target for patients to wait less than four hours in A&E has never been met. One in five people in Wales are on the waiting list for surgery, and to address this situation in north Wales the health board has contracted out to England, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West detailed earlier. And over Christmas, it was reported in the media that Wrexham Maelor Hospital is the worst in Wales for A&E waiting times.

Well before the pandemic, NHS Wales was in dire straits. Betsi Cadwaldr University Health Board, which serves the people of north Wales, was in special measures from 2015, but despite there being no tangible improvements in patient care and outcomes, the board was lifted out of special measures late in 2020, which was just a few months before the next Senedd election.

I can see you chivvying me on, Mr Davies, but it would be remiss of me not to go through a few of the details about the healthcare provision in Wrexham that appear in my casework every single day. Eighteen hours in A&E to be seen, having been referred by a doctor for a blood clot. Elderly patients sitting in A&E with no medication or food, desperately trying to get the attention of overworked, undervalued staff. Ambulances—up to 13 in number—backed up, with people sitting and lying for 12 hours in the back of vehicles just to be seen by a doctor. Constituents giving up waiting for orthopaedics and going abroad for risky, cheap surgery. Diabetic monitoring cut to once a year. Three years to see a gastroenterologist. Two years for pain management. GPs and A&E sending people over the border to access minor injury units.

I urge the Ministers in Cardiff to undertake an inquiry to see what is going on in Wrexham and what people are experiencing.

**The Chair:** I do need to call the Front Benchers.

**Sarah Atherton:** I will make one last point. It is the clinicians who can sort out our NHS. I urge the Welsh Labour Government and the Health Minister to give the clinicians the voice and the influence to sort out the provision for my constituents.

**The Chair:** The Opposition Front Benchers have seven minutes each to speak, and the Government Front Bencher will have 10 minutes.

3.36 pm

**Hywel Williams:** Diolch yn fawr, Mr Davies. Rwy'n falch o gael crynhoi ar gyfer y ddadl yma. Fe wnewch chi faddau, gobeithio, os gwna i wneud un pwynt byr hanesyddol tra mae pawb yn rhoi eu cynn siarad ymlaen. O ran yr Undeb—yn y cyfnod hanesyddol, o leiaf, nid heddiw efallai—credaf mai Encyclopaedia Britannica oedd yr agosaf at y gwir. Yn y mynegai, o dan "Wales", dyweder, "see England". Ond yn fwy na hynny, o dan "England", does yna fawr o ddim ynglŷn â Wales.

Nid felly mae hi heddiw. Mae yna ddatblygiad wedi bod—datblygiad iach iawn, dwi'n meddwl—yn y berthynas. Fel y dywedodd Ron Davies yn enwog iawn, proses ydy hyn ac nid digwyddiad, ac mae'r broses yn mynd yn ei blaen. Felly mae'n briodol iawn ein bod ni'n trafod yr Undeb, ond i ni gydnabod bod yr Undeb fel y mae o ddim yn sefyll yn llonydd ac efallai fydd o ddim yna yn y dyfodol.

Rydyn ni'n gwybod yn iawn bellach mai rhywbeth i'w adeiladu bob dydd o'r newydd ydy hunaniaeth. Dyna sut mae hunaniaeth yn cael ei diffinio. Mae'n cael ei chreu a'i hailgynnal. Mae'n tybiaeth ni ynglŷn â hunaniaeth yn amrywio o un ochr i'r llall ac efallai ymysg pobl yn yr wrthblaid hefyd. Ond mae Cymru yn bodoli oherwydd bod pobl Cymru yn ewyllysio ei bod hi, Cymru, yn goroesi. Felly hefyd yr Undeb. Yr Undeb presennol sydd wedi ei greu a'i gynnal—Undeb sydd yn dyddio ond ers y 1920au pan ddaru'r Gwyddelod sicrhau eu rhyddid nhw.

Felly mae'r Undeb yn datblygu ac fel rydyn ni wedi clywed heddiw, mae'r ddadl ynglŷn â'r Undeb weithiau—neu'n aml iawn i ddweud y gwir—yn fasnachol iawn ei naws. Taswn i'n sefyll mewn ystafell ddarlithio, fe fyddwn i'n defnyddio'r gair "transactional", lle mae pobl yn dueddol o feddwl, "Gewch chi hyn ac rydyn ni'n cael y llall". Mae yna rywbeth arall i'r Undeb, fe fyddwn i'n sicr yn cytuno, ac mae yna lawer iawn i'w ddweud hefyd dros annibyniaeth o ran gwerth, nid rhywbeth sy'n fasnachol.

Rydyn ni yn gweld dadleuon, ac fe glywon ni hynny heddiw, bod y fam Undeb fel petai'n darparu'n hael, yn tywallt buddion unigryw na fyddai ddim ar gael fel arall i ni. Fydden ni byth yn medru eu hennill nhw, eu dyfeisio nhw na'u fforddio nhw ein hunain. Heb yr Undeb, dywedir, fe fydden ni mewn lle sâl iawn, fel soniodd nifer o aelodau gan gynnwys y Bonheddw'r gwir anrhydeddus dros Gorllewin Clwyd yn drawiadol iawn: bydden ni wedi ein llethu gan ddyled, heb wasanaeth iechyd digonol, heb addysg deilwng, a'r gogledd o hyd o dan bawen filain yr hen bethau yna o'r sowth.

Does ryfedd felly bod rhai pobl ifanc—dim ond rhai—yn meddwl yn y termau masnachol yma am yr Undeb. Dylen ni warchod yn erbyn hynny, rwy'n meddwl. Efallai eu bod nhw'n aralleirio John F. Kennedy a dweud, "Ask not what I can do for the Union, but what the Union can do for me." Rwy'n meddwl bod hynny'n rhywbeth i warchod yn ei erbyn.

Diolch byth bod yna rai pobl ifanc eraill yn meddwl mewn termau mwy aruchel a gobeithio mewn ffordd fwy gobeithiol am ein gwlad ac am yr Undeb gyda gweddill gwledydd yr ynysoedd yma. Ond masnachol neu aruchel, mae'r tueddiad i'w weld yn glir. Pobl hŷn sydd yn cefnogi'r Undeb, ac mae'r gefnogaeth honno'n

lleihau'n sylweddol ac yn drawiadol iawn wrth i oedran y grŵp a holir ostwng. Mae'r gefnogaeth i annibyniaeth yn mynd yn iau ac Unolyddiaeth yn heneiddio. Felly does ryfedd fod twf cyson yn y garfan sy'n gofyn, "Os ydy'r Undeb cystal, pam ein bod ni yn y fath gyflwr?" I ateb pwynt a wnaed y bore 'ma, mae Plaid Cymru a'r Blaid Werdd yn cefnogi annibyniaeth, ond os oes yna ryw dryst i'w roi ar y polau, mae tua hanner cefnogwyr Llafur hefyd naill ai'n cefnogi neu'n barod i ystyried annibyniaeth, beth bynnag a ddywed eu harweinwyr.

Roeddwn i wedi gobeithio cael mwy o amser i drafod y pwyntiau yma, ond i droi at gyfraniadau unigol roeddwn i'n falch iawn o weld cyfraniadau yn Gymraeg—tua dwsin ohonynt, rwy'n meddwl. Agorodd yr Ysgrifennydd Gwladol gan frolio manteision yr Undeb, a dweud bod y rhain ddim ond yn bosibl o fod yn yr Undeb. Wnaeth o ddim sôn am unrhyw anfanteision posibl, gyda llaw. Rwy'n falch bod ei gysgod o yn yr wrthblaid wedi rhestru llu o bethau da a ddaeth yn sgil datganoli, ond roedd hi hefyd yn gwbl glir, yn ei barn hi o leiaf, fod y blaid Lafur yn gwbl bleidiol i'r Undeb.

Cymylwyd y ddadl gan gyfeiriadau aml at Brydain gyfan ac at Loegr yn unig. Cyfeiriodd un Aelod at yr "English Government", er enghraifft, ac un arall at y "four Governments". Mae angen i ni fod yn gliriach am yr hyn rydyn ni'n sôn amdano yn y Pwyllgor yma—nid fy mod i'n eich beirniadu chi, Mr Davies, o gwbl.

Cwynodd yr Aelod gwir anrhydeddus dros Orllewin Clwyd am Lywodraeth Cymru yn cynnull comisiwn ar yr Undeb Prydeinig. Traddododd fy Ffrind anrhydeddus dros Ceredigion a'r Aelod anrhydeddus dros Dwyrain Caerfyrddin a Dinefwr areithiau llachar iawn. Does dim angen i fi fynd ar ôl y pynciau wnaethon nhw drafod, ond roedd pethau fel HS2, Ystad y Goron, Brexit a Gogledd Iwerddon a'r Undeb, tlodi, datganoli a datganoli'r drefn gyfreithiol.

Cwynodd yr Aelod gwir anrhydeddus dros Preseli Penfro am y feirniadaeth gyson o du Llywodraeth Cymru o Lywodraeth Prydain. Er enghraifft, dywedodd, "Death rates in the UK compare well with other similar countries." Fe wnes i gael golwg amser cinio ar y rhifau, a'r rhifau yn ôl y filiwn ydy 2,267 yn y Deyrnas Gyfunol, 1,772 yn Ffrainc, a 1,393 yn yr Almaen.

Rwy'n sylweddoli nad oes gen i ddim mwy o amser i drafod llu o bwyntiau a godwyd. Rwy'n gweld, jyst ar y papur yma sydd gen i o 'mlaen, mae yna ddwsin fyddai'n werth eu trafod mewn dadl unigol. Felly gobeithio y byddwn ni yn cael dadleuon ar y pwyntiau yma, naill ai yn Westminster Hall neu efallai yn bellach yn yr Uwch-bwyllgor Cymreig.

Yr oll y byddwn i yn ei ddweud i orffen—ac mae hwn yn bwynt gwleidyddol cwbl bleidiol, os gwnewch chi faddau i mi—yw does ryfedd mai cryfhau'r Undeb a ddewiswyd fel mater o gonsyrn heddiw oherwydd y gwir ydy fod y gefnogaeth i annibyniaeth yn tyfu ac yn mynd yn iau, tra bod y ddadl Unoliaethol yn lleihau ac yn heneiddio.

*(Translation) Thank you, Mr Davies. I am very pleased to wind up the debate. Allow me to make a brief historical point while everybody puts their headsets on. On the Union—historically, at least, rather than at present—I think Encyclopaedia Britannica was closest to the truth. In the index, under "Wales", it said, "see England". But more than that, under "England", there was not much about Wales.*

*It is not that way today. There has been development—a very healthy development—in the relationship. Ron Davies famously said that this is process and not an event, and the process is ongoing. It is appropriate that we are discussing the Union, but we have to recognise that the Union is not standing still and that it might be here in the future.*

*We know that identity is something to be built upon afresh each day. That is how identity is created and continues. In both parties, the idea of identity will vary from one person to another, but Wales exists because the people of Wales want to continue to exist and to survive. The same is true of the Union. The current Union is evolving and developing—a Union that only dates back to the 1920s when the Irish ensured their freedom.*

*The argument about the Union is often a commercial one. If I were in a lecture theatre, I would probably use the word “transactional”, where people tend to think, “You get this and I’ll get that”. But there is something else to the Union, and I would say that there is much to be said about independence as a value rather than just a transactional process.*

*We have heard the arguments that the mother Union gives generously, throwing a load of unique benefits to us that we would never receive otherwise, which as a small country we would never be able to afford. Without the Union, they say we would be in a very poor place, as the right hon. Member for Clwyd West said: we would be laden with debt, have poor national health and the north would be worse off under the control of those horrible south Walians.*

*It is not surprising, therefore, that some young people—only some—think in commercial terms about the Union. I think we should guard against that. Perhaps they are paraphrasing John F. Kennedy’s words and saying “Ask not what I can do for the Union, but what the Union can do for me.” I think that is something to guard against.*

*Thankfully, there are some young people who are thinking in more superior, ambitious and favourable ways. The tendency is clear. It is older people who support the Union, and support decreases as the age of the group surveyed decreases. Those who support independence are younger, and those who support Unionism are getting older.*

*Support for independence is younger, and Unionism is getting older. It is no surprise, therefore, that an increasing number of people are asking, “If the Union is so special, why are we in such a state?” To answer a point made this morning, Plaid Cymru and the Green party support independence, but if any trust is to be given to the polls, even half of Labour supporters also either support or are ready to consider independence, whatever their leaders will say.*

*I had hoped to have more time to speak. I was pleased to hear contributions made in Welsh—about a dozen of them, I think. The Secretary of State opened by boasting about the benefits of the Union, indicating that they can only be possible by staying in the Union. He did not mention any disadvantages. I am glad that the shadow Secretary of State listed a number of good things that happened because of devolution, but she was also clear that, in her opinion at least, the Labour party is totally committed to the Union.*

*The debate was clouded by constant references to Britain as a whole and to England only. One Member referred to the “English Government”, for instance, while another referred to “the four Governments”. We need to be clear about what we are discussing in this Committee—not that I am criticising you at all, Mr Davies.*

*The right hon. Member for Clwyd West complained about the Welsh Government convening a commission on the Union. My hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion and the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr made striking contributions. I do not need to go into the subjects they discussed, but they included HS2, the Crown Estate, Brexit, Northern Ireland and the Union, poverty, devolution and devolving the justice system.*

*The right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire complained about the Welsh Government’s constant criticism of the UK Government, and said that the death rates in the UK compare well with other similar countries. I looked this up during lunchtime and the numbers per million are 2,267 in the United Kingdom, 1,772 in France, and 1,393 in Germany.*

*I do not have time to discuss many of the points that have been made, but there are a dozen things that could be addressed in individual debates. I hope we will have debates on those points, either in Westminster Hall or perhaps in another Welsh Grand Committee.*

*All I will say in closing—and please forgive me for making a party political point—it is no wonder strengthening the Union was raised as a concern today, because the support for independence is growing and getting younger, and the argument for the Union is diminishing and getting older.*

3.43 pm

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Diolch yn fawr.

Today has been a great opportunity for us to spend time talking specifically about Wales at the Welsh Grand Committee. It has been far too long since we have had this opportunity. I pay tribute to the House staff who have facilitated today’s sessions, particularly those who have supported the translation services.

I am a Unionist—unequivocally and proud to be so. I am proud to be Welsh and proud to be British. I believe in the United Kingdom and in a strong Wales, working with other nations in a strong UK that is based on mutual respect. Sadly, what we are witnessing here is that the Conservative and Unionist party has done more to damage the Union than those who wish to break it apart.

I pay tribute to those who have spoken in today’s debate, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley, who talked about the Welsh Government being the first to declare a climate emergency, votes for 16 and 17-year-olds, and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015—an Act that bodes well for the whole UK and from which we can all learn.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West talked about the fact that the UK is being let down by a Prime Minister who is out of his depth and is low on trust, and about the anger and frustration of our constituents in recent weeks. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North talked about the heartbreak of many of our constituents during the pandemic, and contrasted the trusted and supportive approach taken by the Welsh Government with the shenanigans at No. 10 and in the Tory Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli reiterated the point about the lack of support from the UK Government, compared with what we have received in

[Gerald Jones]

structural funds, and said that the benefits resulting from the years of experience of the Welsh Government and local government working together could be lost. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East talked about her bid to change the narrative around menopause, and highlighted the different approaches taken by the Welsh Government and other nations across the UK. She spoke of the quick and decisive action of Welsh Ministers in supporting her campaign.

My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly reflected on the First Minister's calm and careful approach, in contrast to the shocking behaviour that we have seen from the Prime Minister. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East talked about the Union being weakened by the antics of this Government, and the huge under-investment in rail, with a plea to get behind the Western Gateway. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon spoke passionately about how it is possible to be both Welsh and British, and that together we achieve more than our individual parts. He spoke about how nationalism, in all its forms, is divisive. I also pay tribute to other Members who spoke today.

There is a certain irony in the Conservatives holding a debate on strengthening the Union when they cannot even unite their own party. Seeing how Tory MPs have been scuttling around TV studios over the weekend, pressured into supporting a discredited Prime Minister, when the British public no longer believe a word he says, I am afraid that the Conservative party have lost all moral authority. Rather than strengthening the Union, the Conservative party is the single biggest threat to the United Kingdom. As my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State highlighted, one only has to look at the derisory way in which members of the Government treat their own Conservative leaders in Wales and Scotland to see the contempt they hold for the nations and regions of the UK.

Time and again a Conservative Government have let down the people of Wales. Just prior to last November's Budget, the First Minister of Wales wrote to the Government to highlight the need for investment in the restoration of coal tips across Wales. The Budget resulted in those calls being largely ignored. The Government seem unwilling to work jointly to resolve the remediation works required to make the coal tips safe. My constituency covers the community of Aberfan—there is no greater example of the failure to address coal tip safety than there. The legacy of coal tips predates devolution. The export of coal from the south Wales valleys, and elsewhere, helped to create the wealth that built this country. Responsibility for the issue therefore transcends the devolution arrangements, and Wales is disproportionately affected by the legacy of coalmining in the UK. However, the existing devolution settlement, and broader legal arrangements, fail to recognise this.

We have heard a lot today about levelling up, but words are meaningless without solid and sustained action to back them. There was little evidence to suggest that Wales will continue to receive the level of funding that we have received in the past via EU structural funds, despite the promise that Wales would not lose a penny. Shared prosperity funding was meant to be in the region of £1.5 billion per annum, to match EU funds, yet the figure in the Budget for the next financial year is

£400 million—hardly levelling up. Investment is needed to reduce regional inequalities. The unsatisfactory timescale for awarding the first round of funding demonstrates that Whitehall does not have the capacity to manage the level of applications, let alone the monitoring and evaluation that are required going forward.

Why, then, is there still a reluctance to consider that the sensible thing to do would be to allow decisions about these funds to be managed by the Welsh Government? The top-down approach from Whitehall simply will not work. The Government are keen to allocate funding, even in areas that are the Welsh Government's responsibility, but they are reluctant to fund areas that predate devolution, such as coal tips. In addition, funding should be allocated on a needs basis. Local authorities competing with each other, with questionable decisions around allocation, is far from satisfactory.

To conclude, let us recap the Tory record. They have derailed plans to electrify Wales's railway lines; sunk the proposals for new green jobs at the tidal lagoon; refused to help with the legacy of coalmining communities; provided little detail about what the shared prosperity fund will look like; and taken money from the poorest in our communities, just as people are feeling the impact of the Conservatives' cost of living crisis. Under this Government, the phrase "for Wales, see England" has never been more true. As we heard earlier, when the Welsh Government asked for Treasury support to implement crucial public health measures, the Chancellor refused, only for that support to be offered when similar arrangements were needed in England a few weeks later. The Conservatives have never believed in a Union of equals; theirs is a continuation of outdated colonial attitudes that have no place in modern society.

By contrast, Labour is explicitly a Unionist party. We believe that by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone, whether that is by joining a community group, a political party, a trade union, or the Union of the United Kingdom. We look to a future with a strong Wales in a strong United Kingdom, with four nations being treated equally and with respect. I sincerely hope that the Government can step up to that challenge.

3.50 pm

**David T. C. Davies:** May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies? My happiness is marred only by my sadness that you are no longer able to entertain us with one of your speeches.

*Diolch yn fawr iawn i bawb sydd wedi cymryd rhan yn y ddadl heddiw. Byddaf yn gwneud fy ngorau i dynnu sylw at bopeth, ond dwi ddim yn siwr fod hynny yn mynd i fod yn bosib mewn naw munud.*

*(Translation) Can I say thank you very much indeed to everybody who has taken part in today's debate? I will do my best to address everything, but I am not sure that that will be possible in nine minutes.*

I will start with the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, who has just mentioned the importance of coal tips and coal tip safety. That is something that the UK Government have taken very seriously, and they have given extra money for it, but it is a devolved issue. We have spent most of the last couple of hours listening to many Members criticising the UK Government, saying that the UK Government are not working with

the Welsh Government on devolved matters and are trying to override them, but then we heard a speech that asked us to override the Welsh Government's responsibility and to get directly involved in something. What we have done is deliver an extra £3.8 billion to the Welsh Government, who have the powers to deal with coal tip safety. I would urge them to do so if there is any doubt about their safety.

A number of Members—the hon. Members for Cardiff Central, for Cardiff North, for Newport East, and others—talked about funding post Brexit. Here are the figures, because they are very important: Wales has not lost a penny as a result of Brexit. Between 2014 and 2020, agriculture received £337 million a year on average, and it has continued to do so post Brexit. EU structural funds were worth £375 million on average over those years, and what has actually happened is that with the £320 million that was already coming from the EU, the £46 million from the community renewal fund and the £121 million from the levelling-up fund, Wales received not £375 million but around £460 million in levelling-up funds, so Wales has not lost out. There has already been a huge Brexit benefit as a result of pulling out of the European Union.

Tynodd yr Aelod anrhydeddus dros Geredigion sylw at bwysigrwydd seilwaith y rheilffyrdd a dwi'n cytuno'n llwyr. *(Translation) The hon. Member for Ceredigion drew attention to the importance of the railways, and I agree.* The Member for Newport East also asked about that. Y broblem, wrth gwrs, yw nad ydym yn gallu trawsnewid y system dros nos; mae'n cymryd blynyddoedd. Dwi wedi cael sawl cyfarfod gyda Network Rail i drafod y llinell yng Nghasnewydd a hefyd yng ngogledd Cymru. *(Translation) The problem, of course, is that we cannot just transform the system overnight; it takes years to do that. I have had several meetings with Network Rail to discuss the line in Newport, and also in north Wales.* The line in south Wales is being developed and going through the business case process, and the one in north Wales is a little bit further behind.

Un peth sy'n bwysig iawn i gofio yw'r ffaith bod rhai prosiectau sydd yn cymryd lle ar hyn o bryd, er eu bod y tu allan i Gymru, yn creu effaith bositif iawn i deithwyr sy'n dod o Gymru i Loegr. Roeddwn gyda Network Rail yng Nghasnewydd ychydig o fisoedd yn ôl i drafod y prosiect sy'n cymryd lle nawr yn Fforest y Ddena. *(Translation) One thing that is very important to bear in mind is the fact that some projects are currently taking place. Even though they are outside of Wales, they are creating a very positive impact on travellers and passengers who come from Wales to England. I was with Network Rail in Chepstow recently, discussing the project that is currently taking place in the Forest of Dean.* It is important to remember that we have to have a joint approach across all of the United Kingdom for improvements in rail.

Siaradodd yr Aelod anrhydeddus dros Gwm Cynon am y comisiwn cyfansoddiadol a'r ffaith ei fod yn mynd i gael meddwl agored ynghylch cwestiwn ein cyfansoddiad. Dyna beth maen nhw'n dweud, ond dydy e ddim yn wir. Maent yn cael eu harweiniad gan gyn-ymgyrchwyr Plaid Cymru, gyda help cyn-Archesgob Caergaint, sy'n disgrifio ei hun fel hairy old lefty. Dwi ddim yn disgwyl unrhywbeth gwahanol, ond eu bod yn mynd i fynd o gwmpas Cymru yn gwario arian ac amser yn siarad gyda chefnogwyr anibynnaieth yn y wasg, yn y byd

academaidd, mewn prifysgolion ac yn y blaen—adar o'r un lliw—a dod yn ôl mewn ychydig o fisoedd gydag adroddiad fydd yn dweud: “Mae'n rhaid i ni gael mwy o rym i'r Cynulliad.”

*(Translation) The hon. Member for Cynon Valley spoke about the constitutional commission, saying that it will have an open mind towards the question of our constitution. Well, that is what they say, but they are guided by former Plaid Cymru campaigners with the help of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, who describes himself as a hairy old lefty. I really do not expect anything apart from the fact that they are going to go around Wales spending money and time, talking to supporters of independence in the press, academics in universities and so forth—all birds of a feather—and that they will come back after spending months on a report, stating, “We have to get more power for the Assembly.”*

We could save them a whole load of money right now—I could write the report for them because I know exactly what they are going to say. They are going to demand all sorts of extra powers for the Assembly and ask that Mark Drakeford has some sort of blocking role on anything that is done by the Conservative party and Government in the United Kingdom. Let us save ourselves some money right here.

Various Members mentioned the health service, and rightly so. The hon. Member for Swansea East, one of the most sensible Members in the Labour party, if I may say so, drew attention to her worthy campaign to raise the issue of the menopause and HRT. Free prescriptions are not necessarily something on which I would agree with her as a good thing, because then everyone would get a prescription for free, even though some people can well afford to pay and therefore put their money towards the worthy campaigns that she mentioned.

Two of my own colleagues—my hon. Friends the Members for Vale of Clwyd and for Wrexham—have first-hand experience of the health service and, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West, drew attention to the fact that, after more than 20 years of Labour Government in one form or another in Wales—a Labour Government who talk up the health service all the time—the reality is that people wait longer in Wales. They wait longer for treatment and for ambulances, and they are not able to get access to drugs that are available in England.

My right hon. Friend also mentioned education, another area of policy over which the Welsh Labour Government have had full control. The results have been disgraceful. One former Education Minister actually apologised to the people of Wales in a front-page newspaper column in the *Western Mail* a few years ago, for the fact that learners in Wales are less likely to get GCSEs than those in England, less likely to get A-levels and less likely to go to the best universities. What has been the response of the Welsh Government? Not to go out there and to work out what on earth is going wrong with our education system in Wales, but to pull out of the PISA model, which is the only way to verify just how well they are doing in comparison with education systems across the rest of the world.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend and others raised the issue of respect. That is something I agree with fully. We respect the Welsh Government, the fact that they exist. We respect the fact that there have been

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two referendums in which people have voted in favour of devolution, and it would be nice if there was a bit of mutuality about this: it is about time that the Welsh Labour Government recognised the fact that the majority of people in Wales voted for Brexit, wanted to see Brexit delivered and did not want to see it blocked by a group of people who also owed their own jobs to a referendum.

As I start to close, I point out that a number of people in all parts of the Committee raised the issue of levelling up. What is levelling up? It is about the growth deals that are now in place across the whole of Wales, some of which are already delivering projects, such as the one in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. It is about the freeports, and we know that there is now progress towards a freeport in Wales, because the Welsh Government have finally realised that if those are going to happen in Wales and Scotland, it is about time that they got in on the act. It is about the rail infrastructure, upgrading the south Wales freight line and the north Wales coast line, as well as all the other projects taking place across Wales. It is about £18.5 billion, an extra £2.5 billion this year for the Welsh Government to spend on supporting the jobs threatened by covid, and what a marvellous job the Treasury did to ensure that all parts of the United Kingdom were supported through this terrible time.

Levelling up is about using the resources of Britain—which is what happened, by the way, at the start of the crisis—to ensure that PPE was available, that Nightingale hospitals were built in record time and that there were enough ventilators. We did not run out of PPE or ventilators, we had the space in the hospitals, and we were able to go out and develop a vaccine—a vaccine that was bottled in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham. Furthermore, it was boxed in Monmouthshire—Tri-Wall in my constituency was responsible for boxing the vaccine.

In closing, I say that one of the finest speeches we had was by the hon. Member for Aberavon, for Port Talbot—

**Stephen Kinnock:** That's the kiss of death!

**David T. C. Davies:** The hon. Member for Aberavon spoke for so many of us when he said that it is quite possible to be proud to be Welsh, to be proud to be British and to be proud supporters of the Union that has delivered so many benefits for Wales over the years.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That the Committee has considered the matter of strengthening the Union as it relates to Wales.

3.59 pm

*Committee adjourned.*