

Thursday
24 February 2022

Volume 709
No. 123



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 24 February 2022

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

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

Moving Civil Service Jobs outside London

1. **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What progress his Department is making on moving civil service jobs outside of London. [905619]

17. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What progress his Department is making on moving civil service jobs outside of London. [905638]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Steve Barclay): Before I start, Mr Speaker, I am sure I speak for the whole House when I say I am appalled by the horrific events in Ukraine. This is an unprovoked attack by President Putin, and the UK and its allies will respond decisively. This morning the Prime Minister spoke to President Zelensky and chaired Cobra. He will make a statement to this House later today to outline the UK response, including overwhelming sanctions. The Cabinet Office is accelerating work on domestic resilience and we will provide more information on that in due course.

More than 2,000 civil service jobs have already moved to places across the UK under the Places for Growth programme, including York and the south-west.

Kevin Hollinrake: May I associate myself with my right hon. Friend's words? In this Parliament, we will stand in solidarity against the deranged tyranny we have seen and make the road that President Putin has chosen as painful as possible.

York is a beautiful city. It is the beating economic heart of the York city region, the new devolved region of York and the whole of the beautiful county of North Yorkshire. We would give a very warm welcome to anybody who relocates their jobs and their families to the area. Will my right hon. Friend update us on the very exciting plans we have heard about, which will see a number of jobs coming to the city?

Steve Barclay: Mr Speaker, even as Lancastrians I am sure that both you and I recognise that York is indeed a beautiful city. It very much features in our plans to relocate roles. Around 300 civil service roles have already moved or are moving to the city, in addition to the 2,790 civil servants already based in York.

Selaine Saxby: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that the south-west also needs levelling up? Devon and Cornwall are more than just great places to go on holiday; they are also great places to live and work.

Steve Barclay: I very much agree. That is why the south-west is already home to 45,000 civil servants. The recent levelling-up White Paper highlighted the range of Departments that will be relocating, including to the south-west.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): We know it is important to have a good breadth of civil service jobs out in the country, but it is also important to have a diverse civil service. Will the Minister explain what he will do to ensure that the top jobs in the civil service better reflect the nation they seek to serve?

Steve Barclay: I could not agree more. The hon. Gentleman is right to champion diversity, which is at the heart of the Places for Growth programme. If we want a meritocracy, we need diversity as a part of that, recognising, as the Prime Minister has frequently said, that talent is equally distributed but opportunity often is not. People should be able to fulfil their careers closer to home. Moving senior-level jobs—for example, with the Treasury in Darlington—is a key part of enabling people from all backgrounds to access the very best jobs in our civil service.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I associate myself with the remarks made earlier. This is a dark day for democracy. As someone who has been in this House for a very long time and who was born during the Blitz, I know that dictators are never deterred by sanctions; they are deterred by firm action.

Huddersfield is a booming university town. It is the perfect place for people to come and live, with beautiful countryside. We are also a real centre for technology and innovation. We would love anything to do with green skills, green enterprise and green start-ups based in our university town.

Steve Barclay: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman. Through his experience in the House, he brings great context to the issues we face.

On Huddersfield, I very much agree. One of the issues is how we combine the Places for Growth programme with other parts of Government, not least the record investment in research and development—increased from £15 billion to £22 billion—so that we take the best of our academic research in our universities, and get the start-ups and then the scale-ups in places such as Huddersfield.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I echo the comments that have been made and our thoughts are with the people of Ukraine after Putin's unprovoked and unjustifiable attack.

To ensure that talented civil servants can build their careers outside London, we need to see senior civil service roles based in our towns and cities, not just concentrated in Whitehall. We need to put opportunities back in the places that built Britain. The Government's levelling-up White Paper estimates that about 7% of senior civil service roles will be moved out of London

by 2025 and that a further 10% would need to be moved out by 2030 to meet the Government's Places for Growth target, but beyond vague words and wishful thinking, there is no clear plan to achieve that, is there? So what is the Minister's plan? Is it to move Londoners out, sack hard-working civil servants, as the Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency suggests, or to have a meaningful recruitment strategy across our regions?

Steve Barclay: I went to Preston City Council and to look at the new National Cyber Force—we have investment going into the cyber corridor of the north-west, combining the innovation in Manchester with, for example, the fantastic courses that Lancaster University and the University of Central Lancashire offer—and as I found when talking to that Labour-led council, there is actually a lot of cross-party support for Places for Growth. I do not think there is a huge difference between the parties. On the plan, we can look at the 2,000 roles that have already moved and the levelling-up White Paper of 2 February, which sets out the plan for how this will be taken forward.

Civil Servants: Return to the Office

2. **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the return of civil servants to the office following the end of guidance to work from home during the covid-19 outbreak. [905620]

6. **Robin Millar** (Aberconwy) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the return of civil servants to the office following the end of guidance to work from home during the covid-19 outbreak. [905625]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Steve Barclay): The Cabinet Office has followed central Government guidance to employers to reduce the risk of transmission in the workplace, so that all our buildings return to the maximum available capacity as soon as possible now that new restrictions have lifted.

Jack Brereton: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response. As well as getting Whitehall back to the office, and given the recent announcements about rolling back the state, does he agree that we should now focus on reducing both the record numbers of people working in central Government and the civil servant headcount?

Steve Barclay: I very much agree. My hon. Friend will have noticed that the spending review 2020 included a provision to do exactly that. However, the point is more nuanced, because this is also about empowering civil servants and taking away often the many layers so that the very good work of sometimes more junior civil servants can get to Ministers and senior decision makers. There is a fiscal benefit of this and an opportunity in how we better empower staff and, in turn, combine that with our learning and development offer. Indeed, that is why the Cabinet Office is doubling the learning and development package that we offer to our staff.

Robin Millar: We all know that civil servants have a vital role in delivering and managing public services and it is essential that they can get on with that, so I

welcome what has been described. However, will my right hon. Friend reassure my Aberconwy constituents by clarifying that any UK Government instruction to civil servants will also apply in Wales, where Welsh Government guidance remains to work at home?

Steve Barclay: We are clear, in relation to areas of reserved authority, that we are a UK Government—indeed, the Prime Minister is the Minister for the Union—and we have been clear on that in our messaging with Departments. The point is that many staff want to get back into the office, particularly those who do not have the benefit of a larger house, a garden and perhaps an office at home. There are often important opportunities that come from being in the office that are not always available when they work from home.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is very good to hear the Minister's positive response. Has the Department considered encouraging staff by allowing flexible working for a short time to allow reduced staff to acclimatise to working closely with others again? Not only is there a benefit for the workers, but there is a benefit from the economic spin-off of having people in offices so that the shops can also continue to thrive.

Steve Barclay: As an MP for a rural constituency, I absolutely recognise that point, as well as the issue of wellbeing relating to commuting times and other aspects, so this is part of a nuanced approach. However, the point is that the desks in Whitehall, for example, do not equate to the total number of full-time equivalent staff. There are already far fewer desks than FTEs, so if we are paying for office space, the question is why it would not be used. This is about using the office space that we have as well as recognising that there are opportunities for hybrid working.

Brexit Opportunities Unit

4. **Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): What recent progress the Brexit Opportunities Unit has made in delivering growth and innovation. [905622]

Mr Speaker: I welcome Jacob Rees-Mogg to the Dispatch Box.

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Thank you, Mr Speaker; it is a rare treat.

Her Majesty's Government are delivering an ambitious programme to seize the opportunities of Brexit and deliver growth and innovation across the United Kingdom. The Brexit Opportunities Unit co-ordinates those reforms in close partnership with other Departments, including by working towards our target to cut at least £1 billion of EU red tape to help businesses to innovate and grow.

Virginia Crosbie: Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the Welsh Government and Isle of Anglesey County Council are all setting up new facilities in Holyhead to enforce post-Brexit port regulations, bringing much-needed new local employment to my constituency of Ynys Môn. How will the Brexit Opportunities Unit work with those organisations to gather feedback on their operations that can then be used to inform the review and to inform regulation and policy?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend has become the greatest champion that Ynys Môn has ever had; every time she asks a question in this Chamber, she is always promoting her fantastic and beautiful constituency. Her constituents are very lucky to have her as their Member of Parliament. Once again, as so often, she is absolutely right: we will be driven by data and evidence from the frontline, not simply copying what has been done in the past. We therefore all look forward to seeing what happens at Holyhead.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): May I associate myself with the remarks of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster about Ukraine? My thoughts are with the people of Ukraine and I fully support them in their sovereignty.

I welcome the Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency to his place. One result of Brexit is that we have an independent sanctions regime, so why have the Government not taken the opportunity before now to go further in their sanctions against Russia?

Mr Rees-Mogg: If the hon. Lady has had a chance to look at the announciator, she will have seen that the Prime Minister will be making a statement at 5 o'clock. It is best that my right hon. Friend make the statement, rather than my trying to pre-empt him.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Following this morning's inexcusable attack on independent Ukraine, may I put on record the SNP's unequivocal condemnation of President Putin and his actions, and repeat our support for and our solidarity with the people of Ukraine?

I, too, welcome the Secretary of State for fantasy island—sorry, the Minister for Brexit Opportunities—to his place. That was an easy mistake to make, particularly as he believes that Brexit is already a success and that there is no evidence that it has caused trade to drop, despite the Office for National Statistics reporting that UK exports to the EU have fallen by £20 billion in 20 months. How can we trust him to deliver growth when he has hitherto been unable to accept the evidence of the ONS and the experience of just about every exporter in the UK who is losing business while drowning in a sea of paperwork and bureaucracy?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I welcome the cross-party support for the actions that the Government are taking in regard to Ukraine, and the cross-party support for the people of Ukraine in these very difficult circumstances.

As regards the hon. Gentleman's statement about exports, he may have missed the fact that there has been a pandemic. I know that sometimes the SNP does not pay careful attention to public affairs, but the pandemic has had an effect on supply chains across the world and is one of many things that cannot be blamed on Brexit. I am delighted, however, that Scotland is reaping the rewards of Brexit and has decided to have a green freeport, which will be an enormous boost to the economy of Scotland. Perhaps he has noticed that, through the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, more powers have been devolved to Scotland. Is it not eccentric that our Scottish friends would like to be ruled from Brussels, rather than being part of a United Kingdom that works effectively for everybody?

Brendan O'Hara: Yet another classic example of "If the facts don't fit the narrative, ignore the facts."

Such was the faith that the Minister had in himself to find these Brexit opportunities that the first thing he did was issue a "What would you do in my shoes?" appeal to readers of a national newspaper. I am sure that the suggestions for what he could do came thick and fast, but what was the best suggestion that he received? Will he be implementing it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have received 1,800 recommendations from the wise readers of *The Sun*. I believe that the British people have an enormous amount of wisdom from which politicians, particularly politicians in Scotland, could benefit.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Businesses and business organisations in my constituency are eager to engage with the Brexit Opportunities Unit. Will my right hon. Friend be touring the UK to promote Brexit opportunities, and if so, may I invite him to visit Cleethorpes in the near future?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friends the Members for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) and for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) compete with each other to be greatest champion of their constituencies. I look forward to visiting Cleethorpes in the not-too-distant future. There is a date in the diary, and I am looking forward to the finest food that Cleethorpes can provide when I go there to speak.

Mr Speaker: Don't get too excited. You should be going to Lancashire for food.

Public Procurement

5. **Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to facilitate open and transparent public procurement. [905624]

8. **Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to facilitate open and transparent public procurement. [905628]

14. **Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con):** What steps he is taking to ensure that underperforming Government contractors may not apply for further Government contracts. [905635]

18. **Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to increase opportunities for small businesses to bid for Government contracts. [905639]

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Her Majesty's Government are reforming the procurement rules to make it simpler and quicker for suppliers, including small and medium-sized enterprises and social enterprises, to bid for public sector contracts. The reforms will entrench transparency for the full extent of a commercial transaction, and will make it easier for buyers to take account of previous poor performance by suppliers.

Bill Esterson: The Government need to get on and reform those rules somewhat more quickly, do they not? In answer to my written question about steel targets for

HS2, the Government told me that they were unable to set targets for British steel procurement because of World Trade Organisation rules, but that is not true, is it? The US sets informal targets through the Buy American Act because the WTO allows it to do so. Where, then, is the Buy British-made Steel policy in Government contracts in this country, using the informal targets that are allowed by the WTO? Labour will make more, buy more and sell more in Britain; why will the Conservatives not do so as well?

Mr Rees-Mogg: One of the opportunities of Brexit is that we will be able to encourage people to buy more from SMEs, which tend to be UK-based rather than from overseas. Opening up procurement has the effect of ensuring that more British companies get contracts, and that is a good thing to be doing, but there is always a balance to be struck between ensuring that one buys cheaply and efficiently and supporting British companies. I believe that British companies can out-compete, and be as efficient as, anyone in the world, and that that is how procurement ought to operate.

Kerry McCarthy: The Government spend £2 billion every year on food for schools, hospitals, prisons and so on. When they eventually respond to the national food strategy, will they accept its recommendations on reforming procurement rules so that food purchased with taxpayers' money is always healthy and sustainable—and will the Minister confirm that foie gras will not be on the menu?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do not think we need to go into my personal dietary habits. I have mainly been giving free publicity to Cadbury Creme Eggs over the years, rather than going into the details of whether or not I like foie gras—although people may be able to guess what the answer is.

As for the strategy for procurement of food, one of the things it will do is allow social benefit to be taken into account. It will not just be about value for money, although value for money is inevitably fundamental to all procurement, so it will be possible for people to make decisions on a broader range of issues.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's answer, and the reform that he has promised for contractors, but many large-scale projects suffer because the Government's ability to procure and contract management have not been as good as they should be. In his role as Minister for Government Efficiency, will my right hon. Friend take that on board, and will he ensure that the Government set out new guidelines for procurement for themselves so that they do not keep changing them and hence building in inefficiency?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. The new procurement rules will make it easier for buyers to exclude suppliers that have underperformed on other public contracts. Currently, that is possible only if poor performance has led to contract termination, damages or other comparable sanctions. We will establish a new, centrally managed debarment register, which will identify any companies that should be banned from any new public contract.

Crucially, though, there has been a change within the procurement from Government to ensure that the management of contracts once they are procured is improved and is the great focus of the energy of the procurement department, because however brilliantly the procurement is issued, if it is not then managed well and effectively the benefits are lost. This is, in fact, an issue that we discussed when I had another role in this distinguished House.

Jerome Mayhew: Government tender documents are full of ancillary requirements that have laudable objectives individually but collectively form an enormous barrier to the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises because it is much harder for them to demonstrate compliance than it is for large businesses. Will my right hon. Friend consider relaxing those non-core requirements, to enable SMEs in Broadland and elsewhere to compete?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The personal liability insurance that people were required to have when contracting with the Cabinet Office inevitably excluded some smaller companies for which the cost of the extra insurance may have outweighed the benefit of winning the contract, and one of the first things I did in this post was to ask for that to be reviewed to see if it was proportionate and what we really needed. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that it is the detailed pettifogging conditions that keep SMEs out, and we want to bring SMEs in.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Around 70% of all central Government contracts in 2021 went to suppliers in the south of England, with almost half going to companies in London. The Conservative Government's procurement strategy could not be more at odds with the stated aims of their levelling-up agenda. They have made big promises but they are failing to deliver. We must see proper investment in our communities to create good-quality jobs and opportunities across the country and to boost local economies, so can the Minister outline the specific targets in the procurement Bill that will ensure that Government purchasing of goods and services is better spread across our country?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I cannot reveal the details of Bills before they are published, but I agree with the hon. Lady's basic thrust and point. One of the advantages of our new procurement system is that we will have better data and will therefore be able to ensure that the whole of the country is represented. To revert to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), part of the way of spreading it more widely around the country is to bring in smaller businesses, which means getting rid of rules that are unnecessary and that hinder businesses from tendering for contracts.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Minister is very welcome to come to Worthing, where I am sure he will get an even better culinary experience than when he goes to Cleethorpes. One of the great benefits of Brexit is that we are no longer bound by EU bureaucratic procurement rules, so will he ensure that there is clear guidance to local authorities, local schools and other areas of public procurement that they should favour local businesses, particularly smaller businesses, and local producers so that our children and public service workers can enjoy quality

food and drink products that are locally produced in this country, environmentally friendly and create fewer air miles?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I look forward to my trip to Worthing and I am grateful for my hon. Friend's invitation. He is absolutely right; this comes from the de-bureaucratisation—if that in itself is not a bureaucratic word—of the system, because it makes it easier for small companies to apply. The thing to remember is that large companies have departments that fill out tender documents, but small companies do not. We need to simplify the tender documents to bring the small companies in.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Over a year ago, at the Public Accounts Committee, I discovered that there were 10,000 shipping containers filled with millions of items of personal protective equipment costing billions of pounds, and I am afraid of waste. A few months later, I heard that there were 14,000 shipping containers full of unused PPE. I have put in a parliamentary question for an update, but so far it remains unanswered. Can the Minister please give us an update on how many shipping containers are still full of PPE this month?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is a matter for the Department of Health, but I would defend the procurement of PPE because we needed PPE urgently, as we needed a vaccine urgently. We have heard constant criticism from the Opposition of something that had to be done urgently and had to break through the slowness of normal procurement timescales. Normal procurement takes three to six months, but we needed PPE tomorrow so we had to act urgently, as we did.

Cyber-Resilience

7. **Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to strengthen the UK's cyber-resilience. [905627]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Steve Barclay): Our national cyber strategy sets out how we will ensure that the UK remains a leading democratic cyber-power that is more resilient and able to counter cyber-threats. This and the Government cyber-security strategy are supported by £2.6 billion of taxpayers' money over the next three years.

Dr Wallis: I welcome the Government's pledge to create regional cyber-clusters across the UK as part of their levelling-up agenda, but does my right hon. Friend agree we need to be conscious that, if we attempt to standardise security protocols across multiple organisations, the overall effectiveness of the security of each individual organisation must improve and not be weakened as a result?

Steve Barclay: I take my hon. Friend's point, but having the 12 regional clusters will help businesses that want to do the right thing and know how best to protect against the risks of cyber. Our aim is to help businesses improve their cyber-security. Given events in Europe today, it is particularly pressing that businesses take this seriously.

Mr Speaker: I call John Spellar. Not here.

Covid-19: Public Inquiry

10. **Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab):** When the public inquiry into the covid-19 pandemic will begin. [905630]

19. **Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab):** When the public inquiry into the covid-19 pandemic will begin. [905641]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler): On 15 December, the Prime Minister announced the appointment of the right hon. Baroness Heather Hallett as chair of the public inquiry into covid-19. The inquiry is set to begin its work in spring 2022.

Afzal Khan: On Monday, the Prime Minister told the House that we must learn to live with covid-19. This is cold comfort for the bereaved families whose loved ones will not have that opportunity. What does the Minister have to say to families like mine who feel that the inquiry is simply being kicked into the long grass? Does she agree, now that all restrictions will be lifted, that there is absolutely no reason why the inquiry cannot move forward immediately?

Mrs Wheeler: I sympathise fully with the hon. Gentleman. He has told us about his family bereavement many times, and we have all been very moved by those comments.

The inquiry will play a key role in ensuring that we learn the lessons from this terrible pandemic. To do that, we must get the terms of reference right. When the Prime Minister appointed Baroness Hallett as chair, he said he would consult her and Ministers from the devolved Administrations on the inquiry's terms of reference, and he said that Baroness Hallett would then run a process of public consultation and engagement before the terms of reference are finalised.

To give an update, the Prime Minister has now consulted Baroness Hallett and the process of consulting the devolved Administrations is well advanced. The next stage will be to ensure that those most affected by the pandemic, including those who have sadly lost loved ones, can have their say. This process will begin and conclude very soon.

Marsha De Cordova: I associate myself with the earlier comments. My thoughts and prayers are with the people of Ukraine right now.

Throughout the pandemic, disabled people and those with underlying health conditions accounted for six in 10 covid-related deaths. Shockingly, when the Prime Minister declared the end of all covid restrictions and measures on Monday, there was no plan for how he would support and protect some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Have the Government not learned any lessons from the last two years? Will this public inquiry have a specific focus on the disproportionate impact of covid on disabled people?

Mrs Wheeler: I associate myself with the hon. Lady's comments about Ukraine. South Derbyshire and the Derby area have a very large diaspora of Ukrainian-related families, so my thoughts and prayers are with them today.

To answer the hon. Lady's question, and I will try to answer questions in my new role, I believe the answer is yes.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): The covid inquiry has a website and a chair, but it has not formally started and a letter from the Prime Minister is required, so holding hearings and collecting evidence by the spring is going to be incredibly difficult. In addition, "spring" is a vague period of time; daffodils are already out in my garden. We have been promised time and again that the inquiry hearings would start this spring. The Prime Minister told us that, as did Health Ministers, the former Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Paymaster General, and now another Minister is telling us that. I am tired of coming back to this Dispatch Box and reminding Ministers of this but not being given a date.

I ask the Minister to be straight with me and, more importantly, to be straight with the bereaved families, who are very worried that this inquiry is not going to start in the spring, that we will not be hearing what happened during covid and that we will not be learning the lessons. Will the Minister tell me today when the terms of reference will be passed to the chair for consultations to start and when the inquiry hearings will formally begin?

Mrs Wheeler: Derbyshire is a lot further north than Putney and the daffodils are not out in my garden—we still have snowdrops, which are very pretty, so spring is definitely a moveable feast.

The UK Government are negotiating and discussing terms of reference with the devolved Assemblies, and when we receive their replies, we will absolutely move this forward with Baroness Hallett, who is ready to go. The Prime Minister wants this to start as soon as possible, and it will start by the spring.

UK Global Strategy

11. **Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): If he will make an assessment with the Foreign Secretary of the potential merits of introducing a national strategy council to develop and support a long-term global strategy for the UK. [905631]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Steve Barclay): The Government's approach to national security was set out in the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy. The National Security Council provides strategic direction to ensure that the review is implemented, and provides the necessary flexibility and agility to respond to the changing global context.

Bob Seely: On responding to the changing global context, would it be accurate to say that this morning deterrence has failed? Do the Government also agree that perhaps if we had a national strategy council that looked forward a decade to the trends shaping our world, our policy might be less ad hoc, less reactive and less last-minute, and our ability to deter wars, which are currently breaking out in Europe, might be stronger?

Steve Barclay: I know that my hon. Friend takes a close interest in these issues, so he will know better than most that the whole purpose of the integrated review

was to look at the period up to 2030, and it clearly identified China as a systemic competitor. I also know from my time as Chief Secretary to the Treasury that at the spending review 2020 we put in place the biggest investment in the Ministry of Defence—in defence—for about 30 years. That shows this Government's willingness to look longer-term at what the right strategic approach is.

Leaving the European Union: Potential Benefits

12. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What discussions the Minister of State for Brexit Opportunities has had with (a) industry bodies and (b) the devolved Administrations on the Government's assessment of the potential benefits of the UK leaving the EU. [905633]

16. **Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): What discussions the Minister of State for Brexit Opportunities has had with (a) industry bodies and (b) the devolved Administrations on the Government's assessment of the potential benefits of the UK leaving the EU. [905637]

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Last week, I met port industry representatives to discuss Brexit opportunities, and I intend to meet a wide range of interested parties across different sectors and industries. Ministers and officials from each Department regularly engage with the devolved Administrations on specific policy areas, and I intend to do so in areas of common interest. I am delighted to have had a letter from Angus Robertson asking to have a meeting, which I look forward to doing. We will include in these meetings reviews of retained EU law.

Deidre Brock: Annual tax loss to evasion and avoidance in the UK stands at £38 billion, which represents more than 14% of the world's total tax loss and £570 per UK citizen per year. The EU is implementing new tax evasion rules to clamp down on it, but the UK refuses to act similarly. Does the Minister accept that this is yet another Brexit harm? Or does he see the evasion of tax by wealthy individuals and companies as a Brexit opportunity?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Actually, the Government have a very good record in clamping down on the tax gap and ensuring that people pay the tax that is owed. Fraud, within the whole system of government, is something that must be borne down on. Every element of fraud is taking money from other taxpayers. Therefore, the Government have a strong drive to bear down on it, and have introduced over the past 12 years a number of measures to reduce the opportunities for any tax fraud. We do not need the European Union to tell us how to do it; I could go through some countries of that organisation that have a pretty poor tax collecting record.

Richard Thomson: The Government have touted their so-called Brexit freedoms Bill as a means of cutting up to £1 billion-worth of red tape, yet Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs estimates that new customs rules resulting from Brexit could lead to increased costs for businesses of up to £15 billion each year. Is it not the case that the only cuts to red tape that have been made since Brexit

have been the repeated cutting of red tape lengthways to create many more miles of the stuff than ever existed when we were part of the EU?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman conjures up images of origami; I am waiting to see what creatures he will create with the papers he cuts up. It is fundamentally important not only that we cut red tape that was imposed by the European Union but that we do not, as a country, impose red tape on ourselves. We now have the freedom not to impose red tape on ourselves, which is something that I, in my new role, am keen to ensure.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Two weeks ago, the courts again threw out the Welsh Labour Government's legal challenge to the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020. Does my right hon. Friend agree that instead of spending the past five years expending an enormous amount of time, energy and taxpayers' money on fighting a democratic referendum result, the devolved Administrations would have served their populations far better by working collaboratively with the UK Government on the great national mission of levelling up our one United Kingdom?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. It is noticeable that the hard-left Administration in Wales, backed up by separatists, is not acting in the interests of the people of Wales. It would be much better to accept the democratic result of the Brexit referendum. The people of the United Kingdom voted to leave; we have now left and the opportunities will flow. To waste taxpayers' money on taking fruitless legal action is, to my mind, the sort of thing that only the hard-left socialist would do.

One Public Estate Programme

13. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): What steps he is taking with the Metropolitan police as part of the One Public Estate programme. [905634]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler): The One Public Estate programme has provided support and £140,000 to explore estate collaboration across the emergency services and wider public sector partners in London. The programme is working with the Metropolitan police and the Greater London Authority to establish where project opportunities could be progressed.

Munira Wilson: With police stations throughout London up for sale, including in Teddington, the Mayor of London is determined to flog them off to the highest bidder, which generally means luxury housing developers. Does the Minister agree that if precious taxpayer-owned sites such as Teddington police station must be closed, they should routinely be part of the One Public Estate programme so that they can be repurposed for community use—for example, for Park Road surgery, an important GP facility in my constituency—and for affordable homes for key workers and young people?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank the hon. Lady for her interesting question. She led a Westminster Hall debate on the disposal of Teddington police station yesterday; as the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for

Harborough (Neil O'Brien), said then, the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime is responsible for the disposal strategy, but it can take into account the wider social, environmental and economic benefits. He will write to the hon. Lady with further information on this matter.

Official Photographer to the Prime Minister

15. **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the value for money provided by the official photographer to the Prime Minister. [905636]

The Minister without Portfolio (Nigel Adams): It has been the case under successive Governments that civil servants and special advisers provide assistance on communications. We employ photographers to capture Government work, including that which cannot be captured by a press photographer due to its sensitive nature. Photographers are a cross-Government resource, supporting other Departments and Ministers, and play a critical role in the support of the Government's digital communications activity and in progressing key policy areas.

Dame Diana Johnson: Well, Mr Speaker, that was a nice try at justification, was it not? As I understand it, Downing Street employs three tax-funded photographers to chronicle the work and life of the Prime Minister, Cabinet members, and even the Prime Minister's pets. Given the cost of living crisis and the rise in taxes for most families, is it really good value for taxpayers' money to have three photographers for Downing Street?

Nigel Adams: It plays a key role in the support of modern Government communications on social media. With respect, I will take no lectures on spin from Labour: the Labour Government spent £2.5 billion a year on marketing and communications and 4,000 spin doctors worked in central Government and their quangos—

Mr Speaker: Order. Minister, this is about the Prime Minister and press; I do not think we need to wander around the world.

Covid-19 Contracts: High Priority Lane

20. **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What his latest estimate is of the (a) number and (b) value of contracts for the supply of PPE and covid-19 testing equipment to the NHS which were processed through the high priority lane. [905643]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler): Mr Speaker, with your permission, as this is a very detailed question, I would like to give a detailed answer.

The PPE high priority lane was established as one way of efficiently triaging and assessing the thousands of offers of support for PPE early in the pandemic. One hundred and fifteen contracts were awarded to 51 suppliers identified through this route and the total value of those contracts was £3.8 billion. Between May 2020 and March 2021, 50 suppliers had priority referrals for covid testing support and were awarded 128 contracts with a total value of £6 billion. All contracts awarded, no matter the route, were rigorously evaluated to ensure

that the products that were progressed met the required specification. There was no separate high priority lane or process.

Neale Hanvey: The Minister will be aware that it has been established that there is in existence an additional 18 VIP lane contracts, bringing the total to 68. Between them, they were awarded £4.9 billion in PPE contracts. Gareth Davies, the head of the National Audit Office, the Comptroller and Auditor General, has said that the Health and Social Care Department was “open to the risk of fraud.”

What steps are being considered or taken to investigate that and to assure the House that the contracts awarded through the Government VIP lane were not fraudulent?

Mrs Wheeler: I can answer the hon. Gentleman. I am delighted to tell him that he has his facts wrong: recent media articles claim that 19 additional suppliers were referred through the HPL, which is totally inaccurate. Having reviewed the records, I can tell him that only one other company was included, so in fact, instead of 50, the total was 51.

Topical Questions

T1. [905644] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Steve Barclay): I begin by welcoming an excellent new ministerial team. This includes an expanded role for the Paymaster General to include Minister for the Cabinet Office. My hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler) is the new Parliamentary Secretary, and my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) is the new Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency.

As right hon. and hon. Members will also know, the Prime Minister has pledged to make changes to the way Downing Street and the Cabinet Office are run so that we can better respond to delivering across the UK and to the issues raised by parliamentary colleagues across the House. In my role as a Minister and the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff, I will be supporting Cabinet colleagues in delivering for the British people, uniting and levelling up across the UK.

Mr Carmichael: I am sure the Minister will have been as appalled as I was to see the scenes of Russian aggression on our televisions. We should be equally concerned, however, about the Russian aggression that we cannot see. The Minister has responsibility for cyber-security. Can he give the House some assurance that his Department is now taking urgent steps to ensure that Government and commerce in this country will be protected against what we should reasonably expect to be coming from that direction?

Steve Barclay: The right hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important point. It is one that I touched on in my opening remarks about Cabinet Office plans for domestic resilience. It is something that we are working on across the United Kingdom, including with the Scottish Government. Through the excellent work of

the National Cyber Security Centre, we are ensuring that the new national strategy that I launched before Christmas and the Government strategy on cyber that we launched shortly after Christmas are taken forward. They are about building resilience to the cyber risk for the whole of society while also recognising the huge opportunities that online platforms offer.

T2. [905646] **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his commitment to making the United Kingdom the best country in the world in which to be a veteran by 2028. Will the Minister outline for me what he and his Department are doing to improve employment opportunities for veterans in my constituency of Dudley North and across the United Kingdom?

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): We know that veterans make brilliant employees, and the picture on veteran employment is good, with 83% of veterans employed full time six months after leaving service. However, we are not complacent; we are putting in place further practical support, such as tax breaks for those employing veterans, guaranteed job interviews for those seeking to join the civil service, and brilliant armed forces champions in jobcentres across the country, including in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Further to the question from the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), may I urge the Minister to give more detail on civil resilience, especially in light of what is happening with cyber-attacks and threats emanating from Russia. What extra support is being offered to businesses? I know national infrastructure is important, but many businesses across the UK are concerned about this. Has the national security cell done an assessment, and will that assessment be published?

Steve Barclay: This is an area of common ground across the House. I know the National Security Adviser has shared briefings with Opposition leaders, as referred to earlier in the week, and we continue to work closely across the House. The clear message being sent by all parties today is extremely welcome. On the specific question of cyber, we will set out further details of the work that the Cabinet Office is doing. We had a Cobra meeting this morning and that was one of the topics focused on.

Angela Rayner: I thank the Minister for that response. My heartfelt sympathies go out to Ukraine and my support is there with its people. The tragic events of this morning show that there is no space, excuse or justification when it comes to Putin's continued influence in the UK's democracy and national infrastructure. We have seen this week that Russian oligarchs and Kremlin-linked organisations have begun intense lobbying of Government Ministers in an attempt to avoid sanctions if Moscow invades Ukraine. Will the Minister confirm that none of his Conservative colleagues have accepted donations from anyone with links to the Kremlin currently lobbying the Foreign Office?

Steve Barclay: Again, the right hon. Lady raises an important point. She will well know that there is a long-standing principle that permissible donors are those who are on the UK electoral register: in essence, if

people can vote in the UK for a party, they are able to donate to it. It is important in our discussions in this House that we remember—although I do not think that is what she was saying—that people in this country of Russian origin are often British citizens.

T4. [905649] **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): My constituents and I were shocked by some of the revelations that came out of the Grenfell inquiry on building products manufacturers. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that none of those manufacturers will be used for Government contracts and that we have robust processes in place to ensure that Government contracts only go to honourable companies?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler): My hon. Friend is a champion for everything that has gone on since the Grenfell fire tragedy, and I completely understand and share her concerns about the information that has come to light through the Grenfell public inquiry. Current Government policy is to take into account suppliers' past performance when awarding contracts. We are currently in the process of transforming the way Government procedures work, which will mean that in future poorly performing suppliers can be more easily excluded from procurements and buyers will have more scope and discretion to do so where suppliers have performed poorly in previous public contracts. Furthermore, the Government's Building Safety Bill will establish a new regulatory regime for construction products and of course we continue to take action against specific companies where we can.

T3. [905648] **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): The job of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is a huge one. The Cabinet Office has responsibility for some very important projects, from the covid-19 inquiry to cyber-security, emergency response and national security. Those all matter to people in Newport West—national security more so than ever today. How will the Minister reassure my constituents that their concerns will be listened to and acted on without dither or delay?

Steve Barclay: In part, by physically going to areas such as the north-west—I referenced my visit to Preston earlier—working on a cross-party basis to look at creating a cyber-corridor across the north-west, bringing the talent and skills agenda through schools into the universities with courses such as those at the University of Central Lancashire, and ensuring a better pipeline of apprentices into both the business community, such as BAE in that part of the world, and Government itself.

T5. [905651] **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): On a day like today a celebration is perhaps not at the forefront of our minds. However, Her Majesty the Queen's 70th jubilee this year does mark the unwavering devotion that she has had towards this country and the service therein. Across the United Kingdom—and not just in this country but of course around the world as well—people will be very keen to celebrate this historic milestone. Will my right hon. Friend elaborate on what he plans to do about putting this momentous occasion forward?

The Minister without Portfolio (Nigel Adams): I welcome the opportunity to celebrate the extraordinary contribution Her Majesty has made to the United Kingdom, the

realms and the Commonwealth during her 70-year reign. May I also wish Her Majesty a very speedy recovery? I know the thoughts of everyone in this House are with her. In addition to the four-day UK bank holiday weekend, which includes the platinum jubilee pageant, the Cabinet Office is marking this historic occasion by leading a competition for the award of a number of prestigious civic honours, including city status, and we will announce the results of that later this year. Also, the good people of North Norfolk and those across the UK will be as excited as I am that the ballot for tickets to a platinum jubilee party at Buckingham Palace on 4 June has opened today.

T7. [905653] **Taiwo Owatemi** (Coventry North West) (Lab): I would like to begin by sending my thoughts and prayers to the people of Ukraine at this impossibly difficult time.

There has been a great deal of controversy regarding the Cabinet Office's handling of public procurement during the pandemic, and we have all read the reports of cronyism and contracts being dished out to Government friends. With this in mind, my constituents in Coventry North West want to know what steps the Cabinet Office is taking to clean up procurement processes going forward.

Steve Barclay: I think this issue has been well rehearsed at pretty much all the Cabinet Office questions that I have participated in. As was touched on earlier, the purpose of the high priority lane was to efficiently prioritise credible offers of PPE, and that is what we did. The priority was to ensure that our frontline services had the PPE they needed. That is what we invested in and that is what we secured.

T6. [905652] **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his new role as the Prime Minister's chief of staff in addition to his role as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Will he commit to ensuring that No. 10 drives forward levelling up places such as North Devon, whose variation in opportunity is often hidden due to the averages of a large county such as Devon?

Steve Barclay: I very much agree that levelling up is a UK-wide endeavour and there are often pockets of variance within regions, as I know with a constituency in the fens: North East Cambridgeshire has a very different set of issues from Cambridge. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of levelling up from the skills, health and transport infrastructure perspectives, which impact differently within different regions of the UK.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I want to put on record my fullest support and solidarity for the people of Ukraine as they face the unlawful, aggressive and unprovoked invasion by Russia.

The Minister will know that the recently published national action plan does not include a commitment on aid transparency, which is critical for all of us in ensuring that taxpayer money goes to those who need it most. Bond, the network of development and humanitarian organisations, is calling on the Government to engage in meaningful and inclusive consultation on this. Will he commit to meeting Bond to create an ambitious target to ensure that we remain a world leader on the transparency of our aid budget?

Steve Barclay: First, I welcome the hon. Gentleman's opening remarks. The theme this morning has been the unified voice with which this House has spoken on the troubling events in Ukraine. In respect of transparency in the aid budget, I am happy to highlight his concerns to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and ask whether she or one of her Ministers would be willing to meet him to discuss the issue he raises.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the cross-departmental work to tackle illegal immigration across the English channel, and specifically the plans for the establishment of an offshore immigration detention and processing centre?

Steve Barclay: As part of taking back control of our borders, this is an issue of huge concern. That is why, through my role in the Cabinet Office, I have been working closely with the Home Secretary and other colleagues on a whole-of-Government response to the challenge of illegal migration. The Home Secretary has set out a number of areas of that work and we will be saying more on that in the weeks ahead.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): How many staff is the Downing Street chief of staff the chief of? How many of them are civil servants? How many of them are political appointees or Spads, and how many of them are employees of the Conservative party?

Steve Barclay: In terms of how many people currently work in No. 10, it is slightly over 400. Within the Cabinet Office, the number is much larger, but that depends on whether we cut the data to include fast-streamers, who sit on the Cabinet Office headcount, or

to include the Government Commercial Function, which is located with different Departments. In short, one can have a wider answer depending on how we want to analyse the data. The wider point is how we have very clear lines of accountability, how we ensure that the issues raised by the House are addressed and in particular how we empower the Cabinet and Cabinet Government. That is something I am keen to help facilitate through my engagement with Secretaries of State.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Earlier this month, a former civil servant was awarded a large pay-out after suffering a prolonged and sustained campaign of racial abuse, hinting at a systemic problem in the Cabinet Office and its agencies. What steps is the Minister taking to tackle racism in his Department?

Steve Barclay: There are two issues there. The first is the issue of pay-offs when people leave roles, and we have a manifesto commitment. It is something I was committed to in the Treasury, and I know that the current Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), is taking forward proposals on the size of payouts. We had a manifesto commitment to cap those at £95,000. The issue the hon. Lady raises is slightly different, because it pertains to employment law, and as the House knows, it is not appropriate for Ministers to comment on individual cases. Where there is common ground between her and me is that it is important that the civil service is an exemplar in how it supports colleagues across the civil service and how it champions diversity, which again is a theme that has come out of the discussion this morning.

Speaker's Statement

10.31 am

Mr Speaker: Before the urgent question, I wish to make a short statement about the sub judice resolution. I have been advised that there are active legal proceedings in the Court of Appeal in respect of the quashing of convictions of postmasters and postmistresses which relied on evidence from the Post Office Horizon IT system. I am exercising the discretion given to the Chair in respect of the resolution on matters of sub judice to allow reference to those proceedings, as they concern issues of national importance. However, I urge Members to exercise caution in what they say and to avoid referring in detail to cases that remain before the Court of Appeal.

May I also say that I am disappointed, as this urgent question could have been granted at other times over the past three days? I was promised there would be a statement. There has been a chance to convert it to a statement, but that has completely failed. Thank goodness that the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) stuck with it by putting in for a UQ every day. If you are going to give me advice, I expect you to stick to it. I do not think it is a good reason.

Post Office: Horizon Compensation Arrangements

10.32 am

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on compensation arrangements for those sub-postmasters/mistresses who have been impacted by the Post Office Horizon software scandal.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): First, I apologise, Mr Speaker, for the misunderstanding. I was prepared to make a statement, but obviously the current situation and affairs have got in the way. I am happy to provide an update on Horizon matters since I last made a statement in December. I met the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee last month, and last week the Select Committee published its interim report on the Post Office and Horizon IT scandal. The Government will consider the Committee's recommendations and respond in due course.

People need to know about how this scandal came about and what protections are in place to avoid history repeating itself. That is why the Government established the Post Office Horizon IT inquiry to investigate exactly what went wrong. The evidence from postmasters who have participated since the inquiry hearings began last week has been harrowing to hear, and I thank those postmasters for their courage and their willingness to revisit the trauma they have experienced. Compensation cannot take away the suffering that affected postmasters have experienced, but we are determined that each eligible person gets what is due to them, and that that is paid as quickly as possible. Of the 72 postmasters whose convictions have been overturned, more than 95% have applied so far for an interim compensation payment of up to £100,000, of which 63 offers have been accepted and paid. The Government are pushing for final settlements for quashed convictions to follow as quickly as possible, and negotiations on the first two have begun. The Government are determined that all unjust convictions are quashed. The Post Office is reaching out to affected postmasters.

The Post Office is also in discussion with other public prosecuting bodies responsible for the convictions of postmasters that may have relied on Horizon evidence to ensure that those postmasters are also contacted and enabled to appeal. Offers have been made to over 40% of applicants and compensation has been paid to 764 postmasters who have applied to the historical shortfall scheme. So far, 28 postmasters are proceeding through a dispute resolution process aimed at achieving acceptable settlements. At least 95% of those cases should have been dealt with by the end of the year.

With compensation for overturned convictions and the historical shortfall scheme well under way, the postmasters on whom my attention is now focused are those who exposed the whole scandal by taking the Post Office to the High Court. I know that many hon. Members support the Select Committee's view that it is unfair that they received less compensation than those who were not part of the case. I sympathise with that

[Paul Scully]

view too. I cannot yet report a resolution of that legally complex issue, but we are doing everything we can to address it.

The compensation that postmasters are due will exceed what the Post Office can afford, so the Government are stepping in to meet a good deal of the cost of that compensation. I recognise that is an unwelcome burden on the taxpayer, but the House, and I am sure taxpayers themselves, will agree that the alternative is unacceptable.

Andrew Bridgen: I thank the Minister for his response. As he is aware, the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who I am glad to see in his place, and I are the only remaining Members of the House who were part of the original Post Office review working party that was set up to address the issue over a decade ago. In the years that have followed, we and others have been repeatedly dismissed and fobbed off by all the previous incumbents of my hon. Friend's current ministerial position when we called out what we saw at the time, the evidence we had uncovered and what, in retrospect, with so many cases, was an obviously flawed computer system and a huge miscarriage of justice.

The issue was first highlighted to me by my constituent Michael Rudkin in 2011. He had been forced out of his position as a national representative of sub-postmasters and his wife had been advised to plead guilty to a crime that she had not committed because of a flawed computer system, which Post Office officials were too arrogant to believe could possibly be to blame, and because of a Post Office management whose relationship with the sub-postmasters I described in this House as "feudal" in 2015.

My constituents are just two of the hundreds who lost their jobs, assets and reputations in what is the largest miscarriage of justice in this country's recent history. Their lives have been affected for 20 years or more. There is no excuse for further delays to compensation. They were wronged by the Post Office and let down by Ministers and officials who apparently took the Post Office's word without question. They deserve justice and adequate compensation now—not in months and years when the Department, which is partly culpable for the situation, finally gets its act together.

I have written to the Minister, as I have been passed a letter from the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Lord Callanan, addressed to Lord Arbuthnot, who was also part of the original Post Office working party and maintains a strong interest in the issue from the other place. The letter states that no formal request for the funding of sub-postmasters' compensation has been submitted to the Treasury by his Department. Can the Minister clarify whether that is still correct?

Does the Minister agree that all the sub-postmasters who lost out due to the faulty Horizon accounting system should be compensated? I need not remind him that many hundreds of sub-postmasters are due compensation, not just those who have been wrongly convicted, who number at least 736, but the many hundreds—I suspect thousands—who made up shortfalls created by the faulty Horizon system out of their own pocket under threat and coercion from the Post Office but who were not criminally prosecuted. Can he inform

the House whether a system has been set up to identify those individuals and put in place a scheme for their compensation?

I warn the Minister and the Government that it is better for us to get on the front foot with the issue, rather than let a claims management company look at the opportunity, which will undoubtedly result in more litigation and delay at a far greater cost to the Government, and ultimately the taxpayer. The Minister will have read the damning Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee interim report by now. It is time that we accelerated compensation, got closure for the sub-postmasters and ensured that it can never happen again.

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for his work in the campaign for both his constituent and for many other sub-postmasters across the country, and I thank the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), whom my h F mentioned, and James Arbuthnot—Lord Arbuthnot—to whom I spoke earlier this week. I have spoken to Nick Read, the chief executive of the Post Office, and officials about this because, as I was quoted as saying in *The Times* last week, this, of all my wide range of responsibilities, is the one area that keeps me awake at night and absolutely drives me to get resolution.

My hon. Friend asked about the 555 and our commitment. As I have said, the 555 have been pioneers in this area, and I will absolutely work at speed. I do not want this to go on a moment longer than necessary, which is why we have tried to do everything we can to short-circuit any bureaucratic processes to be able to get on and compensate everybody fairly. The 555 postmasters who secured the group litigation order exposed this whole scandal by taking the Post Office to the High Court, and they performed a massive public service by doing so. I have written to the Select Committee with details of the costs and the preparations we have made with the Treasury.

When talking about this legally complex issue, we must remember the timeline of this and the timescale with which we are working. Horizon was installed in 1999, and the prosecutions started in 2000. In 2004, Alan Bates set up the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance, and in 2009 press reports really started to look into the concerns about those prosecutions. Over this 20-year period, many different Ministers have been involved and there have even been Post Office reorganisations, but now—after this 20-year scandal, frankly—we want to make sure, at pace, that everybody, including the 555, get justice, answers and fair compensation.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, thank the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) for securing this important urgent question, and I really pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for all his work on this issue.

The Horizon scandal is perhaps the most devastating miscarriage of justice in British history, damaging the lives of over 700 wrongly convicted sub-postmasters and their families, and the lives of so many who have been affected but have not been convicted. I join the Minister in paying tribute to those postmasters who have been relentless in their quest for justice. As the judge-led inquiry into this scandal has just begun, we have now been hearing extremely moving and devastating

testimonies. I recommend that every Member spends time listening to the accounts just to understand how widespread this injustice has been.

Last week's very important Select Committee report shows that, 12 years on, we are still painfully far from all the sub-postmasters receiving the compensation they deserve. Sadly, 33 of them have died before receiving any recompense. My thoughts and those of the whole House will be with their loved ones.

Given the cripplingly slow pace of justice, I want to press the Government on a few issues. First, without the extraordinary efforts of the 555 litigants, much of what we know would not have come to light. The Minister expressed his sympathy, but as Labour has pushed for time and again, will he now confirm that this group will be able to claim the compensation that is due, as he has hinted, and if so, when? Secondly, a year on from the historical shortfall scheme closing—I understand that over 2,500 have applied—only 30% of claims have been processed. Can the Minister outline what steps he is taking to hold the Post Office to account in urgently getting through this backlog, and can he clarify the definition of “eligible” that he stated? Finally, could he provide the House with an update on how long it will be before we get closure on compensation for all those affected?

The Minister is right that we will need to learn the lessons, understand the causes and ensure that this never happens again. The devastating reality of this scandal will be felt by so many families for years. The Government have taken some of the right steps, and we do appreciate that, but justice is not happening quickly enough and it is not going far enough.

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Lady, and I sympathise and empathise with everything she said. I know that for everybody affected, whether the 555 or those who were not prosecuted but lost money, nothing will be quick enough, and there is nothing we can do to restore up to 20 years of hurt and distress. On the 555, yes we want to ensure that those people who broke open the case and were the pioneers get full compensation. I am not yet able to outline a resolution for them, but I am working at pace within my Department, and with our legal representatives, Post Office legal representatives, and those of the Justice For Subpostmasters Alliance. I hope to have news for the hon. Lady as soon as possible.

Again, the historic shortfall scheme is not moving as fast as anybody would like. The Post Office has paid the de minimis cases and the most straightforward, smaller amounts. For the rest, it is working through the early cases, which will then benchmark the value of compensation for others. That will then allow the Post Office to start rattling through these cases a lot quicker. The Post Office says that it wants this to be 95% finished by the end of the year. I want to say 100% by the end of the year, and that is the kind of timescale I am working on.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I thank the Minister for his response, and for his tone. My constituent, Tracy Felstead, is due to give evidence to the inquiry on Friday. She wants people to be held to account, and so do I. We know that civil servants were non-executive directors on the board of the Post Office, and that they were principal accounting officers for UK Government Investments. We know that civil servants told Ministers to come to this place and to tell MPs that there was

“nothing to see here.” Those civil servants are not on the list of the core participants giving evidence to Sir Wyn Williams. How can those civil servants be held to account by Ministers for their failure to act in this case for so many years?

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for the work she does on behalf of Tracy Felstead and others. Tracy's case is one that I often hold up as someone who was so young that she has spent more than half her life under this absolute shadow, explaining to her children now what happened all those years ago. On civil servants, I set up an independent inquiry to get those answers, and it is right that it remains independent. I do not want anybody to feel that they can get away with this, or that they do not have to answer those questions. I will ensure, as I am sure will my hon. Friend, that Sir Wyn calls up exactly who he needs to call as the facts are uncovered, so that everybody answers without fear or favour.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) on securing this urgent question, and I join him in thanking Lord Arbuthnot for his tenacious efforts over the years. I congratulate the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee on its report. It is clear that the only reason this scandal was unearthed was that 555 postmasters, including my constituent Tom Brown, took the Post Office to court. They were forced to settle because the Government and the Post Office used a tsunami of public money to defend the indefensible. The Minister and I have spoken. He knows that these people need compensation. The report recommends an independent comprehensive scheme, outside of the Post Office, and that is what we need now. I congratulate the Minister on what he has done in this area, but if the problem is the Treasury, can he not call that out now, so that we can put the fire on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to ensure we get the funding that is needed properly to compensate these individuals? The Minister knows as well as I do that this scandal will not go away.

Paul Scully: I reiterate my thanks to the right hon. Gentleman for the work he has done for Tom Brown and all the postmasters. There is no single blockage in the Treasury. We are trying to work through the holistic view about where the money is coming from and how that is justified to taxpayers—as I said at the beginning, however, when taxpayers understand the scale and depth of this, they will clearly want to ensure that those postmasters get their review. We are also trying to unpick that legal settlement, which was, as he rightly describes, pushed through the Post Office under considerable pressure, considerable cost and considerable might. That will take a few days, but I want it to take days, not months—certainly not years—and I am working as quickly as I can to get that resolution. I am really hoping that I will be able to come back to the Dispatch Box and have good news for him in the next few days.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): My hon. Friend the Minister may have just answered my question, but I will press him. I do not doubt the complexities and legalities, and I know how sincere he is on this issue for the brave group of postmasters who fought and were acquitted at the earlier stages. However, my constituent Nicola Arch

[Siobhan Baillie]

and her family's lives are on hold. She lost her job, and she tells me that when the Stroud newspapers covered the story, she was spat at and she lost her home. She thinks that she will have to litigate again. She is waiting. I was going to press him on a timeline, but I think he said days, not weeks or months. Will that be the case—for more information, at least—so that they can have some comfort in the knowledge that information is coming?

Paul Scully: I believe from my Twitter feed that my hon. Friend is meeting Nicola Arch tomorrow—Nicola and I have those exchanges. Again, my heart goes out to Nicola, because being spat at and stigmatised shows the extra suffering that people experience. It is not just about the convictions, tragic as they are, or the money, difficult as that is; it is about what has happened to these people in their communities as former champions of those communities. I cannot give her the timescale. As I said, I am working at pace and need to give myself a little bit of leeway, but it is days or weeks—it certainly will not be a moment longer than is necessary to put these people out of their misery and give them compensation and justice.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson, Marion Fellows.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am speaking in a dual role as I am also chair of the all-party parliamentary group on post offices. The Minister, the APPG and I meet regularly. He has described the Horizon case as “harrowing”, but it is beyond that, and it has gone on far too long. I commend all hon. Members of this place past and present—I will not name them all—who have worked tirelessly on it. The nub of the matter is: is the Treasury really on board for all the money required to compensate for this farcical tragedy and for supporting the continuation of the Post Office network? It is disgraceful that people in Government and the civil service have known about it for so long—far too long—and almost refused to do anything about it. I do not include the Minister in that, because I know that he is working hard, but it requires more than him to work hard; the different silos of Government need to come together and completely sort it out.

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Lady for her work on the Post Office in general as chair of the APPG. She talks about the case being harrowing, and that is why I am so determined to get it done. We have heard about Tracy Felstead and all the years of it that she has had, and frankly nothing that I say at the Dispatch Box will make her trust me because every member of authority, whether in Government, the Post Office or the judicial system, has let her and all those people down. We need to act—actions and outcomes are what matter—which is why I am so driven to ensure that we can resolve the case as quickly as possible.

The Treasury is not a blockage. Clearly, we are having conversations with the Treasury not only to ensure that we can underwrite the additional costs for the Post Office beyond what it can afford, as it has outlined in its accounts, but to give the Post Office the future that it needs. Realistically, we will not be able to get to that until we have sorted out the past. We continue to work constructively.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I associate myself with the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) and the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). They are absolutely right, and they have been long-term campaigners on the issue. Mr Speaker, I smiled to myself when you made your statement, but I understand it and support it. This Minister cares passionately about the issue, and, whatever he says, as a long-term Whitehall hand, I see the symptoms of a Minister caught between the jaws of the Treasury and Whitehall lawyers. Lawyers do not always deliver justice and the Treasury rarely does. What I will say to him is this: nobody deserves justice more than the 555. They opened up the worst miscarriage of justice in modern Government. If it helps him in his battle to get this done quickly and properly, I will say this to him: if he cannot do it, we will find a way of having this House instruct the Government to do it. Let him use that in his battle with the Treasury and the lawyers.

Paul Scully: I can quote the Francis Urquhart line back at my right hon. Friend, but any pressure will be gratefully received. The last two years of covid have been about learning to speed up Government. As someone who has been running small businesses for 25 years, I am used to making decisions, cracking on, getting on and doing things. The Government do not always work that way. We have learnt in the past two years how to do it and I fully expect it to happen in this case.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): As a relatively new Member of this place I am coming to this frankly unbelievable scandal much later than many of my colleagues. However, I recently met a former postmistress in my constituency, Alison Hall and her husband Richard, who have suffered unbelievable stress and financial hardship as a result of this scandal. As well as losing their existing business in Hightown, they were also forced to abandon plans to open a new post office in Roberttown. Does the Minister agree that alongside the dreadful personal trauma that this scandal has been for so many, and which must be urgently addressed, it has had a seriously detrimental impact on communities like mine in Batley and Spen?

Paul Scully: My heart goes out to Alison and Richard. Absolutely. Post offices offer not just economic value. Having more branches than banks and building societies put together has a social value, bringing communities together, and at the heart of that are sub-postmasters. That is why we need to give the Post Office a real future by sorting out the past.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) for securing this urgent question. I know he will agree with me that the role of the whistleblower has been pivotal in highlighting the known issues with the Horizon system. This has been a devastating series of events for many people, but for constituents like mine who saw their father die in the premises of their shop without seeing his name cleared, the devastating impact has been absolutely tremendous. There is a difference between a settled sum in a civil court and compensation. People need to be adequately compensated for the traumas and the experiences they have had. They have had their names cleared, but they now need to be compensated for what has happened to them.

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work she does on protecting whistleblowers. As I say, I want to make sure we can get fair justice and compensation for everybody involved. That needs to go through a process and we need to get the balance right. That will be done by benchmarking people's losses and how they have been affected. We have regular conversations both with postmasters and, importantly, their legal representatives to fully understand the harm done to them, so we can reflect that in any scheme we put forward.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) for securing this urgent question and I pay tribute to the Minister, because I know he cares passionately about this issue. He came before the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and expressed himself with great candour. May I press him on the issue of fair compensation? We have heard from many Members today, and we will hear more, that the correct way to address this situation is not by fair compensation, but by full compensation for all those past losses and expenses. They have paid money back to the Post Office and they need that money back. They need their future losses recovered, their pension losses recovered, and psychiatric injury and exemplary damages for their loss of liberty. That needs to be reflected in the system. We cannot have a compensation system on the cheap. These people have to be compensated in full. Will he commit to that?

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words at the beginning of his question. He outlines the complexity of what we need to do and what the Post Office needs to do to right this wrong. That will be reflected in conversations with legal representatives to ensure, without being able to restore the past 20 years to the people affected, we do everything we can to make sure they get full and fair compensation.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): As a former postmaster, I think I speak for everybody when I say that this Minister has done more than anybody else in his position to pursue this injustice. Last night, I was told that the community of Sheringham in my North Norfolk constituency is losing its post office and I will do everything I can to get it back for them. That shows how important it is for everybody to have postmasters and mistresses in their areas.

Compensation is one thing, but over 800 people were prosecuted and fewer than 80 have had those overturned. What pressure can my hon. Friend put on to speed up that process, and when are we going to start talking about Fujitsu and its role in this?

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend brings to the House his experience of being a sub-postmaster and of the social value of the post office in his area. He is absolutely right; we have asked people to come forward to have their prosecutions overturned. Clearly, some of those people have been let down. They do not trust the Post Office and the Government, but we are trying to work through legal representatives of other organisations to encourage them to do that. We want to ensure that we can get people through this system as quickly as possible. I will make sure that I do everything I can with him and others to get this sorted out.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If the Minister really wants to borrow quotes from Francis Urquhart, I suggest to him that he might want to "put a bit of stick about",

because the Post Office's handling of the historical shortfall scheme has been nothing short of another scandal in itself. I recently took part in what I can only assume was ironically titled a "good faith meeting" in which the Post Office itself was not represented. It only had a lawyer from Herbert Smith Freehills, which, I understand, is not exactly at the budget end of the market. At the end, they said to us, "Of course, if you want to take this further, you should be aware that the offer we have made could be withdrawn". That is how the Post Office is approaching the issue. It is still the same culture that caused the problem in the first place. My more recent meeting was a bit more promising, but it is clear that anybody who has settled under that HSS has probably not had a just settlement and the Minister and his Department need to look at it.

Paul Scully: I will certainly continue to look at it. We want to encourage people to go through such things as the alternative dispute resolution so that we do not need to have prolonged cases going through the courts yet again. As I said, we want to get this sorted out quickly, but not in haste. We do not want to get it wrong so that we have to start all over again. I will certainly keep the Post Office's feet to the fire.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): In 2008, Harjinder Butoy, who ran a post office in Sutton-in-Ashfield, was jailed for three years and four months after he was wrongly convicted of stealing over £200,000. It has taken him 14 years to clear his name. He is bankrupt, he cannot get a job and it has destroyed his life. Compensation is one thing, but when are the people responsible for this going to be brought to justice?

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for that question; my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) said much the same sort of thing. I set up the inquiry with Sir Wyn Williams to get to the answers on this. The prosecutions department has been keeping this in abeyance as well. It is important to be able to investigate. That will come up with the answers and, whatever those are, legal proceedings or whatever will flow from that.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The individuals concerned who have had so much damage done to them need not only compensation, but damages awarded for grievous injustice, reputational damage, emotional trauma, mental health damage, stress and the wrongful contempt from their communities. The Minister referred to the importance of post offices to their communities. What the Post Office also did as part of this process was to cynically use it to permanently close post office branches, so many communities, first, had their postmaster or mistress taken from them in dreadful circumstances and then they had their branch closed. Will he review that because an awful lot of branches were permanently closed in an awful lot of places as a result of this scandal? To reiterate comments from across the House, there needs to be a day of reckoning for those who perpetrated this dreadful injustice on these people.

Paul Scully: I want to make sure that everybody comes before the inquiry to give evidence and feels confident in doing so, so I do not want to impose my opinions at this stage about who did what; otherwise, the inquiry would not be independent. Once the answers are known, however, there will be that day of reckoning, I am sure.

On post office closures, at the moment we are exceeding the 11,500 criterion, which still stands, alongside the access criterion. It is incredibly important to have that social value that I have talked about.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): My constituent Rubbina Shaheen lost her livelihood and her home. She was wrongfully convicted of stealing £40,000 from the Post Office and served 12 months in jail in 2000. She is one of the fortunate ones who have received some compensation, but it has all gone to the lawyers she had to engage to protect her name. I back the calls across the House for a proper compensation scheme to reflect the damage that has been inflicted by a faulty computer programme. I endorse the comments of colleagues: why has Fujitsu not been held to account for the damage that it has caused to so many people?

Paul Scully: My heartfelt thoughts go out to Rubbina Shaheen and her family. That is exactly why those who were convicted had the £100,000 interim compensation: to ensure that they could go a little way towards restoring some of their losses and that, if they needed legal representation, they had those costs paid for. We are working at pace trying to achieve full compensation.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) and I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice. This is the greatest miscarriage of justice that anyone can remember in this country. Most of us have had such tragic cases, and we have worked across parties as Members of Parliament doing our job. I have found the people I have helped pathetically grateful for MPs of all sorts standing up in this House and working on an all-party basis to get this right. Justice and compensation still need to be delivered fast—the faster, the better.

Paul Scully: I agree with everything the hon. Gentleman said. What he says about individual MPs doing amazing work goes to the heart of the early part of the problem, when all the sub-postmasters thought that it was just them. They did not realise that so many people—hundreds across the country—were suffering the same issue because of a faulty bit of software. It was only when they came together, when pressure built, when there was coverage in the media and when other champions raised the issue in this place and elsewhere that it burst open with the 555. Now we need to make sure that we bring it to a proper conclusion.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome what the Minister has said today. To be honest, previous Ministers have failed miserably to grasp the situation; I welcome the fact that since his appointment we have made rapid progress. I had a couple in my surgery who were elated a few months ago because they thought that real progress was being made, but were deflated when they came a few weeks ago. They are an elderly couple. When convictions are quashed, surely compensation

can follow pretty quickly—a quashed conviction is clear evidence to all that they are innocent. They should get at least an interim payment. What can the Minister do to assist in those circumstances?

Paul Scully: As I say, we have made good progress on interim payments. If my hon. Friend's constituents have not applied for or received their interim compensation of up to £100,000, will he please let me know? I will certainly look into it, because that is exactly why those payments are there: as a stepping stone to the final sums.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I pay tribute to the fortitude and strength of character of my constituent Della Ryan, the former sub-postmistress of Dukinfield post office in my constituency. Compensation is one important side of the equation, but another is ensuring that natural justice is not just seen to be done, but done. The hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) posed an important question about the involvement of civil servants in that justice over a long period. What assurances can the Minister give the House that there can be no hiding places at all for those involved in perpetuating this injustice?

Paul Scully: I ask the hon. Gentleman to pass on my heartfelt sympathies to Della for what she has been through.

This is exactly why we set up the inquiry. My Department has said from the beginning that we will work with the inquiry in the fullest sense to ensure that we offer all the information, support and evidence that Sir Wyn wants, and I have received an assurance to the same effect from Fujitsu and the Post Office itself. I am determined that that process will be carried out.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I thank Members on both sides of the House, and indeed the Minister, for their efforts. As for the 555, lives have been ruined. Now lives have been lost; people die. The compensation must be delivered quickly. Why can people not have access to interim payments? That is the least we could provide. I accept that there are the legal challenges that the Minister mentioned, but this is something that we could and absolutely should do now.

As for the independence of the scheme, Herbert Smith Freehills acted for the Post Office in the litigation to reduce compensation, so how can it be right that it now acts with the Post Office in delivering compensation? That cannot be right, especially given that Herbert Smith Freehills oversaw the Lloyds Bank compensation scheme that was judged independently to be unable to deliver fair and reasonable outcomes to the victims, so it all had to be done again. If we do not put independent oversight into this—with a High Court judge—it will all have to be done again as well. We must act now to change the way in which this is working.

Paul Scully: That is why the Post Office has an independent panel to oversee the process. So there is independence. On the interim payments for the 555, they are there for overturned convictions. That is a legal issue that I am working through at the moment because, in the eyes of the law, it was a full and final settlement. That is what I have to tackle at speed because the 555 will understandably not understand this and want to crack on now; they want to receive the compensation. I am determined to ensure that that happens.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I concur with those who have thanked the Minister in particular for his genuine interest and commitment, which we all recognise.

The report produced by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee makes difficult reading for those who took their cases to court and are worse off than those who did not. Constituents of mine who are affected have been asking, where is the equality for all that was promised? Their reputations are shattered and they are financially bereft. Will the Minister direct his team to right this wrong as quickly as possible?

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words and for his ongoing interest. I am pleased to say that, as the first week of evidence to his inquiry finishes, Sir Wyn will be travelling around the country. He will go to Cardiff, and also to Belfast. It is important for him to hear from people close to where they live, so that they can feel comfortable and confident about giving evidence. However, the hon. Gentleman is right: we need to crack on with this and secure the equality that he seeks.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Sadly, some of those who have suffered so much are no longer alive to see justice served. Will the Minister do all in his power to ensure that the full inquiry reports back as soon as possible, so that those who are accountable can finally be held to account?

Paul Scully: I can assure my hon. Friend of that. People have died because this has taken so long, and other people have died because they have committed suicide. It has been horrendous, and that is why we are determined to ensure that we can get this sorted out as soon as possible.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Soon after I was elected, I was contacted by a constituent whose father had been wrongly caught up in this scandal. He lost everything: his livelihood, and, more important to him, his reputation. He sadly passed away before he had the opportunity to clear his name, and he will never see the benefits of this compensation. Have the Government any plans to offer personal, individual apologies to the family members of postmasters who are no longer with us?

Paul Scully: I cannot give a particular commitment, but what I can say is that the Prime Minister is personally exercised by this, which is why we met some postmasters last summer. I was talking to him about the matter just yesterday. He is personally involved, and he gives me the kick that I need in order to give other people a kick to ensure that we can get everyone the apology, the compensation and the justice that they need.

Mr Speaker: That is the end of the statement—the urgent question, actually. It should have been a statement.

Speaker's Statement

11.14 am

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the business questions, I wish to say something about the conduct of Prime Minister's questions. PMQs are an important opportunity for the House to hold the Prime Minister to account. It is important that they are conducted according to the rules of the House, that we have an opportunity for as many Members to question the Prime Minister as possible in the given time, and that the Prime Minister and those asking him questions can be heard. I want to address three issues that were raised yesterday and are relevant to that.

First, the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) made criticisms of the conduct of the right hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer). Those types of criticisms may only be made if the House is considering a substantive motion that deals with them. They may not be made as sideswipes during questions or during debates on other matters. That is to avoid our question times and debates descending into partisan accusations and counter-accusations. I know that the hon. Member for Bradford East understands the issue and that he has apologised to the right hon. Member for Sherwood.

Secondly, I want to address the issue of the length of questions and answers. I wish to call as many Members as possible. Sometimes we have over-long answers, and I often have to interrupt Ministers when that is the case, but sometimes the questions themselves are far too long. They are meant to be questions, not statements followed by a question, and I hope that Members will consider others rather than themselves. We saw a little bit of that yesterday from the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). Considering that a certain amount of time is made available to the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Scottish National party, the remaining time is limited and I have to make sure it is used as effectively and fairly as possible. If Members take too long with their questions, they take away the opportunity for other Members to ask questions. When a Member is asking an over-lengthy question, I try to give them an opportunity to come to an end before stopping them, as I did yesterday. There is nothing personal about that, and I routinely have to call Members on all sides to account for the length of questions. I plead with all Members to keep questions focused and brief.

Finally, I want to deal with a related issue. It is not always easy to ask short, snappy questions when other Members are shouting and barracking. There was far too much of that yesterday, with a disproportionate amount of it coming from the Government Benches, and particularly from those at the side of the Chair, which made it very hard to hear what was being said. I hope that those on the Government Benches will take this on board, and in particular that the Chief Whip will deal with some of his crowd at the side of the Chair. If Members persist in making excessive noise and barracking colleagues, they will be asked to leave the Chamber.

We want PMQs to be a showcase for this House and for our democracy, so I say to all hon. and right hon. Members: please respect the rules of the House about how we refer to each other; make questions and answers concise; and behave with dignity in a way that allows questions and answers to be heard.

Business of the House

11.18 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer): I would be delighted to. The business for the week commencing 28 February will include:

MONDAY 28 FEBRUARY—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill.

TUESDAY 1 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Professional Qualifications Bill [*Lords*], followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the National Insurance Contributions Bill, followed by a motion to approve the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Self-Isolation etc.) (Revocation) (England) Regulations 2022 (SI, 2022, No. 161).

WEDNESDAY 2 MARCH—Opposition day (14th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 3 MARCH—General debate on Welsh affairs. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 4 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 7 March will include:

MONDAY 7 MARCH—General debate on the Ukraine, followed by remaining stages of the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill [*Lords*].

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is not “the Ukraine”.

Mark Spencer: A general debate on Ukraine. I thank the hon. Member for his assistance.

TUESDAY 8 MARCH—Opposition day (15th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 9 MARCH—Estimates day (3rd allotted day). At 7 pm, the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

THURSDAY 10 MARCH—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill, followed by a general debate on International Women’s Day. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 11 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for your reminder about conduct.

The Leader of the House said that there will be a debate on Ukraine on 7 March. Seriously, whatever happens in the next few days, I ask him to consider whether it could be moved up the Order Paper, because it seems an awfully long way away. I appreciate that things might change rapidly over the next few days.

We have woken up to the grim but unfortunately predictable news that Russia has mounted a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Government must urgently reinforce our NATO allies and take the hardest possible sanctions against all those linked to Putin. The influence of Russian money must be extricated from the UK. The House agreed to our Opposition day motion yesterday, so will the Leader of the House confirm when the

Foreign Secretary will be implementing, in full, the recommendations of the Intelligence and Security Committee’s Russia report? The report was published nearly two years ago, and it really should not take a war to clean up. The Opposition stand ready to work together on this in a bipartisan way.

Economic crime now runs to an estimated £100 billion a year, a huge cost to taxpayers. Earlier this month, the Treasury Committee concluded that the Government are still not prioritising economic crime. It said that, since the Government launched their economic crime plan two years ago,

“economic crime has not reduced but has instead continued on an upward trend.”

Again, this is relevant to the current situation. Will the Leader of the House press his Treasury colleagues to report on actions to stem the flow of dirty money and corruption?

The Prime Minister commented yesterday that the long-promised economic crime Bill will make an appearance, but not until the next Session. I am afraid that rather proves the Treasury Committee’s point. We all want to tackle economic crime, and we will work with the Government to pass this vital and urgent Bill, so will the Leader of the House find time to introduce it in this Session?

The Government first promised a registration of overseas entities Bill five years ago—it is a similar theme—to begin tackling corruption and money laundering. We need transparency, and it is crucial that overseas companies make the same level of disclosures on their beneficiaries as UK companies do. We have had prelegislative scrutiny, but I am afraid to say—again, this is a pattern—there is no Bill. The Minister for Security and Borders could not say yesterday when the Bill will be introduced, so will the Leader of the House please help?

It has been clear for years that Companies House has not done the job it needs to do. Unfortunately, urgent reform is needed so that UK companies can no longer be used as laundromats for dirty money. There are countless examples of UK-registered companies with fake directors.

Not only does a weak Companies House enable international economic fraud, but its inadequate powers, resources and remit enable domestic fraud, too. This is part of the cause of the extensive covid-19 business support fraud, and the Government have written off at least £4.3 billion of taxpayers’ money. That money went straight into the hands of fraudsters, so can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on when reforms to Companies House will be brought forward? Can we also have a statement from the Chancellor on why the Government are continuing with this policy?

Finally, we need to take urgent steps to close the loophole that allows foreign money to be donated to UK political parties. Yesterday the Prime Minister appeared to refuse to commit to this. Labour’s amendments to the Elections Bill would prevent the use of shell companies to hide the true source of donations to political parties by foreign actors, and they would prevent non-residents, including people who live in tax havens to avoid paying tax here, from donating to political parties. Will the Leader of the House please explain why we would not want to make it harder for foreign money and donors to

infiltrate UK politics? Will he please find time to persuade the Prime Minister of the value of Labour's amendments to the Elections Bill?

Today of all days, the Government must send a strong, unequivocal message to the world that the UK is not a haven for corrupt money, especially not from Russia. We stand ready to work with the Government on this. They must act, and they must act now.

Mark Spencer: It is a pleasure to present business questions in conjunction with the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). I hear the hon. Lady's plea about 7 March. Clearly, there will be a debate on Ukraine on 7 March, but that will not be the only opportunity for the House to debate these important issues. Just this week, we have had not only Defence questions, but two statements on Ukraine; three hours of debate on Russia sanctions; Prime Minister's questions, where the Leader of the Opposition raised the matter; and an Opposition day debate on Russian aggression. We are also going to have a Backbench Business debate this afternoon on the UK's relationship with Russia and China. The House has debated this matter an awful lot this week and there will be more opportunities coming forward, so I think she will support us in that matter. Clearly, this is a huge problem.

The hon. Lady mentioned economic crime, and it is worth pointing out that already we have published this landmark economic crime plan in 2019, increased the number of investigations into corrupt elites, established a new economic crime centre, passed the Criminal Finances Act 2017, and become the first major economy in the world to implement a public register of beneficial ownership of domestic companies. We are going to go further and continue to push on. We will bring forward the economic crime Bill. I know that she wants that as soon as possible and says she wants it in this Session, not the next. My constituents and hers do not necessarily understand the concept of this Session or the next Session; they just want this very soon, and the next Session is coming very soon, so that Bill will be coming forward very quickly.

Turning to covid procurement matters, it is very easy to look back through the prism of hindsight and criticise decisions made at the beginning of a very intense pandemic. This country was trying to procure as much PPE as possible in a very challenging market. The global market was trying to secure as much PPE as it could and we had to make very rapid decisions. Mistakes will have been made, but the Opposition were screaming like mad at the time for the Government to get on and buy PPE from any source they could procure it from. It is rough to look back through the prism of hindsight and criticise those decisions, which were made in the best interests of the country at that moment. I think history will judge the Government's performance on covid pretty well; when we consider all the big decisions made at the time by the Prime Minister—on going into lockdown, on delivering the vaccine, and on delivering the booster programme and getting us out of covid faster than any other country in the G7—we see a record to be enormously proud of.

Finally, the hon. Lady mentioned foreign donations to political parties. The policy that someone has to be a UK-registered voter in order to be able to donate to a political party is right, but the answer is sunlight—it is

transparency. So anyone who donates to a political party should register that donation and we should all be able to view that.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): May I start by welcoming the Leader of the House to his place? Will he find time for a debate on the scope of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991? Currently, it does not recognise dog-on-dog attacks as an offence unless the dog under attack is an assistance dog. Consequently, owners of dangerous dogs are not prosecuted unless another human fears injury or is injured. My constituent's beloved dog Millie was recently mauled to death and no action has been taken against the owner of the dog involved.

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Lady wants a debate.

Mark Spencer: Thank you, Mr Speaker. First, let me welcome my hon. Friend to her place; it is a pleasure to see her at business questions. She carries on a great tradition from her predecessor, who loved business questions and was a regular at this session. I understand that there are existing powers to allow dog-on-dog attacks to be tackled effectively, including through the issue of a community protection notice and the prosecution of offences under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 and the Dogs Act 1871. It is for the Crown Prosecution Service to assess on a case-by-case basis whether to proceed with a prosecution under the legislation. However, my hon. Friend asks for a debate, and I hope that she will take her request to the Backbench Business Committee or to Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions on 10 March, where she may wish to ask Ministers directly.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I think the whole world shook just a little on its axis this morning as all our worst fears were realised with the invasion of Ukraine. Even though it has been fully expected, the full horror of what has happened this morning has been quite difficult to comprehend and process. We are grateful for the Prime Minister's statement, which I understand will be at 5 o'clock today, but will the Leader of the House assure us that it will be the first of many Prime Minister's statements and that he will promise to keep the House updated on any progress or development?

I welcome the Leader of the House's words about being flexible with the business, but we need to hear more about that. I am sure he will agree with me and the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), that any legislation required to make the toughest of sanctions must take priority over any other business announced for next week.

We are hoping to hear that the Prime Minister will at last take the firm, decisive action that we have all been calling for and that is now required. Will the Leader of the House tell us what type of legislation might be required for the toughest of sanctions? How long might it take to get through the House? The minimalist measures are proving to be totally inadequate and ineffective; we now need to sanction to the max and end the City of London being Putin's financial laundromat of choice.

We also need a statement about Russian propaganda. We need to prevent Russian propaganda from being pumped 24/7 into the houses of the UK. The Prime

[Pete Wishart]

Minister has said it would require an intervention from Ofcom to take RT off air, but does he not now agree that that is a technicality the time of which has passed? I should also say to the Leader of the House that RT contributor Alex Salmond is as much a member of the SNP as the UK Independence party's Neil Hamilton is a member of his Conservative party. Such petty point scoring should now come to an end, because the Ukrainian people want to see the unity in this House.

This is a dark day for Ukraine and for the whole of Europe, but if the Leader of the House brings forward the decisive, hard measures, he will get our support.

Mark Spencer: I genuinely thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. The uniting of this House in its objection to Russian aggression is fundamental to our response. A unified House means that we can present ourselves, along with our international colleagues, in a way that sends a strong message to the Russian President.

The hon. Gentleman will recognise that the Government and the Prime Minister have kept the House up to speed, and that will continue to happen, not least at 5 o'clock this afternoon when the Prime Minister will come to the House.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's commitment to assisting with legislation; the speed of the progress of legislation is assisted by cross-party and cross-House unity. I am sure that, together, we can send strong messages and try to assist the people of Ukraine at this very dark hour.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who is the Minister responsible for water, visited Montgomeryshire and stood with me at Clywedog reservoir, noticing that it was quite full, with three storms heading our way. I am unhappy to report to the House that the River Vyrnwy and then the River Severn hit record, historic peaks. Will the Leader of the House facilitate a debate on cross-border water policy? Most water does not respect the border between England and Wales, and the Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales must work together on flood prevention as well as drought prevention.

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the necessity of cross-border co-operation: it is vital that colleagues in the Welsh Assembly co-operate with the Environment Agency and our friends in DEFRA. My hon. Friend is an assiduous campaigner on this matter and I am sure he will find a way to raise it in the House regularly.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business, particularly the Welsh affairs debate on 3 March and the International Women's Day debate on 10 March. May I give him advance notice that we have an application for a debate on the Irish in Britain on St Patrick's Day, 17 March? That is already on the stocks.

Members will have noticed in the statement that the Leader of the House referred to estimates day, the third allotted day. The House will be asked to agree all the outstanding estimates at 7 pm that day, but applications for the subjects of those debates need to be sent to the

Backbench Business Committee by no later than 2.30 pm tomorrow. In particular, if Select Committee Chairs want the spending of the Department that they oversee to be the subject of those debates, they should please submit their applications by tomorrow.

The Backbench Business Committee has only eight members—eight hard-working members who are very diligent in their activities. Unusually, though, the Committee has a quorum of four. At the moment, we are two members down because they have been promoted by Her Majesty's Government to be Parliamentary Private Secretaries and we have one Member on outstanding long leave, so we currently have five active members and a quorum of four, which makes life a little difficult. Will the Leader of the House look again at the following options: increasing the size of the Committee; reducing the quorum of the Committee; or getting his party to appoint some members to the Committee?

Mark Spencer: I hear the hon. Gentleman's plea for St Patrick's Day, which I am sure will be considered in due course. It is worth recognising that a number of my Conservative colleagues will have seen that two members of his Committee have been promoted—that is the route to promotion, clearly—and I am sure there will be a clamour to join his Committee to get on the promotion ladder in due course.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Yesterday, the Government announced that both Hyndburn and Rossendale have been identified as two of the 109 places for levelling up for culture, meaning that they are a priority for additional investment for our fantastic arts, culture and heritage across Hyndburn and Haslingden. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is exactly what we mean by levelling up and putting Hyndburn and Haslingden back on the map? Will he allow a debate in Government time on how we make sure that places such as Hyndburn and east Lancashire are at the heart of the Government's levelling-up agenda?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. It is vital that we recognise the enormous amount of culture that exists not just in London, which is a great city recognised internationally, but across the country, and she is right to highlight that. She should pursue either an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate to make sure that she can spread that message to as many people as possible.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Can we have a debate on the operation of tier 1 visas, following on from some of the reports in *The Sun* and other newspapers today? I have hold of a leaked document from 2019 from the Home Office, which says in relation to Mr Abramovich:

"As part of HMG's Russia strategy aimed at targeting illicit finance and malign activity, Abramovich remains of interest to HMG due to his links to the Russian state and his public association with corrupt activity and practices. An example of this is Abramovich admitting in court proceedings that he paid for political influence. Therefore, HMG is focused on ensuring individuals linked to illicit finance and malign activity are unable to base themselves in the UK and will use the relevant tools at its disposal (including immigration powers) to prevent this."

That was nearly three years ago, and yet remarkably little has been done. Surely Mr Abramovich should no longer be able to own a football club in this country.

Surely we should be looking at seizing some of his assets, including his £152 million home, and making sure that other people who have had tier 1 visas like this are not engaged in malign activity in the UK.

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman will know that, under the statutory instrument passed in the House this week, there is the opportunity for the Government to take very strong action against high-profile Russian individuals who are of concern. He will be aware that the Home Secretary will be at this Dispatch Box next Monday for Home Office questions, and I am sure that he will be able to challenge her directly.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, Southport was the recipient of a £38.5 million town deal to drive jobs, growth and investment. One of these investments is the £75 million Southport surf cove. Yet Labour-controlled Sefton Council is embarking on another consultation about some more unwanted road-blocking cycle lanes. Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State outlining that jobs, growth and investment should not be impeded by unwanted vanity projects such as cycle lanes in areas that have been given town deal money by this Government?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is a great campaigner for Southport and has secured millions of pounds for his constituents. It is right that he continues to hold the local council to account for how it spends that money. The potential for jobs, growth and investment is a key driver of the towns fund, which is a crucial part of the Government's commitment to levelling up. I am sure his constituents will recognise that he is standing up for their best interests.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Last month, the High Speed Rail (Crewe - Manchester) Bill containing powers to extend the line to Manchester was published and presented to this House. Hidden in it is a proposal to sever the Metrolink line to Ashton-under-Lyne, which runs through my constituency. The line would be mothballed and HS2 would run bus services instead. Can the Leader of the House indicate when Second Reading will be and can he, through his good offices, put in a request to the Transport Secretary to meet the three Tameside MPs to try to find a solution before then?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The business will be announced in the usual way and he will be updated at that moment. On 17 March, however, there is the opportunity for Transport questions; I am sure he will be present in the Chamber and able to ask the Secretary of State for Transport directly what his constituents want to hear.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Through the Derwent valley mills world heritage site, Derbyshire's industrial heritage has been rightly recognised by UNESCO for its international importance. That brings value and visitors to Derbyshire, but I am concerned about the state of disrepair the historic mills are in. The owner has had them for more than 20 years and spent virtually nothing on them. I showed the mills to the Heritage Minister during recess, but can we have a debate on preserving our nation's historic world heritage sites and their value to local communities?

Mark Spencer: It is important that we protect our nation's cultural heritage for everyone to enjoy. Certainly those in Derbyshire, like the rest of the 33 designated world heritage sites across the UK, are some of the finest examples and are recognised at a global level by UNESCO. Derwent valley mills, like many other sites, has faced challenges in striking a balance and reconciling heritage and conservation with economic development. I strongly encourage all those responsible for conservation of the site to work in partnership and take their obligations under world heritage conservation seriously.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Last night, I attended a town hall meeting at St Anselm's church in Kennington in my constituency to speak about the aftermath of and the momentum built around COP26. With the relentless news cycle at the moment demanding our attention in so many areas, it is vital that we stay focused on this important issue. Will the Leader of the House please relay that to his colleagues in government and ensure that there is regular and sufficient time to consider the climate emergency?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady is right to highlight our commitment to dealing with the environment and progressing with our COP commitments. COP questions will be next Thursday, and I am sure she will be present in the Chamber to ask about that. However, I compliment her on ensuring that her constituents are engaged in this process and informed at the same time.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Opposition Members quite rightly like to remind us that we should be careful about the sources of money coming to this country. Does the Leader of the House agree that we should gently remind the Opposition that we should also consider moneys from China, and that maybe we should have a wider debate about where moneys come from?

Mark Spencer: I think it is important that we have a system of political donations that the general public have confidence in and that is open and transparent. Anyone seeking to make a donation to a political party should register that and should be publicly accountable for that donation.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): This week, the all-party parliamentary group on ending the need for food banks, which I co-chair, and the APPG on debt and personal finance, chaired by the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), met to discuss research from the Trussell Trust showing that nearly half of all people referred to a food bank in its network owed money to the Department for Work and Pensions. The Cabinet Office carried out a consultation on fairness in Government debt management in the summer of 2020, but 18 months later the webpage says the responses are still being analysed. In the meantime, thousands of people have been pushed into destitution. Can the Leader of the House update the House on when that consultation will report and commit to giving the House time to debate this vital issue?

Mark Spencer: I am sure there will be many opportunities to debate such issues. The Government's record on the cost of living is a good one. I know that the hon. Lady will hold Government Ministers to account and I am sure she will be present at DWP questions to put her questions directly to the Secretary of State.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I am always cautious about what I read in the papers, but if the Government have reached a conclusion on extending the covid regulation on the receipt of pills for abortion at home, can I gently remind the Leader of the House that in a parliamentary democracy it is better to have the debate before the decision?

Mark Spencer: I think I am confident in saying that the Department of Health has issued a statement this morning setting out its extension of the scheme for six months. This is a temporary extension. However, I know my right hon. Friend will continue to raise the matter in this House.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Further to that question, this morning's written ministerial statement clearly says that it is a six-month extension and then we will return to the original legislation around abortion. I understand that that is a retrograde step by the Government. The alliance of organisations that are opposed to tele-medicine for abortion services being removed include the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Health, the Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of General Practitioners, Mumsnet and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society. The written ministerial statement says that the policy will be kept under review. Could we have a debate on how that review will take place and how we can feed into it so that the right decision can be made for women accessing essential healthcare services?

Mark Spencer: I recognise the right hon. Lady's contribution on this matter and her interest in it. She is a vociferous campaigner on that side of the argument. She will understand the sensitivities of this discussion and the desire of the House to have a say on the situation. As she says, there is a temporary extension of six months. There will be Health questions in the House next Tuesday, when it would be worth raising the matter with the Secretary of State for Health.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Last night's "Panorama" programme was harrowing viewing about the loss and harm of babies under Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust care going back decades. Much of this was revealed through the Ockenden inquiry, which was launched by the then Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) at the request and through the tenacity of my then constituents Rhiannon Davies and Richard Stanton, who featured in the programme and suffered their own tragedy that they wished to see no other parents go through. The programme alleged that a culture existed promoting normal birth practices so that the trust had the lowest rate of C-section interventions in the country. Those who raised patient safety concerns were not taken sufficiently seriously and were apparently subject to bullying. I know that the trust has taken significant steps to improve its practices and acted on all recommendations that Donna Ockenden produced in her initial report in December 2020, since when about 4,000 babies have been delivered safely under the trust's care. Her final report is expected later this month. Will the Leader of the House ensure that a full response is made to the conclusions of that report in this House so

that the Government take heed of the lessons to be learned not just in SATH but across maternity services throughout the NHS?

Mark Spencer: I know that my right hon. Friend is a long-standing campaigner on this matter, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan). The Ockenden review is assessing the quality of investigations relating to cases of newborn, infant and maternal harm at Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust. Donna Ockenden is finalising her second report, as he said, and it is due to be published in March 2022—very shortly. We have Health questions next Tuesday, and I am sure the Department will want to update the House on this matter at the earliest opportunity.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Yesterday one of my constituents, Anish Subramaniam, visited Parliament in his role as the youth ambassador for ONE, which, along with ActionAid, was making the case for vaccine equity. Will the Leader of the House make time for Parliament to debate how we can do more to ensure that everyone, everywhere in the world, receives a covid-19 vaccine?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. We have a proud record in the United Kingdom of supporting the world in getting vaccinated. I think we have done more than 1 billion doses of vaccine through COVAX, and it is important that we continue to do more. She is right to highlight the fact that in dealing with a global pandemic, we need to make sure that the world—the globe—is vaccinated, and I acknowledge her raising this matter.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Further to the question from my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), may I ask that the Minister who comes to the House to make the statement on the Ockenden review be the Secretary of State? I am in awe of the women who have come forward to that review, and it would be appropriate that it is the Secretary of State who makes the statement to the House.

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute once again to the work that my hon. Friend has done in raising this issue on many occasions. Obviously I cannot commit the Secretary of State to personally make that statement, if one is forthcoming, but I know that the Department will be keen to put it on the record and to give colleagues the opportunity to ask questions and challenge the response.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I inform the Leader of the House that coming into Parliament this week, I was approached by a large number of women waving placards? They were the loveliest people. They were campaigning on women teachers' pensions, and I promised that I would call for a debate on pensions in the education sector: in the university sector, in the early years sector and across the sector. Many people—particularly women, but it is not entirely women—are very worried about their pensions and the future.

This is the first chance I have had to say how much we miss Sir Richard Shepherd. He was a great parliamentarian and a great friend of mine. He used to be my pair when we all could pair. He was at the London School of

Economics with me, my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), Frank Dobson and Mick Jagger. It was an illustrious year.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments about Sir Richard Shepherd, the former Member for Aldridge-Brownhills. He was a great man and will be sadly missed. The hon. Gentleman can do better than ask for a debate; he could apply for one. He could apply for a BackBench Business debate or an Adjournment debate. He knows those routes are available to him, and I wish him luck in the ballot.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): In recent months, branches of HSBC and Barclays have closed on Brent Street in Hendon, in addition to the closure of branches of Lloyds and NatWest at Hendon Central. All four branches have taken with them the free-to-use ATMs. Will a Treasury Minister come to the House to make a statement to say what representations the Government are making to the banks to ensure that my constituents can access their money without having to pay a fee?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the fact that it is difficult, certainly in rural communities, to get access to cash through cash machines. It will be Treasury questions on 15 March, and I am sure he will be able to raise the matter there. There are other avenues available to him, too: perhaps he would like to apply for an Adjournment debate or even a Westminster Hall debate on the matter.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Inflation is due to reach an eye-watering 7%, yet this week the Government have recommended a maximum pay rise of 3% for those NHS workers who risked their lives for us throughout the pandemic. Can we have an urgent debate on why this Government hold our indispensable NHS workforce in such contempt?

Mark Spencer: This Government do not hold our NHS workers in contempt. We value the contribution that those people make to our society. It is not just NHS workers, however; people up and down this country are contributing to the economy and working very hard, and the Government have to strike the right balance between making sure we reward those people who certainly deserve a pay increase and supporting those who are vulnerable with the cost of living as it increases. We recognise the challenge that inflation brings, but there are enormous global pressures on the economy at this time, and the Government are doing their best to manage those.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I never thought that I would wake up one morning to find that a democratic independent European country had been invaded by a bigger country. I am grateful for the Prime Minister coming to the House so often to keep us updated, and I know that he is coming this evening, but could the Leader of the House arrange for tomorrow's business to be changed so that we can have a full-scale debate on Ukraine and what the Prime Minister says in his statement? He will undoubtedly bring forward further sanctions and maybe even break off diplomatic relations with Russia. I am very much in favour of

private Members' business, but surely we should change tomorrow's business and have private Members' business next Friday.

Mark Spencer: As my hon. Friend will recognise, there have been a number of occasions this week to discuss a rapidly changing situation. I hear his plea. There will be an opportunity for an urgent question to be submitted tomorrow. The Prime Minister will update the House at 5 pm, and of course that will not be the last occasion on which the House is updated on the situation in Ukraine. We will continue to keep the House informed as the situation develops.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Can we have a debate about why Vnesheconombank was not sanctioned this week? As the Leader will know, its deputy governor was appointed by Vladimir Putin in 1999. On 29 April 2016, that deputy governor was given \$8 million by a sanctioned individual, Suleiman Kerimov. Shortly thereafter, Lubov Chernukhin—wife of Vladimir—transferred £1.5 million to the Conservative party. Missing from the sanctions list this week was that deputy governor's bank. The Government will want to avoid any suspicion that they were paid to look the other way, and I do not want to apply for an unexplained wealth order against the Conservative party, so can we have a debate to clear that up once and for all?

Mark Spencer: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. He will be aware that the statutory instrument that was introduced this week allows for high-net-worth individuals associated with the Russian regime to be sanctioned. I know that my colleagues in the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office are looking at a number of high-wealth individuals who will be subject to that sanctions regime. We have announced some names already and I am sure that others are being looked at as we speak.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): The communities of Ynys Môn are facing a new and real threat from the constant battering of the weather. The 2.4 km Victorian breakwater, which is the longest breakwater in Europe and which protects Holyhead and the UK's second-busiest ro-ro port, is in urgent need of large-scale refurbishment. Will the Leader of the House commit to working with me, the port authority Stena Line and the Welsh Government to support that vital refurbishment? Will he pack his wellies, accept my invitation to visit Ynys Môn and walk along the longest breakwater in Europe?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for the question. I pay tribute to the community of Ynys Môn for its resilience. Holyhead is an important gateway to the UK and we note the value of its ongoing operations locally and nationally. As a devolved policy area, that is primarily an issue for the Welsh Government, but I know that the maritime Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), would be happy to meet her and the other parties involved to understand the issues further.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): We awoke this morning to a very dark day and a barrage of distressing images and videos showing the devastating

[Anna McMorrin]

aftermath of Russia bombing Ukraine in an unprovoked and unjustifiable attack. Those images also show Ukrainian citizens fleeing for their lives. I am proud to say that they would be welcome in Wales, which is a nation of sanctuary for refugees. Can we have a statement on what the Government will do to help the 2.9 million people already in need of humanitarian aid and those who will be displaced if Russia continues this abhorrent power grab?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady is right to highlight that issue. It is important to respond with our international colleagues, such as the EU, the US and those across the world, to ensure that we have an international response. The UK has a proud record of welcoming refugees and of supporting people in those circumstances. She is right to highlight that and I am sure that, working with our international colleagues, we can assist those affected by the humanitarian disaster that will ensue from Russian aggression.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Following my question to the Prime Minister on his statement on Ukraine earlier in the week, can we have an urgent statement from a Government Minister on the impact of the cost of living on people up and down the country? Following the Russian invasion, oil prices have gone up to more than \$100 a barrel and energy prices are rocketing, which will have an impact on millions of people across the country and make petrol and energy even more unaffordable.

Mark Spencer: My right hon. Friend is right to draw attention to this issue. Clearly, the conflict in Ukraine between Russia and Ukraine will have an impact not only on global fuel prices, but on global food prices. Ukraine is an enormous supplier of food—wheat and bread—and this is something the UK Government will monitor and of course assist with, through our work to try to lessen the burden of the cost of living.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): A desperate—truly desperate—constituent has just contacted my constituency office as his wife and daughters are still in Ukraine. They have no visas, but the consulate has now closed and moved closer to western Ukraine. We have tried contacting the Home Office this morning, but there are no updates. He could get them out using an organisation called Project Dynamo—that is not absolutely certain, but it is a possibility—but they are likely to be turned back when they arrive here as they have no visas. Could the Leader of the House please help me? Could he give me advice, and could we have a statement immediately—urgently—from the Home Office about what is going to happen to people such as my constituent's family?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and the direct answer is yes, we can assist. I will put her in contact with the right people at the Foreign Office, who will be able to assist her and her constituents.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Now then, the Leader of the House will be aware of the ongoing issues that we have at Ashfield District Council. The latest shenanigans is that the environmental health department is investigating

a private rented home where the landlord is actually the council leader. I think any investigation should be done independently. Does my right hon. Friend think there is enough in the levelling-up White Paper to tackle rogue landlords in this situation, or do we need a debate in this House?

Mark Spencer: Now then—[Laughter]—there has never been a better campaigner for Ashfield than my hon. Friend. I have to say that he is campaigning for his constituents, and it is disappointing to hear about the standards of the rented accommodation he describes. Everyone has the right to a safe and habitable home, and all social housing should meet the required standards. Landlords should be carrying out planned maintenance and responsive repairs to keep their homes well maintained. My hon. Friend is right to draw this important matter to the attention of the House, and it is important that council leaders practise what they preach.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Next Monday, 28 February, is international Rare Disease Day, and yesterday I met representatives of patient groups at our Rare Disease Day UK reception. It is important that we ensure that people with rare diseases receive the diagnosis and the treatment that they need, so can we have a debate in Government time on the importance of implementing the rare diseases framework?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Fortunately, rare diseases are rare, but she is right to highlight the fact that people who suffer from rare diseases are often late to be diagnosed, and that the symptoms are often not spotted or associated with the disease they have. She is right to highlight that, and I think she should apply for an Adjournment debate, but she will have an opportunity to ask Health Ministers about it at the next Health questions.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Residents of Rother Valley are becoming more and more concerned about the safety of the Kingsforth Lane-Cumwell Lane road that links Thurcroft and Hellaby, and many of my constituents refuse to travel on the route as it is far too dangerous. Over the last couple of years, several people have lost their lives on it and, tragically, most recently—on 11 February—a 30-year-old man was killed. Despite calls from me and local councillor Simon Ball, Rotherham council seems to be dragging its heels on implementing much-needed safety measures such as speed cameras, barriers and lowering the speed limit. What steps can the Government take to get Rotherham council to act swiftly to ensure that no more lives are needlessly lost?

Mark Spencer: I am sorry to hear about my hon. Friend's constituent. He raises an extremely serious matter, and I would be happy to pass on his concerns to Ministers in the Department for Transport. Local traffic authorities have responsibility for making decisions about the roads in their care, including setting local speed limits and introducing traffic-calming measures such as speed cameras and speed-activated warning signs.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): This week a much beloved actress, Anna Karen, who lived in my constituency, tragically died in a fire not far from my constituency office. Anna was well renowned for her role on the series

“On the Buses”, and its spinoff film, which was the biggest British box office hit of 1971. She also appeared on “EastEnders” between 1996 and 2017. She was much beloved of my constituents, many of whom will be heartbroken to hear this tragic news. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate about the contribution of soap operas to the British world, and to pay tribute to London Fire Brigade, who tackled the awful blaze so heroically earlier this week?

Mark Spencer: I read that news in the paper this morning, and I was very sorry to hear about the actress who played Olive in “On the Buses”. It highlights the importance of ensuring that people have an active and working smoke alarm, and I say to anybody who is watching this sitting of Parliament today, that once they have finished watching, they should go to their smoke alarm, press the button, and check that the battery is working and operational, as that could genuinely save their life. The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the fact that the London Fire Brigade is brave in tackling such fires, and it is sad that we have lost a great actress from the United Kingdom.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): On this dark day for Ukraine, Europe and the world, may I join colleagues throughout the House in expressing our solidarity with the people of Ukraine at this dreadful time, and in condemning this abhorrent invasion by Russia? My thoughts and prayers go out especially to the civilians in Ukraine who face terrifying and awful choices as they try to protect their families. I note the comments by the Leader of the House about the upcoming business, but will he reassure colleagues that there will be sufficient parliamentary time to consider the UK’s international actions and also, importantly, our domestic resilience preparations?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend will recognise that the Prime Minister will be in the Chamber at 5 pm, and that will be his first opportunity to question our right hon. Friend. I have not announced further business other than a debate on Ukraine on 7 March, but I think the Government’s record of giving Members many opportunities this week to discuss this matter will be an indication of how we will proceed going forward.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): If we are to make sanctions stick and deal with dirty money being laundered through the City of London, enforcement and regulatory bodies need proper resourcing. Companies House says that it often cannot take on Russian oligarchs, because they are very wealthy and use lawyers that it cannot access because it does not have the resources. Similarly, the mining company Eurasian Natural Resources Corporation has taken the Serious Fraud Office to court for having the audacity to investigate it. It makes in a week what the SFO spends in an entire year. May we have a statement on the resources given to those enforcement and regulatory bodies, so that we can impose these sanctions and deal with the dirty money being laundered through the City of London?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to that matter. The statutory instrument that we passed earlier this week is very robust and allows for strong action to be taken against those individuals. It

gives the Government enormous power to tackle them, but it is not the end of the process. I am sure there is more that we can do, and the Prime Minister will update the House at 5 pm today on further matters and measures that will be taken.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): My constituents have woken up to news of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and I put on record both their and my own full support for and solidarity with the Ukrainian people. This conflict will impact on global energy prices. Given that the energy price cap rise will be devastating for those on the lowest incomes, who will have to choose whether to heat their homes or feed themselves and their families, many will be fearing further pressure on their bills. May we have an urgent statement to assure my constituents in Dundee West that there will be no further raising of the energy price cap, and that an emergency financial package to support the most vulnerable will be introduced?

Mark Spencer: Among the hon. Gentleman’s constituents in Dundee, as with my constituents and those of Members throughout the House, there is recognition of the challenge that we face due to global energy prices. I encourage him to look at what the Government have done to try to help families with their household bills, including the £150 council tax rebate for those in bands A to D, the £500 million household support fund, the maintaining of the energy price cap to protect consumers from the cost spike, the £140 rebate and seasonal cold weather payments—the list of assistance that the Government give to people goes on and on. We recognise the challenges, and we are working to ensure that they are mitigated.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): This week, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and I, as co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on tackling loneliness and connected communities, were delighted to host a meeting in Parliament with the Danish Minister for social affairs and senior citizens to discuss our two nations’ strategies for tackling loneliness. Strong, well connected and resilient communities have an enormous role to play in tackling loneliness and isolation as well as in promoting community cohesion, transforming our towns, preventing extremism and supporting health and wellbeing. For me, building such communities should be a fundamental part of the levelling-up agenda and of covid recovery. Will the Leader of the House therefore grant Government time to discuss this important topic and outline how the Government are working across Departments to build well connected, resilient and vibrant communities throughout the UK?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Member is right to highlight that. We often do not understand or appreciate the impact of loneliness until we meet or know someone suffering from a lack of contact with others. The work that she and other Members across the House are doing to build that resilience in our communities is worthy of praise. I congratulate her on her work.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): There have been many debates and statements on the genocide against Rohingya and other minority groups, but that has not stopped the Myanmar military from carrying out atrocities.

[Jim Shannon]

Will the Leader of the House encourage a Minister or Secretary of State to make a statement about the International Court of Justice case assessing whether Myanmar's military carried out genocide against Rohingya and other minority groups?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Member will have the opportunity at Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions on 8 March to put that to the Foreign Secretary. I know that he is a long-time campaigner on the rights of many suppressed communities across the world as well as an experienced parliamentarian, so he will know of many other routes by which he can raise the matter, and I suspect that he will do so.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Government say that they want to be a world leader on animal welfare. However, despite a ban on the production of animal fur products and foie gras in the UK, there is, as of yet, no ban on imports of these horrifically cruel and completely unnecessary products. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out his opposition to importing those products into the UK? Will he introduce legislation ensuring that such imports, which allow the UK simply to outsource its animal cruelty, are banned as soon as possible?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady is right to highlight that issue. In a former life I was a UK farmer and I am enormously proud of the United Kingdom's fantastic record on animal welfare. We have made manifesto commitments to introduce such legislation and I see no reason why that will not be forthcoming. Indeed, in the business today I announced the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill, which is an example of such legislation being introduced by the Government.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): An unspeakable human tragedy is unfolding in front of our eyes. We must stand with the people of Ukraine. Colleagues in the other place have scrapped tomorrow's business to give a full day's debate on the urgent business of Ukraine. May I reflect views from across the House and insist that, to unleash the UK's most punitive sanctions on Russia, the Leader of the House immediately announces a special sitting of Parliament tomorrow to accelerate legislation against the Russian regime? That legislation must include the register of beneficial ownership Bill, which we know is ready to go, and sanction measures that enable us to go after all of Putin's associates as well as disrupt all business currently benefiting the Putin regime.

Mark Spencer: I can do better than tomorrow; I can do five o'clock tonight, when the Prime Minister will stand at the Dispatch Box to update the House. The hon. Member should be here to question the Prime Minister and get the reassurances that she seeks. It is worth putting on record that that will be the eighth moment this week alone that the House has had the opportunity to debate the crisis in Ukraine. I see no reason why that level of activity would diminish in the days and weeks to come.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): My constituents in Newcastle, like those of Members across the House, are horrified to see ordinary working Ukrainian people waking to Putin's invading forces. Generous Geordies will want to help. Can we have a debate on how local communities such as mine in Newcastle can help and support Ukrainian people and how the Government can root out Russia's dirty money and provide clean, good money for humanitarian support?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the generosity of the British people. In such serious times and in past conflicts, the UK has always stepped up to support the most vulnerable in the challenges that they face. I commend her for drawing attention to it.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): My team work hard to do their best for my constituents, but it is frustrating when Departments take too long to respond. The Home Office in particular is a repeat offender, with some cases hitting the six-month mark before we get a reply. Will the Leader of the House encourage his Cabinet colleagues to ensure that Departments meet their service level agreement targets?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Member is right to highlight that. As a constituency MP, I have also suffered with long times before I get a decent reply. If she is waiting on a specific matter that she wants to raise with a Department, I would be more than happy to take that up on her behalf and try to assist her.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Finance Act 2022

Advanced Research and Invention Agency Act 2022

Dormant Assets Act 2022

Charities Act 2022.

Higher Education Reform

12.17 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi):

It is hard to make a statement without reflecting on the tragic events overnight with the criminal invasion of Ukraine, a democratic free country, by Putin. My family lived through and experienced a despotic dictator in Saddam Hussein who lashed out at his neighbours. It never ends well for them, because ultimately democracy, truth and justice prevail. I am certain that they will prevail again.

With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about how the Government are safeguarding the future of our universities, putting them on a sustainable path for taxpayers and students. Our universities—indeed, our entire higher education system—are some of the most innovative, important institutions in our country. Four of our great institutions are ranked in the global top 10 list. They are a true powerhouse of innovation and research—they even played a leading role in the development of the covid vaccine—and they will play a significant role in the prosperity of our country for years to come.

We recognise that education at all levels plays a role in learners' personal fulfilment and pursuit of knowledge, whether that is in the humanities or in science and engineering as in my case, and in higher or further education. As we move past the pandemic and start a new chapter in our country's history, now is the time to ensure that our universities are on a solid footing and sustainable ground for generations to come. To do so, I am announcing the launch of two consultations, which, taken together, outline our proposals for the higher education sector and secure a better deal for the student and the taxpayer. The consultations will deliver solutions to the problems that Sir Philip Augar's independent panel examined in such depth and so thoroughly. The higher education policy statement and reform consultation, and the lifelong loan entitlement consultation, address the pivotal recommendations made by the panel, to whom I am indebted for their excellent work.

As Members across the House know, one of the Augar panel's core recommendations was the provision of a lifelong learning loan allowance. That is why today I am launching a consultation on the lifelong loan entitlement, to seek views from the sector and the public on the shape and scope of this important policy. Under this new and flexible skills system, people will be provided with a loan entitlement equivalent to four years of post-18 education to use over their lifetime, whether in modules or as a whole. They will be able to train, retrain and upskill as needed in response to changing skills needs, sectors and employment patterns. It will be a powerful and innovative vehicle in levelling up, providing real opportunities for everyone and giving businesses the skilled workforce they need to thrive and grow.

In light of the new entitlement, it is now more important than ever that our higher education funding system is fair for both the student and the taxpayer. The bottom line is this: if we fail to act, we can expect just 23% of students who enter full-time higher education next year to repay the full cost of their loan. That is a challenge that our reforms will address. We are maintaining the

repayment threshold at its current level for current plan 2 graduates until 2025—those who took out loans after 2012. We are also reducing the repayment threshold to £25,000 and extending the loan repayment period from 30 years to 40 years for students starting their studies in autumn 2023. That will make the system fairer for students and taxpayers. Graduates will see the benefit of their degree all their earning life, so it is only right and fair that they continue to contribute. We expect that as a result of our changes the proportion of students paying back their loan in full will increase to just over half. Our significant regulatory reform work, which we are taking forward with the Office for Students, alongside the measures we are consulting on, will drive up student outcomes and help students to access high-value employment that benefits them and the economy.

Without those interventions, the student loan book will balloon to nearly half a trillion pounds—half a trillion pounds—by 2043. I have thought very carefully about fairness for students when pulling together this balanced package of reforms. I am pleased to say that we have delivered on our manifesto commitment to address high interest rates, by reducing interest rates for students starting next year to RPI plus 0%, ensuring that graduates, under these terms, will not have to repay more than they have borrowed in real terms. New students starting in the academic year September 2023 are expected to borrow an average of £39,300. I have seen some spurious headlines today. In today's prices, they will borrow £39,300.

We forecast that the average graduate will repay £25,300 in today's prices over the course of their loan. How does that compare with the current system? Under the current system, £19,500 is what they repay. I hope that offers colleagues clarity, rather than claptrap headlines. I want to be clear: no student will repay more than they took out in today's prices. Let me repeat that: no student will repay more than they took out in today's prices. We are also continuing to freeze tuition fees for all students for a further two years. The combination of those measures, the reduction in interest rates and the two-year freeze, means a student entering a three-year course next autumn could see their debt reduced by up to £6,500 at the point at which they become eligible to repay. When the total seven-year freeze is taken into account, that totals up to £11,500 less debt at the point at which they become eligible to repay.

Alongside that, we are investing almost £900 million in our fantastic higher education system over the next three years. That includes the largest increase in government funding for the higher education sector to support students and teaching in over a decade. An additional £750 million will be invested in high quality teaching and facilities, including in science and engineering, in subjects that support the NHS, and in degree apprenticeships. There are those who say, "Why aren't you making higher education free?" To those people I would say, "Look at our counterparts in Scotland." Over the last five years, universities in England have been able to cover their teaching costs more successfully than their Scottish peers, because of our more sustainable system of tuition fees and grants.

As part of our plans to reform the higher education sector, we are building on our work with the Office for Students to set minimum expectations around completion rates and progression to graduate jobs or further study.

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

We are seeking views on policies that will help to ensure that every student has confidence that they are on a high-quality course that leads to good outcomes, a good job and ensuring that the growth in our university sector is focused on high-quality provision wherever they are in the country. We are consulting on controlling student numbers and introducing a minimum eligibility requirement to access student finance. I want to make sure that every student who goes to university will be able to reap its true benefits and not feel that they have been mis-sold and saddled with debt after completing their course.

It is really important that we have the conversation about the need for minimum eligibility requirements to ensure students are sufficiently prepared to benefit from higher education before they enter university. For example, that could be a return to the old requirement of two E grades at A-level, or a pass in GCSE English and maths. Of course, there will have to be exemptions for some groups, including mature students and part-time learners, on which we are also consulting. Young people should not be pushed into university if they are not ready. After our proposed exemptions that we are consulting on are applied, less than 1% of total entrants would be affected by a minimum eligibility requirement set at grade 4 at GCSE, but we will listen and be open-minded.

Student number controls would limit the uncontrolled growth of provision that does not lead to good outcomes or good jobs. Incentivising the expansion of provision with the best outcomes for students, society and the economy has to be our goal. The proposals are about advancing real social mobility. That means shifting from a focus on simply getting students in the door counting the inputs, to ensuring they complete their course and secure a good outcome after they graduate—being obsessed about outputs and outcomes.

As with everything my Department does, my officials and I have also considered carefully how we can support disadvantaged students with this package of reforms. Access to higher education must be dependent on attainment and ability to succeed, and not inhibited by a student's background. Our proposals to reduce fees for foundation years would make them more affordable for students who need a second chance to enter higher education. Our flagship national scholarship programme, in which we will be investing up to £75 million, will help to support high-achieving young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve their dream, regardless of course or university.

Finally, to complement the lifelong loan entitlement, we are rolling out new approved higher technical qualifications. Those will be high-quality, job-facing alternatives to degrees, approved to deliver the skills that employers need. From academic year 2023-24, we will extend student finance access to those qualifications and allow learners studying them part-time to access maintenance loans, as they can with degrees. That will address financial barriers for learners and move towards the flexibility that we envisage through the lifelong loan entitlement. Those two policies will be vital to bringing further and higher education much closer together, just as the independent panel recommended.

I believe that these reforms are fit for a dynamic and growing economy. The reality is that, apart from buying somewhere to live, taking on a student loan can be one of the biggest financial commitments that any young person can make. I am confident that they will set the sector up for success in the years to come and keep our student finance system fair and sustainable for students and the taxpayer. I have been continually impressed by the resilience demonstrated by students throughout the adversity of this pandemic. We owe it to this generation, and generations to come, to ensure that education remains open to anyone with the ability and desire to benefit from it. I commend this statement to the House.

12.31 pm

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for advance sight of his statement and I join him in his comments about the events that we see unfolding in Ukraine.

Given that 1,000 days have passed since May 2019, Members might be forgiven for forgetting the recommendations of the Augar review and the context in which it was launched. Concerns about fairness and affordability for students seem to have been lost entirely today. As the then Conservative Prime Minister outlined in launching the report:

“removing maintenance grants from the least well-off students has not worked”.

There has been little sign of any real concern for less well-off students this week. Instead, we have seen the Government's total lack of urgency about any matter except their own self-preservation; their lack of ambition for our young people; their lack of ambition for our universities; and ultimately, their lack of ambition for our country. This is a Government whose approach to some of the biggest issues facing our universities is simply to kick the can down the road. They are freezing fees, not changing them, and tying interest rates to measures that they intend to phase out, and there is a deafening silence on living costs for students.

Time and again, this Conservative Government reach for the pockets of working people, with council tax put up twice, income tax thresholds frozen, a national insurance hike and now falling repayment thresholds that will see working people paying more for longer. This Government, who are responsible for a growing failure to support young people to achieve at GCSE, now want to shut people out of university rather than raising standards in schools, slamming the door on opportunity and ambition. As for the lifelong learning loan, which, as the Secretary of State noted, was a core recommendation of the review, why are we waiting even longer for yet another consultation when that was first promised as part of the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill?

This is not the approach that we need. It will not fit our country to face the challenges of tomorrow. These announcements hold back our universities, our young people and our country. A generation of children has gone through education under Conservative Governments since 2010. Let us consider what their experience has been: real-terms cuts to funding per pupil; secondary school classes at their largest for a generation; hundreds of thousands more children eligible for free school meals; school building repairs cancelled and postponed; hundreds of days lost to the pandemic; botched exam

arrangements; and a historic failure to invest in the children's recovery plan that the Government's expert recommended and which our children desperately need. As those children now look ahead to university and the years that follow, they will see higher costs than ever before, stretching almost to retirement. This is a generation of children let down from primary school right the way through to university.

Those decisions are about choices and priorities, but for this Government, our children and young people are an afterthought—an opportunity for a Treasury saving, not the future that we create together. It need not be like that. In Wales, the Labour Government have chosen to focus on supporting students to succeed. They chose to provide extra help on the cost of living and to widen access—two themes missing almost entirely from the statement that we heard.

Today's response, for which we have waited all this time, represents a failure by the Government and, sadly, by the Secretary of State. I have a great deal of respect for him and I know how seriously he takes his role, but what we have is 1,000 days of complacency ending in a victory for the Chancellor, not a victory for Britain. There was a failure last autumn to persuade the Treasury that higher education should be central to the economy and success of our country. There has been a failure to rise to the challenges that our universities face and to design a solution, and there was a failure, this spring, to navigate the chaos of a Downing Street paralysed by scandal.

The people who will feel the pain of this failure and that defeat are not in the Chamber today. They are teaching and learning in our universities. They are sitting in school dreaming of the better future that they deserve and which Labour believes we can achieve. Labour sees their future and our universities very differently from the Government. We believe in matching the ambition of our young people, in enabling university staff to support young people and our country to succeed, and in creating thriving universities at the heart of our towns and cities.

The tragedy today is that the Secretary of State knows full well that this is not good enough, but he cannot persuade his Treasury colleagues otherwise. Unlike this Government, the next Labour Government will treat universities not as a political battleground, but as a public good, central to the success of our country.

Nadhim Zahawi: I respectfully remind the hon. Lady that someone from a disadvantaged background today is 80% more likely to go to university than they were a decade ago.¹ Let me go further and remind her that, in 2016, the coalition Government introduced the new apprenticeship standards and made sure that businesses were at the heart of setting those standards, because it is not politicians or experts in Whitehall who can decide what sectors of the economy will change and re-emerge.

There is a common theme—a strategy—running through all our reforms, from the apprenticeship standards, with more than 5 million people entering apprenticeships, to the skills White Paper, the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill, which we just voted on and sent to the other place, and now our HE reforms. What if someone had said to me when I was choosing those new standards as the apprenticeships tsar that there would come a Prime Minister and a Chancellor who would back adults at any point in their life to upskill or reskill, or that we

would say to someone in Aberdeen oil and gas who wanted to go and work in offshore wind, “We will stand behind you” with funding of £37,000, the equivalent of four years of education? That is what this Government are delivering and I am proud to be the son of a country that gives real opportunity to people from all backgrounds.

The hon. Lady mentioned the issue of excluding those who may not do so well in GCSEs. That is not what the consultation is about. It is about making sure that there are routes for those people, so that if they do not do well in their maths or English GCSEs, but do well in their A-levels, university is still open to them. However, a different route—an apprenticeship degree—is also open to them, as well as other vocational qualifications. Bringing FE and HE together was central to the Augar panel's recommendations and that is what we are doing.

Finally, I respectfully remind the hon. Lady, who talked about our financial settlement, that my Department has a settlement of £86 billion for 2024, with £4.7 billion going into schools, £3.8 billion going into skills and £900 million—the highest uplift in a decade—going into our universities. That is our plan; she has no plan.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I broadly welcome the Government's proposals. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State and particularly to the Minister for Higher and Further Education, who I know has worked hard on them; I am very grateful for the briefing that she gave me.

I welcome the cut in interest rates, which I think will make the system fairer. I have always felt it unfair that working-class people in my constituency of Harlow and across the country have a huge tax burden to pay for people to go to university and get better-paid jobs. The Government are right to rebalance that; I just urge caution on the maths and English GCSE issue. I know that the Secretary of State has qualified it, but there is a better option: just as apprentices do functional skills while doing their apprenticeships, why not make students who have difficulties with maths and English do refresher courses while they have the chance to go to university?

A more fundamental issue is that our education system narrows too early from the age of 16. I urge the Government to consider introducing an international baccalaureate system, as is used in 150 other countries. It could include vocational and technical education, but also English and maths: we would then not face the problem of people not being able to do maths and English by the time they get to university.

I really welcome the extra £900 million investment. I urge the Secretary of State to allocate a significant proportion—perhaps £500 million—to degree apprenticeships, which would mean an extra 34,000 apprentices at higher level. That would solve the student finance problem, because students would earn while they learn and would meet not only their own skills needs, but those of the country. They would be almost guaranteed a job, because 90% get a job at the end. That is the way forward. I know that the Secretary of State wants a 10% target, but a target over the next 10 years for 50% of students to do degree apprenticeships would transform skills in our country and transform the lives of those students.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the support for our proposals from my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee on Education. I will absolutely be listening—this is a real consultation—to his proposals

1. [Official Report, 9 March 2022, Vol. 710, c. 5MC.]

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

and concerns about the maths and English GCSEs. I completely agree that the concept of someone having to pay back more than they have borrowed is unfair; addressing that is a manifesto commitment, so we are delivering it. I am proud that we are touching 20,000 students on degree apprenticeships. I want to go much further than that and have set a target of 10%.

On the international baccalaureate, my right hon. Friend will know, because he has known me for a very long time, that I am about delivery and outcomes. I have the Department focused on skills, schools and family. Sometimes if you try to hug the world, you don't do anything well enough, but I hear what he says. Let me deliver what I can while I have the privilege of leading the Department and then go back and do some more afterwards.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement; I recognise that a lot is going on this morning and that not everything has happened on the normal timeline, so I appreciate it. I add my voice to those expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian people as the horrific events unfold.

The UK Government are presiding over a cost of living crisis, yet they are pursuing policy after policy such as the national insurance hike, the universal credit cut, the mandatory energy loan—even for students without a permanent address, who will have to pay it back despite not necessarily getting it this year—and now this. The UK Government's decision to create a lifelong graduate tax by increasing the number of years in which graduates pay back will affect only those who are not well off enough to pay it back already. So the tax will hit hardest those who are already struggling to make ends meet.

If new students will on average pay £6,000 more back, where is the money going to come from? Has the Secretary of State done any assessment of the effect on those people's pension pots as they approach retirement age, given that £6,000 less disposable income will be available to them? If half the students will be paying back the loan for almost their entire lifetime, it makes little difference to them what the total value of the loan is. The changes proposed benefit those who are already paying back, not those who have no hope of doing so.

In Scotland we believe in free education. We believe that it is important, and we will keep tuition free. I make no apologies for that position; it is the right thing to do. How can the Secretary of State and his Cabinet colleagues who paid nothing to attend university justify burdening those who go to university now with lifelong debt?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's remarks and her solidarity on the situation in Ukraine.

I respectfully disagree with the hon. Lady because, when we look at the overall reforms, we should focus on the outcomes for students. That is what the reforms do. The lifelong loan entitlement, the work that we have done on skills, the ability to do a T-level as a fusion between an apprenticeship and an A-level—there are different paths to achieving a great career as an adult.

Non-graduates continue to pay—at the moment, all taxpayers fund higher education in England at 41p in the pound.¹ We do not think that that is fair or equitable. As former students reach 50 or 51 years old at the 30-year repayment stage, they are coming to their peak ability to earn, so it is only fair that they be able to pay back the loan that they have taken out to give them the opportunity of a great job.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I must say that I particularly welcome the Secretary of State's opening statement about Ukraine. If this country has one institution that speaks for liberalism, openness of vision, and conversation across cultures and across parts of our nation, it is the university. His statement at the beginning was absolutely right, and I welcome it.

I hugely welcome the measures that the Secretary of State set out. I congratulate him and the Minister for Higher and Further Education on their work, particularly its focus on quality and inclusiveness together. I can tell them both from a Herefordshire perspective that if someone is coming out of a career serving Her Majesty in the Army or the special forces, the chance to go back and learn as a mature student and pick up a lifelong loan entitlement is of inestimable value. We should massively welcome it across the Chamber.

I also hugely welcome the combination of HE and FE. Skills-based higher education is absolutely vital. As for this conception among the Opposition that there is some lack of ambition, nothing could be further—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Please could we have the question?

Jesse Norman: Of course, Mr Deputy Speaker—in my exuberance, I was enjoying that. Could I ask the Secretary of State to talk just a little more about how the package will work and how it will meet the twin goals of quality and inclusiveness, which are so central to our future development as a nation?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's support for the package. He is absolutely right to cite those who come out of their time serving their country with the opportunity to feel that their Government will stand behind them for the equivalent of a four-year degree course. Crucially, they can pull it down in modules, which speaks to the dynamic high-skills, high-productivity economy. That will make a difference. On his point about inclusion, I know that he has been a great champion of the New Model Institute for Technology and Engineering in his constituency. That innovation in our HE sector is equally important. I see it as a priority in our levelling-up agenda.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Will Members please go straight to their question, with no preamble?

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My only preamble, Mr Deputy Speaker, is that every Member who has spoken so far has had free higher education, including me, the Secretary of State and you, I believe. Anyone in their right mind knows that this is an area that we should look at—of course we should, so I am glad that it is open to discussion. I have a vested interest: in a former life I was a university academic. Indeed, I taught you at university, Mr Deputy Speaker.

1. [Official Report, 9 March 2022, Vol. 710, c. 5MC.]

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Not very well. [Laughter.]

Mr Sheerman: Obviously not very well.

I am also a visiting professor and have a long-term interest in this area, and I have worked with the Secretary of State before. I am worried about some of the unintended consequences of this. I am worried about the long-term impact on many, many people's lives of higher tax burdens. I am not thinking of the high-fliers, such as those who go into high finance and merchant banking; I am thinking of the core of our skills, the people who became teachers, doctors, nurses and social workers. May I ask him to make this inclusive and, as far as possible, to secure all-party agreement on some of the aspects? As for lifelong skills, many people have tried it but no one has really cracked it. Please value FE as well as HE.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That was completely not what I asked Members to do—bad man.

Nadhim Zahawi: I think I can say that, on this topic, the hon. Gentleman is the voice of reason on the Labour Benches. As he said, I have worked with him, and I know that he has been a great supporter of some of these thinking on this in his work with a think-tank. We are consulting with an open mind to bring people together across parties, and I make that offer to my opposite number as well. Let us try to take the yah-boo politics out of this and get it right, because it is a big moment when we are able to truly integrate FE and HE. And I do not hold it against the hon. Gentleman that he educated you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I welcome this announcement, and I understand that Buckinghamshire New University does as well. I welcome the interest rate reduction, but may I ask whether the lowering of the threshold for people to start paying will apply retrospectively to those who have long since graduated? Buckinghamshire New University has advised me that the freezing of the tuition fee cap means, overall, a real-terms reduction in funding compared to the 2012 level. Will my right hon. Friend consider additional ways in which universities can earn income, such as expanding the number of international students who can come here?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his support for these proposals. I can confirm that the lowering of the threshold will not be retrospective. The £900 million will of course make a difference to the HE sector, and that has been welcomed across the sector. We are very ambitious in our targets for international students. We set a target of 600,000 by 2030, and we have just smashed it: we have reached a total of 605,000, and I hope we can continue to beat that target in years to come.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Chris Bryant.

Chris Bryant: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not mind that you were taught by the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman).

I am concerned about academics, because working in academia is pretty grinding at the moment. Academics are trying to run a business, trying to make the sums add up every year, trying to recruit the right students

and the best students, and trying to meet all sorts of different quotas, while also trying to get on with their research. What in this package will really make the life of an academic an attractive one?

Nadhim Zahawi: I hope that our £900 million investment in the higher education sector will send a strong message about our backing for it. The Augar panel recommended that we bring down the fees, but we did not choose to take on that recommendation. I think that academics are doing an excellent job, and I am very grateful to them. I am pleased to see them making sure that students are given the quality of HE that they deserve by returning to face-to-face education.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): I am grateful to the universities Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), for the assurance that she gave me when we chatted this morning, but there are still a lot of anxious graduates in my constituency and across the country who fear that they will be hit in their pockets by a reduction in graduate repayment thresholds. Can the Secretary of State confirm once again that that will not hit current graduates?

Nadhim Zahawi: I certainly can.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Given the world that we are in now, given the threats that we face and the opportunities that we want to seize, why would any Government make education harder to access, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds? Let me give just one example. The number of students with special educational needs and those on free school meals—as I was—who are attaining GCSE maths and English is falling under this Government. Why should they be excluded from higher education?

Nadhim Zahawi: The simple answer is that they are not; quite the opposite. If the hon. Lady looks at the Government's track record, she will see that someone from a disadvantaged background is 80% more likely to go to university than was the case a decade ago.¹ We are consulting on how best to deliver the outcomes. If we become obsessed with the outcome of a great education, a great career or embarking on further study, that is the right thing to do, and we will achieve what we all want to see, which is disadvantaged young people getting the education they need. This package includes £75 million that is focused precisely on disadvantaged pupils who need additional help to get that degree. As the Prime Minister has said, talent is evenly spread in our country; opportunity is not.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I tell my constituents that the best investment they can ever make is in themselves, and they can do that by going to university. I urge the Secretary of State not to fall for the rhetoric about people not being able to afford to go to university. It is possible to gain employment part time, or even full time in some cases, so it can be done. May I push him further on the issue of value for money for students? I would have liked to see university tuition fees go down, as proposed in the recommendations, and I would certainly like to see a service level agreement to provide students with a level of teaching, tuition and instruction that they have not been given during the pandemic. Perhaps, now that university vice-chancellors

1. [Official Report, 9 March 2022, Vol. 710, c. 6MC.]

[*Dr Matthew Offord*]

are receiving such high salaries, we could think about money going back to the students.

Nadhim Zahawi: The most valuable resource on this earth is the human resource, and our investment in the skills agenda, in our schools and, of course, in our families will mean that our HE sector is also able to deliver great outcomes for young people. My hon. Friend and I may disagree on this, but in real terms the amount of money going into universities is going down because of the freezing of fees. He raised an important point about the return to face-to-face education post pandemic. I urge all those brilliant academics to ensure that they deliver quality and value for money to the students who are taking out loans in order to gain great careers in the future.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I am afraid that the Secretary of State has been trounced by the Treasury. Students will pay more, universities will get less, social mobility will be capped, and when it comes to student repayments, those on lower and middle earnings will actually be disadvantaged. There is a further knock-on effect for universities in terms of research and development, which, as we know, is cross-subsidised. The Government are already struggling to reach their 2.4% R&D target. Presumably the Secretary of State has carried out an impact assessment, so will he publish it?

Nadhim Zahawi: It has been published, with the consultation. I disagree, respectfully, with the hon. Gentleman. The Government are focused on levelling the playing field through the lifelong loan entitlement, and by ensuring that university courses are of the highest quality and that drop-out rates fall and completion rates increase, and of course those career paths are there. Ultimately, if we are obsessed with outcomes, we will deliver a much better and much fairer system for all students throughout the country.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I warmly welcome the lifelong loans, and the funding reforms, however difficult they may be, are infinitely preferable to an increase in fees or interest rates, but as the consultation proceeds, will the Government look closely at the impact on women and, if necessary, take some mitigating actions?

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Raising fees or interest rates would have been hugely unfair and debilitating. The consultation is a true consultation in the sense that we want to get this right and I am willing to work with anyone who wants to join us on this journey to deliver great outcomes for all students in our country.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): On entry requirements, the Secretary of State said that he would listen and be open minded, and I fully support getting the best possible results for kids in their GCSEs. Back in 1990 when I sat GCSEs, I struggled with maths. I resat and still struggled to get a C—I kept getting a D, for some reason—but I still went on to further education and from there to higher education where I secured a distinction in finance, accountancy and managerial economics. Not bad for a kid who could not get a

GCSE in maths. Can I urge the Secretary of State to tread carefully and ensure that he does not pull up the ladder of opportunity from kids like me in the future?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point and I congratulate him on his achievements. Having gone from being a kid who could not speak a word of English to standing here as Secretary of State for Education, I understand what it is like to fight quite hard to achieve. He makes the important point that we have to look at this really carefully. This option on the GCSE in English and maths is only one option that we are considering. As he suggests, there will be some students who not do well in GCSE but do better at A-level. I repeat that I am truly in listening mode on this. I want to get this right.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I warmly welcome the statement from my right hon. Friend. There is clearly a temptation for universities to attract young people who are not prepared to do university courses, and indeed do not have the qualifications, just to get the money from the students, and then they fail them at the end. Research shows that many people are unaware of the opportunities for apprenticeships and other further education. Will my right hon. Friend agree to invest more money in creating greater awareness and career guidance, rather than shovelling people straight into university when it may not be the best course for them?

Nadhim Zahawi: That is exactly what the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill is doing. I do not think he is in his place any longer, but the Chair of the Education Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), is pushing us even further on those interactions between students and businesses and the opportunity of apprenticeships, and on doing more to ensure that teachers have the tools to enable them to share with their students the opportunity of an apprenticeship or a T-level as well as an A-level.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State and I sat together on the Business Committee scrutinising the Conservative funding system, which he now describes as unsustainable. He will recall that some of us argued that at the time. A review was clearly needed, but he has been very selective in adopting its recommendations. The Augar review stated strongly that these sorts of changes to loans must be accompanied by the introduction of maintenance grants of at least £3,000 for disadvantaged students, which he has ignored, and that any reduction in tuition fees—which is what a freeze is, particularly at this time—should be matched by an increase in teaching grants across all subjects, not the selective additional resource that he has talked about. As the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) and others have pointed out, this plan cuts university resources and transfers massive debt from the Treasury to graduates. Is the Secretary of State not effectively making students pay more for less?

Nadhim Zahawi: I remember our time on the Business Committee when Lord Browne made the initial proposals and we scrutinised them. It is only right that one is able to go back and refine the system and get it to work sustainably, and that is exactly what we are doing in this case. On disadvantaged students, the investment of

£75 million in scholarships will make a huge difference. But also, when the hon. Gentleman and I sat on that Select Committee, there was no lifelong loan entitlement where students had a different path to gaining those skills and that career path to university. It is only right that we get the balance right between students and the taxpayer.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): On behalf of the many thousands of Scots studying at English universities and of the many parents of Scots currently at university in England, I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for Higher and Further Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), for engaging with those of us who had concerns about how the Augar report, the review and the announcement today were proceeding. I specifically welcome the abolition of interest rates above inflation and the extension of the freeze on maximum tuition fees, but there will be those who are worried about the lowering of the repayment threshold. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that in this country and under this Government it will always be about ability and never about background when determining someone's access to some of the best educational establishments in the world?

Nadhim Zahawi: That is absolutely right. I could not have put it any better.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): It is estimated that 4,000 Muslim young people every year choose with a heavy heart not to enter higher education because of the Islamic ban on interest. Nine years ago, David Cameron promised a system of alternative student finance to overcome that problem. We were told there would be a decision on that in this statement today. Does the Secretary of State plan to honour the promise made by the leader of his party to Muslim young people?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for that important question. It is only sensible that we align the future delivery of alternative student finance with these major reforms to ensure fair treatment for all students.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): In Burnley and Padiham we have a brilliant further education college, Burnley College, and a brilliant university, the University of Central Lancashire. It is really important that young people know the choices available to them and make the right choice for them on where they study and what they study when they get there. Can I encourage the Secretary of State, as part of looking at the synergy between the two, to work with careers advisers to ensure that we really bed that in, so that young people of 16, 17 and 18, looking at that next opportunity, can have all the information in front of them?

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Skills and Post-16 Education Bill that we are putting through at the moment will go even further in bringing the system much closer together. Let us look at what we have done with the investment in the institute of technology, which involves real collaboration between the university, colleges and business to create those opportunities and moments of inspiration for young people who will end up in a great career and with a wholesome and happy adulthood.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I understand that an impact assessment has been produced on the changes to the repayment of loans. Can the Secretary of State tell the House what the impact of those changes will be for young women who come from less well-off backgrounds?

Nadhim Zahawi: The really important thing to remind the right hon. Lady is that no student will pay more than they have borrowed. That is the most powerful message we can send out to anyone considering higher education.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that these reforms will prioritise the long-term benefits of high-value employment and ensure that university courses are giving students the skills and the knowledge they need to fulfil their potential? Recognising that you asked for no long preambles, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will make my postamble very short. It will be no surprise to the Secretary of State that this is exactly the philosophy behind MK:U. It is about getting the digital skills and the STEM skills needed by businesses in Milton Keynes so that we can future-proof our economy.

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The work that MK:U is doing is exactly the sort of innovation that we need, in the same way that NMITE—the New Model Institute for Technology and Engineering—and others are doing as well. This is part of a long-term strategy. We began with the apprenticeship standards and reforms to ensure that businesses were embedded in the co-creation of our skills landscape. Skills are part of FE and HE, integrated together to deliver great careers and great outcomes for young people and the economy.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Today's announcement could severely undermine the creative courses in higher education. The Government's figures on this are always skewed, because they do not reflect graduates who become self-employed. We know that 47% of those who go into the creative industries are self-employed. What will the Secretary of State do to protect the creative courses that lead to high-value jobs in the creative industries? If he is in listening mode, will he listen to the vice-chancellor of Bath Spa University, who has been raising her concerns about this for a long time?

Nadhim Zahawi: As part of our £900 million investment, we will look at how we continue to support our brilliant creative industries, but it is not the only way to support them through our higher education reforms. I visited Pinewood Shepperton studios a few weeks ago, which is about to deliver 3.5 million square feet of studio and creative space to be used for many decades to come, and it has already been taken by the likes of Netflix, Amazon and Disney. They have been recruiting kickstarters and apprentices, and they are doing a brilliant job. I recommend that the hon. Lady visits to see the incredible enthusiasm of businesses and education institutions for working together.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): As the Universities Minister who oversaw the publication of the Augar review 1,001 days ago, I welcome the Government's considered response and the Secretary of State's marked change of tone and attitude towards higher education, which is much appreciated by the sector.

[Chris Skidmore]

Minimum entry requirements have now shifted to become minimum eligibility requirements, but perhaps the Secretary of State will consider minimum exit requirements. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) said, universities would welcome the opportunity to take young students who, like the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), do not have a maths GCSE and to work with them on their functional skills. If it is about outcomes, we should tell universities that it is their responsibility to deliver the basic functional skills of GCSE English and maths as part of their degree programmes.

Nadhim Zahawi: I commend my right hon. Friend for his excellent work on the Augar panel. He is a passionate advocate for the sector.

With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, I remind the House that, of every four international students, the United States take two, the United Kingdom takes one and the rest of the world shares one. That is how successful our higher education institutions are and have been. My right hon. Friend raises an important point, and this is a real consultation. I will take on board his suggestions and take a proper look at them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. Many of my constituents in Strangford and people across Northern Ireland attend universities here on the mainland to pursue a career in health. Has consideration been given to helping our health service by waiving fees and giving bursaries to those studying severely understaffed medical disciplines such as optometry, where cataract removal waiting lists are up to three years, and orthopaedics, where the waiting list for hip replacements is up to five years? Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Department for Education will work with the Department of Health and Social Care for the betterment of all throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Gentleman will know that we already work very closely with the Department of Health and Social Care to make sure we hit our target of 50,000 more nurses. We always keep that work and the bursaries we offer under review to make sure we continue creating sufficiency so that we have a world-beating NHS.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for responding to questions for just short of an hour.

Points of Order

1.13 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am pleased that the Prime Minister is due to make a statement to the House as 5 pm, but I was surprised that he made a television statement to the nation at 12 noon today. On the basis that we are a parliamentary democracy and that statements should, of course, be made first to this House, as Mr Speaker has made clear on a number of occasions, I wonder whether you have been given any indication of why it was not possible for the Prime Minister to do that today and whether, in fact, it is possible for a Minister to make two statements to the House, if necessary, as I understand there are meetings later today with NATO and the G7.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I have not received any information as to whether any statements will be made before the statement at 5 o'clock. These are exceptional circumstances. We all woke up this morning and saw what is happening. I think we are all devastated, as we have heard, and feel for the people of Ukraine.

If there are to be any additional statements, I am certain the House will be informed in the usual way. The right hon. Lady is right that Mr Speaker has made it absolutely clear that he prefers and wants statements to be made to Parliament first, rather than elsewhere. The next debate is on our relationship with Russia and China, and it will give Members and, of course, the Minister an opportunity to make their views known.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. To clarify it for the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), what the Prime Minister did was set out a statement of intent without setting out any new measures, which he said would be set out to the House of Commons. It seems, in fact, that all the usual proprieties have been recognised.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Could you clarify that it is changes in Government policy that are required to be announced to the House of Commons first? That does not muzzle the Government from making any statement about any matter, however serious, if there is no change of policy. I have read the Prime Minister's statement, and I see no change of policy.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Prime Minister actually used the word "militarily" for the first time. I think that is a very significant change of policy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have nothing to add to my response to Dame Diana Johnson. The important thing for us now is to get on with the next debate and to hear the Prime Minister's statement at 5 o'clock.

Backbench Business

Relationship with Russia and China

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): A lot of people want to speak and we have two important debates today. Although I am not setting a time limit to begin with, Members should think about keeping to seven to eight minutes.

1.16 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to develop separate but aligned cross-Government strategies for both Russia and China; and further calls on the Government to support the international order, working with allies across the globe to develop an approach to Russia and China that, whilst recognising their separate legitimate interests, ensures a robust defence of both UK interests and democratic values.

I will speak for 15 minutes, if I get that far, as I am mindful of others.

As of this morning, offensive war has once again broken out in eastern Europe, as Russian artillery and armour rain down on a peaceful neighbour. We have all seen the reports of columns moving from Crimea, of Kharkiv and Kyiv potentially being under threat and of bridges being blown up in Chernobyl as Ukrainians defend hearth and home.

This is arguably the first conventional war in Europe since 1945. The intentions of Vladimir Putin have long been clear: to control or destroy Ukraine, to shatter western unity, to build a new sphere of influence on the foundations of the USSR and to present the west as a decadent, mortal enemy of the Russian people and Russian identity. It is an agenda that is both febrile and dangerous, but sadly it is also very real. We have needed to understand it for some time, and we urgently need to get our heads around what is happening.

According to polling, the majority of Russians see war—and nuclear war—with the west as now more likely than not, which should be a sobering realisation for all of us. Russian state propaganda has prepared the population for conflict for years. The immediate news is clearly shocking, but I will still try to look more broadly, to talk about tactics rather than strategy and, where possible, to bring in China as much as Russia. People will forgive me if I do not always succeed.

Russia in the west and China in the east present differing but overlapping and increasingly significant threats. However imperfect our current global system, we have avoided major conflict, but that order is now under threat: in Ukraine today; potentially in Taiwan and the South China sea; and potentially in the Baltic and the Black sea in the weeks, months and years to come.

I lived and worked in Ukraine and the former USSR from 1990 to 1994, and I was fortunate enough to travel through the country for much of that time. I lived in Kyiv, but I well remember many of the places we are talking about now. I went down coal mines in Donbas, I visited Soviet dachas in Sevastopol, and in Moldova and Georgia I witnessed the first of the proxy wars engineered, probably, by the KGB. Many of my formative experiences as a young man were spent there, and I am deeply fond of the place and its people. What is happening pains me, because a KGB placeman will now pit Slavs against other Slavs to fulfil a fantasy about the Soviet

Union and the world. The cold war was not a good world. It died 30 years ago and should remain dead. Tens of thousands are likely to die.

I would like to argue the following: the risk of direct conflict with Russia and China is growing and, in some senses, we are already in indirect conflict with both, in different ways—importantly, I am not directly comparing Russia and China. We are midway through a 20-year crisis with Russia that we are woefully ill-prepared for and have done our best to ignore. Frankly, this is now returning with a vengeance. We are at the beginning of a significant and potentially damaging change in our relationship with China—there may be greater opportunity there, but there may also be greater threat. Therefore, for the next 20 years the primary foreign policy goal for this country must be in old-school state relationships and the avoidance of direct conflict, and the establishment of working relationships with both, where we can, that are as productive as possible, while resolutely defending our values and our allies. I do not believe we are there yet by any means; and the coherence and integration of our foreign policy, and our policy in both cases, is not there.

Secondly, we need to understand the new world and the new styles of conflict being practised against us, and the new forms of covert and overt influence. Thirdly, as a result, we need to move to an era of “smart” containment, which is not only geographically based, but is a protection of our values, and of our IT property, our universities and law firms, and our City institutions and others. That includes things such as a national strategy council to complement the National Security Council, because frankly—the more I speak to people, the more I feel this—we need to relearn the arts of strategy and deterrence. We need to relearn how to use power properly—I believe we have forgotten that.

We also need to make provision for laws that we should have put in place years ago: a foreign lobbying Bill—my God, how many more scandals do we have to put up with before we realise we need one?; an updated espionage Bill; an economic crimes Bill; and changes to the libel and data protection rules to protect freedom of speech and to protect journalists from becoming peripheral victims of Russian oligarch intimidation to our freedom of speech.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I wish to add to this list, although I share in everything that the hon. Gentleman is saying. He is very intelligent and foresighted on these issues. Should we not also be looking at those who have dual nationality—Russian and UK, or Chinese and UK—reassessing and making them choose a nationality? Secondly, should we not be looking at everyone from China or from Russia who has a tier 1 visa and reassessing whether those should not be withdrawn?

Bob Seely: The hon. Gentleman make sensible points. I look forward to working with him on them and I thank him for his intervention.

Both the Russia and China leaderships see themselves as being in conflict or intense competition with the west. That may sound “hawkish”, but it is not designed to be so. It is designed to avoid conflict in the future by being clear about the times we live in. Let us face it: who of us today will claim that deterrence has worked in Europe? Let me remind the House that the best wars are

[Bob Seely]

not those that are won, but those that are unfought. Our greatest victory in world war three was that it did not take place, not that we destroyed our civilisation in order to destroy another.

In Russia, the security elites have believed for the past 20 years that they are in conflict with us—in a conflict of values and of information, with spheres of interest. President Putin alludes to a “western plot” that destroyed the Soviet Union and he sees “colour revolutions” in the same light. Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev regularly warns that the west wants to destroy Russia because we fear it and are jealous of it. The Kremlin’s confrontational strategy to change the post-cold war order began with a reassessment of military art in the early 2000s, which was played out somewhat in national publications such as *Voennaya Mysl*, or *Military Thought*, and *Voennopromyshlennyyi kur’er*—or *Military-Industrial Courier*. The result of that debate was a strategy that has, in effect, aligned Russia’s two ways of war, the conventional and the non-conventional, and seen the west as a psychological, spiritual and physical threat. It is not fundamentally a military doctrine—the Gerasimov doctrine—as some people falsely claim; it is actually a strategic art, not simply a military one. These ideas have formed in Russia’s military and national security doctrines, written by those around Putin, where the west is the existential threat, spiritual and physical. Swedish academic Maria Engström has discovered that at its worst there is a disturbing narrative among Russian ideologues that links Russia’s nuclear arsenal and Russian Orthodoxy, known as “Atomic Orthodoxy”, as the “sword and shield” against the Antichrist—the US and NATO. We are the Antichrist. The sword and the shield are also the symbols of Putin’s old KGB and now the FSB. We made the mistake of dismissing fringe Russian philosophers as neo-fascist nutjobs in the 1990s. Given what has happened since, it is unwise that we do the same again. In China, party document No. 9 lays out quite clearly that the Communist party seeks a dominant position of its socialism over western capitalism. The language of win-win is for an external audience, for us. The language domestically is to win and to dominate, and again we should be under no illusion about that.

Whereas Russia is a declining power, China is rising one. They present different but related threats, and both, to a greater or lesser extent, use the tools of hybrid conflict. The principle behind this is not just war plus information ops; it is much more. It is to see state competition as Darwinian, with war as an extension of politics—as set out by von Clausewitz—and politics as an extension of conflict. The latter idea was peddled by German world war General Erich Ludendorff in his book, “The Total War”. China believes in something similar, as readers of “Unrestricted Warfare”, published in the late 1990s, will know. Our opponents are harsh, harsh realists. Their secret police disappear people. They are not liberal internationalists. Although they share legitimate interests, and we need to work on those legitimate interests, their mindset is different from ours.

Putin is a product of the KGB; an organisation involved in some of the greatest crimes in human history, but one that, unlike the SS, has never had to collectively accept responsibility. He is both deeply rational and highly irrational. Russian integrated strategic decision making is years ahead of the west. Its general staff is

probably the last Prussian organisation on earth. This war has been planned for years. He knows that EU dependency on energy is worsening and he has built up tens of billions in reserves. I suspect he laughs at the ad hoc tactics of the west, where we ask, “Do we do a no-fly zone? Do we do this? Do we do that?” From him, this is, as Sun Tzu would say, “tactics before strategy”—it is “noise before defeat”.

Putin is also fuelled by a bitter and cold anger at the loss of the USSR—at the loss of Ukraine—which he cannot abide and refuses to accept. This is the third stage of the Ukrainian conflict. The first, between 2004 and 2014, involved economic and political tools. The second stage, between 2014 and 2022, involved those as well as paramilitary violence. In their hybrid tools, both Russia and China seek elite capture in this country. We know about Huawei and about the academics and the universities. Twice in this House I have heard the claim that Huawei is a private company. Anyone who knows anything about one-party states and about communism knows that that is an incredible and bad claim for a Minister, or for an official putting words into a Minister’s mouth, to be saying. Both countries use covert military force. Both use an intimidating conventional military presence. Both use culture. Both use covert control of the media.

So what is our response? First, it is to understand our adversaries and potential enemies, because they spent a great deal of time understanding us. We need to keep reaching out to their leaders, however futile that now is in the case of Russia, and to their people. We also need to have a conversation in our own house about how we clean up our own house—about the Bills we need to bring in, which I have mentioned: the foreign lobbying law; the data protection law; and the laws on economic crimes.

That is just a start. If Confucius Institutes wish to remain in this country, they must stop spying on Chinese students, and be willing to discuss Hong Kong and Tiananmen Square. If not, they should be shut down. Military dual-use work should be banned. Work for Chinese military universities should be banned. Recruiters for the Chinese secret agencies need to be exposed and prosecuted. Front organisations such as the Chinese Students and Scholars Association should be banned. [Interruption.] I am aware of the time, Mr Deputy Speaker. We need to become significantly less strategically dependent on industry and manufacturing from China, not least because of the environmental damage they do to our state. Globalisation has in many ways been a force for good, but we need to have a conversation with ourselves about whether offshoring so much of our industry is a good thing.

The military dividend—the peace dividend—is over. Spending 2% on defence is not acceptable. To put it crudely, we need a bigger Navy and a bigger Air Force. We need to rebuild our alliances throughout the world. If there is one thing unique about British strategic culture—one of the greatest things this country has done in 200 years, arguably more than any other—it is our ability to build alliances throughout the world. We need to be at the heart of the building of new alliances. Potentially, our second carrier should be part of the CANZUK—Canada, Australia, New Zealand and UK—fleet. Potentially, we should put a physical NATO base in the Suwalki gap between Kaliningrad on one side and Belarus on the other.

I could go on but I am mindful of the time, so let me sum up. There are two courses for humanity in the 21st century. The first is the western model of a law-governed society with politicians under the control of the people. It is incredibly imperfect, as we all know, but it is the best hope for mankind. The second is the new militarism of high-tech authoritarianism that is championed by Russia, and a little bit by China. It promises the data-inspired, artificial-intelligence control of populations. We need foresight, strategy and resolve to fight to defend our values and the future of humanity. We should not underestimate the scale of the task nor shy away from it. The defence of human freedom, wherever it is in the world—in Taiwan, Ukraine, the Baltic or the Black sea—is the struggle for our age.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I inform the House that we will look to start the wind-ups at around about quarter to 3, with the next debate starting at around 10 past, so will Members please be conscious of the length of their speeches?

1.31 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this important debate. His timing could not have been better.

It is clear from today's events that we live no longer in an era of change but in a change of era. That has three significant implications for our strategy on Russia and China, which is why the hon. Gentleman's timing today is so fortunate. The three shifts entail a worldview different from that of UK policy makers, and they require a shift in our defensive strategy and a renaissance in creative diplomatic strategy whereby, quite simply, we in this country need to build a new rules-based order for the new silk road.

Let me start with the new worldview that is going to be needed. I generally try to avoid a Manichean view of the world as divided into black and white, because the world is more complicated than that, but the truth is that, from Kaliningrad through to Kamchatka, we are now witness to the creation of an enormous kleptosphere. Inside the borders of that kleptosphere, the merciless logic is that might is right: in the old phrase, the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. We have to be the guardians of what we might call the "canon-osphere"—the space around the world where there are rules, there is the rule of law and there is justice.

Just as we once rid the world of piracy and slave trading, we now have to be the place that leads the charge against economic crime, no matter where that crime is perpetrated. We have to be the guardians of the new rules-based order for this simple reason: if we think the scale of global corruption today is bad, we must think for a moment about the world that is to come. The World Bank estimates that the value of natural resources in countries with bad corruption scores is \$65 trillion. Imagine the world of the future, in which those natural resources are extracted and the profits go to some of the worst people on earth. That is why there is now an urgency for a very different kind of philosophy to guide our foreign policy. We have to be the place, the country, the leader that seeks a world of

not simply free trade but clean trade. That must be one of the defining features of our foreign policy for the years to come.

The second dimension is that we obviously need new defences. We in this House have to confront the reality that our strategy of deterrence has failed. Most of us who spoke in the debate on the economic sanctions were profoundly disappointed with the weakness of the package proposed. Frankly, many of us feel that the Prime Minister was a little late to the party. "Too little, too late" will be written on his political gravestone, I fear. None the less, we must now accept that the threat of sanctions has failed and we must now offer President Putin the iron fist. That has to take aim at Russia's key strategic weakness, which is its 20 km border.

We must now envisage a different security environment along the Russian border. That means that we should have proactive talks with Finland and Sweden about how they partner with NATO; it means further reinforcing our presence in the Baltics; it means new kinds of conversations at the other end of the border, in Georgia; it means thinking about how we take on and equip those fighting the insurgencies in places such as South Ossetia and Transnistria; and it means that we have to take a completely different approach to the Balkans, and step up and accelerate the path towards NATO membership for Bosnia-Herzegovina.

We now have to start to roll NATO forward in strength across the border, so that President Putin's tactical advance results in what is ultimately a strategic defeat. I am afraid part and parcel of that is that we will have to consider the deployment of intermediate ground-launched cruise missiles in Europe. The truth is that the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty broke down because President Putin was breaking the rules and deploying SSC-8 missiles, which were prohibited by that treaty. Russia has built very effective anti-access and area-denial systems that safeguard it against air and naval attack. A defence against ground-launched cruise missiles is much more difficult. The Secretary-General of NATO has been right to rule out arming those missiles with nuclear warheads, but we must now think more aggressively about our defence posture, given the security threat President Putin now poses to this great homeland of Europe.

The final point I wish to make clear is that it is time for British grand strategy to go through something of a renaissance. This is not an original point of mine but something that people such as Lord Ricketts have been writing about for some time. If we look back over history, we see so many examples of how, when Russian and Chinese leaders feel strong at home, they advance into the periphery—into the borderland. That was true under Tsar Nicholas and under the Qing empire, and it is true today. That means that a corridor of chaos is potentially going to stretch from the Baltic to Ukraine, down through Syria and Iran, through Kashmir, into Myanmar, into North Korea and into the South China sea.

We have not only to think creatively and imaginatively about how we provide a security environment for that space but to think anew about creating a Marshall plan for that space, just as we did in Europe after world war two. Then, we created the OECD to foster Europe's economic development; we now need to do the same for the silk road. The passage to India, the Pacific and

[Liam Byrne]

beyond now needs a British-led institution that looks imaginatively at how we create new infrastructure. China will be spending something like \$1.5 trillion on infrastructure across this great border zone. What are we spending? We do not know, but we could be using our skills to identify the infrastructure priorities in places such as Pakistan. We could be thinking imaginatively about how we mobilise infrastructure finance. London has been the home of infrastructure finance since we defeated Napoleon and Nathan Rothschild created the international bond market in London.

We have the wherewithal to mobilise sovereign wealth funds, which are growing radically and quickly in places such as the Gulf, and deploying that money in good strong contracts, with good strong standards, that avoid the kind of mistakes that we saw in the early days of the Qatari world cup stadium-building programme. We could be a force for good in building infrastructure, in financing infrastructure, and in making sure that there are good rules around that.

We could be thinking imaginatively about how we create free trade across this zone. We could be thinking imaginatively about how we settle disputes. We could be thinking imaginatively about the legal services and the consulting services that we offer out of London into this space. The reality is that, by 2050, the economies of the new silk road will be worth two and a half times the value of the economies on the Atlantic seaboard. The economic centre of gravity is moving east. This is possibly where I differ from the hon. Member for Isle of Wight. In my view, we need to think imaginatively about offering the welcoming hand of trade as well as offering a strong shield and a strong sword.

I will finish with a quote from Dean Acheson, the US Secretary of State after world war two, who famously boasted that he was present at the creation. He warned us that

“the future comes one day at a time.”

We now do not have a single day to waste. That is why this debate is so very important.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

1.41 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am very pleased to be here. I pay huge tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for his prescience and timing in securing this debate. He is absolutely right: this is something that we have needed to discuss for a long time. The fact that he has got the House together to do so today is important.

This is really a debate about the future—a debate that challenges us all to think about the world in which we wish to live. We have already heard cited the kleptocracies that govern so much of our world and the threats to independent sovereign communities, such as Ukraine, that are being so violently and vilely challenged today. We have already heard about the ways in which that affects the very lives that we have here: the price of heating gas going through the roof; the price of petrol going up and up; and now, sadly, the price of wheat and therefore of basic food commodities rising higher and higher, hitting the families, the communities and the

homes that we here are so privileged to represent. This is a debate not about a foreign country, not about foreign relations, but, fundamentally, about the British people and how we live our lives.

That is why I want to start by saying very clearly that this is not a time to live in fear. This is not a time to think that arrayed against us are some enormous armies against which we can do nothing, or that we should bow down, scrape and grovel, as I see some people doing today, praising Putin’s intellect, worshipping Xi’s ability to influence others through force. This is not the time, as others say, to compromise and accept the instructions of evil dictators and say, “No! Free people in Ukraine are expendable. They can suffer because they don’t matter.” That is cowardice. Worse than that, it is betrayal. It is betrayal not just of the people who are fighting for their freedom, but of the British people whose security depends fundamentally on freedoms around the world. We should call this what it is; it is treason and it is wrong.

This country can organise itself. My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight described it exactly. Collecting alliances, building up partnerships, is exactly what we do. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Asia and the Middle East has been doing a huge amount of work in getting us in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. She has been building up alliances in Asia—with free countries that want to be part of the rule of law, not the rule of force. This country can do it. We can build the infrastructure that keeps us safe, that protects the weak, that ensures that small countries are not just steamrollered by larger ones, and that large countries trade freely and on the basis of equality with each other and do not succumb to the bullying ways of evil tyrants. All this is possible. Not only is it possible, it is exactly what we are doing.

Failure to do that would be a betrayal of the legacy of those heroes who fought, defended and won our freedoms, who landed at Anzio and Normandy, and who fought through Belgium into Germany. It would also be a betrayal of those Soviet armies who, in 1946, handed over criminals to the trials at Nuremberg and charged them with the crime of waging aggressive war. What an irony it is that the last time Kyiv was under attack by a foreign army it was a Nazi force doing it, and the Soviets were there to help and protect. What an irony it is to watch what is happening today.

We have in this place, in this country and with our partners the courage to do this if we choose. We can make the commitment. We can build up the partnerships and the alliances that keep us strong. Today though the question is not just about alliances, but about ourselves. We need to call out the corruption in our own city. We need to evict those who have done so much to undermine the rights and liberties of the British people. We need to seize their assets, freeze their goods and expel them.

What Russia has done today is an act of war. There is no question about it, no equivocation, and no possible excuse. The naked aggression that we have seen—the paratroopers landing, the helicopters launching, the tanks rolling—is the beginning of the first war in Europe that we have seen since 1945. [Interruption.] Yes, the first state-on-state war in Europe perhaps. We have a choice. We can turn a blind eye; we can pretend that incremental sanctions make a difference—they do not. President Medvedev laughed at them three days ago,

saying that we know how this play goes: they sanction us, we ignore them and then they come crawling back for business, which, sadly, is true from 2014 and 2008. Alternatively, we can take clear action. Given that a hostile state has launched an act of war, we can act now. We can freeze Russian assets in this country—all of them. We can expel Russian citizens—all of them. We can make a choice to defend our interests, to defend the British people and to defend our international partners, or we can do what, sadly, we have done too often in the past, which is to watch until it is too late and the British people have to pay a much higher price.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will have to introduce a six-minute time limit to protect this business and the next business.

1.47 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for securing this important debate. The eyes of the world may be focused elsewhere at present, but it is vital that we do not lose sight of other nations where people face abuses. My thoughts and prayers are with the people of Ukraine today as they face aggression. Military aggression in Ukraine is not acceptable, and the House stands in solidarity with the people of Ukraine.

I thank the Office of Tibet, Tibet Action and Free Tibet for their briefings ahead of this debate. I thank, too, the all-party group for Tibet for all the work that it does. I declare an interest as the vice-chair of the said all-party group. I was pleased to have the opportunity to meet the Office of Tibet in London last year at the Labour party conference where I heard about the experiences of the Tibetan people.

Since it was annexed more than 70 years ago, occupied Tibet has been closed off to much of the rest of the world, preventing us from witnessing the repression against the people that live in the region. According to the Free Tibet campaign, the Chinese Government have been orchestrating a deliberate and systematic elimination of Tibet's distinct and unique cultural, religious and linguistic identity through a sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism, its culture and its language.

Worryingly, those sinicization measures are reported to have increased in intensity over the past decade, reflecting the Chinese Government's further attempts to subdue the Tibetans, who continue to resist the occupation. This process includes the Chinese Government's bilingual education policy of replacing the Tibetan language—the common language of all Tibetans—with Mandarin. In the words of the Free Tibet campaign, this “strikes at the very root of the Tibetan identity”.

It was reported late last year that two teenage Tibetan students were detained for opposing Chinese-only instruction in their school. A Tibetan teacher was also arrested after her Tibetan-language school was forced to close. According to research by the Tibet Action Institute, as many as 900,000 Tibetan children are estimated to have been separated from their families, while the teaching of the Tibetan language has faced further restrictions, with limitations on monasteries that wish to provide language classes.

Last month, I asked our Government whether they had raised that exact issue, specifically regarding Chinese-run boarding schools in Tibet, with their counterparts

in China. I must say that the response to my written parliamentary question was disappointing. Although I am encouraged to hear that measures are being taken to urge the Chinese Government to respect the rights of all its citizens, including those in Tibet, I appeal to the Minister today to push specifically on this issue to ensure that families do not continue to be coerced into sending their children to residential boarding schools.

Nor has religion emerged unscathed from this process, with the Chinese Government imposing a raft of restrictions that are almost certainly designed to make Tibetan Buddhism compatible with President Xi's vision of “religion with Chinese characteristics”, as he has described it. In reality, that has meant limitations on the influence of Tibetan Buddhism in community life and monasteries repeatedly being placed under Government control and surveillance. In practice, that means all monasteries being forced to fly Chinese flags and hang portraits of political figures on their premises.

The Government are also accused of proactively coercing Tibetans into renouncing any allegiance to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, a process that also extends to outlawing the portraits of His Holiness and arresting Tibetans who carry out seemingly small acts of resistance such as calling for his return to Tibet or singing songs that wish him a happy birthday. In the past three years alone, authorities have ordered Tibetans to place shrines to President Xi and other Government leaders inside their homes in place of religious figures. The Free Tibet campaign also reports that in some counties, authorities have gone to such lengths as physically inspecting households to ensure that that order has been carried out.

Finally, I will focus briefly on Drago county in eastern Tibet. Since last October the county, which is in Sichuan province, has been the site of a series of demolitions of sites of religious and cultural significance, accompanied by arbitrary arrests and alleged torture. One such example is reports of Government officials tearing down a Tibetan Buddhist monastic school that once housed more than 100 young Tibetan students. That was followed soon afterwards by the destruction of two Lord Buddha statues, including one that stood almost 100 feet tall, the construction of which was only completed in 2015 with funds donated by Tibetans and Buddhist disciples.

Further evidence of Government aggression and destruction includes the demolition of several monks' residences, in addition to monastery prayer flags being removed and burned. It is clear to those who witnessed those incidents that, as well as lacking any free or informed consultation with the locals, the demolitions were carried out very deliberately to cause maximum distress, with members of the community in some cases ordered to assist in tearing down schools and statues, and others forced to watch. I hope the Minister will make a note of those ongoing events, given that the forced inspections continue to take place on an almost daily basis, which has led to the lives of all those involved rapidly deteriorating.

I want to highlight that 10 March is observed annually as Tibet Uprising Day. In 1959, hundreds of thousands of Tibetans banded together to revolt, in defiance of the Chinese invasion a decade earlier. That peaceful protest was violently crushed by the Chinese Government.

In closing, I urge the Minister to heed the concerns of hon. Members on both sides and push the Governments of China and Russia to ensure that all rights are respected,

[Navendu Mishra]

and that a way of life is not imposed on people that leads to the destruction and desecration of everything from the heritage to the culture, language and even the very identity of the Tibetan people. Their voices must continue to be heard.

1.53 pm

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): The world order is at a pivotal point in history. From Moscow to Tehran to Beijing, autocratic rulers are attempting to enforce their undemocratic models not only on their own people, but on those beyond their borders. What we are witnessing in Ukraine today is the starkest example of that frightful and frightening phenomenon.

Almost unbelievably, in the 21st century we are witnessing the invasion of a peaceful European state by an armed aggressor—something we have not seen since the actions of Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Yet, in a warped and perverted view of history, Putin last night compared Ukraine to Nazi Germany, painting it as a genocidal state that poses a threat to the Russian people. That can only be true in the deranged analysis of Putin's mind as he unleashes a tsunami of violence against the people of Ukraine.

How could Ukraine be a threat to Russia? Russia has 4,100 aircraft; Ukraine has 318. Russia has 772 fighters; Ukraine has 69. Russia has 1,543 helicopters; Ukraine has 112. Russia has 12,400 tanks; Ukraine has 2,600. Let us also remember that Ukraine gave up its nuclear arsenal at the end of the Soviet era on the basis of a guarantee that it would not be invaded by Russia. One wonders whether, if Ukraine had maintained its nuclear deterrent, those tanks would be rolling across Ukrainian territory today.

Make no mistake: Putin will continue to challenge the international order and advance his imperial agenda until he is decisively confronted. He seeks to reverse the democratic result of the 1991 Ukraine referendum and resurrect the Soviet empire. With increased security control in Eurasia over recent years, the Baltic states and Ukraine stand as outliers—those states that have stayed beyond Moscow's malignant grip.

The implications are clear. We must now increase the NATO presence in the Baltic states, as well as in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania, which will now be on the frontline. NATO countries must be willing now not only to raise the proportion of their GDP that they give to defence, but to give that money to NATO rather than making paper promises.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman mentions that Russia has 12,400 tanks. He will know that the Prime Minister mentioned that we had sent 2,000 anti-tank missiles to Ukraine. Does he think we are doing enough to provide assets to Ukraine to defend itself?

Dr Fox: No, we have not been doing enough. Since we saw the occupation of Crimea in 2014, many of us, including some who are in the House today, have been arguing that the west should be giving Ukraine the proper capabilities to defend itself. It is clear today that we did not do so—something that I will come to in a moment.

Since sanctions were imposed on Russia in 2014, it has paid down state debt, had significant import substitution to make it less dependent on outside producers, and made large investments in European metallurgy, energy and critical infrastructure. In 2020, the inward stock of foreign direct investment in the UK from Russia was £681 million, and the equivalent EU figure was £112 billion. Sanctions must include restrictions on all Russian investment if we are to stop Russia from wriggling out of any new sanctions that are applied because of what it has done today.

To go back to the point made by the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), I hope the House will forgive me for quoting an article I wrote on 22 February 2015, which said that an option would be

“to give the Ukrainians the capabilities they most require in order to defend themselves against the military superiority of the pro-Russian separatists and their Kremlin allies.

Primarily, this would involve properly encrypted communications, UAVs for surveillance and targeting and anti-tank capabilities to deal with the massive deficit which the Ukrainians currently have on this front.

There is increasing scepticism in Washington that any diplomatic solution reached with the Putin government will be as worthless as that achieved in Minsk last September.”

What was true at that time about NATO is true today:

“Everybody wants the insurance policy, but too few want to pay the premiums.

Western nations are too afraid to reallocate funds from their welfare addicted domestic populations to their national security budget and Russia knows it.”

National security is the first duty of all Governments. Today's shocking events should be a clear reminder of that to all of us.

The challenge of Ukraine is likely to be faced elsewhere, as despots start to believe that the west is weaker than it has been for many a long year. It will be a challenge to our values, our democratic way of life and our security. All of us in politics, at whatever level, should remember this: politics is essentially binary. Either we shape the world around us, or we will be shaped by the world around us.

I believe that the values we hold and the history and culture that we defend are worth not only protecting for ourselves, but extending to those in the rest of the world who should have a right to enjoy the same freedoms and benefits we have. The gauntlet was picked up by previous generations. The question is whether we will have the courage to do so today.

1.59 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox). I was reflecting as he spoke that it is now almost 40 years since our paths first crossed at the University of Glasgow. It is fair to say that our shared history has not always been characterised by broad agreement, but there was very little that he said today with which I would disagree.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this debate. As others have said, it is timely in a way that I suspect even he would not have imagined when he made the application to the Backbench Business Committee.

The House knows of my interest in our relations with China—I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary groups on Hong Kong and on the Uyghur population—but today I want to focus my remarks on our relationship with Russia. Before I do so, I pose a fairly basic question to the House: if we acquiesce in Putin invading and occupying Ukraine on the basis that it is ethnically and linguistically Russian, which is his purported basis, what would we say to China if it were then to take the same action in relation to Taiwan? Consistency matters.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Equally, if we acquiesce in what is happening now, the same argument could be deployed by Putin with regard to many other parts of eastern Europe.

Mr Carmichael: That is exactly the case. We know that this is how Putin works. He will take so much, consolidate, bank it and let time pass, trade continues and then he asks for more. It is not just Putin; it is despots throughout history. The parallels with other despots in European history are there for all to see and I fear that we cannot ignore them for much longer.

I have to place on record my frustration that this debate is now the only opportunity that we will have to discuss this—as distinct from the Prime Minister’s statement, because a statement is not a debate—until a week on Monday. If nothing else, the opportunity for this House to debate specifically what is happening in Ukraine would be a very important signal for us to send to fellow parliamentarians in Ukraine that we stand with them in defending their democracy.

We may be shocked by what we have seen happen today, but we should not be in any way surprised. It has been obvious for weeks and months—some might even say years—that this day was always going to come. It grieves me more than anything else that our Government’s response to this challenge so far has been, bluntly, pusillanimous. The scale and nature of the sanctions that have been brought forward is wholly inadequate. We also have to get real about the opportunities that economic sanctions will bring us. Because of the way in which we have pursued our trade policy in the past decade or so, Putin has built up a reported reserve in the region of \$640 billion, so it is clear that he will be able to withstand economic sanctions for some time, and we should not overestimate the opportunities that they bring.

With Putin, and others like him, it is always important to see that we have sent the right signals. What signals have we sent—by “we” I mean western Europeans—since 2014? We allowed Germany to go ahead and negotiate the construction of Nord Stream 2, a project that was designed specifically to take Ukraine out of the equation and allow a continued supply of gas from Russia to Europe.

I, like many people, find myself in a difficult contest between what my head and my heart tell me. My head tells me that we have seen all this before. My head tells me that despots using foreign policy to distract attention from problems at home is nothing new and only ends in one way. My head tells me that the proposition that national boundaries should be defined on ethnic or linguistic grounds is a dangerous road for any country to be going down. My head tells me that history tells us that appeasement never works. But at the same time my

heart says that this risks taking us to a place where we have armed conflict on continental Europe. As somebody who was born in 1965 and brought up through the ’70s and ’80s, I believed that that was impossible and unthinkable, but now we need to confront that very real possibility.

I said that the Government’s response has been inadequate. That has been illustrated to me today by calls and emails I have received from constituents who tell me that at Sullum Voe oil terminal in Shetland, the oil tanker NS Challenger—which is owned and operated by Sovcomflot, a company wholly owned by the Russian Government—is, as we speak, loading oil for export out of Shetland. What does that tell us? It tells us that everything that the Government have said this week has been heard in Russia and has been understood, in simple terms, as saying that it is business as usual. “Why on earth”, my constituents ask me, “are we currently exporting as strategically important a commodity as oil out of Shetland in Russian-owned and operated tankers?” I do not know what answer I can give them other than that we have continued, even at the 11th hour and 59th minute, to send the wrong signals. We need to return to this in the days and weeks to come, but for now the challenge that we have is to the post-war rules-based international order. If we acquiesce in the face of that challenge, frankly, we do not end anywhere that is a good place.

2.6 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who stands out as the only Scottish Member of Parliament who voted for the renewal of Trident in 2016. That is a great credit to him and to his prescience, because, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) said, if there was ever a demonstration of the futility of nuclear disarmament, it is the position that Ukraine finds itself in now. Yet that is the policy of the SNP and of a great number of Labour MPs, and they are a threat to our national security.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this debate. As the dark shadow of war once again falls across our entire continent, I reflect on the adage attributed to Leon Trotsky:

“You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.”

Everyone who loathes war and wants peace should reflect on that. If other people are determined to foment war, we have to take an interest.

The question in this debate is how we should now see Russia and China and the relationship between them. In the UK, we see Russia as an immediate threat, but China as perhaps the much greater long-term challenge. In the US, it is different. All US presidents since Obama have seen China as the existential threat and today’s Russia as yesterday’s problem, Europe’s problem, and a regional rather than a global threat. There are, to be sure, specialists in the US who understand that, like China, Russia is a long-term opponent, but their voices must compete with those who are effectively advocating appeasement for Russia—resets, normalisation, and the overlooking of previous illegal incursions, overseas assassinations, cyber-attacks on NATO allies and so on.

[*Sir Bernard Jenkin*]

In Europe, Germany understands the existential nature of the Russian threat, but has until very recently pursued a policy of engagement with Russia. This now looks to have been deeply unwise. It has created serious vulnerability for Germany and for Europe as a whole. France, historically anti-American, must now accept that Russia presents the threat. Even this week, the French were, understandably, trying to use this to their advantage to prove their global influence and to try to secure peace. But all of Europe must now be united.

Nor is the United Kingdom beyond criticism. We have a firm understanding of the Russia problem in our analytical community, and of China, but until recently successive Prime Ministers chose to turn a blind eye to both problems. This is now changing, but the UK finds itself without the necessary tools to tackle the Russia threat and the China challenge. Our military has lost its ability to fight a peer enemy. Our legal system allows Russians and Chinese agents to exploit the vulnerabilities inherent in democracy. Our own blind reliance on spot markets to obtain cheaper gas has undermined our energy security. I have spoken before about how the UK Government lack the capacity for deep continuous strategic thinking to match the strategy and planning of our enemies, and I will return to that point.

Putin and President Xi have observed years of western failure to react to Russian encroachments and Chinese anti-democratic influence. We have encouraged them to join together in thinking that, despite our bluster, Putin's taking Ukraine and China's expanding influence are in their mutual interests and will remain largely unchallenged. That must now change, and it is changing. Until recently, it seemed that Putin might succeed, as he did in Georgia and Crimea, but Putin has miscalculated. His bullying has mobilised Ukraine's resistance, is galvanizing support for NATO in previously neutral nations such as Sweden and Finland, and is rekindling Washington's concern about Russia's threat to global peace.

Geraint Davies: The hon. Gentleman will have seen a map drawn by Putin of Ukraine, where a lump is given to Ukraine by Stalin, another lump by Lenin and another lump by Brezhnev. Does he agree that the implicit plan is to take all that bit, to leave a little bit, like a doughnut, for the Ukrainians to be corralled in, to have them like the Uyghur population, to Russify the rest, to finish off Ukraine and to take the large majority of it?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: What is completely clear is that President Putin has repudiated his own words and security guarantees that were given to Ukraine on its existing borders.

Last night's strikes by Russia on Ukraine's military infrastructure and border guard units, and the incursions of military vehicles, show that there can be no compromise with Putin. We will only find peace through strength. What is there to negotiate? Putin is now seized by an irrational obsession to crush Ukraine by one means or another. His performance on Russian TV addressing his security council underlined how Putin is now acting out his emotions—his frustration, wounded pride and lust for revenge. According to him, only great powers count, and if you cannot bully your smaller neighbours into submission, you are not really a great power.

President Xi is very different from the usurper Putin. While Russia represents great culture and history, Putin's rogue regime is fundamentally weak, trying to prove its power despite Russia's internal dysfunctionality and economic failure. China, however, represents a far older, more consistent and altogether more considered philosophical tradition. Putin acts impetuously; President Xi demonstrates strategic patience. Russia is trying to distract from its failures; China is building upon its success. The task of the west is not only to deal effectively with Putin, but to give a clear message to China and to other countries that might consider endorsing or imitating Putin's aggression.

To his credit, President Xi has now backed off from his earlier strong support for Putin, as he came to realise that a full-scale invasion of Ukraine will mobilise the west and enable the west to strengthen its defences and have a more competitive stance, against not only Russia, but China. China should reflect on the questions now being asked in Washington and Europe, as raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset. Why should we not formally recognise Taiwan's sovereignty and its right to self-determination, if China is to co-operate so easily with Putin in Ukraine? China can use this moment to build trust with the west. The west will continue to have great differences with China, but we want to work together with China for global peace and security and for a sustainable planet. We cannot begin to do so if China aligns itself with the now rogue regime in Moscow.

2.14 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am grateful to catch your eye, Mr Deputy Speaker, in this important debate. I will concentrate my remarks solely on the west and Russia today, although I have a great deal of experience in China.

By invading Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin is imposing misery on the Ukrainian people and his own people, and economic hardship on the rest of the world. Using military aggression to annex sovereign countries is a 19th-century grand power concept in the 21st-century world, where we should be able to settle our differences in a more sophisticated way. Putin wants to go down in history as the leader who restored the Soviet Union. He is tough, he appears not to respect the west or its leaders, and he will not back down easily now that he has invaded Ukraine. We all know what is going on even at this very minute, and how the whole of Ukraine is coming under pressure, and I think it will probably not be long before Kyiv falls.

It is completely false for Putin to claim that Ukraine, or at least parts of Ukraine, belong to Russia due to historical ties. Following such tenuous logic, other well-established European sovereign states that were former members of the Soviet Union would also "belong" to Russia, including the Baltics, or even those countries that have historically fallen under the Russian sphere of influence, such as Finland and Romania. I imagine many of the countries that have borders with Russia feel very nervous at this moment.

The fact is that Ukraine has gained independence and has had democratic elections for 30 years this month. Indeed, as several Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), have said, Ukraine gave up its

atomic weapons following an agreement in 1994, which was backed by a peace agreement by Russia, America, ourselves and other nations. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) said, it would be interesting to postulate what would have happened if Ukraine still had nuclear weapons.

While the west has responded with solidarity so far, it is very much a first step. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 was a first test by Putin of how the west would respond to his design on rebuilding Russia's soviet legacy, and we know that responding weakly and ending sanctions as soon as we could has led to the situation we find ourselves in today. The decisive western leadership at the end of the cold war could not have been more different. The strong alliance between Thatcher and Reagan was crucial in the diplomacy that took place with Gorbachev, and their combined policy led to the end of the cold war and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

What should our response now be? The two main elements are military and economic. Regarding military support, I am pleased that for a number of years the UK has been supporting the defence and security of Ukraine, helping to train more than 22,000 members of the Ukrainian army, as well as helping to expand the Ukraine's naval facilities and capability. There is plenty more military support that we can provide without sending British troops. I welcome the Defence Secretary's recent announcements about the defensive weapons we have been supplying, including light anti-tank armour and defensive weapons systems, but there is plenty more we could be doing, and I look forward to the announcement that the Prime Minister will make at 5 o'clock this evening. We could, for example, supply anti-aircraft missiles and satellite communication intelligence on Russian troop movements, which would help Ukraine plan its defence. We must continue to re-supply the Ukraine military with anything it needs. We must commit to do that until Russia leaves the sovereign country of Ukraine, so that Russia knows it will not have an easy task in attacking Ukraine.

What concerns me and many of my constituents in the Cotswolds is the somewhat limited economic action we have taken so far. As I have said, it is very much a first step, and we must look to further economic sanctions. We should, for example, examine the fact that Putin is one of the world's richest men, with his wealth estimated at £200 billion, largely distributed about the world in dollars. We should go after that money and freeze it, and we should go after the people who have helped him make that money.

Furthermore, we should go after the oligarchs who surround Putin. If we start to make them really uncomfortable in their pocket, perhaps sooner or later they will start to influence Putin. We need to do that rapidly, because people have the ability to move money around the world very quickly these days. We should have already passed an Act in this Parliament about how we can freeze the sovereign debt of the Soviet Union, how we can get into the SWIFT—Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication—system and stop money getting in and out of the Soviet Union and how we can stop them dealing in dollars. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said that Putin has an arsenal of £650 billion, but that will soon run down if we take effective economic measures.

The west must stand together, impose a full set of economic sanctions and resupply Ukraine in any military way possible without leading to full-scale troop insertions from the west. Above all, we must continue to give Ukraine hope. We must keep morale up. The Prime Minister was dead right to ring the President of Ukraine this morning at 4 o'clock to keep that morale up, and we must keep doing that.

2.20 pm

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown). As he was talking, I was thinking about 1215, King John and his advisers and the necessity to curtail power. President Putin needs to be put back in his box. We need to support our Government in everything that they are doing in the weeks and months ahead. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for securing the debate in the Chamber today, even though it is a sober one. My thoughts are very much with my Ukrainian community in Bolton, where I have a Ukrainian social club and cultural centre, led by Yaroslaw, in the heart of my constituency.

Essentially, I will say three things to three different groups of people. I will make a first point to the Minister, a second to those with slightly more hawkish tendencies and a third to China—although I do not think it necessarily watches our debates that often. *[Interruption.]* Via the embassy, perhaps.

To the Minister, I say do not push China and Russia closer together. To speak to the motion, that should be the case if the Government are seeking to align their policy and strategy when it comes to Russia and China.

To those who are more sceptical and see the threats in the world at the moment, I say that we should choose strategy over ideology, because ideology on its own is not a strategy. As has been mentioned throughout the debate, one of our great advantages in this country is the alliances that we have built over many years and decades. We should be proud of them.

To China, I say that it has a chance to show leadership during this crisis and to show that it can be more sophisticated on the international stage. It is often the case that Chinese friends or contacts of mine will say that they ai heping—love peace. When they refer to Russia on social media, they will often refer to Russians as a zhandou minzu—more of a fighting people. My call to the Chinese in the midst of the biggest crisis that we have had in Europe is that China does not play the game that Russia is playing. It has a fantastic opportunity to show leadership.

On diplomacy and strategy, this week is 50 years since Nixon's detente with Mao Zedong. It is awfully striking that we see the tectonic plates suddenly shifting again. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) spoke articulately about a changing world order. I do not fear the world order changing, because the only constant is change, but how it is happening is completely wrong. How Russia acted in 2014 over Crimea, and how it is acting in Ukraine today, is completely wrong. There should be processes involved—a democratic process—and that has not happened. That is why, in this country, we have to stand by our values in the face of that regime.

[Mark Logan]

To continue thinking about western policy with Nixon, that week was all about Kissinger's foreign policy. Over the last few years, the United States has had a reverse Kissinger approach to develop the relationship with Russia as opposed to with China, but that has failed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) alluded to earlier. Who will be the British Kissinger? Who will be the honest broker who brings China on side?

The United Kingdom has a fantastic opportunity. We were a superpower not that long ago and people in our society still remember that time. We had a very peaceful transition of power to the United States. We also have one of the most historical bilateral relationships with China, which predates the United States' relationship and goes back to the Macartney mission in 1793 and touches on Lord Palmerston during the opium wars, which was a sombre time in that relationship. The Chinese respect the United Kingdom. They have a huge admiration for our culture and civilisation. The British Council's statistics on the perception of the United Kingdom show that we are always among the most favoured nations in the world.

I have only a minute left to speak, but I note that we should be careful about conflating the issue of Taiwan with that of Ukraine. It was mentioned earlier that the Chinese are savvy when it comes to strategy. Indeed, Sunzi bingfa talks about shang bin fa mo, or buzhan ersheng—to win without fighting—as referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight earlier.

In our Government, our country and our society, we need to be careful about the short-termism that has come over us. Six months ago, when we invited the Ukrainian ambassador to speak to the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine, three MPs turned up, but we could see it coming down the line. Everything is too last-minute and we are spending too much time in this Chamber and in other parts of this place talking about things that are not as important as the issue that is at hand now.

Those are the three messages. In closing, I say to the Minister that she should not allow China and Russia to become too close—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I very much regret having to do this. I apologise to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to the House and to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), because I misconstrued his record. It was in fact my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) who was the only Scottish MP who voted for the renewal of Trident in 2016. To the right hon. Gentleman's credit, however, he is not actually a unilateral disarmer.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you for the point of order, Sir Bernard. The record will now be corrected.

2.26 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance is just two years old this month. It is a growing group of 35 countries; I am pleased to say that two more have just joined. Each

country has a Government-appointed representative, such as me, the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. The UK has the privilege of chairing the alliance in 2022. It is an active network of like-minded countries that are committed to advancing freedom of religion or belief around the world.

In 2020, Ukraine was a country that early committed to the principles and membership of the alliance—a commitment that cannot be lightly given or automatically accepted. Our principles are on the IRFBA website. It has been my privilege as chair of the alliance to work with alliance country representatives, and I put on record my appreciation of Ukraine's active commitment to the work of the alliance, which so often includes working for the freedom of others in countries around the world.

As our Prime Minister said to Ukrainians today, as Russia invades their borders,

“we are with you, we are praying for you and your families, and we are on your side.”

Indeed, we are on their side in their passionate belief that the people of Ukraine should be just as free to live by the principles of IRFBA, which Ukraine as a country is committed to championing for others across the world.

I believe that IRFBA is one of the alliances referred to by the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, whom I thank for his interest in the alliance, as having greater potential to work for the common good across the world. As the Prime Minister has said in this place:

“We all know that wherever freedom of belief is under attack, other human rights are under attack as well.”—[*Official Report*, 11 November 2020; Vol. 683, c. 898.]

Sadly, violations against freedom of religion or belief are increasing across the world, not least due to the unwarranted abuse of state power.

In that regard, I turn now from Russia to China. The Sino-British joint declaration was registered in 1985 with the UN as a legally binding international treaty intended to remain in force for 50 years. Yet as we all know—we have become all too familiar with the overt restrictions on rights and the encroachment on human rights on mainland China—over the past three years, Hong Kong's freedoms, democracy, human rights and autonomy have been rapidly and dramatically dismantled and the rule of law increasingly undermined. One by one, we have seen basic freedoms destroyed, with the imprisonment of protesters, legislators and journalists, the closure of almost all independent or pro-democracy media outlets and threats to academic freedom.

Until recently, arguably one of the few remaining freedoms not overtly affected was freedom of religion or belief, but there are now increasing reasons to be concerned. Over the past two years, since the imposition of the draconian national security law, there have been numerous examples of freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong coming under pressure. In 2020, the Hong Kong Catholic diocese discouraged lay Catholics from organising a public prayer campaign for the city, and the apostolic administrator at the time, Cardinal John Tong, issued a letter to all Catholic clergy urging them to be careful in their sermons. His exact phrase was “Watch your language”. Also that year, Hong Kong police raided the premises of Good Neighbour North District church, and HSBC froze the bank accounts of the church and its pastor.

More recently, just at the end of last month, the pro-Beijing newspaper *Ta Kung Pao* carried four articles attacking the Church. They contained a specific critique of Hong Kong's bishop emeritus, Cardinal Joseph Zen; alleged that many of the protesters in 2019 were educated in Christian schools and accused churches of being behind the protests; and called for fresh Government regulations to control religious institutions. As experts have noted, when the Chinese Communist party regime intends to launch a new campaign or crackdown, it often trails it in pro-Beijing media first, so these articles in *Ta Kung Pao* are ominous.

Let us also remember that many of those currently in prison, including several whom I have had the privilege of meeting, are people of faith—jailed not directly because of their faith, but because of their courageous struggle for democracy, freedom and human rights, and often motivated by their faith. While the threats to freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong currently may be much more subtle than those in some other countries and not today in the same fierce spotlight, that is no reason to be complacent. Indeed, it is all the more reason to call out these early warning signs and monitor the situation ever more closely.

2.32 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me in this debate. As much as anybody in the House of Commons, having been chairman of the all-party group on Russia and being married to someone who is half-Russian, I have sought to understand Russia and the mindset of its leaders. What I am going to say in no way amounts to my approval of what is going through the mind of Vladimir Putin; I heartily condemn what has happened this morning. However, in this country and in the west, we think of the relationship of Russia and Ukraine in a rather similar vein to how we thought of the relationship between Germany and Poland before the second world war. Russian nationalists such as Mr Putin have a completely different mindset.

In his speech a couple of days ago, Mr Putin said that the Soviet Union “created” Ukraine, and in a way that is partly true. What happened was that there was a brief upsurge of Ukrainian nationalism in 1918 and 1919, following the collapse of the tsarist empire, but Lenin quickly snuffed out Ukrainian independence and in effect made Ukraine a vassal state. When Putin says that Ukraine has always been part of Russia, in a sense he is right because, following the partitions of Poland in the 1770s and the 1790s, Ukraine was an integral part of Russia for nearly 200 years. When we look inside the mind of a Russian nationalist such as Mr Putin, we can see that he does not recognise Ukraine as an independent state.

I have heard a lot of criticism of the responses of our Government and of NATO generally, but I think that nothing we could have done differently would have changed that mindset or probably avoided what has happened today. I personally think that the response of western Governments and of NATO up to now has been right and proportionate. What we have avoided doing, and must continue to avoid doing, is playing to the victimhood mindset of many Russian nationalists. They believe that they were humiliated by the west following the fall of the Soviet Union, particularly by

President Clinton. They believe that Secretary of State Baker gave a solemn promise that NATO would not expand eastwards. Whether or not that is right is not important; they believe it.

President Putin has claimed, completely wrongly, that we are trying to make a vassal state of Ukraine, and he has used the issue of NATO membership to justify his actions. We could not have said to an independent country such as Ukraine that it could never join NATO, but the reality is that NATO has never made any effort to actually move this application forward. Indeed, the German Chancellor said only in the last week that Ukraine's membership of NATO was “not on the agenda”, so when Putin claims that we are trying to make Ukraine a vassal state, he is lying.

What do we do now? I know that what I am going to say may not be very popular with some, but I think we have to continue with the strategy we have pursued so far. The Government have been attacked for the so-called weakness of their sanctions, but the sanctions they imposed earlier this week were only part of the story. What I am sure we will hear tonight is much stricter sanctions that will really hurt the Russian state. People will say that this is weak and that there should be some warlike response, and people will say that we should have allowed Ukraine to keep nuclear weapons, that we should arm the Ukrainians and that Ukraine should join NATO, but this is the path to war.

It is sometimes difficult to speak of a path to peace, but if we escalate issues and go into a tit-for-tat situation, then war can result. At the height of the first world war, the German Chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg was asked how the war started, and he said that he had no idea how it started and no idea how it escalated.

Bob Seely: As ever, my right hon. Friend is making some very sensible points. I do not think NATO should be asking Ukraine for membership, which is a 20-year path, because it simply enrages Putin, and it gives him a chance to respond and to claim that NATO membership is imminent. However, there is a difference between NATO membership, which is a red rag to a bull, and ensuring that Ukraine is too bitter a pill for Russia to swallow. Arming and training an independent, separate or Finland-like Ukrainian army is different from getting into a position where we are in direct conflict with the Russians.

Sir Edward Leigh: Well, I suspect that is what we have done. However, the German state simply sending helmets or a field hospital to Ukraine or our sending a few anti-tank handheld missiles will make no difference at all. I am not criticising the Government: we have gone through the motions, but the fact is that nothing we could have done would have been sufficient to arm the Ukrainian state well enough to be able to resist Russian aggression.

I want to say to the Government that they have to pursue the path of peace, and I do not think we should decry sanctions. Putin has now moved into the dark side of history, but if we cut off Russia entirely from the rest of the world economically, we can make a difference. I am sure what is going to be announced tonight will start the process of proving that the west can be resolute and determined that we are not playing to Putin's war game and have never sought to make Ukraine in any

[Sir Edward Leigh]

sense a vassal state of the west. There was no intention—this is a complete lie—that nuclear weapons or a dirty bomb could have been restored to Ukraine. The Government have to pursue the path of peace, impose the most rigorous economic sanctions and not escalate to war.

My last point is that the Government should not hold the Russian people responsible for this. Most Russian people I know, and Ukrainian people, are not interested in this warped view of history and sense of victimhood. All they want is to get on with their lives in peace. They just do not want war: they do not want war between Russia and Ukraine, and they do not want war between the west and Russia.

2.39 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): As chair of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and the all-party China group, it is a great pleasure to speak last—I think—from the Back Benches in this debate, which has been brilliantly timed by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely).

It is an extraordinary thing. No one could criticise the energy of our defence and diplomatic engagement with Ukraine and Russia in the past few weeks and even months. It is also true, however, that a united western approach, whether on defence, cyber, energy or even legislation, has been lacking, and that is what, paradoxically, President Putin may be helping to bring about. Our own analysis has been in the integrated review for a year and a half: “Global Britain in a Competitive Age” clearly outlines Russia as the most acute direct threat, and China as a systemic competitor. Nor do we lack policy goals in either direction. We aspire to be the leading European ally in NATO, and have the broadest, most integrated presence of any European partner in the Indo-Pacific, in support of mutually beneficial trade, shared security and values.

However, the best plans have to adapt to facts on the ground, so let us identify the challenge before us which, as the head of the Security Service put it the other day, is

“a contest of different worlds...between the liberal democrat model west and the more authoritarian model nations.”

In my view, that is only partly true, because we do—and should—work closely with nations and societies, whether in the middle east, Africa or Asia, that could not be described as following a liberal democrat model, but that may not wish for a change of global leadership.

In that new environment, we must think carefully about what our approach should be, and I believe the first thing is to define British interests, which include a global Britain, not a Britain decoupled from the world—as the head of the Security Service made clear, there is no need to cut ourselves off from the world. It involves understanding autocrats through engagement. In the context of China, that engagement very much includes forums such as the UK-China Leadership Forum, which brings British and Chinese leaders together to talk about issues of strong bilateral and indeed global interest. It includes the work of a Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office non-departmental body, the Great Britain-China Centre, and the all-party China group. That group has now run its first masterclass for Members of Parliament, so that we all have a better grasp of some of the issues, whether that is mainland China, the

bilateral relationship, Taiwan, Hong Kong—whatever. Such courses play an important part in expanding our knowledge of the autocracies of the world. Engagement has suffered hugely from this pandemic. It has been terrible for engagement, as it is effectively impossible to travel to China or Hong Kong if one has to quarantine for three weeks, and that lack of physical contact is always dangerous in a more uncertain world.

Within that, our approach needs to consider a number of different things. First, careful scrutiny, not blanket prejudice, is incredibly important. Colleagues across the House have talked about not having any danger of prejudice against the peoples of Russia or China, as that would be contrary to everything that this House and democracies stand for. More trade and investment is a good thing; it brings countries closer together and ties us all in, while protecting our national security. Other colleagues have raised ways in which we can and should do that, and we have been too slow to do so.

We also need to define our positive interests as much as the things we dislike. There is sometimes a danger in this House that while we are good at criticising what we do not like, we do not make enough of what is positive—what is good about our own country, what we need to do more of, and how we can engage with the world more effectively.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Through his chairmanship of the all-party China group, my hon. Friend and neighbour has probably done more than anybody in this House to engage with China. One thing he has always done when engaging with China is to be absolutely frank with the Chinese where they have got it wrong, as well as where they have it right. Is that how we should go forward?

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend and neighbour is very kind. I have always felt it incredibly important that we stand up for our values, and for the past 11 years, as chair of the all-party China group, I have never accepted mainland Chinese sponsorship of the group. That is precisely because I knew that somewhere along the line, that would be perceived as the group being obliged to a nation overseas, with whose values we do not always align. I have always felt it incredibly important to speak truth to power, whether that is our own Ministers, who may not always relish that, or foreign countries. It is all about the tone and how we engage, understanding where foreign countries, in particular autocracies, are coming from. There is no need for us to compromise on our values, but there is every need to find a way of co-existing peacefully with countries that will be here for a very long time to come. Our greatest challenge will be how we balance those two things.

I will conclude by musing on the fact that the story of the 20th century is fundamentally a story of how nationalist autocracies underestimated the resolve of the democratic west to come together in defence of what we believe in. It would be the cruelest irony and the greatest shame if the same were now to happen in our own century. For all those reasons, it is even more important that we double, triple, quadruple our engagement with those of different values in different systems, so that we understand where they are coming from and are better prepared to unite in a strategic approach together, if need be, to counter threats to our own future.

2.46 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for securing this debate which, although timely, I do not believe is the debate that he or any Member of the House would have hoped to have when he applied for it. I agree with almost everything that has been said this afternoon. I also agree with many of the solutions that have been brought forward, but I cannot help but regret the fact that it took bombs falling on civilians in Ukraine to get us to this position in the first place.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is an act of naked aggression that all right-thinking people must, and do, condemn. But let me be clear: our fight is with Putin and his cronies, with oligarchs who have become billionaires by having plundered Russia's resources and hidden their obscene wealth in the west, and with those politicians close to the Kremlin who have encouraged and enabled this appalling attack on an independent sovereign state. They are the guilty ones in all of this, not the Russian people. As the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said, the Russian people are not our enemy, and I believe we have a duty to ensure that the language we use does not in any way convey that we believe they are. I am sure that they are just as fearful of the consequences of a war in Europe as anyone on the continent is—indeed, given their history, probably more than most.

Of course, there are close ties, friendships and bonds that were forged during the second world war between Scotland—indeed, the whole of the UK—and the then Soviet Union. I am reminded of the actions of the people of Airdrie and Coatbridge who, when Hitler laid siege to Leningrad in 1941, organised relief packages and sent an album, letters of support and cards from churches, factories, co-operative societies and schools. Somehow, that album got through the blockade, and it was greeted enthusiastically by the women of Leningrad. They were so delighted that their allies—people on the other side of the world—had not forgotten about them in their time of greatest need. Despite struggling daily with hunger, disease, death and the consequences of a siege, the people of Leningrad managed to put together their own album containing letters, watercolours and prints and somehow got it back to Scotland, arriving in Airdrie in 1943. That album has been preserved ever since in the care of the Mitchell library in Glasgow. That is an important example of the solidarity and friendship that can and must exist between our peoples.

It is so important that, when we speak today, we do not speak of the Russian people as our enemy; we must make our remarks specific to the leadership in the Kremlin and those who support him. In so doing, and at the same time, we must also point the finger at those much closer to home—those among us who have facilitated the kleptocracy and grown fabulously wealthy by hiding Russian plunder for those people behind a cloak of respectability.

It is clear that the facilitation of what has been called criminal capitalism and the emergence of London as the money laundering capital of the world has infected not just our financial institutions but our politics, too. That can be seen in the oh-so-cosy relationship that has been allowed to flourish between Russian oligarchs and the UK's governing party. Everyone can see that, for more than a decade, in return for everything from

access to Ministers to priority visas, lunch with Ruth Davidson and tennis with the Prime Minister, very wealthy Russians have been throwing money into British politics.

Tom Tugendhat: Will the hon. Member give way?

Brendan O'Hara: Very briefly, because I am on a strict time limit.

Tom Tugendhat: The whole point of the debate was to bring the country together to help to support free people who are being oppressed. While the hon. Member mentions all those things, and many of us have condemned several of them, the idea that they are in any way relevant is appalling, particularly when his former party leader—someone with whom he sat on those Benches—is a propagandist for Putin. It is really shameful.

Brendan O'Hara: I utterly reject what the hon. Gentleman is saying. If we cannot shine a mirror on ourselves and say where we got this spectacularly and appallingly wrong, we are bound to make those same mistakes again. Let us not gloss over those mistakes. This is not a propaganda exercise. We are complicit—the British political system is complicit—in where we are right now. He spoke on Radio 4 this morning about the weakness of the sanctions regime put together on Monday. He recognises and has gone on record as saying that it was far too little, far too late.

Richard Graham *rose*—

Brendan O'Hara: No, I will not give way.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. You have had six minutes, Mr O'Hara, so please draw your remarks to a conclusion.

Richard Graham: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I give the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) a chance to withdraw the effective implication that somehow a game of tennis played by the Prime Minister was responsible for the invasion of Ukraine?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please resume your seat. Mr O'Hara, you are coming towards the end.

Brendan O'Hara: That was a nonsense assertion to make, and I utterly reject it.

We must be absolutely clear in what we do and what we say. We must be tough on Russia. There is no room for equivocation at all. It is time for the Government to get tough on those who have laundered Russia's dirty money here in the United Kingdom. That is why the Scottish National party supports calls for an economic crime Bill to be brought in now, to unify the House. We want to see that registration of overseas interests. We want to see far more robust use of unexplained wealth orders, which have been not used at all, and a blacklisting of all dubious Russian banks. The UK Government must immediately ban Russia from the SWIFT banking system and take proper cognisance of and improve the Scottish limited partnership system before it gets further out of control.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I realise that I am running out of time. There is much more that I would like to say, but I cannot.

2.53 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. and gallant Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing the debate and on speaking up so clearly for the defence of human freedom. It is so important and appropriate that you are in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, as somebody who was sanctioned by China.

We woke up this morning to dreadful scenes on our televisions that were reminiscent of the 1945 period, with air raid sirens sounding in a European capital and a full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops accompanied by chilling references to denazification by President Putin. As parents, I am sure all of us in this Chamber will be thinking of our own children. My own are 19 and 27. If we were Russian or Ukrainian, they would be going to that terrible fate. We talk about war in far-flung places quite a lot, but let us not forget what it is. It can be the loss of limb. It can be the loss of life. It can be the loss of your mind. It can be the horror of war, where women are raped. It can be the loss of a family member or a permanent disability. Let us not forget the price tag of President Putin's fantasy, as a Select Committee Chair called it. It is the coloniser's fantasy that he owns another place, which is not his and does not belong to him.

I am so pleased with the tone of the debate. We have been united in our response to the provocations and hostility on display by President Putin to date. It is critically important that we remain united and rise above the partisan fray to speak with one voice in complete condemnation. I am so pleased that, as we speak, outside in Parliament Square the Union Jack and the flag of Ukraine are unfurled together. There are many pictures on social media showing that strength of purpose.

We know that Ukraine is an emerging liberal democracy, democratically elected and leaning towards Europe. Putin's attempts to alter its course down the barrel of a gun is completely unacceptable and should be resisted. By his own comments, we know that he has designs not just on Ukraine, but on other nations which, under the Soviet sphere, were under the influence of Moscow. They have chosen a different path and we in this House support their right to choose. We know it is right to bring in sanctions—we look forward to the 5 pm statement, when we will hear more from the Government on strengthening those sanctions—so there can be nowhere to hide economically from the ramifications of the decision to take a country to war.

The situation we face today has ramifications beyond Ukraine. With his invasion of Ukraine, President Putin has put Russia on a collision course with the international system that the world has relied on since the end of the second world war. Many of the speeches today touched on the possibility that we are heading into a new chapter. Not only are we seeing the battle for Ukraine, but the battle for liberal democracy itself. Earlier in the week, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) spoke of

“a wider worldwide trend of authoritarian states trying to impose their way of thinking on others”.—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2022; Vol. 709, c. 177.]

She is right. Nations across the world will be watching events in Ukraine with a sense of foreboding and anxiety. If the international community fails to hold President

Putin to account and abandons Ukraine and her people to President Putin and his warped notions of historical revisionism, then the system we rely on and treasure, and which has largely kept the peace in Europe since 1945, will fall away.

In my remaining minutes, I will briefly address the question of China. We all know that in the China picture, as the hon. Member for Bolton North East (Mark Logan) pointed out, there are differences. We cannot assume that all autocracies are the same. Like dysfunctional families, they all have different patterns. However, we do know that President Xi is intent on controlling Taiwan in some form, and that if President Putin can pull off his attempt to rewrite Europe's borders without serious consequences, then President Xi will feel emboldened to do as he sees fit, particularly as he goes for a third term towards the end of this year. It is up to us to hold the line to defend our democracy and defend freedom over tyranny. I know that is a challenge the Minister recognises and is alive to. The UK's relationships could and should be pragmatic and warm to the people of China and Russia, but we must hold their Governments to account when they challenge our values and our allies' right to self-determination.

The immediate sanctions announced in response to President Putin's renewed hostilities and invasion of Ukraine are welcome, as I said earlier, but obviously we seek reassurance on certain issues, such as a new computer misuse Act, a new foreign agents registration Act, a refreshed official secrets Act, the long-awaited reform of Companies House, a register of overseas entities Bill to deal with the buying up of expensive property in London and the south-east, and now across different regions, and a confident China strategy. The Minister and I have discussed that with her team. I believe that we need to flesh out the China strategy from the FCDO point of view and articulate that in a more confident way that crosses different Government sectors; for example, education in universities, our defence approach and trade and business. Is it safe? Are we ensuring that human rights are being observed? My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) gave an excellent speech about the Tibet situation, for example. All of us across the House have a commitment to opening up and understanding the allegations with regard to human rights and crimes against humanity in the Xinjiang region as well. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) Hill said, we are dealing with a kleptosphere. That is perhaps clearer in the case of Russia, but it is certainly present in the in-flows of renminbi to the UK economy.

Our issue will never be with the people of Russia and China. As parents, we think of the young people; we think of the fear of war. We sincerely hope for a peaceful future, but given the events of this week, with open conflict erupting on the continent of Europe, we must be brave and take the necessary steps that we to protect ourselves, our values and our allies. The world is watching.

3.1 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Middle East (Amanda Milling): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for securing this timely and important debate. It has taken on a slightly different

emphasis by virtue of recent developments, specifically overnight, and I will start by addressing some points on the situation in Ukraine.

The United Kingdom has stood and always will stand for democracy and freedom. The Government are clear that all nations should be held accountable for the international obligations and commitments that they freely signed up to. The UK strongly condemns the appalling, unprovoked attack that President Putin has launched on the people of Ukraine. He has chosen a path of bloodshed and destruction by launching that unprovoked attack. Russia's attack on Ukraine is a flagrant breach of international law and the Government will stand with Ukraine in the face of that attack. As the Prime Minister said earlier today,

“we are with you, we are praying for you and your families, and we are on your side”.

We will work with our allies to respond decisively. As Members are aware, the Prime Minister will come to the House later this afternoon to update them on our response.

To turn to how the Government's strategies help us to respond to these challenges, our strategic approach to security, defence, development and foreign policy under the integrated review is a very important starting point. The integrated review is clear that we are witnessing a growing contest between international rules and norms. It sets out a foreign policy baseline that helps to ensure that there are aligned cross-Government strategies. On my hon. Friend's point, in addition, the National Security Council continues to provide clear direction for the Government's Russia and China policies, and in doing so, reflects the importance of consistency in our foreign policy as well as the need to take a strategic approach to each country that reflects the complexities of each state and each relationship.

Since the integrated review was published, the Foreign Secretary has set out her vision for the UK to use all our weight, as the world's fifth largest economy, to build a network of liberty and advance the frontiers of freedom. Russia's current challenge of the international norms and of Ukraine's sovereignty is a stark illustration of the importance of implementing that vision with our partners, as well as responding to the immediate challenges that Russia poses.

President Putin's attack on Ukraine demonstrates his disregard for Ukraine's sovereignty, for international law and for diplomacy. The United Kingdom and its allies and partners have responded with an immediate set of sanctions and have made it clear that more will follow. The situation in Ukraine today is an acute example of a security threat that could have disastrous consequences—in this case, for Ukraine and Russia—as well as wider global implications. These threats and tests of national resilience can take many forms, as our integrated review published last year sets out.

From the outset, let me be clear: there can be no normalisation in our relationship with Russia while it threatens the UK and our allies. I want to be clear that, as a number of hon. Members have said, while there may be tensions between our Governments, we have no quarrel with the Russian people. But while the Russian Government continue their aggressive behaviour, we will actively deter and defend against the full spectrum of threats emanating from Russia.

Bob Seely: I am delighted by what the Minister is saying. I have just received news that the Ukrainian embassy is putting out a list of medicines that it urgently needs. Will the Government take that list seriously and try to do something about it?

Amanda Milling: As I say, I will leave it to the Prime Minister to update the House on our response to what happened overnight.

Through NATO, we will ensure a united western response, combining our military, diplomatic and intelligence assets in support of collective security. We will uphold international rules and norms and hold Russia to account for breaches of them, working with our international partners as we did after the Salisbury attack. In the context of Ukraine, hon. Members will be aware that the UK is working intensively with allies to ensure that Russia's actions are met with a united international response. We are doing so through NATO, the UN, the OSCE and our partners in the G7 and across Europe. We have engaged with the Russian Government at every level, but Putin has chosen the path of destruction over diplomacy.

The integrated review identifies Russia as representing “the most acute direct threat to the UK”,

as well as predicting that it

“will be more active around the wider European neighbourhood”.

It makes a separate assessment of China, highlighting the

“scale...of China's economy...population, technological advancement and...ambition to project its influence”.

It emphasises China's increasing international assertiveness and scale as one of the most significant geopolitical shifts of the 2020s. Consequently, our approach to China aims to promote a positive economic relationship, but one that avoids strategic dependency and enables us to engage where possible to tackle global challenges. It also addresses the inescapable fact that China is an authoritarian state with a different set of values from the UK's. We cannot let China undermine freedom and democracy. We will hold it to account for human rights violations, whether they are in Xinjiang or in Tibet, and for the erosions of rights and freedoms in Hong Kong.

The Government are clear that in areas of shared interest, the UK will preserve space for co-operation and continue to engage with China and Russia, which, like us, have permanent seats on the UN Security Council. As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary set out in her Chatham House speech in December, we must be

“on the front foot with our friends across the free world, because the battle for economic influence is already in full flow.”

That requires a robust diplomatic framework that allows us to manage disagreements, defend our values and co-operate where our interests align, but let me repeat that we will not accept the campaign that Russia is waging to subvert its democratic neighbours.

As a P5 Member, China has a critical role to play. The UN Secretary General has said that Russia's action

“conflicts directly with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations”.

Just as China refused to recognise the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, we would expect China to uphold the UN charter in the face of this latest violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

[Amanda Milling]

The UK is determined to lead the way in defending democracy and freedom. We will continue to develop an international approach that defends UK interests and promotes our values, including with Russia and China. We will uphold the founding principles of international peace and security in the United Nations, which all three of our countries are duly bound to respect and protect.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): For up to two minutes, we will hear the final word from Bob Seely.

3.9 pm

Bob Seely: I just want to thank Members very much for taking part in the debate. This is a pretty miserable day for all of us who care about democracy in Europe, so let us hope for the best.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to develop separate but aligned cross-Government strategies for both Russia and China; and further calls on the Government to support the international order, working with allies across the globe to develop an approach to Russia and China that, whilst recognising their separate legitimate interests, ensures a robust defence of both UK interests and democratic values.

Recognition of the State of Palestine

3.10 pm

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK Government position on the recognition of the State of Palestine alongside the State of Israel.

It is a real honour to speak about such a critical issue. I wish first to declare an interest as chair of Labour Friends of Palestine and the Middle East and co-chair of the Britain-Palestine all-party parliamentary group. Let me also welcome the Minister to her new role.

The time for recognising the state of Palestine was many years ago. With every year that has passed, the actions of the Israeli Government in creating facts on the ground, building and expanding illegal settlements and taking land and resources from Palestinians have only made it harder to bring this about: a viable, independent, sovereign state of Palestine, based on the 1967 lines, with a capital in Jerusalem.

The UK should make it clear that any future state must include both the west bank and the Gaza Strip. We do not at this stage have to specify precise borders; there may be agreed equal land swaps. Let us remember that when Britain recognised Israel in 1950, it did so without defining borders or its capital. For too long, in fact for over 40 years, successive British Governments of all parties have claimed to support a two-state solution. This claim for Palestinians rings hollow. We recognise only one state, Israel, and refuse to recognise the other. The Government's position remains "not now", but I ask the Government, "If not now, when?"

Palestinian statehood is a right to be recognised, not a gift to be given. It is in the power of the UK Government to do this, and do it we should. We have acknowledged that Palestine has obtained the hallmarks of statehood. The refusal to recognise its statehood sends a dangerous message: it reinforces the view that we support and uphold rights for one people—we rightly recognise the state of Israel—but do not recognise the rights of the other, the Palestinians. It shows that we are not at all serious in our claims to back a two-state solution.

Some argue that Palestinian statehood should be the outcome of negotiations. This allows successive Israeli Governments who reject Palestinian statehood to have a permanent veto. If that is the case, why did we recognise Israel? We recognise Israeli national rights, but not Palestinian national rights. We all want a proper negotiating process to start to bring lasting peace to both the Israeli people and the Palestinian people, but it would be preferable for Palestine to enter that process as a recognised sovereign state. It is essential that Israel knows that statehood for Palestinians is not something to be bartered over, but something that has to happen. Israelis are citizens of a state. They have fully fledged passports. They have a vote at the UN. Palestinians are stateless. At best, they have travel documents. They can travel only with the permission of the occupier, Israel. In fact, they can leave one Palestinian city to go to another Palestinian city only with the permission of the occupier. An Israeli soldier at a checkpoint can prevent President Mahmoud Abbas from leaving Ramallah. Palestinians have no say in the control of their land, water, maritime area or airspace, or even their population registry.

Let me address the points that anti-Palestinian groups make. Recognising a state of Palestine is not about endorsing a particular Government or authority. We recognise many states while having massive disagreements with their Governments—Iran and Syria are examples. As it is, our diplomats meet and work with the Palestinian Authority. There are those who will inevitably say, “Well, what about Hamas?” Hamas wants a one-state solution, something we all disagree with. The longer we dither about recognising Palestine, the more potent Hamas’s argument that there will be no two-state solution becomes. By failing to recognise Palestine, we undermine the Palestinian national movement that agrees to two states in favour of the likes of Hamas. We would be recognising a state under occupation, but there is a precedent for doing that. In 1939, Stalin illegally incorporated Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia into the USSR. In 1990, the long Soviet occupation ended and they ceased to be states under occupation.

On the ground, which I have visited, it is hard to see where this second state is going to be. The moment anyone enters occupied Palestinian territory, they are confronted with the terrifying infrastructure of military occupation, defined by walls, barriers, checkpoints, earth mounds, firing zones and military zones. These are all designed to control Palestinian civilians who live under Israeli military law, as they have done for the past 54 years. In a parallel universe, they now have over 650,000 Israeli settler neighbours living in illegal settlements. This is a violation of the fourth Geneva convention and UN Security Council resolutions. These settlers live under Israeli civilian law. Two peoples living under two different legal systems in the same territory.

Settlers have subsidised housing and fast transport access into Israel, and they do not have to go through the checkpoints and barriers that Palestinians do. The settlers, with the collaboration of the Israeli military, harass and intimidate Palestinians to push them off Palestinian land. The levels of settler violence have gone up massively in the last few years. Violence and the dispossession of Palestinians from their homes are systemic across the occupied Palestinian territory. Israeli soldiers act with impunity and settler violence worsens, particularly in the areas around Nablus and in the south Hebron hills. These are not isolated incidents but day in, day out realities for Palestinians, whose lives and livelihoods are targeted by Israeli settlers, backed up by the Israeli state. To make way for the settlements, Palestinian homes and property are liable to demolition. Whole families—men, women and children—are forced from their homes and land, even in the midst of winter storms.

In Jerusalem, the situation is extremely tense, with a repeat of last year’s conflagration all too possible. Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah and other areas of occupied East Jerusalem continue to face the horrendous threat of forced dispossession and eviction from their homes. Only the other day, the Salem family in Sheikh Jarrah were given a temporary reprieve from being forcibly evicted from their home in favour of Israeli settlers backed by the Israeli state. Political pressure needs to increase, and our solidarity needs to match up with the realities faced by such Palestinian families. It is not enough for our consulate in Jerusalem simply to bear witness as its neighbours literally across the road, the Salhiya family, were forcibly evicted from their home, which was then demolished.

We have all seen the scenes of Israeli police violence towards those protesting against the forced evictions and dispossessions. We have all seen the far right sit-ins and the incitement from far right politicians in Sheikh Jarrah designed to abuse, intimidate and ultimately force Palestinians from their homes. The “death to Arabs” slogans and chants from far-right Israelis, which we heard in abundance last year, are as much part of the lived reality of Palestinians as the threat of forced dispossession. Such is the level of systematic discrimination, is it any wonder that there is mounting consensus among Palestinians and the human rights community that it amounts to the crime of apartheid? Who are we, as British politicians, to dismiss and gaslight the lived experience of Palestinians who speak of apartheid and systematic discrimination?

Why are we shocked when international human rights organisation such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch come to the same or similar conclusions as many Palestinians long before, that their situation amounts to apartheid? What are the Government doing to end such widespread and systematic discrimination and oppression? The Government may dislike the terminology, but the level of discrimination cannot and must not be ignored.

We watch today as a European country faces war and occupation, and we stand with Ukraine in opposing Russian aggression. My heart goes out to the Ukrainian people. We rightly talk about international law, and I listened to the Minister for Asia and the Middle East speak only a few minutes ago about the vital importance of the sovereignty of states, but how must Palestinians feel when they hear that? They have endured 54 years of occupation, which in itself is an aggression.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I am listening carefully to the hon. Lady’s speech. I respectfully say to her that conflating today’s invasion of Ukraine by Russia with the very difficult and sensitive situation we are supposed to be debating with regard to Israel and the people of Palestine is historically, factually and morally wrong. I think it does a huge disservice not just to the people of Ukraine but to the people of Palestine and the people of Israel who face a unique situation and set of challenges.

Julie Elliott: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. However, I was talking about upholding international law, which the Minister for Asia and the Middle East talked about a few minutes ago, and it is as relevant to Ukraine as it is to Palestine.

The Palestinians are looking to us to speak and act in the same terms. We sanctioned Russia over Crimea, and we are now likely to impose more sanctions, with which I wholeheartedly agree, yet Palestinians ask why we do nothing to end Israel’s occupation. Recognising Palestine is now the bare minimum of what we should be doing. In the light of what is happening on the ground, I make it clear that recognising Palestine must be the first of many steps to roll back the inequalities of Israeli occupation and the systematic discrimination that oppresses Palestine. This should include a complete ban on illegal Israeli settlements.

The international community has to hold Israel accountable, as it has held Palestinian groups accountable. If the settlements are illegal and the UK Government

[Julie Elliott]

say they are illegal, the logical consequence is that we should not be trading with, or supporting in any way, enterprises that are in clear violation of international law and that the Government say are an obstacle to peace.

For any state, the strength of its civil society is crucial. We can also support Palestine by defending its civil society and human rights groups from systematic attacks by the occupying power. It is crucial that our Government support and encourage a healthy, prosperous and uninhibited Palestinian civil society that is free from interference by the occupying power, Israel, and from the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. If we are unable to fully pledge our support to Palestinian civil society, what message does this send about our attitude to human rights as a country? We rightly pledge our support for human rights defenders elsewhere, but throw those in Palestine to the wolves. As parliamentarians, many of us would have met and been briefed by organisations such as Al Haq, Defence for Children International – Palestine, and Addameer, three of the six Palestinian civil society and human rights organisations designated, without evidence, by Israel as terrorist organisations. They are one of our most valuable routes into knowing what is happening on the ground. We must support them as parliamentarians, and so must our Government, explicitly and publicly, and defend their right to do their vital work without any interference. In European capitals, we must hear from them, and we must amplify their voices and those of Palestinians living under occupation and under systematic discrimination and oppression.

Logic, the rule of law, fairness and history all tell us that Britain should have recognised a Palestinian state long ago. It is time to correct this and we can do that now. The alternative to a two-state solution is clear, and I shall cite none other than the Prime Minister on this. Five years ago, he said that

“you have to have a two-state solution or else you have a kind of apartheid system.”

Sadly, five years on, we are far closer to the latter than the former. I ask the Government to recognise the state of Palestine now.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): As the House can see, a great many people wish to speak this afternoon, so we will have to start with a time limit of five minutes. That will probably reduce later, but, with five minutes, I call Matthew Offord.

3.26 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I had wanted to intervene on the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) to congratulate her on obtaining this debate. I was listening to what she had to say and I wanted to ask her a question, but unfortunately, as time ran out, I was unable to do that. However, I congratulate her on her words this afternoon. Although I may not agree with a lot of what she says, I am very pleased that she has secured this debate.

It is unfortunate that instead of promoting the resumption of direct peace talks without preconditions, the motion we are debating seeks to undermine the

agreed framework for talks by premeditating the outcome of negotiations. The only route to a lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians is through such talks, and I share the UK Government’s stated view that recognition of a Palestinian state should only come about at a time that best serves the objective of peace. Today’s motion neglects the reality that a two-state solution will be achieved only when both sides make the difficult compromises necessary to achieve it.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman not think that such negotiations have a greater chance of success if both of those communities enter as equals, with a common aim for peace, rather than entering when one can outshine and outvote the other?

Dr Offord: I absolutely do, and the hon. Lady is correct. The problem is that it is impossible to bring Hamas and the Palestinian Authority to the negotiating table. They refuse to negotiate without any preconditions. Until they do so, we will not have any peace in the state of Israel.

Some hon. Members have in these debates evoked the apartheid in South Africa, which is a distortion that we must call out and condemn. Senior Israeli Arabs themselves have rejected the apartheid smear, with the leader of the Islamist Ra’am party, Mansour Abbas, stating that he “would not call it apartheid”

and pointing out that he leads an Israeli-Arab party that is a member of the Israeli coalition Government. Another Israeli Government official, Esawi Frej, responded to the Amnesty report by stating:

“Israel has many problems that must be solved, both within the Green Line and especially in the Occupied Territories, but Israel is not an apartheid state”.

It should go without saying that Israel is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic democracy, where Arab, Druze and other minorities are guaranteed equal rights. The Israeli occupation of the west bank has continued for more than 50 years, not because Israel wants to rule over the territory but because peace talks have thus far failed, despite countless efforts by Israelis and others to achieve peace by negotiations.

Instead of demonising Israel and downplaying the history of terrorism and extreme violence that Israel has faced and continues to face, let us not forget that the Palestinian leadership has rejected all peace proposals and failed to fulfil its commitments of promoting peace and renouncing violent incitement. The cycle of violence will be broken only when peace is built between Israelis and the Palestinians. I do not believe it would be constructive or beneficial to prematurely recognise a Palestinian state before the successful conclusion of peace talks.

Greater investment in peaceful co-existence projects is desperately needed. Peace between leaders will last only if the Israeli and Palestinian peoples trust and empathise with each other. As the US increases its support for peacebuilding, so too should the UK. We should join the US in the establishment of an international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace, to invest in shared-society projects. That would demonstrate our commitment to peace. Will the Minister commit to that?

It is crucial to ensure that our aid promotes peace, so I urge the Minister to reconsider our strategy on aid to the UN Relief and Works Agency, which continues to use the official Palestinian Authority curriculum in its schools despite clear evidence of incitement and antisemitism.

I continue to hope that the Israeli coalition Government's founding principles of compromise and reconciliation will be reflected in the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians.

3.31 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in this debate after the superb opening speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott). None the less, it is a great shame that we are here, once again, holding another debate on the UK's recognition of Palestinian statehood, almost eight years after this House voted formally to adopt that position, because the British Government are yet to do the right thing and abide by that historic decision.

What is more dispiriting is the way in which the situation on the ground in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories has further deteriorated over the past eight years, meaning that the prospect of peace in the region looks more distant than ever. In May 2021 alone, during the violence sparked by the racist eviction of Palestinian families from the east Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah, the UN reported that 256 Palestinians were killed, of whom at least 129 were civilians, including 66 children, as were 10 Israelis, plus three foreign nationals, including two children.

The killing has not let up. Just this week, a 14-year-old Palestinian boy, Mohammed Shehadeh, was killed by Israeli forces gunfire at al-Khader, near Bethlehem. This followed the killing of 19-year-old Nehad Amin Barghouti, who was shot in the abdomen last week by Israeli troops in a village near Ramallah. Over the past year, the Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem recorded 77 Palestinian deaths at the hands of Israeli forces in the west bank, with half those killed not being implicated in any attacks.

The killings have come after the Israeli Government advanced their plans in recent months to build more than 3,000 new homes in illegal settlements across the occupied west bank. With each illegal home the Israelis construct, the dream of a viable Palestinian state is dealt another blow, as settlements are established intentionally to stop contiguous geographical connection between Palestinian communities living in the west bank and east Jerusalem.

The Palestinian people are subjected to yet more intolerable brutality and oppression, with Israeli forces standing idly by or even protecting settlers while they attack Palestinian civilians. B'Tselem has documented that there have been more than 450 incidents of settler violence against Palestinians over the past two years, with Israeli forces failing to intervene to stop the attacks in two thirds of cases.

The organisation has also recorded how settlers have been used as a tool of the state to expropriate 11 square miles of Palestinian farm and pasture land in the west bank over the past five years alone. Palestinian rural communities in the South Hebron hills are under sustained attack from settlers in illegal outposts such as Havat

Ma'on and Avigayil, with the sole intent of pushing them off their land to make way for further Israeli domination and control.

Another Israeli human rights group, Yesh Din, summarising 15 years of monitoring investigations into settler violence, found that, of more than 1,200 investigation files, indictments were served in only 100 of those cases. There is no other way to look at this than as a state-sanctioned project of colonisation and ethnic cleansing.

As the Human Rights Watch report, published in April last year, concluded:

"the Israeli government has demonstrated an intent to maintain the domination of...Israelis over Palestinians across Israel and the OPT. In the OPT, including East Jerusalem, that intent has been coupled with systematic oppression of Palestinians and inhumane acts committed against them. When these three elements occur together, they amount to the crime of apartheid."

It is as simple as that. We must see a change. We must see the oppression of the Palestinian people met with material consequences and meaningful accountability. If this Government will not act, it is perfectly proper for civil society in this country to take the action that they determine. Like those who supported apartheid in South Africa, the malign voices who oppose this will come to learn that they are on the wrong side of history. As well as the recognition of the Palestinian state alongside Israel, we need actions and sanctions, and we need them now.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): After the next speaker, the time limit will go down to four minutes.

3.36 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I am grateful to be called to speak in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) on securing this debate. She spoke very powerfully. There was a lot with which I did not agree. I fundamentally disagreed with the occupation narrative that she sought to outline, but there were parts of her speech that I did agree with, including when she talked about the challenges and poverty that Palestinians live with and the imposition created by the security measures. I can recognise that.

I chair the Conservative Friends of Israel here in the House of Commons. I have been to Israel numerous times and most of those times I have taken the opportunity to spend time on the west bank. I have met many Palestinians over the years, most regularly with the late Dr Saeb Erekat, who, until his death in November 2020, still held the position of chief negotiator for the Palestine Liberation Organisation. On each of those visits to the west bank, I came away having learnt and understood more about the Palestinian perspective and the situation that they face.

There is a real challenge there. I hope there is a cross-party desire in this House—I hope there is unity—on the aspiration of seeing a Palestinian state. That two-state solution is the official UK Government policy and the official policy of the Opposition. It is the mainstream peace agenda that the international community wants to support. But it is 22 years now since Bill Clinton tried to bring the different parties together at Camp David and it is almost 30 years since the Oslo accords were outlined that set the framework for peace.

[Stephen Crabb]

The hon. Member for Sunderland Central framed her argument around the question of, “If not now, when?” She was speaking to that long-term yearning and the length of time that it is taking to see a Palestinian state. I recognise that, but I believe that it is premature to put recognition of statehood ahead of a peace process. There is still a peace process that the parties have to sit down and grind their way through. We know what the issues are. In fact, we have a very good idea of what the final outcome will look like. It has been known for decades now. It may involve some land swaps. It involves some compromises on some difficult issues. All that is contained in the Oslo accords, but it requires a commitment from both parties to sit down and work it out.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) outlined, it is complicated on the Palestinian side because who would the Israeli Government be talking to? Is it the Palestinian Authority, the old men in Ramallah, or is it the young extremists of Hamas in Gaza, who will claim to be the legitimate voice of the Palestinians? We are not talking about a simple situation.

Dr Offord: That sums up the crux of the problem. I pay tribute to those Opposition Members who are seeking a solution to the problem, but the big issue is the conflict between Fatah and Hamas, who do not agree with Israel’s right to exist. Until we can get past that and until they stop inciting hatred and violence, we cannot get to the peace table.

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend makes an important contribution. I will be very brief and wrap up my comments in a few moments, but I want to focus on what the nature of peace is. Peace is not just the absence of violence and hostility; it implies engagement, warmth and co-operation.

I believe I have had a glimpse of the future. One Opposition Member said earlier that peace in the region seems a long way off, but peace is happening in the region. I recently visited the United Arab Emirates with the cross-party UK Abraham Accords Group—I draw hon. Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. There I met Arabs who spoke about the need for peace: not only a high-level agreement between Government leaders, but the peace that comes through people-to-people contact, the peace and prosperity that come through trading together and building those close links.

If the United Arab Emirates can do it, if Bahrain can do it and if Morocco and other nations in the region are on a journey, surely that is the future. As one Arab leader said to me recently, “We have spent 40 years saying exactly the same things about the region, repeating the same things over and over and doing the same things over and over, and it achieved nothing—nothing for our own peoples, nothing for the Palestinians and nothing for the people of Israel.”

There has to be a different approach, and I believe the Abraham accords set out that different approach. My appeal to the Palestinians would be to look at the opportunities for their own people that would come about through peace, co-operation, trade and people-to-people contact, and to pursue those. That surely has to be the future. To my colleagues on the Front Bench, I

say there is a role for the UK Government in supporting that, and I hope they will lend every effort to peace in the wider region and to seeing how in the Israel-Palestine context we can learn the lessons of the Abraham accords.

3.41 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I start by declaring an interest, in that I was a volunteer with Medical Aid for Palestinians in Gaza in 1991 and 1992, and after visiting in 2016 I helped them to set up a breast cancer project between Scottish specialists and local teams in Gaza and the west bank. I thank all the clinicians who take part in that on a regular basis.

In addition to almost 55 years of occupation, the people of Gaza have suffered from 15 years of intense blockade and repeated military attacks every few years, which have degraded their civil infrastructure. Unlike in my town, the tap water there is now undrinkable, raw sewage pollutes coastal fishing waters and, due to the destruction of the power plant in 2014, there is only intermittent electricity—including to hospitals. Not only the public health of Palestinians but the provision of healthcare is being undermined, with the destruction of clinics and hospitals through military attacks and demolitions and difficulty in obtaining medical supplies. Approximately one third of vital drugs constantly run close to zero stock.

Many modern therapies are simply not available in Gaza, yet it is difficult for patients to get permission to travel to east Jerusalem to access treatment. Gaza has no radiotherapy provision, which is important for preserving the breast in breast cancer patients; when I visited in 2016, all the women I met had undergone radical mastectomy because they could not access that treatment. However, it is even more vital in other cancers, such as lung cancer, where it is the main treatment. Overall, the World Health Organisation reports that 35% to 40% of patients who apply for permission to travel to Jerusalem are refused, delayed or get no response. All that contributes to the poor survival of Palestinian cancer patients.

On annual training visits prior to the pandemic, I have seen the impact of the occupation and fragmentation in the west bank, with communities separated from each other, their farmland and particularly their water sources. Palestinians face constant harassment and obstruction. Their homes are demolished while settlements are relentlessly expanded in what is de facto annexation and conquest by concrete.

The UK has a particular responsibility, as the 1917 Balfour declaration promised

“a national home for the Jewish people”
in Palestine, but that

“nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities”.

For over 70 years, the UK has recognised the state of Israel and honoured that promise to the Jewish people but broken it to the Palestinians.

After 55 years of occupation and 15 years of the Gaza blockade, and the ongoing annexation of the west bank, the two-state solution is simply becoming unviable unless there is a reversal of current Israeli policy, and there is no chance of that without external pressure. Government Ministers repeatedly stand in this Chamber and claim that the UK supports a two-state solution,

but that is hollow if there is not recognition of both those states. That is a minimum. It must be combined with real action to ensure that no UK banks or companies profit from the occupation or illegal settlements.

I was working in Gaza at the start of the Madrid peace process. By late afternoon, I saw young Palestinian men giving olive branches to Israeli soldiers. That image of hope has crumbled to dust 30 years on. Immediate recognition is the minimum, and it is vital.

3.46 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I am afraid I do not share the view of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) that the immediate recognition of a Palestinian state would advance the cause of peace. The Palestinian Authority's unilateral efforts to achieve statehood outside the agreed framework of negotiations directly contravenes the 1993 Oslo accords and undermines the peace process. Those who support such attempts are regrettably sending the Palestinian leadership the message that it does not need to make the necessary compromises for a lasting peace or to establish stability.

Promoting peaceful coexistence in the region should not be looked at as a one-sided effort. In the Palestinian Authority, removing hate-filled material inciting violence against Israel and Jews in official PA school textbooks would be a welcome start. Young, impressionable Palestinian children are being indoctrinated to hate their neighbours and told that killing Israelis is an honourable act. And that is only the hatred espoused by the Palestinian Authority. In Gaza, the Hamas terror group recruits child soldiers who are taught to practice sniper shooting and how to launch anti-tank missiles. Video footage of children expressing their hope to die as martyrs, marching with weapons and burning Israeli flags, has been widely published online. Both sides will need to make the necessary compromises, but let us not forget that Israel has a track record of removing settlements and making land swaps in the interests of peace. Land borders can be negotiated, but hatred cannot be unlearned. Until the Palestinian leadership shares a message of peace and reconciliation, including acknowledging the Jewish connection to the land of Israel, peace remains unlikely.

Mahmoud Abbas is now in the 18th year of a four-year term as Palestinian Authority president, so I ask the Minister what more can be done to encourage the Palestinian Authority to reschedule last year's postponed election. Just as our friends in the UAE, Bahrain and elsewhere have understood that peace with Israel will lead to shared prosperity and security, so too should we help the Palestinian leadership to boldly follow suit. It is deeply regrettable that the Palestinian Authority has opposed these landmark peace agreements, and I hope the opportunity presented by these accords will be seized to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace. Instead of supporting efforts to bypass direct peace talks, I urge the Government to work with international partners to address the issues that I have raised and support the Palestinian Authority to take a more constructive and a more democratic approach to the region and to these issues.

3.49 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I am pleased we are having this debate today, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) on securing it, because it is well past time that we had it. I agree with one part of what the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) said in his contribution, when he said that peace is not just the absence of violence. That is absolutely the case; there has to be a peace process that is respectful and recognition of the traditions and histories of all sides. Surely we learned that in Northern Ireland, and we have learned that in other places.

It is simply not tenable to continue with the narrative that somehow or other we can continue not recognising Palestine because the Palestinian leadership has not passed threshold X, Y or Z or jumped over this fence, that fence, that hurdle or the other, while all the time accepting the recognition of Israel. It gives a message to the Palestinian people that we do not care, that we are not very interested and that they will continue suffering under the occupation they are under.

We need to have a sense of reality about what an occupation means. It means soldiers driving past your house every day. It means checkpoints. It means a young person on a demonstration being taken into military custody. It means being in a prison in Israel. It means an inability to get the medical treatment that people need, because there is a checkpoint that will stop them going anywhere. Many Members in the House today have visited Israel and Palestine. I have visited many times, and I have watched the behaviour of soldiers at checkpoints and the humiliation of building workers waiting to go through a checkpoint to work, being told to wait for hours and being abused. They get that on their way to work and they get that on their way home. I can understand it when we are visitors—we can put up with it, because it is an hour or two's delay—but when it is all someone's life that they are being humiliated by occupying soldiers, people get angry as a result. We should just think about the reality of what occupation means.

Then there is the continuation not just of settlements, but of house demolitions, where Palestinian homes are demolished by the Israeli occupying forces to make way for some alleged security need. I remember very well how the late, wonderful Tom Hurndall was shot dead in Rafah when he was trying to save children's lives as a house demolition went on. Those in Sheikh Jarrah, who have lived in those houses for 70 or 80 years, are now being removed by force. That is what the occupation actually means.

If we go up on to the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and look out on what should be pristine beauty all the way down to the Dead sea, what do we see but settlement after settlement after settlement? Roads are constructed between the settlements that Palestinians cannot go on, which is why the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu described it as an apartheid state, where people cannot travel freely and easily on the same roads as Israeli settlers. Those settlers take the land, the water and the very lifeblood out of people's lives. That is something we have to understand.

I have had the good fortune to meet human rights activists in Israel and Palestine, and I have spoken to many people in Gaza during some visits I have made

[Jeremy Corbyn]

there, and I have good friends in the mental health service and campaigns in Gaza. As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) would attest, the number of people in Gaza who are suffering from functional mental health conditions and stress, because of the continuation of the occupation, means that we should understand their lives and those of the refugees and, I believe, support the immediate and unconditional recognition of the state of Palestine.

3.53 pm

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Today's motion asks the UK Government to undermine their commitment to the peace process by predetermining the outcome of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Some may think that recognition is merely an empty gesture and that there is no harm in it whatever, but I believe that supporting this motion would give the green light to the intransigence of the Palestinian Authority and the terrorism of Hamas in Gaza by suggesting that the current policies of the Palestinian leadership befit a sovereign state, which they clearly do not.

A peaceful Palestinian state is in Israel's best interests and is important for its long-term security, but we must be clear that the biggest obstacle to peace is Hamas, the stated aim of which is to wipe Israel and the Jewish people off the face of the earth. The UK Government have been clear that they will recognise a Palestinian state

“when it best serves the objective of peace”,

but that must not happen while Palestinian territories are controlled by terrorists and the Israeli people suffer appalling rocket attacks and suicide bombings.

We are all aware that Israel has offered, on multiple occasions, to withdraw from almost all the west bank, reaching a negotiated land swap deal with the Palestinians to cover the land along the green line that Israel would retain. No matter the offer on the table, however, the Palestinian leadership continues to reject all possible outcomes. Hon. Members will know that the green line is the 1949 armistice line and has never been internationally recognised as a border. Negotiations are required to agree the final borders for the two-state solution that we all hope to see.

Israel has shown that it is driven by the policy of land for peace. In 1979 with Egypt, and in 1994 with Jordan, it made land swaps and compromises in the interests of peace and its good-will gestures were reciprocated. It withdrew from Gaza in 2005, including uprooting settlements. I hope that all Members of the House share my view that the rise of the formidable Iran-backed Hamas terror group was one of the greatest setbacks to peace in the history of the middle east peace process.

When Israel withdrew from Palestinian territories in an effort to jump start the peace process, it was met with tens of thousands of rocket attacks, as well as suicide terror attacks and violent border incursions emanating from the Gaza strip. The only way to negotiate a lasting two-state solution is for the Israelis and Palestinians to return to direct peace talks. That is what we should be calling for. I urge the Minister to prioritise that and to leave the final status issues for the parties to determine themselves.

The principle of land swaps is well established in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations—even Yasser Arafat agreed to it—and the shape of a future and viable Palestinian state is largely understood by the parties. However, premature recognition of a Palestinian state before the conclusion of direct peace talks will not help the Palestinian people. It is only by making difficult compromises and resolving final status issues that peace can be achieved and a lasting two-state solution can finally be agreed.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We have to reduce the time limit to three minutes.

3.58 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) for securing this important debate. To have a two-state solution, we need two states. That is exactly the point of this debate. It is not a prerequisite for negotiation but a duty on the United Nations, which has ensured by a huge amount of votes that Palestine has been recognised as an observer member in its proceedings. Yet we are unable to follow the vote that was taken here in 2014 to recognise the state of Palestine, where we voted 274 to 12—a majority of 262—in favour of recognition.

In a debate in 2021, the right hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), the then Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, rejected all calls for recognition. He stated:

“The UK Government position is clear: the UK will recognise a Palestinian state at a time when it best serves the object of peace.”—[*Official Report*, 14 June 2021; Vol. 697, c. 21WH.]

Peace is always there for us to recognise, but we can only do that when we are able to sit down together at the same table with the same status as each other. That is what is important, and that is what we are talking about here.

It is the duty of the United Nations to look at this issue. Conservative Members have talked about the issue of elections for the Palestinian Authority and what is going on in relation to how we expedite them, and that is also an obligation on the United Nations. Until we have stability in a place, we cannot have such elections taking place, and the United Nations needs to fulfil its peacekeeping role to provide the stability for that to happen.

Finally, I will make a point about the Abraham accords, which the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) mentioned. There is no threat from any Muslim country to Israel. Therefore, it is time now for us to recognise Palestine, to recognise our responsibility and to recognise what is important, and the most important thing we have to do today is to recognise that peace can be made only when we have two people of equal status sitting at the same table.

4.1 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): In 2014, I voted to recognise the state of Palestine, and I would do so again today. However, let nobody be under any illusion: I certainly support the state of Israel and its right to exist. Every one of us in this House needs to remember

that there are those who say, even in the United Kingdom, that they would wish to eliminate that state, which cannot ever be allowed to happen. We must remember that Jewish people in the UK, as one said to me recently, remember the holocaust every day, not just on Holocaust Memorial Day, and they fear a holocaust in the future. We must understand that the existence of Israel is absolutely to be insisted upon, but I would vote again today to recognise Palestine.

The issue of Israel and Palestine matters most profoundly in my constituency of Wycombe. On the last set of census data, about one in six of my voters are British Muslims. It says “Asians”, but I know that that means overwhelmingly Kashmiris and British Muslims. My electors feel very acutely the suffering of the Palestinian people, which has been set out in the House. I am afraid that on both sides there has been terrible suffering, hatred and violence, and we need somehow to move beyond and above it.

If I may say so, I know that some of my colleagues do not represent very diverse constituencies, so let me dispel an illusion about who cares about this issue. We are not talking about radical youths here, although they may well be included; we are talking about professional middle-aged people—indeed, people of all ages—who are thoughtful and well educated, and we are talking about Conservative councillors, who feel most acutely this issue of the suffering of the Palestinian people. So let us be under no illusions about who we are talking about who want the British Government to recognise Palestine.

It is a grave mistake, and one I have confessed to from this position before, to neglect this issue between periods of violence. When we do so, we send the message that we do not care about the issue or we have forgotten about it, which in some cases people have, and that of course only encourages violence. We must stay on top of this issue and the British Government must stay on top of this issue continually.

My final point is that, when we say we want a two-state solution, we must really mean it—we must mean it with all our hearts and we must get behind it—and that implies that we must recognise the state of Palestine. On behalf of the electors of Wycombe, who feel this issue most powerfully, I implore my right hon. Friend the Minister to recognise the state of Palestine, and to do it very soon and preferably at the moment that she can collectively agree it with her colleagues.

4.4 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The vote in the House in October 2014, which Members have referred to, was important, but as we know, it was not binding on the Government. The Government have consistently said that the UK will recognise a Palestinian state at the time of their own choosing, and the judgment will be on when it is best to further the objective of peace. The difficulty we find ourselves in is that, since 2014, the peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians has in effect been moribund. Clearly, if a negotiated two-state solution is to happen—and I believe firmly that it must—a meaningful initiative will be needed to break the logjam. One such initiative is recognition of the state of Palestine. From time to time, the idea of the formal recognition of a Palestinian state has been raised by, and through, a number of international bodies.

Indeed, some states have formally recognised Palestine. I now believe it is essential that the UK Government take the lead on this issue. If they genuinely believe that the only way forward is a two-state solution, and I believe they do, they must take the international lead in immediately recognising a Palestinian state.

Some people say it is a mere gesture to recognise a Palestinian state, but the importance of symbolism should never be underestimated. However, recognition must be much more than that. As Professor Yossi Mekelberg of the middle east and north Africa programme at Chatham House has argued, it is surely inappropriate for recognition to be seen as a prize waiting for the Palestinians at the end of negotiations. If that were allowed to happen, negotiators from Palestine would be in an inferior position, with one hand tied behind their back when the negotiations take place with the Israelis. If our aim is genuinely to see a two-state solution agreement that is acceptable to both sides, there must be a high degree of parity between the two negotiating parties. That is why I believe that the immediate recognition of a Palestinian state would give those peace negotiations the best chance of success.

At a time when international law is being so blatantly transgressed, recognising the state of Palestine would be an important signal to the international community. I believe that if this country had the vision and determination to recognise Palestine, the UK would not only enhance its reputation among the world's democratic community, but it would give a huge boost to the possibility of meaningful negotiations, leading to a two-state solution.

4.7 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Eight years ago, this House voted to recognise the state of Palestine. Tragically, in those eight years, we have seen more war, more conflict and more violence, taking us further away from peace in the region, and closer to the collapse of any chance of a two-state solution. In reality, eight years later, rather than marking the recognition of an independent state of Palestine, we are reading yet more reports about the persecution, oppression and injustice that Palestinians face at the hands of the Israeli Government, the latest of which comes from Amnesty International.

We have more reports that prove that Palestinian children are still being put in military detention as their parents are put on trial in unfair military courts; more reports of indiscriminate attacks, leaving Palestinians in constant fear of military raids on their home in the dead of night, or of airstrikes that demolish their homes, schools, and hospitals; more reports of villages bulldozed to make way for illegal settlements; and more reports that a continued siege has left Gaza in a state of abject poverty, as the largest open-air prison in the world. Let us be clear: these acts are grave injustices against humanity, they are in direct contravention of international law, and they are a clear threat to the lives and livelihoods of the Palestinians. They must be condemned in the strongest possible terms as incompatible with peace in the region.

The violence that took place last summer was shocking for the silence and lack of action that it elicited from the international community. Instead of demanding sanctions

[Imran Hussain]

for violations of international law, an immediate overhaul of all arms used indiscriminately to kill civilians and commit war crimes, and the immediate recognition of the state of Palestine, the international community stood by and did nothing. The silence of the international community was deafening then and it is deafening now. They should hang their heads in shame.

There needs to be immediate recognition of the state of Palestine. That is not even a radical notion, because 138 countries across the globe have already done so. Let there also be no doubt that time is of the essence. If we do not recognise the state of Palestine now, soon there will be no Palestine left to recognise as illegal settlements reduce the two-state solution to a one-and-a-bit-state solution and undermine the viability of an independent state. I urge the Minister to recognise an independent state of Palestine immediately.

4.10 pm

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): This is indeed a timely debate. While our attention is rightly focused on the devastating events in Ukraine, an immediate crisis in one part of the world should not prevent us from addressing a long-running injustice elsewhere. As we wrestle with what we can do to defend the people of Ukraine, it would be a dereliction of duty to consign the people of Palestine to the “too difficult” pile.

As we speak about the need to uphold international law, respect legally recognised frontiers and protect territorial integrity, we should remember that those principles are universal—we cannot pick and choose where to apply them. Therefore, while we demand that our adversaries adhere to them, we should be ready to remind our friends that they should do so, too. I see no contradiction in being a friend to Israel and a friend of Palestine; that is to be a friend of humanity and a friend of peace.

The treatment of the Palestinians is a stain on the conscience of the world. They have every right to conclude that, for decades, they have been subjected to a relentless campaign of oppression, subjugation of their human rights and illegal occupation of their lands. The consequences of that history of injustice are felt day in, day out as the people of Palestine go about their lives. To take just one example—there are many—how can it be right that, in such a small geographic area, a woman giving birth in the occupied territories is nine times more likely to die than a woman in Israel?

For me, the suffering of human beings—families, young children, the old and the sick—should always be at the forefront of our minds. For many of those people, abstract principles like sovereignty and self-determination probably do not mean much, but that does not mean that they are not important. Do I believe that recognition of the state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel would end their suffering overnight? No, of course not, but is it an essential and overdue step on the road to a peaceful settlement that would start to put these historic injustices right? Yes, it is.

By recognising the state of Palestine, we would be offering its people the hope of a better future; one in which they are entitled to the same rights and respect as their neighbours. It may be a symbolic act but, as my

hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) said, and as Professor Yossi Mekelberg of Chatham House stated:

“The power of symbolism cannot...be underestimated...there is also overwhelming evidence that international recognition of Palestine would serve the causes of peace, justice and international law.”

If we believe, as we do, that there must be a negotiated, diplomatic settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that ensures a safe and secure Israel alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, we should take whatever steps we can to advance that process. Recognition of the state of Palestine would be a powerful demonstration of the right of both Palestinians and Israelis to enjoy security, dignity and human rights.

4.13 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): My congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) on securing the debate, because on trial today is the complete incoherence in the Government’s approach to Palestine. Let me go through the three basic logical points in the argument.

First, do we believe that we have a moral responsibility to recognise the state of Palestine? Yes, we do. When we held the mandate between 1923 and 1948, we acknowledged a sacred trust of civilisation to prepare Palestinians for an independent country, thereby recognising the right to self-determination.

Secondly, is there now a legal responsibility and imperatively to crack on with recognition? Yes, there is. In November 2011, Lord Hague said that Palestine met the criteria for statehood. In 2014, the House voted for recognition by 274 votes to 12. In October 2014, the Foreign Office said again that there should be a two-state solution on 1967 boundaries with East Jerusalem as a shared capital.

Thirdly, we recognise the moral responsibility and we recognise the legal responsibility to crack on. Do we now think that peace and a two-state solution is in jeopardy? Yes, we do. There are now 650,000 settlers breaking up the occupied territories. The threat is explicitly recognised by the UN Security Council in resolution 2334, which states that the cost of settlements is now “a flagrant violation under international law and a major obstacle” to peace.

Despite that moral responsibility, despite the legal urgency and despite the threat to peace, what are the Government doing? They are refusing to recognise the state of Palestine. They are pursuing a free trade agreement with Israel. They are standing by while products such as those made by JCB are destroying homes in the occupied territories. Frankly, they are not investigating the whys and wherefores of some of our arms exports.

Like many here, I have stood in Palestine and seen how the route taken by Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem is now impossible to take, because it is broken up by walls. I have heard children talk about the post-traumatic stress disorder they now suffer. I have listened to shepherds whose lives have been destroyed because they have no legal right to build a home of their own. I have listened to farmers whose water has been stolen.

Like everybody here, I deplore the attacks on Israel. I deplore the viciousness and madness of the madmen of Hamas, but I have to say to the Minister that the two-state solution is now becoming a mirage and we

have to intervene now in order to act. We have to act for peace and that is why we should recognise the state of Palestine today.

4.16 pm

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Like many others, I firmly believe in a lasting and just two-state solution to the long-standing conflict between Israel and Palestine. I maintain that the two-state solution is the best means of ensuring the sovereignty and security of the Palestinian and Israeli people. However, the two-state solution is currently more imperilled than it has been for decades. The ongoing illegal annexation of Palestinian land by Israeli settlers, along with the evictions of Palestinians from east Jerusalem, is eroding the territorial integrity of the Palestinian state. This, I believe, is a deliberate attempt by the Israeli Government to diminish the possibility of a viable state of Palestine, rendering the two-state solution impossible. That is why it is imperative that the UK Government recognise the state of Palestine.

Some 138 of the 193 member states of the United Nations now recognise the state of Palestine, yet here in the UK, where the Government profess a commitment to a just and viable two-state solution, no such recognition is forthcoming. How can we be serious about a two-state solution if we will not even recognise the state of Palestine? Without such a commitment from our Government, any talk of a commitment to peace in the region is, to put it bluntly, a load of hot air.

The necessary first step in a two-state solution is a secure, legitimate and viable state of Palestine with unanimous global recognition. So long as countries such as the UK refuse that recognition, a two-state solution to the conflict is simply not possible. It really is that straightforward. I hope that we can hear a commitment from the Government today that recognition of the state of Palestine will be granted as soon as possible.

To that end, I call on the UK Government to use all their diplomatic, economic and other ties with the Israeli Government to press for the immediate halt to all illegal settlement and Palestinian land, to return all stolen land to the Palestinians, and to recognise the state of Palestine fully without further delay or hindrance. This is a question not just of sovereignty, but of justice and humanity. The human and civil rights of the Palestinian people, and their right to self-determination, must be recognised and respected by all parties if there is to be any hope of a two-state solution in our lifetime.

4.19 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Members who secured this debate—the hon. Members for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) and for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), and my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). It is particularly significant on a day when the post-war rules-based international order comes under strain as never before. All our thoughts and prayers are with the people of Ukraine as they face an unjustified war of aggression.

The conflict between Israel and Palestine remains a weeping sore on the face of the world. I repeatedly hear from constituents who want to see a just and lasting peace. Several have shared with me their first-hand

experiences as medical practitioners, humanitarian responders, academics or as participants in the ecumenical accompaniment programme, and I regularly meet the local Amnesty International group. I also hear from other constituents who have friends, family and colleagues in Israel and who are rightly concerned that the state must be able to exercise its right to defend itself against aggression and terror, and that its citizens should be able to go about their daily lives without fear for their personal wellbeing and security. That is why a negotiated, peaceful solution is so important.

The global consensus remains the “vision of two states, Israel and a sovereign, independent, democratic and viable Palestine, living side by side in peace and security”, as stated in the 2003 UN road map. We must and can be clear that just as condemnation of certain actions by the Israeli Government is in no way questioning the right of the state of Israel to exist and defend itself, so too acceptance and recognition of the state of Palestine is in no way an endorsement of violence or terrorism perpetrated by certain Palestinian factions or militias.

Last month, I took part in a briefing organised by Yachad, a British Jewish movement that advocates for a political resolution to the conflict. We heard from Esawi Frej, the Israeli Minister of regional co-operation, who is only the second Arab Muslim Minister in the history of Israel. He recently suffered a stroke and I am sure that we all want to wish him a speedy recovery. When he spoke, he could not have been clearer that a two-state solution is his preference. That is not necessarily the language that we hear from some of his Government or ministerial colleagues at present, but that demonstrates the desire for peace and negotiation among many communities in Israel and Palestine. The belligerence and rhetoric of leaders on both sides are not necessarily as representative as they claim.

That is why the UK Government have to take their opportunity. They signed a memorandum of understanding with the Government of Israel last year that makes no mention of a two-state solution or even a road to peace, so will the road map that is to come out of that do so? Will the territorial application of a free trade agreement specifically exclude illegal settlements? How will the cut to the aid budget improve the UK Government's ability to provide humanitarian support to Palestinians or peacebuilding and civil society? What criteria will the Government use to determine when the time is right to join the 139 member states of the United Nations, and, indeed, Scotland's Government and Scotland's Parliament, in recognising the state of Palestine?

4.22 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Today's debate on the UK Government's recognition of the state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel is long overdue. I find it heartbreaking that after decades of violence, illegal occupation, the demolition of Palestinian homes and complete disregard for human rights, we are still debating the basics.

In October 2014, the House of Commons voted in favour of recognising the state of Palestine, to secure a two-state solution. The UK Government have since not recognised that statehood and even abstained in the UN General Assembly vote that granted Palestine non-member observer status. That woeful decision also undermines the sovereignty of Parliament.

[Afzal Khan]

The inaction has cost lives and entrenched the de facto annexation of Palestinian land, and it sends a loud and clear message that Palestine is not equal. Of the 193 member states of the United Nations, 138 have recognised the state of Palestine. The UK is not one of them. In response to a written question that I tabled, the Government stated that

“the UK will recognise a Palestinian state at a time when it best serves the objective of peace”.

The verdict given by the international community and multiple human rights organisations clearly dictates that that time is now.

A two-state solution and equality cannot be discussed without talking about occupation, which is the root cause of so many of the issues. The settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are illegal under international law, and such actions entrench divisions and make peace harder to achieve. The shocking scenes at the holy al-Aqsa mosque last year resulted in the spill-over of violent conflict within Israel’s recognised international borders, while the continuing expansion of Israeli settlements on Palestinian land risks making the occupation irreversible.

UK recognition would be more than symbolic. It would be the first step to signifying the UK’s parity of esteem for two peoples: Israelis and Palestinians. If the UK Government continue this trajectory of inaction, there will not be a Palestine to recognise. The only way to achieve a new momentum is to put both nations on an equal footing, so that negotiations between occupier and occupied can turn into talks between two neighbouring sovereign nations. If the Minister is serious about a genuine two-state solution, will she wish now to recognise the state of Palestine?

4.25 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Let us try to agree on some themes. Have illegal settlements been built on Palestinian land, evicting Palestinians in the process? Yes. Are the people of Gaza penned in by Israeli occupation? Yes. Have unarmed Palestinian civilians been killed by Israeli forces? Yes. Have unarmed Israeli civilians been killed by Hamas rockets? Yes. Are all those things and many others wrong? Yes, they are, but they are the consequence of a failure to resolve the basic question: how can a safe and secure Israel live alongside an independent Palestinian state?

The painful truth is that there is no peace process to speak of. Those who yearn for Palestinian statehood are increasingly in despair, as we have heard in the debate. The prospect of the two-state solution for which many of us have campaigned for so long is receding into the distance. The truth is that despair breeds hopelessness. There will be no progress until the violence ends and Israelis and all the Palestinians sit down together to negotiate. Plenty of people will say, “It won’t happen.” I would just observe that that is what we used to say about a solution to the conflict in Northern Ireland. We learned that that which today seems impossible can become possible tomorrow, but for it to take place we need new political leadership on the part of the Israelis and the Palestinians. Why do I say that? I do so because nobody can want peace more than the parties to the conflict themselves. Without that, it will not happen.

Finally, I think recognition of a Palestinian state, given the justified desperation of the Palestinian people, is the very least we can do. The more I have heard the arguments over the years as to why it should not happen, the less convincing they seem. To say that Palestinians should be granted their statehood only as a kind of favour at the end of the negotiations is the least convincing argument of all.

Dr Offord: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: There is so little time.

It is the least convincing argument because it holds that Palestinians somehow do not have the right to statehood. That is wrong; they do.

Recognising a Palestinian state will not, on its own, solve the problem. It will not end the stalemate, which requires courageous political leadership, but it would offer a glimmer of hope and respect. That is why I voted eight years ago in this House in favour of the recognition of a Palestinian state, and why I shall do so again tonight.

4.28 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): When the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones)—who I know wanted to be here today—and I went before the Backbench Business Committee about six months ago to bid for this debate, we had in mind its taking place on the anniversary of the vote in October. An advantage of its being a little overdue is that I am no longer a Back Bencher, so I have been able to hand it over to my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott). She made a superb speech, a much more compelling and persuasive one than I could possibly have made, and has done real service to Palestine in the process.

Back in 2014, there was more hope. President Obama said in 2010 that he hoped to see the recognition of a Palestinian state within a year. Although William Hague coined the phrase “moment of our choosing”, or “when the time is right”, I think that he meant it as a statement of intent, but it has become a filibuster that is endlessly repeated by Ministers to enable them in fact to do nothing. We in the UK who have a responsibility, through the mandate and the Balfour declaration, have not recognised Palestine although 138 other countries have.

We have heard that this is a precondition and not a matter for negotiation. Of course Israel and Palestine will not sit down as equals, because one is a regional superpower while the other has been impoverished by occupation, but they should at least be given the status of states so that they can do that. But this is also tied heavily to the idea of occupation, and a recognition exposing what occupation is about. It is about displacement of a population, and it is about settlement and occupied land. Both those are war crimes. This is relatively rare, thank goodness. It happens in Crimea, it is happening in Ukraine and it happens in Western Sahara, but in Palestine it has continued since 1967 and we have done precious little about it.

The Government’s own “Human rights priority countries” report on Israel and the Occupied Palestine Territories, published three months ago, refers to settler violence, settlement growth, evictions and demolitions,

child detention, an “apartheid” regime, a Gaza blockade and terrible incursions into Gaza and the massacre of civilians there, and the classing of respectable non-governmental organisations as terrorist organisations. The list goes on and on.

Statehood would benefit Palestine, but it would also benefit Israel to have a secure state alongside it, with the responsibilities of a state. When I spoke in the last debate on this subject, I quoted Naftali Bennett, who was then the Minister with responsibility for the economy, as saying that he never wanted to see a Palestinian state. Now he is the Prime Minister of Israel. We must do something to resolve this issue, because the situation is becoming steadily worse.

4.31 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker,

“statehood for the Palestinians is not a gift to be given, but a right to be acknowledged”.—[*Official Report*, 28 November 2012; Vol. 554, c. 230.]

I first heard those words in 2012, at the time of the historic United Nations vote, and I heard them again today from my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), whom I thank for securing the debate. We are a decade on from that vote, and there is still no visible light at the end of the tunnel for the Palestinians; if anything, the tunnel is becoming bleaker and darker. We know that for nearly seven years there have been no peace talks; we also know that since Senator Kerry’s initiative, there has been no serious attempt at negotiations.

The Conservative party’s stated claim is that it wants a negotiated solution through peace talks before it recognises Palestine. Let us call a spade a spade, and be honest with ourselves and the House: any recognition of Palestine would not cut across any peace negotiations because the fact remains that none exist, and there is no realistic prospect of any existing because successive Israeli Administrations lurch further to the right and continue to build illegal settlements at a rapid pace, thus changing the geographical reality on the ground and making the possibility of a viable Palestinian state increasingly unlikely.

I do not have an issue with a party that has a different view on foreign policy. What I do have an issue with is the party’s hypocrisy. It cannot say that it wants a two-state solution while recognising only one state. We often talk about the right of Israel to exist, but Palestine also has a right to exist. Not recognising the state of Palestine is denying Palestine’s right to exist. We cannot repeatedly reaffirm our commitment to Palestinian self-determination through United Nations resolutions and leave it unfulfilled.

Let me put this in simple terms. Indians come from India, Americans from America, the English from England, the Scottish from Scotland, the Welsh from Wales and the Irish from Ireland, so it is surely not a leap of faith to understand that Palestinians come from Palestine—a country, a state. In the light of that fact, I urge the Minister to stop using the phrase “occupied territories” and start using the phrase “Palestine”. These are not territories; they are a country, a state.

I began my speech by referring to the United Nations recognition of Palestine a decade ago. The then Foreign Secretary, William Hague—now Lord Hague—said then,

“There will be a time when we will have to recognise the state of Palestine.” That time has come. The world is watching, and I promise the House that history will not judge us kindly for continuing to abdicate our responsibilities again and again, as we did, shamefully, at the United Nations, because if we do not do this now, there will be no Palestine left to recognise.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am really trying to get everyone in, so I have to reduce the time limit to two minutes.

4.34 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): It is important to start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), and by recognising that as the only Jewish nation, the state of Israel is of great significance to many Jewish people across the globe and we of course support its right to exist. However, I do not believe that the existence of any state should be predicated on denying another group of people their right to self-determination. All people have the right to live free from oppression and occupation. The recognition of the state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel is a vital part of the policy that we need, and it should be driven by human rights, equality and international law.

We must recognise that since the vote in 2014, which many Members have referenced, the situation has become worse for the Palestinian people when it comes to their human rights. In the context of widespread human rights abuses, the UN Commissioner on Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, has raised particular concern about the recurring incidents of excessive use of force leading to the death and injury of Palestinian children. The International Criminal Court is holding an inquiry into abuses committed in the Occupied Palestinian Territories since 2014, and the blockade of Gaza continues.

The UK really needs to be part of international pressure and we should immediately ensure that no UK funds are supplied and that no arms are bought or sold that can be used to violate the human rights of Palestinians. To that end, the recognition of the Palestinian state should not be seen as a prize at the end of peace negotiations. It should be regarded as a prerequisite for peace. Only when the two states have equal status and recognition can we have genuine hopes for peace. The Government cannot continue to claim that they are committed to a two-state solution while only recognising one state. I welcome today’s debate and this chance for Members to show our commitment to the immediate recognition of the state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel. This has to be part of securing a just peace and an end to the ongoing blockade, the occupation and the settlements, which are all illegal under international law.

4.36 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): The question before us today is not whether we support a Palestinian state within the framework of a two-state solution—Governments of both parties have rightly long backed that goal—but how we can achieve it. I want to begin by sounding a note of caution about unilateral actions. The history of this tragic conflict teaches us very clearly that the best route to sustainable progress lies through

[*Christian Wakeford*]

direct negotiation between the two sides. Compare, for instance, the results of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 with the 1978 Camp David accords or the 1994 peace agreement between Israel and Jordan. While the peace treaty with Egypt that came about via the Camp David accords still stands, it has largely led to that border being quiet and free from hostilities. However, following the unilateral withdrawal in 2005, Israel got an internationally proscribed terrorist organisation on its border. We can therefore understand why Israel would be wary about future land concessions.

I want to talk today about the concrete steps that can be taken to advance the prospect of a lasting solution between Israel and the Palestinians. For us to recognise Palestinian statehood outside a wider peace process would make little or no impact in the real world. We need to take concrete steps that will advance and recognise both peoples' right to self-determination, peace and security, and steps that will make a real difference to the lives of ordinary Israelis and Palestinians, rather than the kind of gestures that seek to demonise one side or the other. The territorial contiguity of a future Palestinian state must be preserved. Continued Israeli settlement building, especially that which occurs beyond the security barrier, represents an obstacle to a two-state solution, but we should acknowledge that while such settlement building is an obstacle to a viable Palestinian state, it is hardly an insurmountable one. Nine out of 10 Palestinians live outside the security barrier, while some 85% of Israelis who have settled beyond the 1967 lines live within that security barrier, including Israeli Jews residing in East Jerusalem. I am aware that I have run out of time.

4.38 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I stand alongside many other Members of the House in calling for a two-state solution. This is not about supporting one group of people to the detriment of another; it is about achieving equal standing and parity for the benefit of both. I was privileged a few years ago to join the Council for Arab-British Understanding on one of its visits to Israel and Palestine. It is one thing to read the many briefings that Members receive on these issues, or to watch things play out in the news, but it is quite another to see it for yourself in person and come to terms with how these people are being forced to live. In Hebron I saw Palestinian workers making their way home, walking along a convoluted route. When we asked why they were taking that route, we were told that Palestinians were only allowed to travel down certain roads. Tired and hungry, having just put in a hard day's work, they were not even allowed to take the short route home for arbitrary reasons.

I then visited Ramallah, a fascinating and bustling city where I was able to get a taste of what normality might look like if peace were made. I came home from the trip with two lasting thoughts that resonate with me years later. First, how terrible the conditions are in which Palestinians are forced to live under Israeli occupation. Even having seen it for myself, I cannot imagine having to live every day like that. Secondly, how the average Palestinian just wants to live a simple life free of persecution and harassment.

The Government have said that they will recognise a Palestinian state at the time of their choosing that is most conducive to the objective of peace. As the saying goes, it feels like tomorrow never comes. When will that time be? Will the Minister elaborate on what criteria must be met? Is there even a fully defined policy on how the decision will be made? The recognition of Palestine would be the beginning of a peace process. The longer the current status quo is maintained, the more unobtainable a two-state solution becomes. It is increasingly urgent and it cannot be put off for another day longer. I look forward to the Minister's response.

4.41 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to wind up this debate. There have been a number of positive, constructive and thoughtful comments.

This is a bleak day for human rights and international law. I congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield—[HON. MEMBERS: "Sunderland!"] Forgive me. It is Scotland's near abroad, but I am not that precise in my geography. No disrespect intended. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) on securing this debate.

On a note of consensus, let us all agree that human rights are universal and that international law applies everywhere. On a day when we rightly condemn Russian aggression against Ukraine, it is worth remembering that the rights and dignity of the Palestinians have been grievously infringed for decades.

The SNP supports a just peace in the middle east. Israel has a right to exist and a right to security within its borders, and it is an important partner of the UK and Scotland in many significant ways. Equally, the Palestinian people have a right to statehood, dignity and security, and they have been let down by the international community for decades. That failure is continued in UK Government policy today.

The SNP supports the recognition of Palestine as a state, for the simple reason: how can we have a two-state solution without two states? Statehood is not a bauble or a prize to be given to the Palestinian people at the end of the process; statehood is the entry ticket to the talks. There must be parity of esteem between the two parties, albeit there is not much parity of anything else between the Palestinians and the Israelis. It is open to the UK Government to give parity of esteem and dignity to the Palestinians in these talks.

But what talks? There is no peace process for precisely that reason. As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, despair will be bred of violence, and that frustration can only build at the lack of progress because the rights of the Palestinian people and the prospect of a durable, viable Palestinian state are being infringed and undermined on a daily basis.

We believe that recognising Palestine as a state would be a symbolic move—of course it would—that gives impetus to talks that badly need impetus. I was struck by the comments of the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on the weaknesses and failures of the Palestinian leadership. We are very cognisant of that, but we do not think it is a reason to delay; we think it is a reason to accelerate to give a symbolic boost to these talks.

We also recognise the reality on the ground. A two-state solution is possible only if both states are viable. Like many colleagues on both sides of the House, I have visited the region and have seen that, in many significant ways—be it watercourses, access to farmland, security barriers, security walls, checkpoints, settlements, archaeological sites and many other ways—the viability and contiguity of Palestinian territory is being undermined on a daily basis. We support the two-state solution, but the reality on the ground is that it is becoming a less and less realistic prospect.

Let me add a note of caution for those who are opposing Palestinian statehood or, even worse, are opposing it while pretending to just delay the process. The alternative is a one-state solution—one that I fear will never ever be able to be at peace with itself. Those of us who, however forlornly, support a two-state solution believe that recognition of the state of Palestine would give a badly needed impetus to that process. So I hope that the UK Government will change their course and I look forward to the Minister's comments.

4.45 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) on securing this important debate; we have had an excellent debate.

I begin by stating unambiguously that I am a friend and supporter of the state of Israel and also a friend and supporter of Palestinians. As such, I strongly wish to see progress towards the establishment of a viable, sovereign and flourishing Palestinian state. I strongly wish to see a safe, secure and thriving Israeli state alongside it. The Labour party and I firmly believe in a two-state solution as the best answer for an enduring peace. There is no inherent contradiction in that position. Underlying the Labour party's commitment to a two-state solution is our unshakeable commitment to human rights and the rule of international law. We want a United Kingdom that puts human rights, social justice and ending global inequality at the heart of its work. Recognising the state of Palestine is a commitment that goes to the very heart of these matters and of Labour party values.

This House has already voted, in 2014, to recognise Palestine's statehood and now is the time for the British Government to confirm that recognition. There are several reasons why I believe that to be the case. First, the Palestinian people, along with all populations, deserve dignity and the right to self-determination, which is defined as a cardinal principle in modern international law. It is therefore legally and morally incumbent upon the UK Government to take the step of giving recognition, along with the 71.5% of UN member states that have already done so.

The second reason that the Government should enact the recognition relates to the issue of ensuring Israel's long-term security. Speaking as a supporter of Israel who wishes it to be a safe and thriving country, I am deeply worried by the continued political stalemate. I believe that Israel's long-term peace and security depend on the existence of a Palestinian state side by side with Israel. A recognition of Palestine is an inherent recognition of Israel too, within its sovereign borders. The UK Government's endorsement of Palestinians' aspirations would contribute to a peace process that is vital to safeguarding Israel and her citizens.

That brings me to the third reason the UK Government should recognise Palestine: it would be a pragmatic step towards helping to broker wider peace talks. The last time there were meaningful peace talks directly relating to Israel and Palestine was eight years ago. As a country with some global influence, the UK's recognition of Palestine could help to restart the peace process. At the moment, that peace process is moribund, notwithstanding the welcome advent of the Abraham accords, which I will return to later.

Dr Offord: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bambos Charalambous: I will not give way as we are short of time. The peace process needs both impetus and international support, and the UK Government should be showing leadership on this, rather than remaining silent.

The fourth reason that the UK Government should recognise Palestinian statehood is because of the way in which it could help to shape political realities on the ground. To be recognised as a state would require the Palestinian leadership to take on the obligations of behaving like a state. That is also clearly in Israel's immediate and long-term interests.

We know that many Palestinians and Israelis want peace more than anything else, and we know that extremists on both sides do not speak for them. International recognition of a Palestinian state, including recognition by the UK, would be a step towards undermining the stranglehold of extremists. For all those reasons, the UK Government should see the immediate recognition of Palestinian statehood as both morally and practically important. The position of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has consistently been that British recognition of Palestine's statehood will come when it best serves the objective of peace. For all the reasons I have stated, I would argue that that time is now.

On the wider political context, it is true, of course, that some progress has been made towards peace in the region with the Abraham accords. But we have to be realistic: this progress on its own is not enough to help the current political stalemate between Israel and Palestine. It is very welcome that Israel has been receiving its own greater recognition across the Arab world, but that positive step surely strengthens the argument that the same international recognition of Palestine is also important to establishing peace.

If the UK Government do not take active steps to encourage peace, the two-state solution will remain as elusive as ever. If we as a nation are serious about upholding the international rules-based order, we must be proactive about it. To remain silent on these issues is not an option. It is time for the Government to demonstrate that they are committed to active peacemaking rather than merely to conflict management—for example, by demonstrating support for the international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The UK has historical and moral obligations to both the Israelis and the Palestinians. We have a duty to do all we can to unlock the stalemate. We have a duty to do all we can to foster peace, the rule of international law and the sanctity of human rights. Recognising Palestinian statehood would be a step towards achieving all those objectives.

4.50 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Middle East (Amanda Milling): May I say how grateful I am to the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) for securing this debate? I thank Members from all parties for their contributions.

The UK's position on the middle east peace process is clear and well known: we support a negotiated settlement leading to a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state. We firmly believe that a just and lasting solution that delivers peace for both the Israelis and the Palestinians is long overdue—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It is most discourteous to the Minister, who is responding to a very serious debate, for Members to come in at the end of the debate and talk among themselves. Please, stop it.

Amanda Milling: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. We also believe the best way to make progress towards such a solution is through negotiations between both sides that take account of their legitimate concerns. To that end, a two-state solution is the only way to protect Israel's Jewish and democratic character and realise Palestinian national aspirations. The resumption of two-way negotiations, with international support, is the best way to get to an agreement.

The UK will recognise a Palestinian state at a time when it best serves the objective of peace. Bilateral recognition in itself cannot deliver peace or end the occupation. Without a negotiated settlement, the conflict and the problems that come with it will continue.

The UK works closely with international partners to strongly advocate for a two-state solution and encourage a return to meaningful negotiation between both parties. We welcome recent engagement between the Government in Israel and the Palestinian Authority. That engagement includes discussions between the Ministries of Finance aimed at improving the economic conditions in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Such direct engagement is vital, given the scale of the challenges. We consistently call for an immediate end to all actions that undermine the viability of the two-state solution.

The UK remains resolute in its commitment to Israel's security. We have been clear that Israel has a legitimate right to self-defence in responding to attacks—

Dr Offord: Will the Minister give way?

Amanda Milling: I will not, because I do not have enough time. I would love to otherwise.

In exercising that right, it is vital that all Israel's actions are in line with international humanitarian law and every effort is made to avoid civilian casualties. The UK unequivocally condemns Hamas's inflammatory action and indiscriminate attacks against Israel. We continue to call on Hamas and other terrorist groups to end their abhorrent rocket attacks, such as those seen in May 2021. The Government assess Hamas in its entirety to be concerned with terrorism. As of November, we have proscribed the organisation in full.

We remain committed to the objective of a sovereign, prosperous Palestinian state living side by side with a safe and secure Israel. That is why we are supporting

vulnerable people through our development programmes in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and why we work to strengthen Palestinian institutions and to promote sustainable economic growth in the west bank. The UK has strong relations with the Palestinian Authority, who have made important progress on state building. That progress is why it is so important that the Palestinian Authority return to Gaza to ensure that improved governance is extended throughout the territory that will become a Palestinian state.

Economic progress can never be a substitute for a political settlement, but it is vital that, in the interim, Palestinians see tangible improvements in their daily lives. Economic growth in the Occupied Palestinian Territories remains vital in order to give hope to Palestinian people. We call on the Palestinian Authority and Israel to resume dialogue on economic issues, to reconvene the Joint Economic Committee and to address the financial crisis together.

Our development programmes work to preserve the prospect of a negotiated two-state solution and to improve the lives of Palestinians throughout Gaza and the west bank, including east Jerusalem. The UK is providing life-saving aid to Palestinian refugees in Gaza and across the region. In 2021, the UK provided more than £27 million to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, the UN agency working with Palestinian refugees, including £4.9 million to its flash appeal after the Gaza conflict in May. UK aid to UNRWA is already helping the agency to provide education to more than 533,000 children a year and access to health services for 3.5 million Palestinian refugees.

On 17 December, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and North America announced an additional £2 million to UNICEF to assist the most vulnerable people in Gaza, helping children to continue their education, to meet their basic needs and, hopefully, to fulfil their potential.

I am aware that I have to give a couple of minutes to the hon. Member for Sunderland Central to conclude the debate. To conclude, we have urged Israel and the Palestinian Authority to work together to meet their obligations under the Oslo accords.

Dr Offord: I am very grateful that the Minister was strong enough to give way, unlike the Opposition Front Bencher. Is she aware of the comment by the EU's middle east peace envoy that the application by President Abbas for recognition at the UN was a confrontational act? Was he wrong?

Amanda Milling: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am incredibly conscious of time because I do have to give the hon. Member for Sunderland Central a couple of minutes. As I have said, our position is clear. We have urged Israel and the Palestinian Authority to work together to meet their obligations under the Oslo accords. We also call on all parties to abide by international humanitarian law to promote peace, stability and security. Peace will not be achieved by symbolic measures. It will be achieved only by real movement towards renewed dialogue between parties that leads to a viable Palestinian state, living in peace and security side by side with Israel. The UK stands ready to support this in every way we can.

4.58 pm

Julie Elliott: I thank all colleagues, on all sides of the House, who have taken part in this very important debate. I accept that, today, there have been pressing issues elsewhere; that is why the Minister left the debate and has only been present for part of it. But I urge her to read the debate in *Hansard* and perhaps address in writing some of the issues that were raised. I do accept that it has been a difficult day.

I also would like to hear what the Government are saying about respecting international law. We have heard much today on the issue of international law and respecting it. Unfortunately, the Minister did not address that in her response. The issue remains that the Palestinian people have fulfilled what is needed to fulfil statehood to get recognition. The Government are saying, “At some point, when the time is right.” The time is right now. There has been broad consensus in this House for many years and the Government are simply not acting on it. We all want to see a movement to meaningful negotiations, leading to a settlement on a two-state solution, but the Government’s prevaricating on not recognising the state of Palestine is hindering that process, in my opinion. We need no more warm words; we need action. We have the ability as a country and the Government have the ability as our Government to recognise Palestine today. We do not have to wait—let us just act and not wait.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the UK Government position on the recognition of the State of Palestine alongside the State of Israel.

Ukraine

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the Prime Minister’s statement, I point out that the British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv.

5 pm

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I have just come from a meeting of G7 leaders joined by Secretary-General Stoltenberg of NATO; with permission, I will update the House on our response to President Putin’s onslaught against a free and sovereign European nation.

Shortly after 4 o’clock this morning I spoke to President Zelensky of Ukraine, as the first missiles struck his beautiful and innocent country and its brave people, and I assured him of the unwavering support of the United Kingdom. I can tell the House that at this stage, Ukrainians are offering a fierce defence of their families and their country. I know every hon. Member will share my admiration for their resolve.

Earlier today, President Putin delivered another televised address and offered the absurd pretext that he sought the

“demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine”.

In fact, he is hurling the might of his military machine against a free and peaceful neighbour, in breach of his own explicit pledge and every principle of civilised behaviour between states, spurning the best efforts of this country and our allies to avoid bloodshed. For that, Putin will stand condemned in the eyes of the world and of history. He will never be able to cleanse the blood of Ukraine from his hands.

Although the UK and our allies tried every avenue for diplomacy until the final hour, I am driven to conclude that Putin was always determined to attack his neighbour, no matter what we did. Now we see him for what he is: a blood-stained aggressor who believes in imperial conquest.

I am proud that Britain did everything within our power to help Ukraine prepare for this onslaught, and we will do our utmost to offer more help as our brave friends defend their homeland. Our Embassy took the precaution on 18 February of relocating from Kyiv to the city of Lviv in western Ukraine, where our ambassador Melinda Simmons continues to work with the Ukrainian authorities and to support British nationals.

Now we have a clear mission: diplomatically, politically, economically and eventually militarily, this hideous and barbaric venture of Vladimir Putin must end in failure. At the G7 meeting this afternoon, we agreed to work in unity to maximise the economic price that Putin will pay for his aggression. This must include ending Europe’s collective dependence on Russian oil and gas that has served to empower Putin for too long, so I welcome again Chancellor Scholz’s excellent decision to halt the certification of Nord Stream 2.

Countries that together comprise about half the world economy are now engaged in maximising economic pressure on one that makes up a mere 2%. For our part, today the UK is announcing the largest and most severe package of economic sanctions that Russia has ever seen. With new financial measures we are taking new powers to target Russian finance. In addition to the

[*The Prime Minister*]

banks we have already sanctioned this week, today, in concert with the United States, we are imposing a full asset freeze on VTB.

More broadly, these powers will enable us totally to exclude Russian banks from the UK financial system, which is of course by far the largest in Europe, stopping them from accessing sterling and clearing payments through the UK. With around half of Russia's trade currently in US dollars and sterling, I am pleased to tell the House that the United States is taking similar measures.

These powers will also enable us to ban Russian state and private companies from raising funds in the UK, banning dealing with their securities and making loans to them. We will limit the amount of money that Russian nationals will be able to deposit in their UK bank accounts, and sanctions will also be applied to Belarus for its role in the assault on Ukraine.

Overall, we will be imposing asset freezes on more than 100 new entities and individuals, on top of the hundreds that we have already announced. This includes all the major manufacturers that support Putin's war machine. Furthermore, we are also banning Aeroflot from the UK.

Next, on top of these financial measures and in full concert with the United States and the EU, we will introduce new trade restrictions and stringent export controls similar to those that they in the US are implementing. We will bring forward new legislation to ban the export of all dual-use items to Russia, including a range of high-end and critical technological equipment and components in sectors including electronics, telecommunications and aerospace. Legislation to implement this will be laid early next week. These trade sanctions will constrain Russia's military-industrial and technological capabilities for years to come.

We are bringing forward measures on unexplained wealth orders from the economic crime Bill, to be introduced before the House rises for Easter, and we will set out further detail before Easter on the range of policies to be included in the full Bill in the next Session, including on reforms to Companies House and a register of overseas property ownership. We will set up a new dedicated kleptocracy cell in the National Crime Agency to target sanctions evasion and corrupt Russian assets hidden in the UK, and that means oligarchs in London will have nowhere to hide.

I know that this House will have great interest in the potential of cutting Russia out from SWIFT, and I can confirm, as I have always said, that nothing is off the table. But for all these measures to be successful, it is vital that we have the unity of our partners and unity in the G7 and other fora.

Russian investors are already delivering their verdict on the wisdom of Putin's actions. So far today, Russian stocks are down by as much as 45%, wiping \$250 billion from their value in the biggest one-day decline on record. Sberbank, Russia's biggest lender, is down by as much as 45% and Gazprom down by as much as 39%, while the rouble has plummeted to record lows against the dollar. We will continue on a remorseless mission to squeeze Russia from the global economy piece by piece, day by day, and week by week.

We will of course use Britain's position in every international forum to condemn the onslaught against Ukraine, and we will counter the Kremlin's blizzard of lies and disinformation by telling the truth about Putin's war of choice and war of aggression. We will work with our allies on the urgent need to protect other European countries that are not members of NATO and that could become targets of Putin's playbook of subversion and aggression. We will resist any creeping temptation to accept what Putin is doing today as a fait accompli. There can be no creeping normalisation, not now, not in the months to come, not in the years ahead.

We must strengthen NATO's defences still further. So today I called for a meeting of NATO leaders that will take place tomorrow, and I will be convening the countries that contribute to the joint expeditionary force, which is led by the United Kingdom and comprises both NATO and non-NATO members.

Last Saturday, I warned that this invasion would have global economic consequences, and this morning the oil price has risen strongly. The Government will do everything possible to safeguard our own people from the repercussions for the cost of living, and of course we stand ready to protect our country from any threats, including in cyberspace.

Above all, the House will realise the hard and heavy truth that we now live in a continent where an expansionist power, deploying one of the world's most formidable military machines, is trying to redraw the map of Europe in blood and conquer an independent state by force of arms. It is vital for the safety of every nation that Putin's squalid venture should ultimately fail, and be seen to fail. However long it takes, that will be the steadfast and unflinching goal of the United Kingdom, I hope of every Member of this House and of every one of our great allies, certain that together we have the power and the will to defend the cause of peace and justice, as we have always done.

I say to the people of Russia, whose President has just authorised an onslaught against a fellow Slavic people, that I cannot believe this horror is being done in your name or that you really want the pariah status that these actions will bring to the Putin regime. To our Ukrainian friends in this moment of agony, I say that we are with you and we are on your side. Your right to choose your own destiny is a right that the United Kingdom and our allies will always defend, and in that spirit I join you in saying "Slava Ukraini". I commend this statement to the House.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): In this dark hour, our thoughts, our solidarity and our resolve are with the Ukrainian people. Invading troops march through their streets and missiles shell their cities. They have been cast into a war through no fault of their own, because Putin fears their freedom and because he knows that no people will choose to live under his bandit rule unless forced to do so at the barrel of a gun.

The consequences of Putin's war of aggression will be horrendous and tragic for the people of Ukraine, but also for the Russian people, who have been plunged into chaos by a violent elite who have stolen their wealth, stolen their chance of democracy and stolen their future.

We must prepare ourselves for difficulties here. We will face economic pain as we free Europe from dependence on Russian gas and oil and clean our institutions of

money stolen from the Russian people, but the British public have always been willing to make sacrifices to defend democracy on our continent, and we will again. The consequences of Putin's actions will be felt throughout the world for years and, I fear, for decades to come.

Russia's democratic neighbours and every other democracy that lives in the shadow of autocratic power are watching their worst nightmare unfold. All of us who believe in democracy over dictatorship, in the rule of law over the reign of terror and in freedom over the jackboot of tyranny must unite and take a stand. We must support the Ukrainian people in their fight and we must ensure that Putin fails.

Putin will eventually learn the same lesson that European tyrants learned in the last century: that the resolve of the world is harder than he imagines, that people's desire for freedom burns brighter than he can ever extinguish, and that the light of liberty will prevail over his darkness. For that to happen, we must make a clean break with the failed approach to handling Putin, which after Georgia, after Crimea and after Donbas has fed his belief that the benefits of aggression outweigh the costs. We must finally show him that he is wrong. That means doing all that we can to help Ukraine to defend herself by providing weapons, equipment and financial assistance, as well as humanitarian support for the Ukrainian people. We must urgently reinforce and reassure our NATO allies in eastern Europe who now stand at the frontier of Putin's aggression.

The hardest possible sanctions must be taken against the Putin regime. It must be isolated, its finances frozen and its ability to function crippled. That means excluding Russia from financial mechanisms such as SWIFT and banning trade in Russian sovereign debt. I welcome the set of sanctions outlined by the Prime Minister just now and pledge Opposition support for further measures.

There are changes that we must make here in the UK. For too long, our country has been a safe haven for the money that Putin and his fellow bandits stole from the Russian people. It must now change. Cracking open the shell companies in which stolen money is hidden will require legislation. The Prime Minister should bring it forward immediately, and Labour will support it, along with the other measures that he has just outlined. [HON. MEMBERS: "Monday."] Thank you, and we will support it.

This must be a turning point in history. We must look back and say that this terrible day was when Putin doomed himself—and his plan to reassert Russian force as a means of controlling eastern Europe—to defeat. We know how he operates so we know how to defeat him. He seeks division, so we must stand united. He hopes for inaction, so we must take a stand. He believes that we are too corrupted to do the right thing, so we must prove him wrong. I believe that we can and that in this dark hour, we can step towards the light.

The Prime Minister: I want to say how grateful I am to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for the terms in which he has just spoken and for the robust support that he is offering to the Government and to the western alliance at a very difficult time. The whole House can be turning to some of the issues that he raised.

Briefly, I think the whole House can be proud of the role that the UK has played in pioneering military

support—logistical support—to the Ukrainians and the role that we have played in bringing together a ferocious package of sanctions that we will now implement. We will bring our allies together to protect NATO and to show that President Putin will get a tougher western alliance as a result of his actions, not a weaker western alliance.

I think that events will show that the Russian President has profoundly miscalculated. He believes that he is doing this for his own political advantage. I believe the exact opposite will prove to be the case, because of the resistance that will be mounted against what he is doing, not just in Ukraine but around the world. We will support those Ukrainians. We will support them economically, diplomatically, politically and, yes, militarily as well, and I know that in due time we will succeed.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement this afternoon. This House and this country are united in our defence of democracy and our support for the Ukrainian people. Vladimir Putin has initiated war in mainland Europe. The response must be unequivocal and absolutely clear, so will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government are putting in place every possible economic sanction so that Russia feels absolutely the cold wind of isolation and the Russian people understand that Vladimir Putin has brought their state to a pariah state?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend. She is absolutely right about what the Government are setting out to do, and I do indeed believe that that will be the result for Putin and his cronies.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Let me thank the Prime Minister for an advance copy of the statement, and let me also welcome the very close contact he has kept with the Ukrainian President—importantly, overnight. I was grateful that I had the chance this afternoon to meet the Ukrainian ambassador to the UK and indeed Ukrainian MPs. Our thoughts and our support are very much with each and every one of them, as they are with all the people of Ukraine.

Although last night's events have been prophesied and predicted for some time, the acts of Russian violence, aggression and tyranny are no less shocking. What we are witnessing is a full-scale invasion: it is an act of war. This is first and foremost an unprovoked attack on the peace and the innocence of Ukraine and of its people, but it is equally an attack on international law, an attack on our European democracy and an attack on the peace that our continent has so carefully built over the last 75 years.

President Putin, and President Putin alone, bears responsibility for these horrific acts, and it is he and his Kremlin cabal who must pay a massive price for their actions. It is important to say to the Russian people that we know that Putin is not acting in their name. He is a dictator, he is an imperialist, he is a tyrant and he is as much a threat to his own people as he is to all of us.

This is a moment for unity, and it is especially a moment for European unity. All of the economic sanctions that are now finally being implemented have one clear objective—the complete economic isolation of the Russian state. Can the Prime Minister confirm that this is the objective, and that he has agreed that with his international

[*Ian Blackford*]

allies? That economic isolation must include sanctions on Putin and his network of oligarchs and agents, their expulsion from countries around the world, sanctions on his banks and their ability to borrow and function, and sanctions on his energy and mineral companies. As I said yesterday, it must finally mean clearing up the sewer of dirty Russian money that has been running through the City of London for years. I know all the complications involved, but can I ask the Prime Minister about the actions taken to suspend Russia from the SWIFT payment system—one of the steps that would hit the Putin regime the hardest?

As we rightly seek to punish Putin, we must redouble our support and solidarity for the Ukrainian people. Can the Prime Minister give further details on the humanitarian aid being deployed and the plans in place to offer refuge and sanctuary, where necessary, for those who might be displaced? What plans are in place to evacuate the families of UK citizens currently in Ukraine, given that commercial flights have now stopped?

Let us not fall for the Kremlin propaganda that it is prepared to soak up any sanctions. If we act now, and if the sanctions are targeted enough, swift enough and severe enough—if we impose nothing less than economic isolation—Putin and his cronies will suffer the consequences of their actions. So let us act together, stand together and, most of all, let us all stand with the people of Ukraine.

The Prime Minister: Again, may I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the wisdom and the statesmanship with which he has just spoken? On his points, we have put 1,000 troops on stand-by to help with the humanitarian exodus in the adjacent countries, and we have people in forward presence in the adjacent countries to help UK nationals come out. He is quite right that the way to make these sanctions work—as we discussed today in the G7, where there is a great deal of unity—is to do them together and at the same time, and that is what we are doing.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister has some very important meetings, and I will be running the statement to 6.30 pm. For those colleagues who do not get in, we are keeping a list, as we did from the other day, to try to ensure that all Members have a voice on this very important matter.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I pay huge tribute to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and his Government for introducing what sound like the toughest sanctions we have seen in years. May I ask him to look wider than simply the Russian people, and at all those who are enabling Putin's economy—those who sit on boards of the businesses that finance him, whether they are former Chancellors of Germany, or former Prime Ministers of France? Will he look here, close to home, at those who enable and propagate the propaganda that is used by Putin to undermine his own people and free people everywhere? Will he update the Treason Act 1351, so that we can identify those people and call them what they are: traitors? When the Prime Minister speaks to people around the world, will he

speak with the truth that he can in Russian through the BBC Russian service, and start to broadcast in languages other than Russian into Russia, so that all Russian peoples can know that their oppression does not need to exist and they do not need to side with the tyrant?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much. He is absolutely right to say that we have to look at those who abet the Putin regime. There are many, many of them, and that is why we are looking at all sorts of ways in which we can address threats to this state. We are, of course, ensuring that the messages from this House, which are so impressive in their unity, should be registered by the people of Russia, because we mean no ill towards them. They are, in many ways, as much the victims of this appalling regime as the people of Ukraine, and they need to know what is really going on.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister tell the House, if he can, what is going on with the Russian troops going through Chernobyl? That sent a chill through a lot of people's thoughts when we heard about it.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady. I hesitate to give the House a running commentary on what seems a very fluid and dangerous situation, but to the best of my knowledge she is right in what she says.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): For the best part of 50 years, Britain gave sanctuary to the Governments in exile of the occupied Baltic states. If, as appears likely, Ukraine gets overwhelmed, will we offer to give sanctuary to a Government in exile, pending Ukraine's future freedom?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend, and of course we will give all the support we can, logistical or otherwise, as Britain always has done, to Governments in exile. One of the points I made to President Zelensky this morning was that it might be necessary for him to find a safe place for him and his Cabinet to go.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): With President Putin responsible for this catastrophic human tragedy, the Liberal Democrats join all sides to stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine, and I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. Today must be a wake-up call. The west has been too complacent over Putin's threat for too long. We have taken for granted our fragile alliances, so crucial for the defence of freedom, emboldening Putin and this outrageous act of aggression. The west cannot be complacent any longer. Will the Government reverse their proposed troop cuts to the British Army, and offer far greater military support to our NATO allies in eastern Europe? Putin must face the most punitive of sanctions. The world must isolate Russia like the rogue state it is, including the state-backed oil giant Rosneft, which is 20% owned by BP. Will the Prime Minister commit to banning UK investment in Russian oil and gas companies, with immediate effect?

The Prime Minister: On the right hon. Gentleman's point about investment in Russian oil and gas, as I have said, we must move away from all our dependencies on

Russian oil and gas, and that is the objective of the UK Government. We are lucky in this country in that only 3% of our gas comes from Russia. Other European countries are in a much more exposed position. On his point about supporting eastern Europeans, as he knows we have doubled the size of our commitment to Estonia. We have gone bigger in Poland, there are another 350 marines from 45 Commando, and we are in the skies above Romania. I do not believe there is another country in NATO that is currently doing more to strengthen NATO's eastern defences.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): My constituency has strong historical connections with Ukraine, so I welcome this robust approach. My constituency has also seen significant property investments by Russian investors. May I urge my right hon. Friend to accelerate the introduction of a register of beneficial ownership of property?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is completely right that we need to unpeel the façade of these shell companies so that we can see who owns the property concerned.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): It is because John Stuart Mill was right when he warned that

“Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing”

that the whole House will support the measures that the Prime Minister has announced. In his statement, he said that our mission is clear “diplomatically, politically, economically and, eventually, militarily.” What did he mean by militarily? Was he referring to providing further defensive weapons to enable Ukraine to defend itself?

The Prime Minister: Obviously I do not want to go into detail, because it is a sensitive and difficult business, but, yes, we have done so and continue to do so. I believe that I have the support of the House in intending to continue to do so.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his words and, if I understood correctly, his early commitment to an economic crime Bill and a kleptocracy cell. In relation to that, will there be a foreign lobbying Bill? Will there be amendments to LIBOR and the Data Protection Acts to stop unscrupulous law firms from offering intimidation services to oligarchs and kleptocrats? Will the NCA be properly funded, as the Intelligence and Security Committee report suggested, so that it can take on the kleptocrats, the autocrats and the oligarchs in this country?

The Prime Minister: As I said in my statement, we are setting up a new combating kleptocracy cell in the National Crime Agency to target the very individuals mentioned by my hon. Friend.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Let us be under no illusion: we are on the brink of a potentially enormous humanitarian crisis that could see massive loss of life and widespread suffering for the Ukrainian people, all because of the warped desire complex of the Russian President. The attack on Ukraine is also likely to cause mass displacement of people, potentially triggering a

significant refugee crisis in Europe. What is the Prime Minister doing to support the Ukrainian people who stay and those who choose to flee?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member makes an important point, for which I am grateful, because the humanitarian impact threatens to be enormous. That is why I said what I did about supporting refugees as they come out of Ukraine. We must ensure that we do everything we can to stabilise the Ukrainian economy and support their Government. That is why on Tuesday I announced the \$500 million extra package of development aid on top of the £100 million that we have already given. Other countries—our friends and allies—are working with us to do much more.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that the international order as envisaged in the Atlantic charter of 1941 has been the most successful in the history of freedom and democracy and that, as one of the architects of that order, we have a special responsibility to defend it? While today's sanctions are extremely welcome, this cannot just be about economic measures. We need a fundamental review of our military capability, including revisiting the integrated review, whose assumptions may now be out of date.

The Prime Minister: The integrated review begins with the assertion that the most important area for our national security is the Euro-Atlantic area, as I believe I said to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on Tuesday, and that remains fundamental. That is why we have continued with our investment in NATO, and we are the second biggest funder of NATO, as my right hon. Friend knows. He is right in what he says about what is at stake. This is about the whole idea of that wonderful thing that was so inspiring when some of us were young: a Europe whole and free. The fantastic revolution that happened in 1989 and 1990 when communism fell was a great moment for humanity. We must not allow it to slip through our fingers.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I would like to state, on behalf of the people of Norwich, our solidarity with the people of Ukraine. But warm words will not defend the Ukrainian people. I have been speaking to people who have been liaising with Ukrainian trade unionists, people who have been fighting privatisation and wage cuts, and they say one thing: that they will not run from their homes; they will defend their families. Those people need to be able to defend themselves. I support the Prime Minister's assertion that we will be providing more defensive capabilities to that end, but let me ask one thing. Does the Prime Minister agree that we must have an end to this by a negotiated settlement, not by an escalation of military means?

The Prime Minister: I think the whole House and everybody in the world would want President Putin to have chosen the path of negotiation. He had that moment. That is why, if the hon. Gentleman remembers, we had that discussion in the House on Tuesday about that perilous moment. He had that opportunity. I am afraid he has missed it. He has chosen the path of overwhelming violence and destruction. I am afraid that puts us on a very, very different course and we have to accept that reality.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Everybody will wholeheartedly support the Prime Minister's sanctions against, hopefully, all 140 Russian oligarchs who support Putin and against all the major banks. The Prime Minister described Russia as a pariah state. He is right, because it has broken international criminal law on a major scale. Can we implement our view of the pariah state by ensuring that everybody involved in that decision, if they leave Russia to go abroad, faces international criminal sanctions wherever they go?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend and that is exactly what we can now do thanks to the measures this House has passed.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): This morning we woke to the worst possible news. I make no apology in hoping for a diplomatic solution. However, my party and I condemn the escalating Russian aggression. This is a fluid and developing situation, but we are now in uncharted territory.

I can update the House. While there have been calls in this place for Alex Salmond to cease broadcasting on Russia Today, negotiations have obviously been happening in the background, and I can confirm that he has suspended broadcasting on Russia Today.

We must prepare for the worst. What strategy is the Prime Minister bringing forward to increase North sea oil and gas capacity, so that we can support ourselves and EU member states, and protect our people from a further increase in the cost of living?

The Prime Minister: I must say I disagree profoundly with what the hon. Gentleman has to say about negotiating now. I do not think that that option is open to us. We must do our best to support and protect the people of Ukraine, working with our international friends and allies to constrict what Vladimir Putin can do.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about Russia Today, I simply observe that the former leader of the Scottish National party—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman's leader; I am so sorry. I understand the pleas he entered in defence and mitigation. They do not seem to cut much ice with me.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I strongly welcome the further set of sanctions announced by the Prime Minister this evening. We look forward to further steps being taken in the days ahead and to not being held back by perhaps some of the slower moving members of the alliance in Europe. Does he agree that if sanctions are really to bite on Putin and his gangster Government, it will inevitably mean cost and inconvenience to UK economic interests? However, that cost and inconvenience will be nothing compared with what the people of Ukraine are going through, and we stand with them this evening.

The Prime Minister: Yes, I am afraid my right hon. Friend is right. It will mean cost, it will mean inconvenience, it will mean difficulty for us in the UK, but that will be a price worth paying for defeating the objectives of Vladimir Putin and showing that aggression does not pay.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): To follow up on the question from the hon.

Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) about the combating kleptocracy cell in the National Crime Agency, may I seek from the Prime Minister a view on whether additional powers and additional resources will be required for the NCA to do its work?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady very much for her question. Of course, the NCA has plenty of existing statute, but among its additional powers will be the ability to peel back the façade of ownership, which will be extremely valuable.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): While this terrible, appalling incident is, of course, directly the cause of Russia, it is appropriate that we also recognise that over the last 14 years, the UK, the EU and the US collectively have not been attentive to Russia in the way that we should have been. Can my right hon. Friend now say that, whatever happened in the past, moving forward we are not going to let Russia fall between our fingers again?

The Prime Minister: The lesson of 2014 is that the whole of the west failed to respond in the way that we should have done. I am afraid that it was quite wrong that, when a sovereign country was invaded and part of that country was occupied, we tried to manage the situation with various diplomatic processes, which, in the end, produced absolutely nothing except, finally, this catastrophic invasion today. We have learned a bitter lesson about how to deal with Vladimir Putin.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I agree with the Prime Minister that it seems like the curtain has now come down on the era that began in 1989. We have lived in an era of change since then, and this now feels like a change of era. In this new era, the permissive environment that we created for the Kremlin's quartermasters to live, invest and party in London, sometimes with the Prime Minister himself, must now come to an end—*[Interruption.]* So let me ask the Prime Minister this: will he undertake to ensure that every visa issued to a Russian dual national is now reviewed? Where proximity to President Putin is proven, that citizenship should be stripped away.

The Prime Minister: Yes, we are doing that, although I think it is worth the House remembering the point that I made the other day: not every Russian is a bad person.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): I welcome the package of sanctions that the Prime Minister has set out. Although I understand why it has not been possible to suspend Russia from the SWIFT payment system at this stage, I ask him: what work are we doing with our European allies to offer them reassurance, so that we can eventually get to a position where Russia can be suspended, because that is by far and away the biggest thing that will isolate the Russian economy?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is spot on—actually, the biggest thing would be if everybody stopped taking Russian hydrocarbons, but SWIFT is extremely important. It is a Belgian company, as I am sure the House knows.

We are raising the issue and trying to make progress with our friends but, for obvious reasons, it has to be done in unison.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): This morning, I spoke to friends in Kyiv who were leaving the country with their family and their children. We have all seen the scenes from the capital of cars trying to get out. I send my deepest thanks to the embassy team there, who are doing all they can to support people.

May I ask the Prime Minister about two areas of support for Ukraine: economic support and continuing support for defensive capability? Will both those areas of support intensify? I see the Foreign Secretary telling me so, but can the Prime Minister assure the House that the Government will continue the deepest possible conversations with the Government in Ukraine to ensure that, no matter the assault that comes to them from Vladimir Putin, we will be supporting them in a deeply meaningful sense?

The Prime Minister: On the hon. Gentleman's last point, the answer is certainly yes. For instance, the other day I was looking at two British minesweepers that are being refitted in Rosyth, as I am sure he knows, and are due to go to Ukraine. The question will be access; that is what it all depends on.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): It is crystal clear from this act of naked aggression that Putin does not seek Finlandisation on his borders; he seeks, at best, to recreate a Belarus in the south or, at worst, to dismember the sovereign state of Ukraine. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that means that we need to build on the outcome of our integrated defence review and think differently from how we thought in the past about eastern Europe? At home, with respect to his announcement about bringing forward economic crime measures, it seems that there is consensus in this House that could allow us to introduce emergency legislation to bring in those important measures, to really hit those people hard and hit them now.

The Prime Minister: That is clearly the will of the House and it is the will of the Government, which is why we will be bringing forward those important measures on Monday.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): My thoughts are with the Ukrainian people at this time. While I welcome the sanctions that the Prime Minister has announced today, can he update the House on whether he plans to sanction the major state-owned Russian banks such as Sberbank and Gazprombank and the non-state Alfa bank?

The Prime Minister: Yes.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): The Ukrainian prisoner of war chapel at Lockerbie in my constituency is a focal point for the Ukrainian diaspora in Scotland; prayers are being said there for their fellow countrymen. Ukrainians in the UK, who are grateful for the military support that has already been forthcoming, have identified an immediate need for medical battlefield supplies, for warm clothing for troops and for camouflage gear. Can my right hon. Friend assure the House that they will be forthcoming?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises a very important issue. We are working on exactly those supplies right now.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement and very much welcome the sanctions that he has announced today, but can he give an assurance that the sanctions targeting individuals will also target relatives and connected parties? The right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) mentioned the economic crime Bill; there is also the review of the Official Secrets Act and a foreign registration Act. Why can we not bring them forward and do them now? They would get huge support and we have been waiting for some of them for nearly two years.

The Prime Minister: I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that we will certainly be making sure that we are able to sanction—and that we do sanction—relatives and other interested parties. There will be a rolling programme of intensifying sanctions.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Having been one of the officials who accompanied the then Defence Secretary to both Moscow and Kyiv in 1993, I am in no doubt that the signatures of the United States and the United Kingdom on the Budapest memorandum gave Ukraine the confidence to give up its nuclear deterrent. Will my right hon. Friend support the United States to whatever extent it is prepared to go, and stand alongside the United States in giving whatever military support it is prepared to give to Ukraine?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to remind the House of the 1994 Budapest memorandum, which had exactly that effect and created exactly that obligation on us as one of the signatories.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister will be aware that Opposition Members are very keen on these sanctions, but does he share my worry that the record of driving out dictators and demagogues with such sanctions is not always that successful? Does he share my concern, from reading what Putin has been saying in the past few hours, that he is a man who might not stop at Ukraine, but might go into a NATO country? Are we playing that scenario? Many of us think that it might be the next step.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that appalling possibility, and it is vital that we reaffirm, again, that under article 5 of the North Atlantic treaty, we stand four-square behind every one of our NATO allies and will come to their defence.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): With Ukrainian men and women dying to fight against the Russians for their freedom today, those who are calling for negotiation at this point can only please that rambling wreck of a neo-Nazi sitting in the Kremlin, and they should be shunned.

Today the ambassador from Ukraine asked desperately whether NATO would look at a no-fly zone. I know it is a difficult choice, but could my right hon. Friend step to the Dispatch Box and make it clear that in this particular case, he rules nothing out?

The Prime Minister: I know that my right hon. Friend is a great military expert, and I understand the attractions of the no-fly zone. I remember the no-fly zone that was created in 1991, as I recall, in northern Iraq. However, the situation here is very different. We would face the risk of having to shoot down Russian planes, and that is something that I think the House would want to contemplate with caution.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I hope the Prime Minister can reassure me that locking out Russian state money will include our overseas territories and dependencies. I note that protests are taking place in a number of cities across Russia, and that celebrities in Russia have been speaking out. I do hope that we will be offering all the support we can to those people who are likely to be shunned by the fascist imperialist Putin regime.

The Prime Minister: Yes, and let me also say that one of the reasons I want to keep our fantastic British embassy staff in Moscow, even though the temptation is there simply to sunder diplomatic relations with Putin, is that I want them there to support groups such as the ones that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have given evidence at four war crimes trials. It was with genocide and crimes against humanity that those people had been charged. May I ask my right hon. Friend and the House to agree with me that any Russian who kills a Ukrainian must remember that one day they may well be brought to court for crimes against humanity or genocide?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and not just any Russian combatant, but anyone who sends a Russian into battle to kill innocent Ukrainians.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): President Zelensky has called for the toughest possible sanctions. If they are to be the toughest possible sanctions, that must mean “immediate”. In his statement, the Prime Minister referred to economic measures “in the next Session”, including measures relating to Companies House and the register of overseas property ownership, but in his answer to the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland), he said something about bringing this forward on Monday. Which is it to be, and if it is Monday, will it have the same effect as is required for that immediate action?

The Prime Minister: We will be bringing it forward on Monday, and I am grateful for the support of the Opposition. We want immediately to start cracking down on these individuals.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): The whole House will welcome the enhanced package of sanctions that the Prime Minister has announced today, but may I raise the question of football, much beloved of Russian hearts, and in particular issues of ownership, property and shareholdings, and the future participation of Russian clubs in international matches?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is completely right. The Russians attach a great deal of sentimental importance to football, and they hope to hold the UEFA championship final in St Petersburg. I cannot for the life of me see how that can currently go ahead.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Putin’s war on Ukraine is brutal, illegal and a calculated attack on peace and stability in Europe. Plaid Cymru fully supports the actions and sanctions announced today. Putin and his cronies with their personal fortunes must pay for their actions. On a visit to Ukraine, Plaid Cymru leaders spoke to Ukrainian soldiers, Government officials and organisations, admiring the Ukrainian people for their strength and resilience, but those people are now in harm’s way. With Poland organising medical assistance and Slovakia opening up its borders to refugees, will this Government mobilise and resource a global effort to support and aid people fleeing this horrific conflict?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady very much for her support and her resolve. I want to assure her that we are of course working with our international friends to prepare for a humanitarian crisis.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): Earlier this afternoon, I had the opportunity to speak on a Zoom call to a number of Ukrainian MPs, who were all calling for additional support. One of their key concerns was that their communications networks might be shut down. Can I urge the Prime Minister to ensure that we are doing all we can to provide equipment such as satellite phones to ensure that they can still communicate, not just internally but with us here in the UK?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a threat to communications already. We are observing it in the contacts we are having with people in Ukraine. Satellite phones are certainly an option and we will be looking at that.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): We have rightly heard a lot about tougher trade sanctions today, but nothing about ridding our democracy of Russian state influence. Will the Prime Minister commit to investigating all political donations received from people with links to Putin, and will his Government finally bring forward measures to clean up the corrupt Russian money that for far too long has been laundered in the UK?

The Prime Minister: All political donations are properly registered and monitored. I can tell the hon. Lady that we are putting forward progressively over the last few days and weeks and today the biggest ever package to crack down on dirty Russian money, not just from Russia but from anywhere.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I welcome the sanctions today. My right hon. Friend has been crystal clear that all of Europe needs to end its dependence on Russian oil and gas. Can he tell us a little bit more about how he intends to see that that comes to pass?

The Prime Minister: The key thing is first to get people to recognise the scale of their dependency, as in any addiction, and that is what we are doing. The UK Government have been making that point to our friends the whole time, because it has got worse since 2014. What we are also doing is helping countries such as the Baltic states to go further and faster with renewable technology.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I think everyone knows that Ukraine is a major producer of grain. Unfortunately, because of these awful events, there are likely to be consequences for many countries, including our own. Can I ask the Prime Minister to look again at our food security proposals and ensure that we are secure and not reliant on others as much as we have been in the past?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Food security is an important consideration. One of the many things that our fantastic Ukrainian community has done in the last few years is to help us in that very sector.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that western Europe's ongoing reliance on Russian oil and gas has been a major factor in emboldening President Putin in the mistaken belief that he can invade his peaceful neighbour with relative impunity? In the UK, should we not refocus our energy policy on maximising the use of our own natural resources and look again at fracking while we invest in low carbon alternatives?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is totally right when he talks about the excessive dependence on hydrocarbons. We are moving away from it in this country. I think he and I might agree that there is merit, during a transitional phase, in continuing with the use of hydrocarbons in this country rather than pointlessly importing them from abroad.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Putin's imperial bloodlust will not stop at Ukraine. We are rightly focused on sanctions, military and humanitarian support and our commitment to Ukrainian freedom, but the Prime Minister knows that there has been a phenomenal increase in Russian submarine activity over the last 20 years. Our undersea cables carry more than 95% of western military, diplomatic, commercial, financial and personal communications, and the consequences of these cables being weaponised is terrifying. Can he assure me that countering this threat is part of our ongoing dialogue with allies?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that there is a continual struggle beneath the surface of the sea between submarines that are out to sever cables and those of us who are trying to make sure those links are maintained.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): My right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) asked a question about war crimes, and I suspect those crimes are already being committed by Russian soldiers against their Slavic brothers and sisters. Will the Prime Minister join NATO heads of state in setting out, at an early stage, how war crimes will be prosecuted so that all Russian soldiers, field officers, generals and, of course, politicians are brutally aware of where they will end up in a few years' time?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and it is why we are working on setting up a particular international war crimes tribunal for those involved in war crimes in the Ukraine theatre.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): As well as being incredibly ruthless, President Putin is incredibly rich, with one assessment saying that his personal wealth is up to \$200 billion. Will the Prime Minister ensure that President Putin himself pays a heavy price by targeting his own cash and assets?

The Prime Minister: Yes, absolutely, and not just him but, as the House has heard over the last few days, as many of his immediate cronies and family as we can hit.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for all he has done. Just before the statement, I spoke to some of the Ukrainian protesters outside. One of them was holding back tears as she spoke about her mother being in a cellar as her house is surrounded by Russian tanks. Any hon. Member who asks for a negotiated settlement needs to speak to the protesters, because all they want is to live their lives as free and peaceful people. Will the Prime Minister confirm to the people of Ukraine that he will do everything he can to end the tyranny of Putin and to make sure they live as a peaceful, free people?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I certainly can confirm that. I believe that, through this invasion, President Putin has done more than anybody else to bring his regime to an end. In the end, he will pay a huge price for what he has done, and I know this House will want to make it so.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): I welcome and support the measures outlined by the Prime Minister today. Putin is a gangster and a despot who has been trying to undermine and subvert democracy across the world for years. One of the tools he uses is donations to political parties, including in this country. Will the Prime Minister commit today to ridding our democracy of Russian money?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland triggered article 4 of the north Atlantic treaty today, and I heard that we will be joining those discussions. Can my right hon. Friend assure our NATO allies in eastern Europe, particularly the Baltic states that have significant Russian populations, that we stand firmly with them?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is completely right. It is why one of the first things we did was to strengthen our presence in Estonia in the way I described, and why our Canadian friends are strengthening their presence in Latvia. We will make sure that we give the Baltic states, which seceded from the Soviet Union to become free and independent in that amazing moment, all the security they deserve.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): There is overwhelming evidence that Russian state actors have been involved in trying to disrupt and destabilise western democracies by using social media platforms such as Facebook. What are the Government doing to ensure such platforms are not used in these events?

The Prime Minister: As I said in an answer a couple of days ago, we have no evidence of disruption of UK elections or electoral events as a result of Russian activity, but the online harms Bill is there to provide such protections.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, and indeed thank the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition for his supportive and moving words. But I also reinforce the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly). Why has it come to this pass? How has the west in general and the UK in particular been so asleep at the switch for such a long time? I commend the defence and security review, but is it not now time to ask what the permanent and impartial machinery of our government does in failing to provide Ministers with consistent advice about the strategic threats that our country faces?

The Prime Minister: There are all sorts of reasons for the failure of the west to take sufficient account of the threat of Vladimir Putin since 2014, but the two biggest are oil and gas.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): With cyber-attacks and falsehoods, Russia is peddling lies today. Observers on the ground are crucial to relaying the truth. In recent weeks, the UK has withdrawn its team from the OSCE special monitoring mission because staff safety is key, but can the Prime Minister look again to support international efforts such as that to get to the facts and counter Russian disinformation?

The Prime Minister: I thank the monitoring mission teams. They are wonderful. I have met them and they do a fantastic job. I am sorry that they have had to be withdrawn, for the duty of care reasons that the hon. Gentleman rightly alludes to. We will keep that under constant review.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): The 1994 Budapest memorandum saw Ukraine give up its nuclear weapons in return for a security guarantee signed by not only Britain and the United States, but Russia. Does my right hon. Friend believe that Ukraine would have been invaded had it retained its nuclear weapons? What does that say about the value of a Russian signature on any international agreement?

The Prime Minister: It is clear that President Putin sets no stall by international law whatever and that is just one of the legal obligations that he has torn up.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): We awoke this morning to images of innocent families cowering in tube stations. We know the Putin regime's propensity for oppression and tyranny, particularly when it comes to minorities. Will the Prime Minister ensure that humanitarian aid is delivered in concert with not just other international partners, but third sector organisations?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course. The third sector plays an invaluable role.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and his specifically ruling out the threat of creeping normalisation. This House should be in no doubt that Putin is well prepared.

He has hundreds of billions of foreign currency reserves and a military that has been tested. Will the Prime Minister do everything he can to convert the current intent into frameworks that cement our intent over time, because Putin is betting on the fact that it will not be?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right because the plan that the G7 has agreed on, and our friends and partners have agreed on, is that Putin must fail—Putin must not succeed in this venture. We have to put in place all the steps we need to take, diplomatically, economically and, yes, militarily, in order to ensure that that is the case and that is what we are doing.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The Prime Minister is right to have set out the most stringent possible set of sanctions against the Government of Russia. Can he outline for the House what the implications will be for co-operation at the international space station?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. We will have to see what further downstream effects there are on collaboration of all kinds. Hitherto, I have been broadly in favour of continuing artistic and scientific collaboration, but in the current circumstances it is hard to see how even those can continue as normal.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The mix of practice and principle is the test of democratic politics, exemplified at its best when this House comes together in common cause. The test of leadership is the mix of vision and will, and the Prime Minister is to be commended for his wilful, clear-sighted determination. Will he now reassure the House that he is in close touch with those countries close to Ukraine, where nerves will be frayed? Will he send them the urgent message that this House and this nation will always stand together and behind free nations?

The Prime Minister: As so often, my right hon. Friend is precisely right. That is why, together with my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Defence and the Foreign Secretary, we have been visiting Poland, Romania, the Balts—all those who are now feeling such deep unease at what is happening.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): As we speak, the Sovcomflot tanker NS Challenger is berthed at Sullom Voe in Shetland and taking on a load of crude oil for export. As the Prime Minister may know, Sovcomflot is a company owned and operated by the Russian Government. My constituents are asking me why they should be loading oil on to a Russian tanker while Russian troops are marching into Ukraine. I cannot think of any good answer to give them. Will the Prime Minister tell me whether anything that he has announced today will ensure that that will not happen again?

The Prime Minister: I will of course immediately investigate what is happening with the Sovcomflot oil tanker. The result of the measures that the House passed the other day is that we can now target any entity—any company—that has any relation with the Russian state. We have that power.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Tyrants and megalomaniacs invade countries because they think they can get away with it. The way to deal with bullies is to stand up to them. I am sure the Prime Minister will acknowledge that the way the west responds to this aggression will have repercussions not just for Russia and Ukraine but for other bullies such as China. Will he be mindful of the need to show support to Russia's smaller southerly neighbours, especially Georgia and Armenia, which feel particularly vulnerable at this time?

The Prime Minister: Yes, my hon. Friend is right, because the read-across—the knock-on—is obvious for Georgia and Armenia. What Putin proposes to create is a new sphere of influence—a new Yalta—in which those countries come behind his new iron curtain.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): As a Member of this House with Ukrainian heritage, this issue particularly troubles me. I thank the Prime Minister for the tone of his statement and for not only the resolute and swift action he proposes to tackle Russia but the resolute and swift support that he is offering to the people of Ukraine. During his statement, the Prime Minister highlighted the cost of living and the rise in fuel prices. Could he touch on what further action the Government will take to address those issues?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is quite right, because people throughout the country will be thinking about the effect on us all of the increase in the price of oil and gas as a result of a war in Ukraine. We will continue to do everything we can to help people to abate the cost and to support people through councils and all the funds we are providing, such as for the reduction in council tax, but the best thing we can do is to ensure people are in good, well-paying jobs, and in that we are certainly succeeding. In the medium and long term, we have to have more self-reliance in this country on our own energy supplies. That is what this Government are also committed to building.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): One of the most important economic sanctions we can take against Russia is to freeze its sovereign debt. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Bill proposed on Monday on economic crime will include powers to do so?

The Prime Minister: We are taking the most powerful measures against Russia and the Russian economy that have ever been taken—probably the most powerful ever taken by any country—and Russia will no longer be able to raise any sovereign debt on UK markets.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): What support will we be providing to Ukrainian citizens who are settled in the UK and wish to reunite with family members who still reside in Ukraine? Many have watched their cities rapidly get caught up in this conflict and are keen to know what more we can do to support them to reunite with their families.

The Prime Minister: We will make sure that we support Ukrainian nationals who need to come to this country to meet their relatives—of course we will do that.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): I am proud that the Prime Minister and this country are leading the international support for our friends in Ukraine. Domestically, will the Prime Minister be providing more support for our NHS, other public sector organisations and businesses that will now be the subject of Russian cyber-attacks?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to point to that risk. It is foresighted of him. We are investing massively in cyber-protection—I think we are putting in another £2.6 billion. In the past few years, we have tackled more than 3,000 cyber-attacks. It is a risk, but a risk, I am afraid, that we must run in the cause of freedom.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I offer my wholehearted support for much tougher sanctions against President Putin and his dreadful regime.

As mentioned earlier, there are many historic Ukrainian communities in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and indeed I would like to commend the work of the Reading Ukrainian Centre. What additional support can the Government give to these very valuable community groups and centres around the country that offer such support to families, friends and relatives both in the UK and in Ukraine?

The Prime Minister: Perhaps the most important thing that we can do for the Ukrainian community in this country is thank them and recognise everything that they have done for us in the past decades. They have been an amazing addition to the UK, to the UK economy and to our cultural and artistic life.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The House is united in its condemnation, but I suggest to the Prime Minister that the lessons to be addressed from this affair started with Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, and not in 2014. Many of us across the House have been warning about Russia and yet the response has been weak. Does the Prime Minister accept that, as we enter the battle for democracy globally, we must understand that the sooner that we square up to the playground bully the better and that must we adequately support our hard and soft power to do that?

The Prime Minister: Yes, my hon. Friend is quite right. I know that, by soft power, he is thinking also of the British Council, which can have such a wonderful beneficial effect across Russia. Indeed, I have seen its work across Russia. He is right about standing up to the playground bully. We should have done it ages ago. I think the scales have fallen from the eyes of many of our friends and partners.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): In an earlier response, the Prime Minister suggested that this country would welcome people who were reuniting with family here. I have a constituent who is Ukrainian but a British citizen. She is trying to bring her mother from Ukraine, but has been turned down because she is over 18. Her mother is on her own and has no family, so naturally she is frightened. Will we see a change in the Home Office to enable British citizens who are Ukrainian to bring their vulnerable family here?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady very much. I think I read out a helpline number in the House on Tuesday. I do not have it with me. There is a number both in Lviv and in this country, but if she could do me the favour of sending me the details, I will take them up.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend and his Ministers for the firm stance they are taking. None of us knows what Mr Putin's longer-term aims are. If Ukraine falls, and I fear that it might, his covetous eye might land on the Baltic states and other vulnerable countries. Can my right hon. Friend reassure NATO members that if one Russian boot lands on NATO soil, military force will be met by military force?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and what is so encouraging is that the whole House understands the vital importance of that article 5 guarantee that we make to every one of the 30 members of NATO.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Prime Minister quite rightly pitches this as a battle between the party of war and those who support international law. There is only one lawful Government in Ukraine—the Government of President Zelensky. If they are forced to move or possibly forced into exile in the short run or the longer run, will the Prime Minister state clearly that we will ensure they can be a functional and effective Government, wherever they operate from?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. That is why in our discussions with President Zelensky we are seeing what we can do to give them the practical support they need to continue.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): The City of London is a global asset whose enduring success rests not on dirty money, but on a commitment to excellence and on adherence to the rule of law. It is right that we now use that as a way to show global leadership. Can I encourage my right hon. Friend to sanction all the remaining Russian banks, to sanction the executives associated with them—I notice that many are resigning today—to publish a further list of individuals, resident in this country or otherwise, to be sanctioned and to redouble his excellent efforts to suspend Russia from SWIFT, as the single most effective immediate step the west could take to put pressure on Vladimir Putin?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend particularly for his important testimonial to the City of London, whose work should not be sullied by association with ill-gotten Russian money. The programme he sets out for sanctions is exactly the right one and the one that the Government are following.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Mr Speaker,

“Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.”

Will the Prime Minister reiterate that our quarrel is not with the Russian people, but with their leader Vladimir Putin, who has committed a very grave error?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is so right, and I know that is what the House thinks. We admire the Russian people. Our links to the Russian people go back to the time when we stood shoulder to shoulder

with them to fight fascism. Russia's contribution to culture, to art, to literature and to music is unparalleled. It is an extraordinary country, and nothing we do or say should obscure that.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Winston Churchill created the Council of Europe as a bastion against fascism and communism. Since the fall of communism, Russia has set great importance on its membership, as a fig leaf of respectability. Every time our Conservative group has tried to get it expelled, we have been foiled by Russian gold. Will the Prime Minister now instruct his ambassador on the Council of Europe to move for the immediate expulsion of Russia from the Council, so that there is no place for gangsters in the halls of civilised nations?

The Prime Minister: Eloquently put, and my right hon. Friend is dead right. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), who is on the Council of Europe, made that point the other day, and I certainly agree with it.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): So many Russians see this attack on Ukraine as they would see an attack of their father on their mother, because there are such intimate family relationships between the two groups. Today, thousands of Russians are protesting in cities—against their domestic law—about this awful war. Will the Prime Minister provide them with his support? Will he amplify that support to help reduce any support there is for this ridiculous war? Will he also provide sanctuary and safe haven for refugees, including troops, outside Ukraine so that they can re-engage and we can win this war at home and abroad?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman makes a series of extremely important observations. Yes, it is vital that we get the message across to the whole of Russia about what is really going on. They are being lied to day after day, and his point about supporting troops who need temporary exile, as it were, is a good one.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for yet again coming to the House to keep us informed and for his leadership in this crisis. He was right to provide military aid to Ukraine. The Ukrainian ambassador asked for our support on a no-fly zone today. In his answer earlier, I think the Prime Minister was keeping that option open—is that correct?

The Prime Minister: I think it is pretty clear to the House that we are trying to keep all our options open on this front. Some of them, frankly, may be more practicable than others. We must also have a dose of realism about what we can do on the military front, but we will keep all things under review.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Many of the residents in my constituency come from a number of the countries on the eastern flank and still have relatives living there. Obviously, like us, they will be deeply concerned about the humanitarian impact of the crisis. So what steps are the Government taking to prepare for the humanitarian issue? Will the 1,000 troops on standby to help with humanitarian assistance now be deployed?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. What we are seeing now, tragically, as I am sure the House knows, is people moving west out of Kyiv, with columns of traffic, and people already moving into south-eastern Poland. There is going to be an influx. As I said to the Prime Minister of Poland as well, we are there to help.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement today and for his strong package of sanctions. I want to ask him about preventing sexual violence in conflict. In November last year, we issued a strong statement that said that the use of sexual violence as a weapon in conflict is a red line akin to the use of chemical weapons. Will he reaffirm that commitment today, and will he send a strong message to Russia that the international community will not tolerate the use of sexual violence in conflict?

The Prime Minister: Yes; I thank my hon. Friend for all the work she has done on that issue. It is something that the UK Government have campaigned on for a long time and have indeed raised, very rightly, in international consciousness. I think it should be treated as a war crime like any other, and people who perpetrate sexual violence in conflict can expect to be tried in those tribunals.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): In seeking to redraw the boundaries of Europe through bloodshed, Putin has attacked not only Ukraine but all of us, and we stand with Ukraine in standing for the rule of law. I welcome the sanctions that the Prime Minister has announced, but I was confused by his response on Russian disinformation, which he seemed to imply would be addressed by the online safety Bill. That is many, many months away. Russian disinformation is organised; their bots are state-sponsored. What steps will he take to address that?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises a good point. What we are doing is a massive, positive strat comms campaign in Russian and in Ukrainian to make sure that people get the truth and hear the truth.

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): As we have noticed this afternoon, virtually everyone in this House has supported the efforts towards resistance over the past few months and in these days. I imagine the House will also support the very different sort of warfare under occupation over the coming months and possibly years. But the House will also have noticed the marvellous way the Prime Minister has spoken directly to the Russian people today. I hope that he will bear in mind that at the moment public opinion in Russia is rather different, and that does underline the importance of accurate information.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is quite right. He is a distinguished former soldier and he knows that truth is the first casualty. We have to make sure that we are telling people exactly what is going on. To the best of my knowledge, at the moment the Ukrainians are resisting much more strongly than some people had thought that they would. Who knows how long they

can keep going? Let us hope that they can and let us encourage them to do so, but let us get the message out as well. That is our job.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Prime Minister is absolutely right: we equivocated shamefully after Crimea; we were spineless. We must not be spineless now, because what will inevitably happen is that either the Baltic states, one of the members of NATO, or perhaps Sweden or Finland will feel the wrath of Putin next, and that will mean British action. Do we not need to try to set in train now a process whereby Putin himself ends up in the dock in a court? Norman Birkett, who was the alternate British judge at Nuremberg, said at Nuremberg that to

“initiate a war of aggression, therefore, is not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.”

Putin must be brought to a court of law and end his days in prison, must he not?

The Prime Minister: One of the most fascinating things about what Putin is doing is how close an analogy there is between his actions and those of Slobodan Milošević. We have exactly the same nonsense being peddled about the mystical union between Kyiv and Moscow as we did about Kosovo and Belgrade, and exactly the same aggression, and remember that Slobodan Milošević died on trial.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I welcome the package of sanctions set out by the Prime Minister and the fact that he has confirmed that more will come. If they are to be successful in punishing President Putin for what he has done to date and to deter him from going further and attacking our NATO partners, they must be sustained, and if they are to be sustained, we must be honest with the British people that there will be a cost for them and that we will have to pay an economic cost, but that it is a cost we must pay, and it pales into insignificance compared with the cost to the people of Ukraine.

The Prime Minister: Yes, and not only is that true, but the opportunity and the reward for success and being strong are huge, because if this should end with the rejection of aggression and the rejection of the Putin regime's view of the world, that will be a massive, massive benefit, including economically, to the whole world.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Up until May 2021, Valentyna Yakovleva was my constituent. She resided in Scotland for 20 years with her daughter and her family, but due to an initial error in application, she eventually exhausted appeals and was deported with two covid jags last year. Now that 71-year-old is sheltering in a subway. In response to the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who is no longer in her place, I reiterate: does the Prime Minister agree that as we face a likely refugee crisis, the UK must be doing all it can to extract individuals who have immediate family relatives in the UK? I urge for support for this case.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady very much for drawing the case to my attention. If she sends me the details, I would be happy to ensure it is properly taken up by the Home Office.

Mr Speaker: I just say for those who did not get in that we have a list for next time, because this will definitely not be the end on this topic.

Long Covid

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Alan Mak.*)

6.33 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): We were told this week by the Prime Minister that the worst of covid was over and that we are moving from responding to covid as a crisis to it being something we will be living with for the long term. I think we all hope that the Government's assessment is right and that after two long years of sacrifice, the worst is over.

This Adjournment debate, granted before last week's recess, is also timely, because missing from the Prime Minister's statement on Monday was something very important: how we deal with long covid. In fact, the Prime Minister did not comment on long covid at all. He talked about omicron being a less severe variant, and he said that covid should now be treated like the flu, but that overlooks the fact that the debilitating symptoms of long covid are not impacted by the severity of someone's initial covid symptoms. Someone can have very mild covid symptoms initially, but be left with an endless illness stopping them from carrying out the most basic activities. That is one of the reasons why my party wants everyone to continue to have access to free testing—the fight against covid is not over just because we want to appease Back Benchers.

It is not really possible to describe long covid, but doctors now think that it is caused by somebody having an ongoing immune response to covid, long after the virus has left their body. What that looks like differs from person to person. There are 150 possible symptoms, with each person having a unique combination. The most commonly reported symptom is fatigue, then shortness of breath, loss of smell, difficulty concentrating and aching muscles. Symptoms can also include vertigo, fever, vomiting and diarrhoea to name just a few.

Long covid is also relapsing-remitting, which means that symptoms can come and go with little warning. In short, it is complicated, but what we do know is that it is affecting a vast amount of people. According to the Office for National Statistics, in the four weeks before 2 January, 1.3 million people across the UK had it. Considering that the spread of omicron did not peak until 30 December, the actual number of people suffering today is likely to be higher.

Tackling long covid is a challenge that we must take on, as much as tackling covid itself. When I applied for this debate, I caused a little confusion for some: "Why does a Scottish MP want to talk about a health condition when the care of her constituents is under the remit of the Scottish Government?" In some ways, they are right. It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to the hard work of my friend the Member of the Scottish Parliament for Edinburgh West, who has been leading the way on getting health and social care support for long covid sufferers in Scotland. I know that his calls for proper care pathways, specialist clinics and support from trained district nurses will hugely benefit my constituents and others.

Treatment is only half the battle, however. The focus of this debate is how long covid affects someone's ability to work and what support they need as a result. If we are now living with covid, we are also living with

long covid. We have learned a lot about the disease in the past two years. There was little understanding for people who caught covid in the early days, and no understanding that their symptoms could last, but they have lasted. For that first cohort of sufferers, they have lasted for nearly two years. At first, it might have been understandable to think that they just needed to wait it out for their health to return to normal, but it would be completely disingenuous to say that now. Their symptoms are the reality of their daily life.

I have already mentioned that more than 150 symptoms are associated with long covid. The medical profession is still just starting to grapple with it and most people do not understand it much at all. Sadly, that lack of understanding is causing a stigma, as it often does, which is all too well known by sufferers of other diseases such as ME. Like long covid, fatigue is a common symptom of ME that also comes and goes.

When preparing for this debate, I spoke to representatives from Action for ME who have extensive experience with the problems facing those who describe fatigue as their primary symptom. They told me that people with ME face a significant stigma and face being told that their illness does not exist or that they should learn to just push through. They also told me that the same narrative and the same problems are being reported for the hundreds of thousands of people who have severe fatigue as a result of long covid. Indeed, Action for ME has had to close its helpline and waiting list because such a surge of people have contacted it. I cannot believe that that is unrelated to long covid.

Thousands of people are left suffering from an illness that may well make it hard for them to work, but their colleagues and employers do not necessarily believe that there is anything wrong with them. How can they explain an absence or ask for support in the face of being told that they are fabricating their debilitating symptoms? A better definition, guidance for employers and a Government-led campaign to boost awareness and understanding would go a long way towards changing attitudes to long covid.

The problem is exacerbated for people who do not have a formal diagnosis of long covid to fall back on. The Government's working definition of long covid is a condition where symptoms cannot be diagnosed as being from anything else but the after-effect of a covid infection, but not all sufferers of long covid have had a positive covid test result. For the past 18 months, covid tests have become a part of daily life for most of us, but those who got covid in the first months of the pandemic were ill without ever being tested because the tests simply did not exist. That is a huge problem in a system where support—from employers or the Department for Work and Pensions—requires proof.

There is a future problem too that I have already referred to and that perhaps the Government would like to pre-empt. On Monday, the Prime Minister announced that free testing will end in just five weeks' time, which means that more people will have covid, and might then have long covid, without a formal diagnosis. It would be a small but vital change to ensure that the diagnosis does not rely on someone having a positive test result on their NHS record.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Would antibody testing achieve the aim the hon. Member intends, rather than antigen testing, which is what we are currently doing?

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I would accept either testing, but I am asking that proof of a positive test does not need to be a requirement for a diagnosis of long covid. Of course, it would be better for many reasons to just keep testing everyone, but failing this, I ask the Minister to speak to his colleagues in the Department of Health about how long covid can be diagnosed without a test result, and to commit to making sure it is not required for recognition of the disease by his own Department.

I am sure that, in his remarks, the Minister will tell me that there is no evidence of a problem of long covid and keeping people in work, but that is because the information is not being collected. As I have said, 1.3 million people have long covid, and of those almost two thirds report an impact on their ability to carry out their daily lives. It is logical to assume that this includes employment—getting up, commuting, concentrating and completing a full day of work—and I would urge the Minister urgently to collect the data needed to find out the extent to which people with long covid are struggling at work.

I also urge the Minister urgently to provide guidance to employers as to how they can support employees with long covid. At the very least, affected staff need understanding, but beyond this, employers need to know what reasonable adjustments are appropriate, how to support staff who are on long-term sick leave and how to adjust their business practices to function in the face of increased absences. I have some experience in that I worked for a time in human resources—I have some experience with dealing with issues that arise as a result of long-term health conditions—and I have great sympathy for those in human resources who are tackling this problem now on behalf of their employers.

This problem may be larger for some employers than others, particularly given the number of key workers who caught covid by working on the frontline during the first waves of the pandemic, and I have been written to by many constituents in this position. To mention just one, a constituent of mine was working as a healthcare support worker in the first wave of the pandemic when she caught covid from a patient and, as a result of long covid, she has been unable to return to work. Her employer, the local council, wants to help, but it does not know what is best to do. There will be thousands of employees in the same position all around the country, and employers need guidance from the DWP about the condition, and what support they can and should be expected to give. In this regard, I am told that it would be helpful if long covid was classified as an occupational disease. I therefore ask the Minister to use his time today to advise whether that is under consideration, and then to bring forward such guidance as a matter of urgency.

I am sure the Minister will agree with me in hoping that, with the right support and guidance, most people experiencing long covid will be able to stay in their jobs—to keep working, to keep earning, to continue in their careers—but, sadly, that will not be the case for everybody. There will be those who cannot work as

[Wendy Chamberlain]

much as they used to or who cannot work at all, and that is where our social security system steps up. As the Minister knows, it is already official Government guidance that for

“anyone with a disability or long-term health condition, including long Covid, there is a strong financial safety net”,

and it goes on to list available support as statutory sick pay, universal credit and personal independence payments.

However, as is so often the case with benefits, it is not that easy. Applying for benefits is complicated, as there are a lot of forms, a lot of boxes to tick and a lot of assessments. When someone has a debilitating condition such as long covid or one of the other relapsing-remitting diseases I have already mentioned, they may not be able to sit and complete a 30-page form in one go, or even in the course of a week or two. Research by the MS Society has shown that a third of people with MS thought four weeks was not enough time to complete the forms, but the majority of applicants did not know that they could request a two-week extension.

One solution is simply to extend the time allowed to complete the forms. There is no incentive for claimants to take excessive time because they want to get the support that they need. Meanwhile, DWP resources are used up requiring people to request extensions. Setting the time to return the forms at eight weeks would be a simple and cheap solution. If the Minister disagrees and prefers a system that does not work for disabled people and also costs his Department money, will he at least commit to including clear information on the PIP application form on how people go about applying for an extension?

While we are thinking about the forms, does the Minister agree with me that the forms ought to be designed to be usable by the people completing them? People with relapsing-remitting conditions, of which long covid is just one, do not find those forms usable. There is no space on the forms properly to explain the impact of having fluctuating symptoms. They do not work for people with long covid, and these forms must be fit for purpose. I strongly encourage the Minister to consult with disabled people on this.

Long covid is a novel condition, and the DWP, like all of us, is having to learn and adapt, but as DWP staff see more and more individuals with long covid, it is vital that they receive the appropriate guidance and training. Universal credit requires claimants who can do so to look for work. In fact, more recently it required claimants quite quickly to look for just any work at all. Are work coaches trained in what sort of requirements are appropriate for someone with a relapsing remitting disease, where they fatigue quickly or have brain fog or any of the other hundred-odd symptoms of long covid? I look forward to hearing from the Minister about what guidance is in place and what support is offered, but I fear there is little.

The same is true for personal independence assessments. A PIP assessment is supposed to determine what additional support someone needs as a result of their disability or illness, but again that is an impossible test for anybody with a fluctuating condition. They could be functioning one day, or even ok, but the next day they are unable to get out of bed. One assessment—just one assessment on

one day—determines whether they get support or not, and that system does not work. Of course, the system is failing not only long covid sufferers, but those with ME, multiple sclerosis and chronic pain, to name a few. There is a simple solution that I ask the Minister to adopt, which is to allow more weight to be given to medical evidence and the information provided by doctors and experts on someone’s condition, or by those people who see claimants on their good days and on their bad days. It is an obvious solution.

There are other ways that the assessment process could be reformed better to support all disabled people, including those with long covid: using specialist assessors, ending the five-week waiting period and increasing payments in line with inflation are vital for the health and wellbeing of all disabled people. I await the publication of the Government’s White Paper this spring, and wonder whether the Minister is able to provide an update on that this evening.

However, those with long covid cannot wait until then for their condition to be properly recognised by the DWP and their employers. The pandemic has been the biggest mass-disabling event since the first world war, and long covid is not going away. We have seen covid rip through classrooms over the past few months. Long covid does not just affect people of working age, and children who suffer from it are going to miss education and training. It does not matter if, like me, someone views social security as a public service and a safety net, or if they see the DWP as a means to get people into work. From either perspective, the Government must do more to support those with long covid to stay in work, get into work, and get the support they need if they cannot work.

We need information about the impact of long covid on employment, and a formal recognition of long covid as a debilitating condition, or an occupational health disease that affects someone’s ability to work. We need proper guidance and training for employers and DWP staff, and an assessment process that works for people with fluctuating symptoms. The Prime Minister told us on Monday that it was time to get our confidence back, but those words are cold comfort to those suffering from the debilitating impacts of long covid. They need practical support and they need it now, and I urge the Minister to heed them.

6.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Russian invasion of Ukraine colours everything we talk about today, and I wish to put on record my support for what has been said by all political parties. I am sure I speak for all colleagues on both Front and Back Benches when I say that we stand with the people of a sovereign and independent Ukraine. We are a legitimate democracy, which means that we can debate things. We can have a discussion in a way that other countries, such as Russia, cannot do. I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on securing this important debate on an important issue. As she knows, the Minister for Disabled People, Work and Health, who would normally respond to this debate, cannot be with us tonight because of personal reasons. She apologises for that, and I am here to respond to the best of my ability on all matters on behalf of the Government.

The Government recognise the impact of long covid on individuals and their families. We are committed to working across the Government to ensure that appropriate provision and support is available to those suffering from the condition of covid. The hon. Lady is right to say that we have been through the worst pandemic since the Spanish flu of 1919, and all Governments around the world are playing catch-up in an attempt to understand, appreciate and deal with the consequences of this terrible disease. It is also a chance for us in this House to put on record our thanks to the pharmaceutical companies, everyone behind the vaccine taskforce, the NHS, the public and private sectors, and the volunteers behind the vaccine roll-out.

We cannot discuss covid without raising the specific issue that it is in everybody's interests to get the jab. I have done everything possible, including videos with my dog, Zola, to encourage vaccine take-up, and it is very much in our interests to have a continuation of that take-up. Sadly, however, a significant proportion of the population have still not had the jab, and we urge them to go forward and do that.

Mr Steve Baker: One thing I notice when I look at the vaccination map brilliantly provided by the Government is that the areas of Wycombe with the highest ethnic minority populations are the least vaccinated. Will the Minister take this opportunity, if he can, to tell us a bit more about what the Government are doing to help those people?

Guy Opperman: A great deal is being done; I will write to my hon. Friend and set it out in copious detail. The most important thing is that thought leaders, whether voted for or not—they range from Members of Parliament to religious leaders and community leaders—make the case in their communities that people need to get the jab, because the way out of this and back to normal life and living with covid is clearly to embrace the vaccine. There is much more that I could touch on, but that is the main point.

Specific guidance was set out in the detailed “COVID-19 Response: Living with COVID-19” document put forward by the Prime Minister. The hon. Lady said that there was no reference in the Prime Minister's statement to long covid. That is not the case for the document—I refer her in particular to paragraphs 87 and 118—but this is clearly a work in progress. I will come to the specifics in a bit more detail. We remain committed to ensuring that everybody can access the health and support that they need. We are doing what we can to ensure that care pathways are available and clearly signposted so that people who need extra help receive it.

The hon. Lady rightly mentioned that she is a Scottish MP and that this is a devolved system. I will therefore briefly touch on the health approach before turning to benefits. The Department of Health and Social Care has invested over £50 million in dedicated research to improve the diagnosis and treatment of long covid. In addition, NHS England and NHS Improvement have invested £224 million to provide care for people with long covid, including £90 million in 2022-23. There are 90 long covid assessment services across England, including 14 specialist paediatric hubs that have been established to support adults, children and young people with long covid and to direct them into appropriate care pathways.

The Government recognise that while England has adopted a clinic-based service model, no one single approach is likely to fit all areas and circumstances, and it is right and proper that each part of the UK can adopt a service model for long covid that most effectively responds to its patients' needs. That recognises that—this goes to the hon. Lady's point—everyone experiences long covid differently and that health services are organised differently depending on where they are located.

In Scotland, I understand, NHS boards are developing pathways between primary and secondary care according to local services and the needs of their respective populations, with a focus on providing care and support that is as close to home as possible. In Northern Ireland, assessment services have been established featuring multidisciplinary assessment and support in primary and secondary care settings. Similarly, in Wales, a recovery programme has been established whereby the majority of people accessing services will do so directly via their GP practice and, following assessment, people may be supported by a range of healthcare professionals depending on their individual needs.

I turn to benefit entitlement. It is vital that the existing benefit system provides inclusive, accessible and sustainable support to all people with health conditions that impact on their ability to work and participate fully in society. That includes, obviously, people with long covid. However, the benefit system is set up to consider the impact that a health condition has on an individual's ability to work and carry out day-to-day activities. In the case of long covid, there would be an assessment of a person's needs in the same way as for other conditions, by understanding its impact on their day-to-day activities.

Claimants can apply for benefits on the basis of their symptoms and the impact that those symptoms are having on them. The hon. Lady rightly outlined that there are a multitude of different symptoms, which goes to my point that the NHS in the UK and particularly in England—I cannot speak in detail for the Scottish NHS—is making great efforts to better understand diagnosis and treatment. Clearly, however, the main symptoms would be pain, fatigue, breathlessness and some things that are akin in many ways to ME and other illnesses. Clearly, how those symptoms fluctuate is particularly relevant to long covid and the ability to function on an ongoing basis.

Assessments for health and disability benefits take those matters into consideration. Our healthcare professionals are trained to explore and evaluate those factors. Overall, there are three ways in which we assess a claimant's needs. First, irrespective of a person's income or whether they are in or out of work, we can assess mobility or care needs through the disability living allowance, the personal independence payment and the attendance allowance. For the current financial year 2021-22, PIP alone will provide around 2 million people of working age with £12.2 billion of support.

Secondly, we can also look at a person's capability for work to understand if, owing to the impacts of a health condition, they might have difficulty finding and keeping a job. We assess that through the work capability assessment, which provides access to the employment and support allowance and the additional health-related element of universal credit. Anybody who is unable to work can claim those benefits. New-style ESA provides support to those with sufficient national insurance contributions,

[Guy Opperman]

and universal credit provides support for those without contributions. Overall, in 2021—I accept that it is an ongoing process—we are supporting over three-quarters of a million people on the universal credit health journey and spend over £17 billion a year on working-age benefits or incapacity.

That brings me to the third type of need that we must address, which is financial need, whereby the system of universal credit looks at a household's situation in and out of work, and provides support according to that household's financial needs. For those out of work, it is also the main gateway to access Jobcentre Plus support to help them get back into work.

The hon. Lady referred to industrial injuries. I cannot speak to the specifics for Scotland, but the Department for Work and Pensions is responsible for the industrial injuries scheme, which compensates for injuries arising from an industrial accident or a disease contracted as a result of a person's occupation. The Industrial Injuries Advisory Council advises the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions regarding industrial injuries disablement benefit, and is considering available scientific and epidemiological evidence on long covid. IIAC does not specifically apply in Scotland. It is important to add that any changes to the scheme can be recommended only where there is sufficiently robust evidence. However, it is reviewing the available evidence on an ongoing basis to inform on whether long covid can and should be prescribed as an occupational disease for the purposes of industrial injuries disablement benefit. The House will be updated as that work progresses.

In addition, work is being done on occupational health support. The hon. Lady will be aware that in July 2021 we published the response to the "Health is Everyone's Business" consultation—if she is not, she should look at it—which specifically sets out the measures the Government are taking to help employers better navigate the work and health system. They include improved access to occupational health, particularly for employees of smaller employers and self-employed people who are least likely to have access; testing a new occupational health financial incentive; and stimulating the development of innovative quality services while addressing workforce capacity constraints.

In addition, there is clearly a situation in respect of data on long covid. I am aware of the figures from the Office for National Statistics which the hon. Lady cites, but they are not necessarily a reflection of what the NHS is seeing. The nature of that particular report would disagree with, for example, the NHS England activity data. I will read out some of the figures, as they are published. Information is published on activity and demographic characteristics of patients referred to a post-covid assessment clinic in England. For the period 22 November 2021 to 19 December 2021, there were

5,539 referrals to NHS post-covid assessment services, 458 fewer than in previous weeks. Of those, 4,946 were accepted as clinically appropriate for assessment. There were 4,750 initial specialist appointments assessments, which were completed together with 8,695 follow-up appointments. Those figures are the highest reported since publication of that data commenced.

A whole host of further long covid research is being done through the National Institute for Health Research and UK Research and Innovation, which invested some £50 million in research to better understand long covid and to treat it. My strong advice to the hon. Lady is that she sits down with Health Department colleagues from Scotland and this country with a view to getting the details on that. I cannot give more information about that tonight given the limited time that I have.

Clearly, however, a lot of work is being done. There is £8.4 million being spent on the post-hospitalisation covid-19 study at the University of Leicester, and £18 million of funding has been given to four research studies to better understand and address the long-term effects of covid-19 on physical and mental health. The studies will examine the causes, consequences and treatment of what is known as long covid. Similarly, a further £19 million has been given to 15 research studies to accelerate the development of new ways to diagnose and treat long covid as well as to consider how to configure services to provide the absolute best healthcare. It is clear that this is a work in progress. This is a journey. It is important that the hon. Lady raises these points and we debate them, and that we all understand that the journey is not complete.

In conclusion, the Government recognise that long covid can have a significant impact on individuals and their families. We are committed to working across Government to ensure that people suffering from this terrible condition can access the appropriate provision and support. The initial £50 million investment in research to improve the diagnosis and treatment will help us to understand the condition and its impact more fully. That, alongside investment in expanding care and assessment facilities for patients, shows that the Government recognise the condition and are acting.

In addition, the Department for Work and Pensions provides a great deal of financial support in the ways that I have outlined, which enables those affected by the pandemic to access the help that they need. We will carefully monitor and consider the advice of the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council regarding long covid. We remain committed to this support. We continue to review our approach and to ensure that there is ongoing support, and I thank the hon. Lady for the points that she has raised tonight.

Question put and agreed to.

7.2 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 24 February 2022

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

1.30 pm

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Before I call Marion Fellows to move the motion, I wish to make a short statement about the sub judge resolution. I have been advised that the Government have applied to appeal the findings of the High Court in relation to the lawfulness of the UK disability survey. These proceedings are therefore live before the courts under the terms of the House's sub judge resolution. However, Mr Speaker has exercised discretion to allow reference to the issues concerned, given their national importance. Nevertheless, Members should remember that these matters are still before the courts, and they are encouraged not to discuss the legal proceedings in any detail whatever. I would also like to remind Members of the advice on covid.

1.31 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to raise these matters. Around the world, 1 billion people live with a disability. According to World Vision 20% of the world's poorest live with a disability, and according to the UN around 80% of disabled people live in developing countries. Here in the UK, nearly half of disabled people—49%—live in poverty, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. In spite of that, disabled people's rights at home and abroad have been consistently ignored and deprioritised by the UK Government.

The UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, or the UNCRPD, was adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2006 and ratified in the UK in 2009. It introduced obligations to

“ensure and promote the full realisation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms”

for all disabled people, including taking into account

“the protection and promotion of the human rights of persons with disabilities”

when making and assessing policy. Following a parliamentary inquiry on disability and development in 2014, the UK committed to become a global leader on this neglected and under-prioritised area in its bilateral development review. However, eight years and a global pandemic later, we have seen glacial progress in the policy area of disability rights in the UK.

Last week, the second global disability summit was hosted by the International Disability Alliance, the Government of Norway and the Government of Ghana. The aim of the summit was to mobilise efforts for the

implementation of the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, the principles of “leave no one behind” and building back better, and more inclusive programming with regards to covid-19. Although I was glad to see the UK Government making 18 commitments at last week's summit, they will not meet the real needs of disabled people or allow us to do our duty as global citizens to protect the human rights of disabled people at home and abroad. Sadly, this was a missed opportunity once again, and the UK Government's commitment fell way short of what is needed. Ahead of last week's summit, the Scottish National party called on the UK Government to enshrine the UNCRPD in law. That was another missed opportunity to protect disabled people's rights at home and abroad and to advance the rights of everyone.

The UN committee overseeing the UNCRPD not only called on the UK to incorporate the convention into legislation and allow domestic remedies for breaches in 2017, but has investigated the UK over “grave and systematic violations” of the convention in 2016. Although the UK Government recently published their progress in response to the recommendations late last year, the socioeconomic landscape for disabled people has changed beyond recognition since 2016, when the recommendations were made. Examples include coercion of disabled people or their carers to sign “do not resuscitate” orders, and failure to include disabled people in Government plans for financial and social support during the pandemic. Thus, disabled people's rights remain a great cause for concern.

The Oxford University disability law and policy project and the Bonavero Institute of Human Rights report, “An Affront to Dignity, Inclusion and Equality”, published on 2 July 2020, referred to a

“failure of the government to implement properly its legal duties with respect to the rights of people with disabilities.”

The report stated:

“The government's policymaking in response to the pandemic has failed to fulfil its own Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act 2010 with respect to disabled people and its obligations under the United Nations Convention”.

Despite the progress that the UK Government claim to have made, disability organisations have expressed concerns to me and others that disabled people's rights as set out in the convention are not being protected by the Government. One carer working with the Disabled Children's Partnership shared her story:

“My name is Sarah, and I live in Devon with my daughter, who has an acquired brain injury...There is horrendous resentment towards disabled people in our society, and carers are massively undervalued. As one of the richest countries in the world with an apparent commitment to human rights, you would have thought the UK could respect disabled children and their families—but we are treated horrifically. We need to change attitudes, change services, and fight the injustices that affect disabled children and families”.

Another carer, Joanna, told me:

“The system is broken....It doesn't get us the services we have a right to to live a good quality of life, and makes us spend a fortune. It needs reform”.

The national disability strategy, published last summer, committed to being “mindful” of the UNCRPD in its implementation—but being mindful of disabled people's rights is just not enough. In Scotland, as part of taking forward the 30 progressive, bold and ambitious recommendations of the national taskforce for human

[*Marion Fellows*]

rights leadership for a new human rights framework for Scotland, a new human rights Bill will be introduced to the Scottish Parliament during this parliamentary Session. The Bill will incorporate four international human rights treaties, including the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. It will be a significant and historical milestone in the Scottish human rights journey. It will give effect to a wide range of internationally recognised human rights—belonging to everyone in Scotland—as far as possible within devolved competence, and it will strengthen domestic legal protections by making them enforceable in Scots law. It will also demonstrate global human rights leadership, placing Scotland at the forefront of human rights legislation and, most importantly, practice. The inclusion of those rights will empower people, enabling them to claim and enforce their rights in multiple ways domestically, including in a Scottish court. Incorporation of the CRPD will give greater impetus to public bodies to remove barriers and support disabled people to participate fully in society, such as by being able to access information and services and living independently with dignity.

The Scottish Government have created a comprehensive delivery plan to help Scotland meet the requirements of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. “A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People” was the Scottish Government’s delivery plan for that. It covered 2016 to 2021 and aimed to make equality of opportunity, access to services and independent living a reality for all disabled people in Scotland. Flowery phrases are all well and good, but setting challenging targets is the correct way to push forward on the rights of disabled people. That sometimes leads to not achieving all targets, but overall it leads to improvements in the lives of disabled people. The Scottish Government have committed to publishing a new disability equality plan, which will be published this year. Will the Minister follow the Scottish Government’s lead, commit to enshrining the UNCRPD in law and champion disability rights at home and on the global stage?

The UK Government have exhibited a continual pattern of deprioritising disability inclusion in their policy and decision-making processes. One of the key recommendations following the 2017 investigation by the UN committee into the UK’s implementation of the convention was to involve disabled people and disabled people’s organisations in planning and implementing all laws and policies affecting disabled people. The UK Government said that because the convention was ratified, all UK Government Departments “need” to consider it when developing policies that affect disabled people. However, UKIM, the UK independent mechanism for monitoring progress on the UNCRPD report, said in October 2018 that it

“remains seriously concerned about the continued failure of the UK Government to conduct an assessment of the cumulative impact on disabled people of multiple policy and law reforms in relation to living standards and social security.”

That was exemplified by the national disability strategy published in summer last year, which beyond being, frankly, a lot of bluff and bluster with no meaningful action, failed to consult disabled people in an adequate manner. Disabled people need more than warm words and a surface-level appearance of engagement with the disabled community. Will the Minister commit to properly

engaging with disabled people and disabled people’s organisations in planning and implementing all laws and policies that affect disabled people at home and abroad?

Just last month, the High Court ruled that the UK Government’s attempt to involve disabled people and disabled people’s organisations in the consultation that shaped the strategy was both unlawful and inadequate. The chief executive officer of Disability Rights UK, speaking about the strategy, said that it was

“disappointingly thin on immediate actions, medium-term plans and the details of longer term investment”

and that there were

“scant plans and timescales on how to bring about vastly needed improvements to benefits, housing, social care, jobs, education, transport, and equitable access to wider society.”

Some of those issues are devolved, but I am not just talking about people in Scotland: I want people across the UK, especially those with disabilities, to have what is their right. I refer to what I said earlier about challenging targets and how the Scottish Government try to improve the lives of disabled people. On 3 February 2022, the Department for Work and Pensions was refused an opportunity to appeal against the High Court’s ruling. Notwithstanding what you have already said, Mr Stringer, will the Minister confirm whether the Department intends to apply for permission to appeal that decision to the Court of Appeal?

The organisation Sightsavers has raised concerns about the vagueness of the commitments made at the global disability summit last week and about a continual lack of transparency on the implementation of disability inclusion policy by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. For example, it has expressed concern about the UK Government’s commitments to move from equality awareness to equality transformation, which encourages collaborative work to empower women and girls, people with disabilities, and other socially marginalised people. The commitments made at that summit risk being little more than aspirational language with no measurable objectives and few or no financial commitments or plans to report results. While the Scottish Government welcome the UK Government’s commitment to fund the Global Action on Disability network, the FCDO has not made any other financial pledges in its commitments. Without tangible reporting on the results, they hold very little weight in upholding the UNCRPD and protecting disability rights on the global stage, so will the Minister join me in asking the FCDO to make the monitoring framework and action plan that will accompany the disability, inclusion and rights strategy available publicly?

Globally, disabled people are disproportionately impacted by poverty, natural disasters, healthcare barriers and covid-19, but they are still excluded from many aid programmes, which do not take disabled people’s needs into account. Unfortunately, we do not compare completely favourably in a global context, as here in the UK, poverty is consistently higher for disabled people. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, there is a gap of around 12 percentage points in poverty rates between disabled and non-disabled people.

The UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Professor Philip Alston, highlighted in a 2018 statement concerns about changes to legal aid since 2012, which he said had

“overwhelmingly affected the poor and people with disabilities”,

meaning that they were

“effectively deprived of their human right to a remedy.”

In November 2020, the UK Government announced that they intended to spend 0.5% of gross national income on official development assistance in 2021, down from 0.7% in the seven years from 2013. An unpublished impact assessment of the reductions, written in March 2021, reportedly concluded that this would result in a significant reduction in the number and size of programmes targeted at women, girls and disabled people.

World Vision found that less than 0.5% of all international aid targets disability inclusion. Aid was equivalent to less than \$1 per person with disabilities in developing economies. The five most disability inclusion-focused donors target just 3% of their aid to this purpose. The SNP was front and centre of the attacks on the Government’s shameful decision to cut aid by over £4 billion this year and by £2.2 billion last year. The unpublished impact assessment I referred to found that this would result in a significant reduction in the number and size of programmes targeted at disabled people. Only six of the 1,161 aid programmes funded by the UK Government had disability inclusion as their primary objective in 2018.

The new disability inclusion strategy launched by the FCDO last week said that it will work to “accelerate implementation of the UNCRPD”

globally by supporting Governments to fulfil their responsibilities under the convention through legislation and development and through improving local accountability mechanisms.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for obtaining this debate; she is making an excellent opening speech. Would she agree that the UK Government must lead by example by implementing the convention here in the UK before they can preach to anybody on the world stage?

Marion Fellows: I totally agree with the hon. Member. That is one of the reasons I wanted this debate. I want the Government to commit. The FCDO’s new disability inclusion strategy said that it will work to accelerate the implementation of the UNCRPD globally. Well, as the hon. Member said, the Government cannot preach to others about what they have not done themselves. The strategy lacks any solid financial or measurable commitments to protect disability rights on the global stage.

Will the Minister join me in asking the FCDO to commit to tripling the number of aid projects that have disability inclusion as their primary objective by 2023, prioritising grassroots disability aid projects and ensuring that disabled people are not further excluded from global aid? Further, will she join me in asking the FCDO to commit to including disability in the eligibility criteria for applying for refugee status in the UK, in recognition of the disproportionate disadvantages disabled people face globally?

The UNCRPD seeks to ensure and promote the full realisation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all disabled people. Being “mindful” of human rights is not enough; the incorporation of the convention into domestic law will provide the legal enforcement and protection required. It is time for the UK Government to follow the UN committee’s recommendations, match

Scotland’s ambition and enshrine the UNCRPD in law, to champion disability rights on the global stage and here in the UK.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): This is a 90-minute debate and I intend to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at around 2.30 pm, so you can do the arithmetic yourself.

1.50 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this debate, which is both important and very timely. I absolutely agree with the central tenets of her excellent speech, and I particularly agree with her on one point: how can we possibly preach internationally when we cannot get our own house in order?

However, I want to look at some of the positives. In the current context of global mayhem—I think that is probably the best way to refer to what is going on in the world at the moment—it is always good to see areas, and policy areas in particular, where countries can unite and show a joint commitment, although, as the hon. Member said, for the UK to be preaching internationally is not particularly seemly; let me put it that way.

The hon. Member mentioned the investigation that the UN’s Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities undertook back in 2016, which happened because of the concern about the breaches that the UK Government were believed to be making, contrary to the articles in the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. As she rightly said, the committee found that the Government’s policies had led to “grave or systematic violations” of the rights of disabled people. I gave evidence to the committee back in 2016, but I will pay tribute to the hundreds of disabled people and disabled people’s organisations that really drove the committee’s inquiry.

The committee’s report emphasised the impact of changes to housing benefit entitlement, eligibility criteria for personal independence payment and social care, and the closure of the independent living fund. It showed that the austerity policies brought in by the Government in 2010 to reduce public spending, such as the destructive bedroom tax and the damaging cuts to the social security and social care budgets, are infringing the rights of disabled people. Despite the rhetoric from successive Administrations, we have seen sick and disabled people being failed consistently. And the response to the UN’s findings? The Government dismissed them out of hand.

In 2017, the committee held a session in Geneva to examine further the Government’s failures to protect and promote disability rights. During that session, once again we saw the UK Government obfuscate and dodge key questions from the committee that covered all articles in the convention. The UK was repeatedly told by the committee that it was not a global leader on disability rights, and the chair stated that cuts to social protection, which was how the committee referred to social security in the UK, were a “human catastrophe” that was being visited on disabled people.

The UK’s human rights watchdog stated that the examination by the UN had seen a “disconnect” between the UK Government’s replies and

[Debbie Abrahams]

“lived experiences of disabled people”.

In conclusion, the rapporteur stated that the committee was

“deeply concerned about the lack of recognition of the findings and recommendations of the conducted inquiry”.

The committee’s “concluding observations” report called on the Government to

“initiate a process to implement and follow-up the recommendations issued by the Committee”

in its inquiry report. Unfortunately, that never happened. Instead, as the hon. Member has already mentioned, we see an ongoing onslaught against disabled people, or at the very least action without any consideration of the impact on them, which is against the CRPD and against our own equality laws.

Just this week, we have seen the lifting of covid restrictions. Few people know that disabled people were more likely to die of covid than any other group—60% of covid deaths were of disabled people. There is an additional burden when we adjust for underlying conditions. There is still an extra risk that someone will die just because they are disabled. As the restrictions are lifted today, what assessment has there been of the impact on disabled people? Are they and their families being provided with free testing? What additional support is being provided if they still have to self-isolate?

Yesterday we had a debate in this very room about how children are being subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse. We heard about how those targeted were predominantly children and young people with disabilities and learning difficulties being groomed online. Everyone present at that debate—including the Minister—was rightly outraged. Where there are system failures in local institutions, councils and the police, they should be exposed and held to account. But what about the Government’s culpability? What assessment did they undertake of the risks to safeguarding, with council and police budgets cut to the bone?

A few weeks ago, the Government were yet again found to have unlawfully discriminated against disabled people in two cases. In view of your initial statement, Mr Stringer, I will not stretch that point, but I need to make people aware that the first case was to do with the consultation on the national disability strategy. I appreciate that the Government intend to appeal in that case, but the second case upheld an appeal that the Government had decided to pursue against two severely disabled men who had been transitioned on to universal credit after having been on employment and support allowance, with additional support in disability premiums. They had lost all those premiums, and the High Court upheld that that was a discriminatory act against them. The Government decided to appeal that decision, but it was upheld against them. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw was absolutely right when she said that if the Judicial Review and Courts Bill is enacted, the first case that I mentioned—the one on which you, Mr Stringer, have said we must not go into detail—would not have even happened. That is what this Government are doing.

Yesterday I heard from a constituent about the only station in my Oldham East and Saddleworth constituency, which has appalling access issues. You probably know it, Mr Stringer. It has a bridge; if someone has mobility issues, there is no way they can get over it. They can go to Manchester, but they cannot come back. It has been

decided that the disability toilet will be closed too, which is absolutely outrageous. We have been trying for years to get the Government to recognise that they are not enabling proper access for disabled people to go to work, which is what the Government say they want all disabled people to do.

It is the attack on disabled people through the social security system over the last decade that I want to close on. A few weeks ago, the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2022 was laid before the House. It announced a 3.1% uplift in social security support from April, including for disabled people. We know that inflation is currently running at 5.5% and is estimated to increase to more than 7% in the spring, which is, in effect, a real-terms cut in support to social security claimants.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has identified a cut in support to disabled households of £6,500 since 2010 as a result of cuts to social security and public services. Accordingly, half of the households living in poverty have a disabled person living in them. I recently asked the Work and Pensions Secretary what assessment had been made of the impact of the 3.1% uprating on disabled people, but one had not been undertaken. Again, that is contrary to our equality laws, and it just shows the lack of commitment to disabled people at home and abroad.

Yesterday, the Work and Pensions Committee took evidence on pensioners living in poverty. I am sure you will not be surprised, Mr Stringer, that disabled people are disproportionately represented in that group as well. There are sanctions targeted at disabled people, woeful health assessments—I could go on. Separate from the covid deaths, we have no idea of the scale of the deaths of disabled people, because this Government are not making that transparent. It is an absolute disgrace that our public policies contribute to the deaths of our most vulnerable citizens.

I have been calling for an independent inquiry into this for a number of years and I will not stop until that happens. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw for bringing this debate forward, because this Government’s treatment of disabled people is an outrage.

2 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I appreciate being called to speak early in the debate, Mr Stringer. I am nearly always at the end of the queue. I am not worried about that, by the way—I always think that getting to speak is more important than when I am called. The good book says that the first shall be last and the last shall be first; today, I have been elevated to one of the first, so I am very pleased.

When the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) asked me, as I am sure she did everyone, “Would you come down and speak?” I did not have to be asked twice, because this subject is of particular interest to me. I will mention a couple of things that I think will resonate with other Members present. I thank the hon. Lady for her tireless work on behalf of those with disabilities—I want to put that on the record. It is often said in this House, but she truly is a disabilities champion. I have heard the word “champion” used so many times in the Chamber that I think it has lost its importance, but when I say it today, I mean it. I want her to know that.

The hon. Lady has perfectly underlined that we have obligations to those with disabilities. I share her frustration and that of the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), who is a good friend as well. I say this respectfully to the Minister and the Government, but I have seen how the Government pick and choose how they interpret those obligations. In Northern Ireland, they chose to interpret the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women as a legal obligation; they circumvented the Northern Ireland Assembly and, in so doing, circumvented the principle of devolution. That is not what this debate is about, but I just want to put that on the record.

At the same time, the Government have refused to uphold the protections to prevent unborn babies from being terminated for a disability as repairable as a cleft lip. Under their interpretation, having Down's syndrome is reason enough not to live. I find that absolutely unbelievable and reprehensible. I believe we are witnessing something that is morally wrong, and I do not think I will ever be able to understand or accept that rationale. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw has outlined many further failings of this Government pertaining to our obligations to disabled people.

I want a society where disabled people have the same rights and opportunities as we have and where they are treated equally. That is the society I want to live in. Maybe I dream too much, or maybe, through this debate, we have an opportunity to express the hope that every one of us can have the same opportunities in life.

I want to give some examples to illustrate the issues raised by the hon. Lady, although they are absolutely frustrating. I have a full-time member of staff in my office who is dedicated solely to filling out forms for those who are unwell. Unfortunately, she is never out of work. Her name is Yvonne; she is an important member of staff. All my staff are important, of course, but Yvonne has a very important role to play. I wish I could bring her here to explain in her own down-to-earth way the living nightmare that some of our disabled people endure to get their disability benefits.

One of my constituents, Sharon, was born with a severe mental impairment. I know the young lady and her now elderly parents, who have cared for her for 50 years. Due to the distressed mental impairment she has, she used to simply watch the TV and walk up and down the living room. However, she is now 50, and her mobility has decreased. After 50 years of being on her feet, pacing up and down the hall, she needs hip replacements. There is something seriously wrong when a Government Department questions whether such an operation is necessary when it is very obvious that it is. In this case, there was a successful conclusion, but only after a fight. Everything I do for disabled people is a fight, and there are always so many obstructions put in front of us.

Consultants have questioned Sharon's ability to go through rehab after the operation and do not feel it will be successful. She cannot deal with the pain of walking and mentally cannot deal with sitting down for prolonged periods, because that is how her condition affects her. Her disability living allowance, as it was then called, was up for renewal. After that was explained, a house call was set up and Sharon was asked to do a number of physical exercises that she was physically and mentally unable to do. Her parents told me that she screamed for hours afterwards due to the upset that it caused her. Is

that fulfilling our obligation? No, with great respect, I do not think it is. Her medical records clearly indicated her difficulties, yet the form-filling and the check-box exercise put her and her elderly parents through an awful time getting her benefits, which should never have been in question.

My brother Keith was injured in a motorbike accident some 18 years ago. It left him unable to do multiple tasks. Every one of us in this room is blessed. We can walk down to the room below; we can chat and walk, have a drink and eat a biscuit, use a mobile phone—we can multitask. He can only do one thing at a time, let alone fill in all the questionnaires that our mother and I have to go through as his court appointees. We are appointed by the court because he does not have the ability to look after his financial affairs. That is a fact of life; it is what happens. But then a Department comes along with so many exercises for someone to go through that they feel downtrodden and burdened almost before they even start. They are asked, “Can you stand on one leg?” Keith cannot stand on one leg; he would fall over. People such as Sharon, the young lady I mentioned, are asked to do things that they cannot physically do, which should be clear from their notes.

That is the story of just one of my constituents, many of whom suffer from mental health issues. They are put through the mill when a cursory glance at their medical records would show everything that needs to be shown. I welcome efforts to get those who are able to work back to work; I want them to do that, and they want to get back to work too, if possible. But tormenting—I use that word on purpose—people who are unable to is simply not acceptable. It is time that our definition of “disabled” gave more protection than the disability discrimination Act offers at this stage.

I represented a constituent with ulcerative colitis who worked for the civil service. She had her DDA form in, but she was still medically retired at the age of 27. She is a lovely young girl; I have known her since she was a wee tot, as we would say back home, and I know her parents very well. The civil service could not find a flexible way of working around her disability, so I went to appeal with her as her DLA said she was able to care for herself. Really? Had they not comprehended the seriousness of the issue? One Department said, “You're fine” and another said, “You'll never work again,” and the doctor was saying, “Give her antidepressants to deal with the upset and effect of it all.” I question whether those Departments work hand in hand.

I know that others want to speak, so let me conclude with this. How dreadfully sad it is that the Government's own employees do not have the flexibility to allow them to stay in work when they so desperately want to do so, especially now that staff can easily and effectively work from home.

I commend the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, the other hon. Members who have spoken and those who will contribute later. I am confident that the Members here today, as well as others who are not present, have compassion for the people we are here to help—those with disabilities and those who cannot cope with the troubles of life in the way that we can. We are privileged to be Members of Parliament and to be able to help others, and to get paid to do it. One of my great pleasures is helping people who are disabled and

[*Jim Shannon*]

those who have real problems on the journey of life that they tread, and today's debate gives us an opportunity to do that.

Something must be done about the way that our disabled people are viewed and treated—not by those speaking in the debate and not by the Minister, but we really need central Government and the civil service to have a better grasp. The change needs to start in this place and work its way down. All the disabled people we are speaking on behalf of today should have the benefit of a Government with compassion and a system that understands them, and should get the help they need when they need it.

2.10 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I normally speak before the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), so it is an honour to follow him this afternoon. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for drawing attention to this important topic. I want to commend her and my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for ensuring that this issue is always at the forefront of their campaigning, and for giving a voice to many constituents across our respective constituencies. In these two Members of Parliament we see fantastic champions for disabled people.

As we know, the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities was a landmark treaty, signed in 2007. It places a positive obligation on Governments to promote the full equality of disabled people under the law. It is fantastic that over 200 countries recognise the convention. However, I want to take a moment to reflect on what it says about the place of disabled people in society, both here and abroad, that we even need to state that disabled people are fully equal citizens. Surely that is so obvious that it should not need to be said, but too often we see disabled people and accessibility treated as an afterthought. Often it is not conscious discrimination, but a reflection of how much society is built around those who are not disabled.

I confess that I was not fully aware of the scale of the issue until a wheelchair user joined my team. Walking around with him, even in this place, I have seen at first hand the small everyday things that he is disadvantaged by: a dropped kerb on the side of the road that is not matched by the one on the other side, public venues that do not have a disabled toilet, and light switches that are placed far too high for him to reach. I could go on, but my point is that disabled people simply should not have to put up with workaround solutions to simple everyday activities, such as turning on lights. These are things that, if we are honest, most of us in this room take for granted.

Sadly, I have heard from several constituents in Vauxhall who have invisible disabilities, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or dyspraxia, who are afraid to speak out and ask for the support they need in the workplace for fear of being judged. These experiences are replicated for millions of people up and down the country who do not have their access needs met. It will not change until we start to take the UN convention's words seriously and proactively consider accessibility in the planning, design and organisation of everything we

do—it must be front and centre. By fixing problems with a sticking-plaster here and there, we will never truly live up to our UN obligations.

Any of us could become disabled at any time, so prioritising access future-proofs all of us and enables the valued perspectives of disabled people to be heard. Will the Minister please ensure that accessibility is no longer treated as an afterthought, and work on a cross-party basis to deliver the transformative change that disabled people need and deserve?

2.13 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your stewardship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this important debate and on her continued campaigning and championing of such an important issue.

The UN convention on the rights of disabled people—I will say disabled people because I subscribe to the social model of disability, so I will refer to it in that context going forward—is timely because it follows the global disability summit, which was the second of its kind. Many of us will remember that the first summit was hosted by the UK, and I made a number of comments back then about the Government leading by example. Disappointingly, we have progressed in years but there is still no change from the Government.

The convention was established in 2006, and it was the last Labour Government who ratified it. Twelve years on, there has been no implementation of it by this Government. As other hon. Members have asked: why is that?

The pillars of the convention are to ensure health, education, employment, access to justice and information, personal security and, most importantly, independent living for disabled people. It is the benchmark, the blueprint, the gold standard of all policy making to ensure that disabled people can live independently and that we have equal rights: it is about equality. If we say that we are serious about equality, the convention must absolutely be the blueprint for it.

Unfortunately, during more than a decade of austerity we have seen cuts to social security, to social care and to every public service. As I continue to say, that has created a hostile environment for disabled people. Almost half of people in poverty in this country are disabled or live with a person who is disabled. I think we all know, as we proceed further through a cost of living crisis, that that is only going to get worse. The convention is clear on support for disabled children, but there is a gaping funding gap of more than £2 billion in support for those disabled children. Their families report that they are struggling to support them without adequate support.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) mentioned, the independent living fund—the clue is in the title—was cut and scrapped, and was not replaced with a proper independent living fund or support to enable disabled people to live independently. What is the Minister doing to support people in social care? Although the funding that was announced last year is welcome, we all know that it certainly is not enough, because more than 18,000 people's access to care and support has been affected by the cut.

We all know about the social security cuts; we were all here for the debate about them that I led a few weeks ago. The cuts to employment and support allowance, which remove the work-related activity component, and the changes to PIP have made things incredibly difficult for ill and disabled people. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth highlighted, we need an independent public inquiry into the deaths caused by the cuts. As we all know, far too many people have lost their lives—let that sink in—as a result of cuts to their social security, which is the very thing that is supposed to be a safety net enabling us to live. Sadly, that is happening on this Government’s watch.

I appreciate that the Minister is not the Minister for Disabled People, but ultimately, she is the one who is here and she is responsible, so I really hope that when she responds, she will address some of these issues.

As a result of the cuts to all those services and support, the UK became the first nation state to be investigated for human rights violations against disabled people. That highlights that everything we had been lobbying and campaigning for before I even entered this place was true. I commend the thousands of disabled people who really fought for that investigation to take place. What did the UN committee conclude? Members have already said it, but we cannot say it enough: in 2016, the UK Government were guilty of “grave or systematic violations” of the rights of disabled people. I want the Minister and everyone here to let that sink in. They are some of the most vulnerable people in our society. How can that be right?

What is more worrying is that since the UN commissioner looked at independent living, social security, the right to work and so on, the Government have been required to provide annual updates to the UN committee, but in last year’s update they failed yet again to address the main challenges. Why? Why will the Government not carry out a cumulative impact assessment on all those areas, including independent living, poverty and inclusion in our communities and in employment? I and many other Members from across the House have called for that, but there has been no progress. The years of inaction raise the question: are the Government taking that UN inquiry seriously?

We know the impact that the pandemic has had on disabled people; the numbers do not lie. Six out of 10 covid-related deaths were of people who had underlying health conditions or were disabled. That is a scandal. At the start of the pandemic the Government failed to provide proper signed interpretation; they were found to be liable for that in the courts—we know that happened. We also know that the £20 uplift to universal credit was not applied to those on legacy social security, 2 million of whom were ill and disabled people.

The pandemic has really shone a light on how badly this Government are treating disabled people. This week, when the Prime Minister declared the end of all restrictions, there was still no plan on how we are going to protect the most vulnerable, some of who are disabled. Where is this plan and where is the equality impact assessment? Ultimately the Government do have an obligation to do that.

Other Members have spoken about the issues around consulting disabled people and their organisations. I will not go into detail on the national disability strategy, because the Government are planning to appeal the

High Court decision ruling it unlawful. Let us be clear: that is just another decision in a long line of court rulings where the Government were found to be acting unlawfully against disabled people. The Labour party has been clear in its support for disabled people, and we will continue to hold this Government to account for their treatment of disabled people. As I said at the start, we ratified the UN convention; it is time for the Government to implement it. I ask the Minister to tell us why the Government are still choosing not to, and when they will implement it. Does she agree with all of us that the convention should be implemented? That would be a good start.

We disabled people make up a large proportion of the UK population. We face a cost of living crisis. There are so many challenges confronting all of us in society, but we must give a thought to those who are so vulnerable, many of whom are disabled. I ask the Minister, please, to consider that when she responds.

2.22 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I think it is a really important debate, and I am very pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) secured the time today and delivered an excellent speech, which covered many important issues. I know that she, like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), is very focused on this issue, and I have no doubt that she will continue to be. I hope that the important questions that she put to the Minister are answered, because I have no doubt that she will keep asking them; they really matter. The other speeches today have underlined why that is the case: the impact of inaction on the lives of disabled here and across the world is profound. The additional vulnerabilities that often come with a disability make that doubly concerning as we—hopefully—emerge from the covid pandemic.

We have heard from hon. Members about the important voices of disability organisations. I will take a moment to refer to one of those located in my constituency. East Renfrewshire Disability Action group do a powerful job advocating at home, but also for people further afield, on disability issues. We heard a familiar tale about access issues; I know that East Renfrewshire Disability Action group would find that tale very familiar. The power of the work that goes on, day in and day out, is a testament to those groups. It should also give us pause for thought as to why groups of disabled people are having to do the heavy lifting that should be done in Parliament. The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) spoke very powerfully about why that matters.

The remarks of the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) were key, because she spoke about big and small things, and why both matter. She spoke very clearly about why disabled people should not have to put up with the lack of focus in this place. It speaks ill of us all—and of our priorities—that that undoubtedly is the case. I commend her for pointing out the importance of recognising invisible disabilities in the context of this conversation.

As we all know, and as I am sure the Minister would recognise, the inequalities that people with disabilities face in everyday life have been exacerbated during the

[Kirsten Oswald]

pandemic. As my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw said, in the UK half of people with a disability live in poverty. Progress in moving that on in recent years has been very slow, and I fear that covid has arrested it entirely. My hon. Friend also noted that although the SNP welcomes the UK Government's 18 commitments at this year's global disability summit, the FCDO has not gone far enough in that regard. The commitments do not meet the needs of disabled people.

That takes us to the vexed issue that we have heard about from a number of hon. Members—the UK Government's failure to agree to enshrine in law the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, which the Scottish Government will do. The hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) outlined very well that the UK Government cannot preach to others when they are not even taking that very straightforward action themselves. We need to think about all of that in the context of the new reality that covid has wrought.

Around 1 billion people in the world are living with a disability. Some 80% of them are in developing countries, and there are higher levels of disability among women, the poor and the elderly. We can read that through to lots of other vulnerabilities that really exacerbate the situation. We have noted the reason why that really matters for policy making, but having listened to the debate so far, my concern is that the UK Government's "being mindful" approach is not bold enough, is not ambitious enough, and will not deal with the inequalities that people face daily. The hon. Member for Battersea hit the nail on the head when she talked about that in the context of equality, which is what this is all about: it is about the lack of equality for disabled people, which leads to what is often almost a hostile environment for people to try to navigate. That clearly should not be the case, but it is the situation that people face here in the UK and globally. We have a responsibility here to acknowledge that, and to act. As we heard from the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth, the additional vulnerability is not factored into the UK Government's decision making. That means that we are in a somewhat difficult situation in trying to pin down some of the challenges that people have, which is extraordinary, because we do not have the data to allow us to do so.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw eloquently set out, the Scottish Government have a number of concerns in relation to the UK Government's decision not to enshrine the UNCRPD in law. Their commitments do not contain enough detail about measurable objectives; the language is rather vague, to say the least, so it is difficult for us to see how the UK Government will be able to provide tangible results. As I said, such things are not measurable or quantifiable, so I hope the Minister can say something about my hon. Friend's questions on that.

We have called for progress on a number of things, and it would also be good to hear from the Minister on the number of aid projects that have disability inclusion as their primary objective, and on the UK's support for grassroots disability aid projects. We should ensure that there are proactive steps to prevent further exclusion of disabled people from global aid, and we must look at

disability in the context of the eligibility criteria for applying refugee status. Those are only some of the issues on which the UK Government need to make progress. Of course, there is also the issue of the percentage spend on official development assistance, which is something that underpins all that and is a cause for significant concern. The reality is that many aid projects are not specifically aimed at disability inclusion, so disabled people are often left behind in aid spending.

Whether we are looking here or farther afield, the bottom line is that poverty is consistently higher for disabled people, and that impacts on life chances and choices. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, there is a gap of around 12% in poverty rates between disabled and non-disabled people.

The hon. Member for Strangford was very powerful in setting out why, on the domestic front particularly, we need to see progress to improve the life chances and life choices for disabled people, and to ensure that basic dignity is available for them. The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth spoke very powerfully about the failures of the UK social security system in terms of disability. I do not intend to repeat all that she said, but I hope that the Minister has some responses to her points, because those issues make such a difference to people's daily lives.

I would, however, like to speak about the missing employment Bill, which I would dearly love to see appearing. I have been saying that for a long time, so I am not sure that I hold out a huge amount of hope. However, it is important—and increasingly so, as we move out of the pandemic—that we have the opportunity to look again at things like flexible working, which can make such a difference to people's ability to secure and sustain employment. That kind of issue, which really has a profound effect on the lives of disabled people, is an illustration of why all the elements of policy need to be considered by the UK Government when they are looking at disability and how best to move things forward.

I will conclude by asking that the Minister responds to the key questions that have been put. I am reinforcing that this issue really matters, because the impact on people's lives cannot be understated. Disabled people need far more than our warm words and positive sentiments. We must ensure that we are taking action that goes right below the surface to improve the lives of people here and across the world. The best way to start doing that is for the UK Government to step up, enshrine the convention in law, and take some of the clear, positive steps set out today.

2.32 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank everyone who has contributed today. I highlight in particular the work of the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), and congratulate colleagues from across the House, including my hon. Friends the Members for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) and for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), and, indeed, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), on their contributions. I am grateful to them for raising such important issues.

I also pay tribute both to disabled people and to the organisations that represent them. In particular, I thank those who carry out important work in the constituency

of Reading East, which I have the privilege of representing, both in the town of Reading and in the neighbouring town of Woodley.

It is important that the decisions we take in this House are led by disabled people and experts, and informed by experience. As we have heard, in 2009 the UK pledged to follow the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, on the basis that it protects and promotes the human rights of disabled people, including by eliminating disability discrimination, enabling disabled people to live independently in the community, ensuring an inclusive education system and that disabled people are protected from all forms of exploitation, violence and abuse. I am glad that that there is agreement across the House on that, and we are right to seek to take it forward. I believe that we must go much further in our efforts to uphold human rights and equality for disabled people, and that is why the UN convention on the rights of disabled people should now be incorporated into British law.

I should also add that I am proud of the last Labour Government's record on improving the lives of people with disabilities, whether in cutting NHS waiting times, introducing free bus travel—a subject very dear to my heart, as those who know me well may remember—and introducing the Equality Act 2010. We know that well-designed policies, implemented and resourced well, and delivered properly, can transform the lives of disabled people.

I also pay tribute to the individual efforts of many Ministers and Government staff and Back Benchers during the years of the coalition and Conservative Governments. However—and I would like the Minister to reflect on this—there is so much more we should be doing.

Figures published last month show that 1 million more disabled people are trapped in hardship than were a decade before. Data from the Department for Work and Pensions reveal that 3.8 million disabled people live in poverty. We have heard eloquently from colleagues today about the pressure that that puts on disabled people and their families. I am sure that that is a trend that colleagues across the House would like to reverse.

As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw said, it is worth considering that a recent report by the Oxford University disability law and policy project and the Bonavero Institute of Human Rights found that there has been a

“failure of the government to implement properly its legal duties with respect to the rights of people with disabilities.”

That is set against the backdrop of a significant lack of appropriate support for disabled people during the pandemic. Almost 2 million ill and disabled people did not receive any additional support, despite the fact that disabled people on average face additional costs of £583 per month. In addition, as was said earlier, while universal credit was temporarily increased by £20 a week—we supported that decision and indeed campaigned for it to continue—it is important to note that other social security support such as the employment and support allowance and the jobseeker's allowance were not increased. The pandemic has hit everyone in our community, but it is wrong that it should have a particularly hard impact on disabled people. I am afraid that that lack of support is part of a wider picture of the Government failing to give disabled people the support that they need.

I appreciate the point you made earlier, Mr Stringer, about the sub judice nature of some of the issues with the national strategy for disabled people, so I will try to stick to the ruling that you rightly made, but I will say that there were two years of delay before the strategy was published in July 2021. Even when it did arrive, it appeared not to be the bold strategy that so many people had looked forward to, but more a series of unrelated announcements, with only £4 million of extra money pledged for disabled people, which amounts to just under £30 for each disabled person in the UK, a relatively modest amount. Disabled people and the organisations representing them said that they felt excluded from the process and had not been consulted when the strategy was drawn up.

That is all deeply disappointing. The Government could and should do so much better. I ask the Minister to look at that again in much greater detail with her colleagues—I appreciate that it is not her area of responsibility—and, collectively, to change their approach fundamentally, to give disabled people the support that they so clearly need.

Eliminating disability discrimination, enabling disabled people to live independently in the community, ensuring an inclusive education system and that disabled people are protected from all forms of exploitation, violence and abuse must be a priority for all of us. The Government should now incorporate the UN convention into UK law. That important legal change will have real effect in the everyday lives of disabled people.

It has been a privilege to speak today and to contribute to this important debate. Once again, I thank colleagues from across the House who have also contributed, and I thank disabled people and the organisations that represent them. I hope that the Minister will take on board the points made by colleagues from across the House and respond by letting us know how the Government plan to address these very serious issues.

2.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this debate on the importance of the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. It is a pleasure to respond, and I thank all hon. Members for their insightful contributions. I am here on behalf of the Minister for Disabled People, who is disappointed that she cannot be here today, due to a medical appointment.

The principles in the UN convention are at the heart of the Government's approach. We remain fully committed to the treaty, which we ratified in 2009, as has been mentioned, and to our obligations under it. No one wants to see any of their constituents held back from fulfilling their potential. I reassure all hon. Members that the UK Government and the devolved Administrations share the common goal to improve the lives of disabled people in the UK.

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Minister give way?

Mims Davies: I will just make some progress, if I may. I would also like to share with the House that for nearly 30 years, my father lived with an acquired brain injury due to a criminal incident at work. It turned us into a family who cared, and I applaud all unpaid and family carers for all they do with the utmost love and care.

[Mims Davies]

First, I will speak to the action we are taking as a Government to improve the lives of disabled people. In July 2021, we published the national disability strategy. Of course, we have sought permission to appeal and cannot comment further on any legal proceedings, but it is really important to highlight the five essential elements of that strategy, which complement those of the UN convention and underpin how we will continue to implement it in the UK. Those elements are to ensure fairness and equality; to consider disability from the outset; to support independent living; to work to increase participation by disabled people in all aspects of society; and to recognise that complex challenges will very often require joined-up local solutions.

Debbie Abrahams: I extend my best wishes to the Minister's father. What she has said about what he went through was very moving, and reminds us that eight out of 10 disabilities are acquired—that most disabled people have lived lives without disability. The Minister started by saying that we want disabled people to fulfil their potential. Do the Government believe that there is a social model of disability, in that society puts up barriers that prevent disabled people from living their lives? It is not up to disabled people to enable themselves; it is also about society, via the Government, ensuring that those barriers are not there.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Just before the Minister responds, I remind hon. Members that interventions should be short and to the point. We have had plenty of time in this debate, but I hope hon. Members will bear that in mind.

Mims Davies: Thank you, Mr Stringer, and I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words. It was quite ironic that during his working life, my father was the first person to put in supported disabled crossings for people with blindness, and became blind later in life due to his acquired injury. It is very important for all of us in policy making to understand that people are not necessarily born with a disability or a health condition.

The hon. Lady mentioned her train station. We have similar access issues in East Grinstead in my constituency, and we are trying to improve them. The Department for Transport also has an access programme under way, so she may want to look at that.

Marsha De Cordova: I echo the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), and commend the Minister for sharing her father's story. Is the Minister aware, however, that we were supposed to meet our obligation to deliver an accessible transport service by 2020, but we failed to meet that target? The Access for All fund was very welcome, but we are not doing very well when it comes to making our stations more accessible.

Mims Davies: The hon. Lady makes an important point: I have not even mentioned my Wivelsfield station, so the reality is that we still have work to do. I know that my hon. Friend the Rail Minister, the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), is very committed to that.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, who opened the debate so eloquently, asked about committing to spending on aid projects, and I will address that later

in my speech. I am trying to cover various points, so I hope hon. Members will bear with me while I make progress.

Alongside the Government's national disability strategy, we have published the health and disability Green Paper and the Government's response to the "Health is everyone's business" consultation on minimising the risk of ill health and related job loss. Those publications demonstrate that we are taking a holistic approach to improving the lives of individuals living with disability. I think it is important for anybody listening and engaging with this debate to notice and to know that progress is being made. Of course, there is always more to do.

Significant progress has been outlined in the national disability strategy. At the DWP, we have piloted the adjustments passport, which supports disabled people's transition into employment. The passport is personalised to the individual and captures in-work support needs, enabling the employer to have an informed conversation with the passport holder—we have just heard about flexible working. In addition, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has launched an online advice hub offering accessible information and advice on employment rights for disabled people.

BEIS has also completed a consultation on making flexible working—we have seen hybrid working too—the default in Great Britain unless employers have good reasons not to offer it, and it is reviewing the responses. I think that consultation is crucial and necessary. The pandemic has given us an opportunity to bust the myth of presenteeism and show that, moving forward, many sectors can be flexible and work in a hybrid way and can absolutely be inclusive of people who are disabled or living with a health condition. That will make opportunities so much more accessible for our constituents, which is what we all want.

I want to turn to the comments made by the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth on the pandemic. Since the start of the pandemic, the Government have worked hard to ensure that disabled people have access to employment support, disability benefits, financial support, food, medicines and vaccines, as well as accessible communications and guidance. I, like other Members, had constituents asking for all of that and more, and I am glad that we have been able to respond.

Of course, the NHS is offering new antibody and antiviral treatments for people with covid-19 who are at greater risk of becoming seriously ill, such as those who are immunosuppressed or face other risks. There is separate guidance and there will be additional boosters coming forward as well, which many of our constituents may be eligible for. It is important that we let people know, whoever they are and whatever is going on in their lives, that when it comes to the challenges of living well out of the covid-19 pandemic, we recognise that we must understand the impact on those with a disability or health condition. We are absolutely committed to that.

The Prime Minister made clear in launching the national strategy that we fully recognise the need not only to deliver on our near-term commitments but to go further. I can assure the House that we are doing so. As an example, in the autumn 2021 spending review, we provided an extra £1 billion via the Department for Education to support children and young people with

more complex needs, including those with a disability. That will bring the total high-needs budget next year to over £9 billion.

It has been mentioned that work is an important part of disabled people's lives. It is absolutely right that we in the DWP place the emphasis on supporting people into work where possible. Of course, we know how valuable that is. It is more than just a pay packet; it is camaraderie, friendship, and a reason to get up and get going. It makes such a difference to be part of a team and to achieve what we are able to achieve. I am passionate that, whoever someone is, wherever they are and whatever barriers to progression they may face, if they are able to work, they should be well supported to fulfil their potential by the Government, the community and jobcentres.

Jim Shannon: On that point, it is also important that employers understand their responsibility to ensure that their employee is respected in every way and has the opportunities that every other employee has.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that really important point. I recently had some engagement with the construction industry about really good, inclusive work practices, reaching out and being more equal. For example, 50% of the population—females—is under-represented in the sector.

Many employers often do the same recruitment and end up with the same people. They want to be more inclusive; they want the different voices and experiences that we have found so important this afternoon, but unfortunately we end up recruiting the same people because recruitment processes are not open and wide enough. We need to do more.

Jim Shannon: I wanted to put that on the record because the Minister is right. A recent headline said:

“Swindon man with Down's syndrome gets scaffolding apprenticeship”.

There is an example of what can happen if you put your mind to it.

Mims Davies: I have found this through our 160-plus youth hubs at DWP. Many people have neurodiversity. Young people have been very anxious and nervous. It has been really great to give people that “can-do” experience; it makes such a difference, in terms of being inclusive. People with a disability or a health condition are absolutely perfect for some jobs, and it will be right for them to be in that workplace. Let us challenge employers. Let us not just talk about it, but push for action. I am proud that DWP has led the way in supporting disabled people by recognising what they need in order to get into employment. We are there to help.

Kirsten Oswald: The Minister has spoken enthusiastically about employment, and I agree about the value of ensuring that everyone can secure the employment opportunities that they absolutely deserve. Can she shed any light on the employment Bill mentioned earlier, which would assist us?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady. If the Bill fell in my portfolio and that of my Department, I could shed many lights on it, but I am afraid it sits with BEIS. I am sure that it will take note of the hon. Lady's query.

On levelling up opportunities, the work and health programme offers intensive personalised employment support, and we are working with the NHS to improve access to psychological therapy services across England. There are also measures under the access to work scheme, which provides employees with grants of up to £62,900 a year for workplace adaptations, such as special equipment, support workers and help to get to and from work. Last financial year, almost 36,000 people with disabilities and health conditions received tailored and flexible support to do their job under access to work. Not enough people know that that is out there, and I am pleased to make the point today.

Disability Confident is another really important part of the package. We talked about employers seeing the value of having a mixed group of people in their workplace. It is a voluntary, business-led scheme, designed to give employers the knowledge, skills and free resources they need to recruit and retain disabled people, and to help them to develop their skills. As of 30 September, over 20,000 employers were actively engaged with the scheme, which covers more than 11 million employees. It is right that we push harder on this, and we will do that through our national employer partnership.

Marsha De Cordova: The Minister talks about the Disability Confident scheme. More than 4 million disabled people of working age want to work. While she may applaud the 35,000 figure, it is not enough. An employer can be a Disability Confident employer and not employ a single disabled person. What quality assurance and monitoring is there to ensure that the scheme will provide for disabled people? At the moment, I am not confident in it.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point. If I may, I will let the Minister for disabled people, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), pick up on that issue and write to her.

I turn to international engagement—the hon. Lady who introduced the debate, the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, would be upset if I did not. It is right to emphasise that the UK has a proud record of furthering the rights of disabled people. We have not got it all right, but we are using our overseas development work to go further, and we always have to do more. The UK is a leading global voice on disability inclusion; it hosted the first ever global disability summit, which was mentioned.

Marsha De Cordova: Will the Minister give way again on that point?

Mims Davies: I need to make progress. I may try to come back to the hon. Lady.

In the same year, we also launched the disability inclusion strategy, setting out our priorities for social protection, economic development, education and humanitarian action. On our commitments to progress on disability inclusion in the FCDO's diplomacy, policy and programming—

Marsha De Cordova: Will the Minister give way?

Mims Davies: I am speaking, if I may. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw will be pleased to know that we are publishing on gov.uk all the details of the ways in which we absolutely are being more inclusive in our aid programme. I hope that is something she will ask for. On our support for global disability rights, we

[*Mims Davies*]

have committed to spending £10 billion in 2021-22, making the UK's official development assistance, as I mentioned, disability-inclusive. I am very pleased to see that coming forward. We are absolutely committed to implementing the convention through our strong policies. [HON. MEMBERS: "Will the Minister give way?"] I have given way enough, thank you.

On the treaties that were mentioned, the Government are absolutely sure that the substantive provisions are already largely reflected in our existing domestic policies and legislation right across the UK. We note the recommendations, but the Government's approach is to put in place a combination of policies and legislation to give effect to the UN human rights treaties that we have already ratified.

I need to give the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw some time to respond, so I will try to do that, after making a final point. I would like to underline fully this Government's commitment to the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, and to transforming the lives and opportunities of disabled people, both in the UK and internationally. We are unwavering, and I hope that the announcements last week will sit right with those listening today. We will continue with the wide-ranging commitments made in the national disability strategy. We will consider how we can build on that and go further, making sure that disabled people's lives are better every day, and we will do that in the context of a central goal: to level up, and to create a society that is more positive, more engaging, and fairer for all, where everybody can get on and progress.

2.57 pm

Marion Fellows: I congratulate the Minister on her robust defence of what I will not refer to as the indefensible, though that is there in my thoughts. She has done a

grand job—she has a job, and she has done it—but unfortunately she has not convinced anybody on this side of the Chamber with her arguments.

One of my main asks was: does the Minister agree that the Government should enshrine the UNCRPD in law? If that was done, then lots of other things would follow from it. Warm thoughts and good intentions from the Government are great, and I am really pleased that the Government have them, but we really need hard law to make all these things possible. The Minister referred to the employment Bill—where is it?—and access to work, which is the subject of another debate that I will apply for. Hon. Members have reflected on the effects of austerity, too.

I will raise one other issue: the Government's silo mentality. The Minister had a hard job, because there was discussion of FCDO and DWP—and she also managed to bring in BEIS. Again, I go back to the importance of enshrining the UNCRPD in law, because then Departments would almost be forced to work together.

Something the Minister said struck me. She said that people should be treated fairly and equally. We heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), among others, about how people applying for PIP and other DWP benefits are assessed. Could the Government please start treating disabled people with dignity, fairness and respect? That would go a long way towards making things different for disabled people, here and further afield.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Christians and Religious Minorities: India

3.2 pm

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind Members to observe social distancing and wear masks.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this has considered the matter of the persecution of Christians and religious minorities in India.

It has been a while since we had a debate on this issue, although a few days ago we were fortunate enough to have a debate on India-UK trade negotiations, introduced by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I commented on the issue of the persecution of Christians and other ethnic groups in India during that debate, ever mindful that this debate was coming up. I am pleased to see the hon. Gentleman here; in fact, I am pleased to see everyone here. I wanted to mention that debate, because perhaps it was a warm-up for this debate. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief. Looking around this hall, I see that most of the people here are members of it. Indeed, some are officers of the APPG.

I am always an optimist, and always have been; I live my life along those lines. I always look to better things. This debate looks to better things in India, ever mindful that we have a special relationship. It is my hope that things in life will get better. I prefer the glass half full to the glass half empty, and think we should try to build the world a better future. That is at the crux of this debate. With prayer and perseverance, crises may resolve, relationships will heal, and collectively we inch towards a better world. I believe we can achieve that if we all have the same motivation, and try to achieve the same goal.

I am pleased to see the Minister for Levelling Up Communities in her place—I look forward to her response—and the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) on the Opposition Front Bench. I am also glad to see my good friend from the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson)—there is not a debate that she is at that I am not at alongside her, and vice versa. I am very pleased to see the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), who has just joined the all-party parliamentary group, here to support the debate. I thank the Library for the background information it has given us.

Freedom of religion or belief is always my hope, but looking back on the past year in India, it cannot be said to have been there for Christians and other religious or belief minorities. Back in 2016, in his address to the United States Congress, India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, said that

“For my Government, the Constitution is its real holy book. And in that holy book, freedom of faith, speech and franchise, and equality of all citizens, regardless of background, are enshrined as fundamental rights.”

To be fair to President Modi, he has the motivation to do that, but the reality is very different. Some of the examples I will refer to are evidence of where that is not

happening. That is what the debate is about. President Modi also said, referring to some extremely violent clashes, that a new law would have

“no effect on citizens of India, including Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Christians and Buddhists.”

Well, if only. In fact, it has an effect on all the religious minorities. They no longer have the freedom they once had. They can no longer follow their beliefs and express their religious views. Today's debate offers time to stop and reflect on the situation regarding freedom of religion or belief in India and the problems that persist today.

In January 2021, this same topic was discussed by this House. I have no doubt that the hon. Member for Harrow East and everyone else here was present for that debate. Some might wonder why we are raising the subject again. Well, I will tell the House: we are raising it quite simply because, looking back at developments in India over the last 12 months, we find a string of human rights abuses and the suffering of Christians. More than ever, Her Majesty's Government need to take additional steps to encourage full and rigorous defence of freedom of religion or belief for all. The steps they have taken so far are clearly not enough. Christians and other minorities continue to be failed by efforts in this regard.

In the previous debate, I commented on the lack of representation of Christians and other groups in the political sphere, but looking through the Library background briefing, I see it shows that at least one of India's states is taking steps to ensure that there is political representation of all groups.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Many minority communities have played prominent roles in Indian politics and public life since the country's foundation in 1948, and that continues today.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Lady is right that there are examples in the past, but in many Indian states, representation for minority groups is not in place. Previously, there was a free country where freedom to practise one's religion was in place, as President Modi said in 2016, but today, in 2022, the same cannot be said. I note that the right hon. Lady is a sponsor of the annual Open Doors event. I gently remind her that in the past year, India has seen grave violations of freedom or belief. A report by the United Christian Forum highlighted that 2021 was one of the worst years for attacks on Christians in India, with ongoing impunity for the perpetrators of violence. In 2013, Open Doors' world watch list ranked India 31st of the 50 countries where Christians face the highest levels of persecution; and last month, in its latest list, India was ranked 10th. In short, there can be little doubt that the situation is getting worse at an alarmingly fast rate.

The research sounds the alarm on the escalation of freedom or belief violations in India—not just against Christians, but against those of other faiths and beliefs. In many cases, freedom of religion or belief is a litmus test for the full realisation of other human rights. When citizens cannot freely exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief, it is depressingly inevitable that other human rights are being compromised.

At the heart of all freedom of religion or belief is the ability freely to change one's religion or belief, free from fear. In other words, a Hindu should be able to become

[*Jim Shannon*]

Muslim or Christian. Unfortunately, that is practically impossible in about a third of India's states. There is some flexibility in some states, but there are certainly states where there is no flexibility at all. A third of India's 28 states prohibit or limit religious conversion to protect the dominant religion, Hinduism, from perceived threats from religious minorities. That is entirely unnecessary; it stems from prejudice against non-Hindu religions and support for Hindutva, an ideology that does not count Indians who are Christian or from other religious minorities as true Indians because they have allegiances that lie outside India. They might believe in something other than Hinduism, but their allegiance to the Indian state is not in doubt. The Indian Government must look at where they are on that, discuss those issues, and make sure that there is opportunity for all.

Speaking of opportunity, the background information given to us for this debate says:

"Christians and Muslims...do not qualify for the officially reserved jobs or school placements available"

to Hindus,

"putting these groups at a significant economic and social disadvantage."

These things need to be fair. If a country's constitution mentions freedom and equality, the country should ensure those things, not draw away from them.

This is not an easy debate. I am well aware of our countries' close relationship and I welcome it. Indeed, the other day, the hon. Member for Harrow East and I mentioned how important that closeness was, particularly when it comes to trade between the UK and India.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman talks about the close relationship between India and the UK. Does he agree that that relationship puts the UK in a unique position to be a positive force for change, and to encourage and pressure India to respect religious minorities?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I hope, as I think we all do, that we can achieve that through this debate. That is why I look forward to the Minister's response. She is always fair and always gives a calculated response. We are conveying our feelings and thoughts to her, and ultimately, I am sure, to India, so that it takes the opportunity to address these issues.

It is not my wish to alienate a close ally, but these caveats must not prevent us from speaking up when we see the mistreatment of minorities and mistreatment on grounds of religion or belief. Indeed, it is the close relationship between the UK and India that necessitates our raising the alarm, as the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran says. The UK is the third biggest investor in India, and in 2020, India became the second largest investor in the UK, so trade is clearly an important issue. To be frank, people including my constituents—and me; I am no different—care where their taxpayers' money goes. Customers increasingly care about corporate responsibility and social impact; our country should not think that it is above such standards. We are not. The majority of people think that if the United Kingdom were to trade with a country that violates and abuses the human rights of its citizens, the UK would be somewhat complicit in that abuse.

In various debates this week, most of them to do with Russia, we have highlighted human rights abuses and persecution. We have also talked about China and where it has done wrong. In the main Chamber and Westminster Hall, and through our Government officials and the steps that the Government are taking, we are highlighting these issues, and today, we are doing the same. One thing is clear: our nation cares about human rights abuses in India. A majority of people think that the amount of foreign aid that the UK provides to a country should be tied to its performance on certain human rights standards. It is undeniable that one human right currently being violated in India is freedom of religion or belief. A range of religious and belief minorities, not the least of whom are Christians, are suffering infringements of this right. I will go through some of these violations.

Attacks against Christians have been refuelled in recent years and months by the impact of online disinformation and hate speech. How easy it is to hide behind a screen and destroy people, or fill people's head with things that turn them against others. On 6 December last year, a mob armed with stones and iron rods attacked St Joseph's school in Ganj Basoda, days after a video was circulated on social media that falsely claimed that the school was forcibly converting Hindus to Christianity. The video was not filmed at the school; it was not even filmed near the school, and none of the students were present, yet the misinformation was peddled through that video. The language and disinformation in the video were deliberately provocative and sought to target the local Christian minority community.

The video succeeded in its aim, which was the attack organised for the following day. When the school's principal was warned of the imminent attack, he immediately requested police protection, but—alarmingly—no such protection was provided. That is a terrible stain on the police. Although the police assured him that the protests would be peaceful and that they would send officers to guard the school, on the day itself the police failed to show up; they arrived only after the crowd had dispersed, having already caused distress and destruction. As this tragic event shows all too well, online misinformation and hate speech accelerate violent attacks, and the relevant authorities often do not do enough to prevent the brutality. There is no doubt that online misinformation can lead to violence, which happens on a frighteningly regular basis, and indeed today.

Another example of the horror that Christians face can be found in countless reports issued over the last year. Ours is a country of freedom of religion and belief, free from persecution and intimidation, and we know that Christmas is a very important date in the calendar for Christians—indeed, for many people, but especially Christians. In the run-up to Christmas in India, many churches in Karnataka state were forced to cancel their Christmas celebrations following threats from radical groups. More than 150 churches did not open over Christmas due to the fear of attacks, and many other churches opted to limit their Christmas celebrations. Their caution was not without cause. On 24 and 25 December, Christmas eve and Christmas day, dozens of churches were attacked across the states of Assam, Haryana, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh. Services were stopped short, Bibles were set on fire, a statue of Jesus was torn down and the crowds shouted, "Death to

missionaries!” Is that what their religion tells them—“Death to missionaries”? It is not what my religion or my beliefs tell me, and it should not be what any other religion or belief tells anyone else either.

Father Anand, a priest at one of the targeted churches and therefore on the frontline, said that the protests were indicative of the increased attacks that Christians in India have been facing in recent months. He said:

“This is a symbol of what is happening because these people have impunity, and it creates tension... Every Sunday is a day of terror and trauma for Christians, especially those belonging to those small churches”,

which feel under threat. I go to church every Sunday, Mr Stringer, as I suspect others in this place do. We are free to do so and we enjoy it in peace, but for those Christians in India every Sunday is a day of terror and trauma. Let the devastation of that phrase just sink in; think about what that means. When we go to church on Sunday, we do so in peace, and we thank God for it. If we had to go through a crowd to get to church, and if we came out to be stoned or potentially face attacks against our property or damage to our cars, it would put things into perspective.

Christians are not the only ones who suffer. In recent years, there have been several high-profile murders of well-known rationalist leaders. I am not sure my Ulster Scots accent will aptly render this gentleman's name, but in 2015, Malleshappa Madivalappa Kalburgi, a 77-year-old scholar and university professor, was killed after receiving death threats following criticism of idol worship during a seminar. In 2013, Narendra Dabholkar, president of the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations, a member organisation of Humanists International, was murdered in Maharashtra state. Despite both cases being high profile, to this day there has been inaction and a failure to prosecute suspects for either crime.

Muslims suffer challenges and attacks too. At a conference of the right-wing Hindu Mahasabha political party on 31 December, delegates were encouraged to attack Muslims with the words,

“If 100 of us become soldiers and are prepared to kill 2 million”
Muslims

“then we will win. We will protect India, and make it a Hindu nation.”

That is not what should be said by any religion, and it certainly should not be said by the Hindu political party. My God tells me that he is a God of love. He is also a God of judgment, but he is a God of love. I suspect that everybody else's religion tells them something similar, so why turn it into a campaign? Despite immediate international condemnation, Pooja Shakun Pandey, who made the remarks, was only arrested weeks later after sustained pressure from the international community.

The double vulnerability faced by female Muslims was also highlighted this year when Karnataka state introduced a ban on Muslim schoolgirls wearing a headscarf. Malala Yousafzai has since responded by saying that the move is forcing Muslim girls

“to choose between studies and the hijab.”

The choice between an education and one's religion should never be a dichotomy that anyone, let alone a child, should ever have to face. In addition to the attacks, Muslims have faced increased discrimination during the covid-19 pandemic. In 2020, Indian Government

Ministers accused the Muslim Tablighi Jamaat minority of spreading covid-19. It was an absolute fallacy, but people were geed up and fired up by it, and they took action against Muslims.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for securing the debate. I would like to speak briefly on behalf of my constituents in Bolton North East. I have one of the largest Indian Gujarati Muslim communities in the United Kingdom—it numbers somewhere around 14,000. What are the hon. Gentleman's views on how important it is that, as we increasingly develop our bilateral relationship with India, we bring all the opportunities and things that could be better to the table in those sorts of discussions?

Jim Shannon: That is one of the objective of today's debate, and we hope that we can reach a better understanding. The views that I had when I was 20 are very different from the views that I have now, in my 60s. I see things very differently today from when I was younger. I feel responsible for the words that I use, which is why I try to be very careful with my terminology and what I say. As the hon. Gentleman says, it is important that we pick our words and try to understand someone else's point of view. We may not agree with it, but we should certainly understand it and appreciate that they have a point of view. The hon. Gentleman is right to suggest there is a duty on us all to do so, and I make that point on behalf of Muslims, because it is important.

As I mentioned earlier, freedom of religion or belief is a gateway right and a strong indicator of the future trajectory of the human rights landscape in a country. Often religious or belief minorities are the first groups to be targeted before other rights are eroded. Sadly, we are now seeing warning signs that attacks on fundamental human rights are targeted not only on religion or belief minorities, but on journalists and critics of the Government. Human rights apply to religious minorities and ethnic groups, but they also apply to journalists who are critical of President Modi and who often find themselves being denounced as anti-Indian. Earlier I said that they are not anti-Indian, but they want to have freedom. They are as proudly pro-Indian as any other citizens. Two UN special rapporteurs recently highlighted the treatment of journalist Rana Ayyub, who is a victim of intensifying attacks and threats made online by far-right Hindu nationalist groups due to her critical reporting on Prime Minister Modi and issues affecting the Muslim community—the very people to whom the hon. Member for Bolton North East (Mark Logan) referred a few moments ago.

What is happening in India cannot be overlooked and deserves greater attention from the international community and Her Majesty's Government. There is broad consensus among academics and civil society that there are increased attacks against India's religious and belief minorities. The evidential base is there and cannot be ignored. When a country's constitution calls for freedom for all religious and ethnic groups, it has to mean more than just words. There has to be action as well.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Amnesty International, Genocide Watch, the London School of Economics, the Institute for Development Studies, Humanists International,

[Jim Shannon]

Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Hindus for Human Rights and Open Doors—the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) is a great promoter of that organisation, and we never miss the event that she hosts every year—all agree that the situation for religious and belief minorities in India is dire. The hon. Member for Bolton North East, whose accent gives him away, knows that we use that word often and regularly, because it describes the issues very well.

This is the question we are asking: when will our Government gently remind President Modi and his Government that they have to do more to address the issues? Important though trade is, that is a key question in the debate and from me to the Minister, to my Minister in my Government. Earlier this week, in the debate led by the hon. Member for Harrow East, I encouraged the Government to raise the human rights violations as a new trade deal is negotiated with India. Since the 1990s, it has been the norm to include human rights provisions in international trade deals, and such provisions have the overwhelming support of the British public when they are asked if the UK should take into consideration human rights standards in a country with which we are negotiating and signing a trade deal.

As a country, we must use our new trade agreements to pursue broader international objectives and defend human rights across the world, in particular the right of freedom of religion or belief—I believe passionately in that, as the chair of the APPG. I believe in standing up for those with Christian beliefs, those who have other beliefs and those who have no belief, on the grounds that that is the right thing to do. That is what the debate is about today. This is just one of many things on which more can and must be done.

To conclude, India shares a very close relationship with the UK—we all know that well, and the Minister knows it in particular. My hope is that the debate is not seen to be disrespecting that relationship. Always, my hope and prayer is to strive to improve it, as I believe we can. Just as we are judged by the company we keep, so too are states by the allies and trade partners they keep. In the interests of accountability and of ensuring full freedom of religion or belief for all, the Government of this country—my Government and my Minister—must strive to hold all allies and friends to higher standards when it comes to freedom of religion or belief. No longer can we turn a blind eye—that cannot be the default.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Four Back Benches have applied to speak and are standing. I intend to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at 4 o'clock. I will not put a time limit on, but hon. Members can do the arithmetic.

3.27 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer.

Freedom of religion is a fundamental right that must be defended and should be a high priority in our foreign policy. I have spoken out many times on the plight of

Christians facing discrimination and oppression around the world, but it is vital that we base debates on such crucial issues on the facts. I am concerned that India is not getting a fair hearing in this Parliament.

Diversity, inclusion and respect for minority faiths has been a core principle of the state of India since its inception. In any country, there will be wrongdoers and extremists who commit crimes and incite hatred against minorities. Think of the vile abuse shouted from the so-called “convoy for Palestine” on the Finchley Road—just one of a record number of disgraceful antisemitic incidents recorded in this country last year alone. What is important is to look at is how a state responds to such criminal and unacceptable activities.

It is clear that India’s respect for the rule of law, its independent judiciary, its Human Rights Commission, its vibrant free press and its thriving democracy ensure that the greatest efforts are made to protect minorities from attack and from unfair treatment. Equality before the law and religious freedom are constitutionally protected in India. Not only that, the right of minorities to promote their identities and cultures is also constitutionally protected.

Institutions such as the National Commission for Minorities and the Ministry of Minority Affairs work actively to safeguard the rights of minority faiths. There are extensive government assistance programmes dedicated to minorities, including the Nai Roshni project to support leadership development among women. India’s phenomenal economic success in recent years is bringing millions of people of all faiths out of poverty across India.

Any person in India who has been attacked or treated unfairly because of their religion has my sympathy—especially Christians, whose faith I share. All such cases must be taken seriously by law enforcement authorities. However, we need to view them in the context of a minority population that could be as high as 200 million people. Among such a massive group, it is sadly inevitable that some will be victims of crime and disorder.

I find it disturbing when hon. Members assert that law enforcement authorities are somehow complicit in such attacks. If there is evidence, it should be brought to the attention of the appropriate authorities in India; if there is not, claims of complicity by the authorities should not be repeated. I would make a comparison with the allegations routinely made against the Royal Ulster Constabulary during the troubles in Northern Ireland. Just as it is wrong to stigmatise the RUC with allegations of collusive behaviours without solid evidence, it is wrong to make those allegations about organisations in India.

I would also say that before trying to pass judgment on other countries, we should reflect on where the UK has failed minority groups. Most notoriously, the Windrush scandal caused deep hurt and suffering, and systemic problems at the Home Office clearly contributed to what happened.

In conclusion, India’s record on minority faiths is infinitely better than that of almost all its regional neighbours—especially Pakistan and China, where there are grave concerns about the treatment of religious minorities. In contrast, members of Christian, Muslim and other minority communities in India play a hugely successful, visible and positive role in business, politics, public life, media and culture. It is something we should

all celebrate. It reflects the Government of India's vision of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas": together, for everyone's growth, with everyone's trust.

3.32 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate and on his work in support of religious freedoms.

As a member of the APPG, I stand firmly behind the rights of minorities to religious freedom, both India and across the world. With the rise of nationalist and populist politics all over the world, we are witnessing increased threats to minority rights. According to recent research by the V-Dem Institute, authoritarian regimes outnumber the world's democracies for the first time since 2001, and the number of such regimes is growing. It is therefore essential for democracies—of which India is, of course, the world's largest—to stand firm together in defence of universal human rights.

We must lead by example and stand up for the freedoms of expression and religious belief. They are the cornerstones of the values that we in the United Kingdom, and particularly in the Labour party, hold dear; they are values that democrats across the world should defend. That is why, on behalf of my Sikh constituents—many of whom have families living in India—I would like to call attention to and condemn in the strongest possible terms the persecution of Sikhs and other religious minorities in India. We saw that persecution during last year's farmers' protests in India, where Sikh men and women faced the most appalling violence. I reiterate that the farmers in India must have the right to protest peacefully, and that the Indian authorities must commit to upholding that right.

We have seen a recent legacy of persecuting other religious minorities in India as well. In 2019, India passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which offers amnesty to non-Muslim illegal immigrants and expedites the path to Indian citizenship for members of six non-Muslim faiths. Both measures explicitly exclude migrants who are Muslim. Amnesty International has said that this Act

"legitimises discrimination on the basis of religion".

The situation has been compounded by recent mob violence against Muslims—often working class men—in what Human Rights Watch has called "mob attacks against vulnerable communities."

Equally as grave, we have heard reports of gruesome violence perpetrated against Christians across the country. Open Doors recently published a report based on research from the London School of Economics in which they refer to the case of Sunita, a Christian woman who was eight months pregnant. She was brutally assaulted by a group of men and suffered the death of her unborn baby as a result. The report also detailed the case of a Christian teenager in Odisha who was lynched and murdered by a vigilante mob.

These harrowing stories speak for themselves. We must use our platforms to shout down the appalling persecution of religious minorities in India. British foreign policy must place the rule of law, democracy and human rights at the heart of its agenda, and we

must be clear that religious freedom is a critical right that must be universally upheld. I call on the Government to do just that.

3.36 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on leading the debate, and on setting the tone for it and the other contributions that have been made. May I gently but firmly correct him? Shri Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister of India and not the President. The hon. Gentleman referred to him as that in his speech, and I am sure he will want to correct that when he sums up at the end of the debate.

We have to be cautious when we come to lecture India on protecting religious freedom when in this country, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) alluded to, antisemitism is at its peak, anti-Muslim hatred has been launched and anti-Hindu feeling is strong. When so many people feel threatened, it ill befits us to lecture India. Equally, the history of the United Kingdom in India is not completely blame free, particularly in Punjab; the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) referred to her Sikh constituents.

We have to be cautious and to remember that India's constitution directly protects and safeguards religious minorities. Minority community status for Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Buddhists and Jains is not only protected by law, but they are encouraged to promote their individual identities. That is in the constitution.

I am always cautious about talking about somewhere I have never been, and I declare my interest as the co-chair of the Indo-British all-party parliamentary group who has had the opportunity to visit India on seven occasions. I have been to 14 states in India, which is about half the states, and seen at first hand what protection of religious minorities is available, and I will come on to that later. I have spoken to many parliamentarians in India, and I assure hon. Members that they like nothing more than to debate their constitution. The constitution is very important to all the representatives of the Indian Government and the Members of Parliament.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet said, the Indian Government have enabled many programmes to protect religious minorities and to promote the opportunities that they should have. In many Indian states minority religions are practiced by the majority of people in those states.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I am honoured to represent one of the largest Goan populations outside India. Of course, they are devout Catholics. Would my hon. Friend agree with the observation that the largest non-agricultural landowner in India is the Roman Catholic church? That underpins the important differentiation we need to make between atrocities against religious minorities and wilful acts or omissions by the state of India. The two things are different, and we should remember that in this debate.

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his intervention. He rightly refers to investments that have been made, not only by the UK but by the various different religious groups across India.

[*Bob Blackman*]

We should also remember that India has state government as well as federal government, and therefore the state government should make decisions as well as the national Government. Indeed, independent democratic institutions, such as the National Commission for Minorities, the National Human Rights Commission of India and the Ministry of Minority Affairs, safeguard those rights. National Minorities Rights Day is observed in India every year on 18 December. Given that we are talking about what should happen in India, perhaps we might think about having a national rights day in this country. India has one already, so let us learn the lesson from India and give minorities that opportunity.

We should equally look at the growth of the different minority religions' populations. India is an incredibly diverse country; there are more Muslims in India than in Pakistan and Bangladesh combined. We should remember that minority religion is growing demographically, up from 15% in 1947 to around 20% in 2011. That is completely unlike the trend in our country. With over 207 million followers of Islam, India has the second largest population of Muslims in the world. Indeed, that is 10% of the world's Muslim population. Not only is that number growing, but it is expected that by 2050 India will have the largest Muslim population in the world, overtaking Indonesia.

Of the 28 states, four—Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Nagaland—have a Christian majority. I hope that they have enlightened policies and enable other minority religions to prosper and grow. Kerala and Tamil Nadu have the largest section of Christian population anywhere in India. I know the hon. Member for Strangford has not had the opportunity to do so yet, but I invite him to come with me on a visit to India and we can see that first hand. Kerala is the state that is visited most by people from the UK, and there not only the churches but the synagogues are preserved. It was the centre of the Jewish population in India before Israel came into existence, and, after that, many of those people chose to migrate to Israel from their ancestral home. These circumstances demonstrate that clearly not only is there an opportunity but there are centres of Christianity in India.

Jammu and Kashmir has a Muslim majority and Ladakh has a Buddhist majority, so it is not fair to say that India is not a diverse country. That can only be possible when minorities feel safe, secure and nurtured. Across the board, minorities have been the torchbearers of India's scientific and economic success and leadership. From Indian states in the north-east and regions in the north where minority religions form the majority, minorities' visibility, success and leadership in all spheres of human activity—from the civil services to political representation and civil society, and from media to corporate houses—is a true reflection of the Indian people's genuine commitment to their age-old tradition.

In any thriving democracy there are bound to be questions, debates and challenges from time to time. There might have been—and have been—isolated cases and reports of minorities facing discrimination. However, there are independent institutions to address them, such as the National Commission for Minorities, and others that I have mentioned, as well as an independent judiciary. Those reports and cases need to be reflected on in the

context that there are 200 million religious minority members. The incidents are very rare, relative to the population size.

We should also consider the concerns that have been expressed to me by many people of Indian origin about the activities of those who seek to convert people from one religion to another. We have to be very cautious about that approach. I agree that it is the fundamental human right of an individual to choose their religion. However, it is not reasonable—it is unacceptable—for people to be forced to convert against their will, and against their family's will as well.

Jim Shannon: Of course, if the individual is of age, he or she will be able to make their own decision about which religious viewpoint they wish to pursue or follow. May I say gently to the hon. Gentleman—we are good friends, and I am always very mindful of that fact—that Open Doors, whose event the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) chairs every year, said in its report that India was 31st on the list in 2013 and is 10th today, meaning that it went up the ladder of where religious incidents are recorded? That shows that there is more persecution, so how does the hon. Gentleman equate those facts? Whenever persecution is rising in India, the number of incidents rises, and he cannot ignore that.

Bob Blackman: Clearly there are tensions, and I would never say that any attacks on individuals because of their religion are acceptable. What I would say, however, is that when a country has a growing population with growing opportunities for employment, wealth and getting people out of poverty, there are bound to be clashes. There are often clashes in India over religious sites, and there is fault on all sides in that respect. In many cases, the clashes occur where there has historically been a temple when a mosque or a church has been erected on that site, or the other way around. That leads to fundamental clashes between religions. It is up to the Government of India and the forces of India to ensure peace and harmony between people, and it is up to the religious leaders of the religions in India to encourage and promote that harmony as well.

I say to the hon. Member for Strangford gently that, having had the opportunity to visit many of these parts of the world and to see at first hand the position in India, I would argue strongly against the position he has taken. Yes, there are problems—there will be problems all over the world—but they are very rare relative to the size of the population and the number of people who celebrate their religions in peace and harmony.

India is a robust pluralistic democracy where the aim is harmonious co-existence of people of all religions, cultures and ethnicities across the length and breadth of the country. That is a fundamental characteristic of the people—certainly in my visits, I have always experienced that. Safeguarding and celebrating India's unity and diversity is central to the Indian Government's social and political ethos, and is firmly embedded in the constitution of India through inviolable provisions and plays out in spirit in myriad ways. Finally, India's unique example of protecting and nurturing religious minorities offers important insights for other countries, including this one.

3.48 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate and on all the work he does as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, which I think we would all acknowledge is dedicated, committed and sincere.

Speaking in my capacity as vice-chair of the APPG, I recognise that when it comes to India, there is understandable reticence when tackling the subject of this debate, given the historical and current ties between the UK and India. To put it bluntly, the largest democracy in the world should not need or want other countries—not least the UK, given our colonial history—to criticise it about a fundamental human right and foundation of democracy, namely freedom of religion or belief. However, it is because of our close relationship with, friendship with and support for India, as well as because we want freedom of religion or belief for everyone everywhere, that we have to call out the concerns, particularly those expressed by Muslims and Christians in India, about serious violations of freedom of religion or belief in that country.

It is because India is a great country, founded historically and constitutionally upon a respect for other religions, that we take seriously the concerning reports of increasing discrimination and persecution of religious minorities in some parts of India. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) said, India is a massive country. It has 1.4 billion people. It is complex, so any judgment on India will be multifaceted.

My hon. Friend also said, quite correctly, that virtually every country, including our own, has lessons to learn about freedom of religion or belief. Having said that, FORB is not just a lobby for religious minorities' rights or indeed for one religion or another. It is for everyone, everywhere. It is the foundation of a good, functioning democracy, and it is good for a growing economy and for peace and security. It is testament to the Hindu Sanskrit verse Vasudeva Kutumbakam, meaning "The whole world is one family", that faith communities such as Jews, Parsis and Christians have long found a home in the wonderful land of India, even before its young secular constitution came into effect in 1950.

It is worth noting that Christians have been living and flourishing in India for over 1,500 years. They were free to manifest their faith and were key contributors to modern India's development. There are many Christians and churches flourishing across various parts of India. Some have thousands attending every Sunday, and those who are able to attend do so without any issue whatsoever. However, in recently years we have sadly seen a decline in tolerance towards the Christian faith in some—I emphasise the word "some"—of India's states, particularly in rural areas and where churches are run independently.

Any state has the right to scrutinise Christian churches and organisations that are run illegally, but the burning of churches, desecration of altars and beating of pastors or congregation members by various radical mobs is totally unacceptable and must not be tolerated. It is not the India we have known for hundreds of years, nor does it reflect its historic principles or, as we have heard, the principles in its constitution.

It was deeply worrying to hear reports in December that the Karnataka assembly secretariat had instructed the department responsible for minorities' welfare to

submit a report on all religious conversions in the state over the past 25 years, in what appears to be groundwork for the anti-conversion law that the ruling Bharatiya Janata party has promised to announce. BJP MLA Gulihatti Shekhar, who presided over the meeting, has controversially instructed district authorities and the police intelligence wing to conduct a survey of the state's 1,700-odd churches and prayer halls to examine their legality.

Although this may seem like a direct attack on the Christian faith, it should also be noted that Hindu temples have been and still are under security in various states for the status of their legality. After independence, the Tamil Nadu Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act 1959 was passed, and Tamil Nadu temples are under the control of the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department. That is incompatible with the fundamental rights granted to every Indian citizen in the constitution. This should matter to all in India's 75th years of independence who seek to uphold the constitutional principles described by Prime Minister Modi as the real holy book.

As Sadhguru, the founder of Isha Foundation, wrote last year,

"If people do not have the freedom to practice their religion the way they want, what kind of freedom is that?"

India is experiencing Islamophobia and Christianophobia, which in response can lead to Hinduphobia. This is all a far cry from the founding principles of India. It is a sad stain on modern India.

People of all faiths, especially Hindus, Muslims and Christians, should stand together in solidarity, both in the UK and India, and must surely condemn some of the following incidents. Some 505 violent incidents against Christians were recorded by the United Christian Forum for Human Rights in 2021, including false accusations leading to arbitrary police detention, arrests and prosecution, forced conversion, hate campaigns, assault, death threats, illegal occupations of churches, forced displacement, acts of public humiliation, disruption of religious gatherings, and the looting and destruction of Christian homes, church buildings and other Church-owned properties. The attacks against the Chhattisgarh Christian community in January included imprisonment, injury, arson and forced conversion.

Theresa Villiers: We have heard about the controversy surrounding rules to regulate conversion, but I get the very strong impression from those who understand those issues that the laws are designed to protect people from forced conversion, which is a very real risk—it is also a problem in Pakistan. It is very often young Christian women who are vulnerable to the pressure of forced conversion, forced marriage and forced conversion to Islam. That is what the laws are trying to prevent.

Fiona Bruce: The concern, of course, is the misuse of such laws.

Pastor Rakesh Babu and his family were brutally beaten at their home in Chandauli, Uttar Pradesh, by unidentified men armed with wooden logs as they gathered to pray in their parsonage, a tiny room attached to the church where Pastor Babu had served for 15 years. A week earlier, he had been threatened with jail if he continued to encourage others to join him in prayer. Worryingly, after the attack, the pastor struggled to get

[Fiona Bruce]

local police to properly register his report. Mervyn Thomas, the founder-president of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, told me that police often refuse to register first information reports and that over a number of years, perpetrators of communal violence in a number of areas have not been penalised. More information about that can be found in the CSW reports.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) made the important point about referring things to the police. A number of incidents against Christians—particularly the desecration of churches, the beating up of people, the burning of bibles, and the injuring of people going in and out of churches—have been reported to the police, but there have been instances of the police not turning up as requested. There is an evidential base that cannot be ignored.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. As I said, more details about such reports can be found in the Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports on India.

I will mention two further reports. On 20 May, Pastor Alok Rajhans was attacked at his church by Hindu nationalists. Most worryingly, we learnt about the death in judicial custody of Father Stan Swamy, one of 16 human rights defenders, on 5 July. We should applaud Indian civil society for last week launching a popular petition opposing the anti-conversion Bill, which was approved in the Karnataka state Parliament on February 14.

Ram Puniyani, the co-ordinator of the National Solidarity Forum—a consortium of more than 70 organisations and civil society groups of different origins and inspirations—said:

“Wherever the anti-conversion law, ironically called the ‘Religious Freedom Law’, has been passed, it has become a justification for the persecution of religious minorities and other marginalized groups. Attacks on minorities have increased significantly in recent years since this law has been used as a weapon against Christians and Muslims, especially Adivasis, Dalits and women”.

To those who criticise us for calling out those incidents in India, and who ask what it has to do with us, I say that we are all in this together and we must all join together, as demonstrated by this cross-party debate, to unite around the universal human right of freedom of religion or belief. I look forward to working as the Prime Minister’s special envoy for FORB—across party lines and across all faiths and none—to continue upholding that fundamental human right.

3.59 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to participate in this afternoon’s debate, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing it. I also pay tribute to him and to the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for all the work they do on these matters.

As we have heard today, India’s minorities face increasing intolerance under the Modi Government. The principle of freedom of religion is inviolable. The freedom to practise one’s faith freely and without persecution is a basic human right. I have listened very carefully to all the viewpoints in this debate, but the reality is that Prime Minister Modi’s Government have presided over

discriminatory policies and delivered the persecution of religious minorities, so much so that in April last year the US Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended that India be designated as a country of particular concern for egregious religious freedom violations and placed on a religious freedoms blacklist alongside countries such as Syria, Saudi Arabia and Eritrea.

According to the South Asia State of Minorities report 2021, human rights defenders and religious minorities in India who dare to protest against discriminatory laws and practices have faced restrictions, violence, criminal defamation, detention and harassment, while recent legislation has limited freedom of opinion and expression under the guise of preventing disharmony and disaffection. More and more of India’s states have adopted controversial and radical anti-conversion laws, which we have heard a lot about today. These laws are used by militant Hindu groups to prosecute members of religious minorities and make false allegations against them. It seems that these laws often provide justification for attacks on Christian leaders, which are carried out with impunity.

In 2021, Open Doors—a very important charity that supports the freedom of Christians to practise their faith in the face of persecution around the world, and one to which I pay tribute for its excellent work—ranked India as the world’s 10th most dangerous place to be a Christian. The Open Doors report concluded that since the current ruling party took power in 2014, Hindu extremists have fuelled a crackdown on Christian house-churches and attacked believers with impunity, believing that to be Indian is to be Hindu. In rural areas, Christians were told that one church would be closed down every week, because they have been destroying local tradition and culture by luring non-Christians to convert to Christianity. It is also common for Christians to be cut off from local water supplies and denied access to Government-subsidised groceries.

International Christian Concern has told *The New York Times* that Christians are being suppressed, discriminated against and persecuted at rising levels in India, like never before. Indeed, last year was branded the most violent year in recorded history for India’s Christians, with the United Christian Forum recording 486 violent incidents of Christian persecution, which exceeded the previous record of 328 violent incidents in 2019.

The evidence seems pretty clear. Of profound concern is the growing number of arrests in India of human rights defenders, student leaders, feminist activists, Dalit and Adivasi rights campaigners, trade unionists, opposition politicians and writers, artists, lawyers, academics and journalists who are critical of the Modi regime.

The UK has a considerably interlinked and close relationship with India, as we have heard today, and every diplomatic tool at the UK’s disposal must be used to effect change in India, in order to ensure that religious minorities are protected and flagrant abuses of human rights, of which religious freedom is only one, will not be tolerated.

During the UK-India free trade agreement negotiations, the UK Government have a clear opportunity to send a clear message that a trade partnership between the UK and India will not be ratified unless there is real and meaningful change on human rights and religious freedom in India. The UK has a very positive relationship with India, so it is in an excellent position to exert such

influence. The UK must demand more from its friends, and human rights and religious freedoms in India must be at the forefront of our conversations and trade negotiations with India.

The human rights text in the clauses of any free trade deal with India must have policy teeth and must be enforceable. Will the Foreign Office, with help from the Department for International Trade, undertake human rights impact assessments before any trade and investment agreements are finalised with India? Will the UK Government work towards an integrated framework of atrocity prevention in the UK's India strategy to ensure that at the very least UK officials can monitor risk and communicate the risks internally and externally? Will the UK Government ensure that human rights and environmental specialists are included in trade delegations?

India has ratified only six out of the eight international labour organisations' core conventions. Will the UK Government make access to UK markets conditional on the Indian Government ratifying and effectively implementing key human rights conventions?

In 1995, it was agreed that every new EU trade deal would make human rights an essential criterion, allowing a treaty to be suspended if human rights commitments were broken. It is deeply concerning that the Foreign Secretary appears to have edged away from that principle in trade deals with Turkey, Singapore and Vietnam. Will the current Secretary of State for International Trade, or indeed the whole UK Government, go down the same path?

It is abhorrent that people can be prosecuted simply for practising their faith and worshipping their God. The constructive relationship between the UK and India gives the UK influence, perhaps uniquely among all the international actors, to effect change and exert influence—to pressure, encourage, cajole and do whatever it takes to ensure that India is governed by tolerance, understanding and equality, and that that is shown to Indians who are a part of a religious minority.

The ongoing trade negotiations with India represent a very important moment to focus minds on this matter. I hope the Minister will be able to tell us that that is exactly what will happen, and that the UK will stand up to India as a critical friend to make it clear that basic human freedoms are inviolable, and we expect our friends and allies to recognise, practise and respect that principle.

4.7 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who as ever has secured a debate to continue to champion his interest in religious freedoms across the world. He, the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) and others in this House are assiduous members of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief. They stand up also for people with no faith, and that is a very positive part of their group.

As we know, India is a proudly diverse and multifaith democracy with a secular constitution that places freedom of religion or belief at its heart. That is welcome statutory backing for equality and protection of minority rights. India's diverse communities and its proud record of

religious freedom with rights for religious minorities is unthinkable in many other countries of Asia. It is also noteworthy that in India there is political representation for minorities in Parliament and in the Cabinet. There is still some disproportionality relative to other countries in the region, but the attempt to diversify and provide role models from different communities in leadership positions should be recognised and placed on the record.

We have heard Members in today's debate express multifaceted and broad-ranging concerns about increasing numbers of attacks on minority groups. As Members have highlighted, there is a raft of anti-conversion laws that have targeted Christians in some Indian states. Although the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has reported that very few arrests have been made under those laws, it cannot be right that people face sentences of up to four years for violating anti-conversion laws. I urge the Minister to address that question in her concluding remarks.

There are also numerous concerns relating to the treatment of Muslims in India, which is what I want to press the Minister on. Research by the House of Commons Library indicates that some 4,000 people have been arrested in Uttar Pradesh alone under its contentious anti-cow-slaughter legislation. NGOs have criticised the police for their inadequacy in responding to complaints of violence against Muslims in that dispute. I hope that the Minister will mention that in her concluding remarks.

Arguably more worrying, and a point made so well by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West, is the general direction of travel being witnessed in pockets of Indian society, with the Citizenship (Amendment) Act seen by many as anti-Muslim. Human Rights Watch, among others, has highlighted that "mobs" have been reported assaulting Muslim men with impunity, and that deserves to be looked at closely and to be part of the ongoing dialogue the FCDO is having with India on trade. It is right that these issues are highlighted and addressed by the Indian Government.

I know that many in India have added their voices to the condemnation arising across the world at this trend. Islamophobia, anti-Sikh hate, anti-Christian actions and general persecution of minorities are not something that most Indians believe in. Indeed, the majority would be repulsed by the association of their proud country with these actions.

The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the hon. Member for Congleton are correct in expressing caution, given the traumatic past relationship between India and the UK, with many painful memories associated with the colonisation period in India. Criticism from this Chamber can be difficult to hear. I hear the exhortation from the hon. Member for Harrow East to visit India, and during the forthcoming Commonwealth Parliamentary Association visit to Delhi in April, MPs will seek to develop a deeper understanding of the complexity and diversity of India on the part of the UK Parliament.

Theresa Villiers: In the light of that mutual understanding, does the hon. Lady regret that during the Batley and Spen by-election, Labour circulated a leaflet showing our Prime Minister and Mr Modi together, with the title:

"Don't risk a Tory MP who is not on your side."

That was very divisive and it upset many in the Hindu community.

Catherine West: I thank the right hon. Member for her reminder of what was a mistake. I understand that, at the time, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) clarified that that was a moment in the heat of the by-election. I know she is a fierce campaigner and understands the sentiment that this was not the right thing to put out and that it does not contribute to community cohesion.

I urge the Minister to outline what steps the British Government are taking to support freedom of religion or belief in India, and indeed whether it has been raised in discussions with the Indian Government. India is, and will always be, a country that is held in the highest regard by Members of this House and in this country, not least with the large diaspora of British Indians who live in all our constituencies. I think of the community hub in my own constituency, providing such crucial community-based services locally. Those involved are great champions of human rights and have written to me regarding their concerns about today's debate.

We must redouble our efforts to understand more fully the complexity of today's India, and we must continue to develop our shared understanding of the promotion of human rights, as enshrined in the constitution of India, without fear or favour and to cherish religious freedom of expression.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Before the Minister responds, let me say that we have plenty of time, but please could she leave two minutes for the mover of the motion to reply?

4.13 pm

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate. I commend him for his tireless work in supporting freedom of religion or belief, including as chair of the all-party group. I thank him and his colleagues for their 2021 annual "Commentary on the Current State of International Freedom of Religion or Belief", published in March last year, which provides valuable insight into the state of freedom of religion or belief around the world. I look forward to the 2022 edition.

I am grateful to the Opposition Front Benchers, the hon. Members for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) and my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton North East (Mark Logan) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for their contributions.

We heard many passionate views on all sides, and I hope hon. Members will understand that due to the situation in Ukraine and the debates happening in the main Chamber, I am providing cover for my Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office colleagues, so any topics that I have not been able to address fully will of course be followed up by letter.

The hon. Member for Strangford gave a passionate speech in support of religious minorities. He mentioned Rana Ayyub, and that is a case that the UN is looking

into. I want to reassure him that the Government are committed to working for freedom of religion or belief for all and to promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities. I want to put on record the fact that we condemn all threats, discrimination and violence perpetrated on the grounds of religion, belief or faith.

Although this debate focuses on Christians, we must not forget those who have been persecuted around the world for belonging to other religions and holding other beliefs, or for having no religious belief at all. We want everyone, everywhere, to be able to live in accordance with their own conscience and exercise their faith or beliefs freely. That not only is the right thing to do for individuals, but makes countries stronger. When countries protect and promote freedom of religion or belief, they tend to be more stable, more prosperous and safer from violent extremism.

The Prime Minister reaffirmed his commitment to promoting that agenda globally by appointing my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton as his special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, and I am very pleased to see her in the debate. She has been working closely with the Minister of State responsible for human rights, Lord Ahmad, to drive forward our work on freedom of religion or belief.

My colleagues in the FCDO wanted me to give a bit of background on India, although I fear that it might look shallow compared to the extensive briefing we received from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—I think he should probably be briefing the FCDO. As we have heard, India, like the UK, is a society with many different faith communities. It has a proud history of religious tolerance and is among the most religiously diverse societies in the world, with significant religious minority communities, including Christians and Muslims. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East said, it also has strong constitutional and legal protections for human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, and is home to a vibrant faith-based civil society.

We recognise that, in a country of 1.3 billion people, the situation for minorities varies, depending on the region and their social and economic status. It is up to the Government of India to uphold those freedoms and rights, which are guaranteed by its strong democratic framework and legal mechanisms.

We have an open and constructive dialogue with India. As with any issue, where we have concerns, we raise them directly with its Government. We have previously discussed the impact of legislative and judicial measures on minorities with the Indian Government at the ministerial level.

There were some questions that hon. Members raised that I think I have answers to. The hon. Member for Coventry North West talked about agricultural reform laws. I understand that India repealed the three agricultural reform laws in December 2021. We recognise the interest in the Indian Government's agricultural reforms, particularly among the Indian diaspora in this country.

There were questions around India's Citizenship (Amendment) Act. I wanted to let hon. Members know that Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon has discussed the impact of that and other judicial measures on India's minorities with Indian Government Ministers. As I said

earlier, its strength—like that of the UK—is its diversity, and it is the Indian Government’s responsibility to address the concerns of all Indian citizens, regardless of their faith.

Several Members, and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, discussed the interfaith marriage laws. My understanding is that the British high commission in New Delhi also monitors all political and societal trends in India. We have noted new interfaith marriage laws in some Indian states, but that is as far as I am able to speak on those laws. I cannot confirm some of the things that Members have said during the debate, but they have been noted, and I am sure that Foreign Office Ministers will be able to address anything required in more detail.

Bob Blackman: One of the key concerns is around abduction and forced marriage, particularly of young women, which is the prime focus of those particular laws. I am sure the Minister agrees that forcing someone to change their religion after having abducted them from their family is not only morally wrong, but reprehensible.

Kemi Badenoch: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. It is morally wrong and reprehensible to carry out such actions.

The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green requested UK action in India. As other Members have recognised, faith leaders in India are influential figures in their local communities, so UK Ministers and diplomats regularly meet them to understand their perspectives and hold a dialogue with diverse communities across that country.

Our high commissioner has visited a number of different places of worship in India and met faith leaders there. He has met Christian communities, including visiting Sacred Heart Cathedral, where he met the Catholic Archbishop of Delhi, and the Cathedral Church of the Redemption, where he met the Moderator of the Church of North India.

Faith-based NGOs also make a positive contribution to Indian society. Over the last three years, staff across our network in India have worked with local NGOs to bring together young people of different faiths. Through our high commission, we are supporting a UK-India interfaith leadership programme, which brings together emerging Indian leaders of diverse faith backgrounds, including Christians and Muslims, to exchange UK-India perspectives and foster understanding and respect. In May last year, the high commission held a virtual iftar to celebrate the important contribution that Indian Muslims make to Indian society and to bring together different faith communities. My fellow Minister, Lord Ahmad also met with faith leaders while visiting India last March.

I know that Members are interested in the UK-India relationship. It is central to our foreign policy tilt towards the Indo-Pacific. In May 2021, the UK and Indian Governments committed to strengthening the relationship through our new comprehensive strategic partnership. Our 2030 road map, which was launched by the Prime Minister and Prime Minister Modi last year, will guide our co-operation and benefit people across both countries. It will support regional and global security and prosperity.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran asked a few questions to which I am afraid I do not have the answers. I think some of them are DIT questions, but our 1.6 million strong diaspora community provides a living bridge of people, commerce, ideas and culture between our countries. It is an important strategic relationship, but even within that group there are many views that we have to take into account.

Jim Shannon: Minister, in the Open Doors top 50 league India is now No. 10; it was No. 31. That is clear factual evidence of lots of persecution and attacks on people of religious minorities. I know that it is not the Minister’s responsibility, but will she ask the Minister responsible to bring this to the attention of the Indian authorities? It is important that we are constructive in our contributions, but also that we are friends who can highlight issues that people are telling us are important?

Kemi Badenoch: I understand that. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It is something that I can ask my colleagues to do. I know that this is the sort of regular engagement that they have with their counterparts.

I can update those Members who raised the UK-India trade relationship. We recently launched negotiations for a comprehensive UK-India free trade agreement, which would particularly benefit the north of England, the west midlands, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. We will work with India to support its COP26 commitments, including through a \$1 billion green guarantee and British international investment partnership. Oxford University, AstraZeneca and the Serum Institute of India are enabling the world to navigate its way out of the pandemic with their collaboration to produce covid-19 vaccines at scale.

I now want to turn to the UK’s wider work on freedom of religion or belief. In July we will host an international ministerial conference. We will use the conference to bring Governments from across the world together with faith leaders to drive collective action in promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities around the world, so that everyone, everywhere can practise their religion or belief freely. We continue to work with organisations such as the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the G7, and the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, to bolster international action on freedom of religion or belief.

The Prime Minister’s special envoy—my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton—who even now is working in this capacity by participating in the debate, is currently chairing the alliance, and I thank her for her commitment and leadership. In November, the Foreign Secretary attended the alliance ministerial forum and underlined the UK’s commitment to working with partner countries to support freedom and openness around the world. We and our alliance partners raise awareness of cases of particular concern and advocate for the rights of individuals persecuted or discriminated against on grounds of their religion or belief, as we have heard from hon. Members today.

We also continue to implement the recommendations made by the Bishop of Truro’s review of our work in support of persecuted Christians and members of all faiths and beliefs and those of no religious belief. We

[Kemi Badenoch]

have implemented 13 of the recommendations. We are close to achieving a further six and we are making good progress on the remaining three.

To conclude, it is right that we reaffirm our commitment to do all we can to foster intercommunal and interfaith understanding and respect around the world. That is why we continue to discuss issues of freedom of religion or belief with the Indian authorities. This is part of our dialogue and partnership with India, a country with a long history of religious diversity. Our partnership with India is very important to us. It is a partnership that brings great benefits to communities in both our countries.

4.24 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions, and in particular the Minister for her summing up. The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) sponsors the Open Doors event every year. We thank her for that. I am sure she will bring to the attention of the Indian Government the fact that India is now No. 10 rather than No. 31. We look forward to her using her position to do so.

I thank the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) for her contribution. She recently joined the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. We are very pleased to have her on board, and thank her for highlighting that where there is persecution we must stand up and say so. Well done to her for that.

The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) knows that he is a good friend of mine. We might agree on some things and disagree on others, but I thank him for the very balanced point of view that he put over today. He acknowledges that there are issues to be addressed. We are not here to give him a hard time, but to highlight the issues. That is our job. People do not come to us when things are all right; they come to us when things are wrong. They tell us these things, and these things have to be addressed. When there is an evidential base and the police are not providing protection, or are letting things happen, that has to be taken on board, so I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point.

The hon. Member for Bolton North East (Mark Logan) spoke up for Muslims in his intervention. I thank my dear friend, the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for all that she does. The Government made the right decision in putting her in her post. I

mean that genuinely. Forgive me, Mr Stringer, for going all gushy, but she is wonderful. She does that job well, and we are particularly pleased to have her in her post.

Fiona Bruce: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Shannon: I am not allowed to take an intervention. The hon. Lady expressed all the concerns that we have about the issues.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who is also my friend, always brings passion and fire to these issues. The conversation in trade negotiations should be about human rights; they must be at the centre of all discussions.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), also highlighted the issues in her summing up. I understand that there are pockets in India where these things are happening. That is what we are here to highlight—where they are happening—not to brush over them like they do not matter, because these people have no one else to speak for them.

I know that the Minister is not responsible for this area, but she always does well and I thank her for that. I am very pleased to know that the Government have the persecution of Christians, and the freedom of religious belief for people of all religions, at the core of what they are doing across the world. As always, I thank the Government for that.

I was reminded by people who emailed or texted me during the debate that, when right-wing groups are emboldened by a culture of state negligence or complicity, such things continue to happen. We need to ensure that they do not happen in India any more, and that the future will be one in which all people, wherever they are from in India and whatever their religious viewpoint may be, have freedom of expression and belief. That is the one thing on which probably all of us present in the Chamber can agree. We believe in that, and we must see it happen. If it does not happen, we look to our Minister and our Government to ensure that they highlight that with the country of India.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of the persecution of Christians and religious minorities in India.

4.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 24 February 2022

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Platinum Jubilee Pageant Ltd

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): I am repeating the following written ministerial statement made today in the other place by my noble Friend the Minister for Arts, Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay:

I am tabling this statement for the benefit of all members of this House to draw their attention to the departmental minute laid today which provides notice of a contingent liability created by the Department. This is in respect of a request for the Government to provide an underwrite to The Platinum Jubilee Pageant Ltd ("The Pageant Company") to cover any projected losses should the platinum jubilee pageant be cancelled due to specific, extenuating circumstances. The underwrite will only be agreed in the event of certain conditions being met.

Buckingham Palace has invited the directors of The Pageant Company to deliver the platinum jubilee pageant. The Pageant Company is a company limited by guarantee.

The Pageant Company is independently fundraising to deliver the pageant at no cost to the taxpayer. The Government wish to place on record its thanks to the board of The Platinum Jubilee Pageant Company, and to all their partners and donors, for their efforts to mark this historic moment in our nation's history. Given the Government underwrite will only provide The Pageant Company with financial support in the event that the pageant is cancelled due to specific, extenuating circumstances, the likelihood that the underwrite will be required is low.

The Government underwrite will be capped at £2.45 million, will expire at midnight on Monday 6 June 2022, and will not be used to repay donors.

A copy of the departmental minute will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS631]

EDUCATION

Higher Education Reform

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Michelle Donelan): Today I am announcing the Government proposed plans to reform the higher education sector through the launch of two linked consultations on higher education reform and the lifelong loan entitlement.

The Secretary of State for Education will make an oral statement to the House of Commons later today.

Our university sector is a great success story, home to world-leading universities that are true powerhouses of innovation and research and I am very proud that four of our great institutions are ranked in the top 10 in the world.

That does not mean our system is perfect and it is our duty as Ministers at the Department for Education to deliver solutions to the problems the higher education system is facing and to deliver a fairer deal for students and taxpayers.

These problems were examined in great detail with the review of post-18 education and funding, launched in 2018. I am grateful to Sir Philip Augar and his panel for their thoughtful and important recommendations across the higher and further education sectors, and I am pleased to say that with the publication of these documents, which address the pivotal higher education recommendations, we have brought this review to its long-awaited conclusion.

Lifelong loan entitlement

One of the independent panel's core recommendations was the provision of a lifelong learning entitlement. That is why we, the Government, are launching today a consultation on the lifelong loan entitlement, to seek views from the sector and public on the shape and scope of this policy.

Under this flexible skills system, new students will be able to sign up and log in online to find a lifelong loan entitlement worth the equivalent of four years of post-18 education (£37,000 in today's fees) to be used across Higher and Further Education as they choose. This entitlement can be used for individual modules or full years of study, at higher technical and degree levels, provided in colleges or universities.

People will have the opportunity to train, retrain and upskill as needed, in response to changing skill needs and employment patterns. The lifelong loan entitlement will turn education from a narrow, set destination, into an accessible, long-term and flexible journey.

Picture vehicle technicians who have worked building and fixing diesel vans for 10 years. They know their current roles will eventually become extinct and they want to move to higher-wage, higher-skilled jobs in a growing part of their sector like electric vehicle production. Maybe they have children and time constraints, so they never imagined they would be able to flexibly reskill on a higher education course.

After 2025, these technicians will be able to log onto their online lifelong loan entitlement account and see their loan entitlement and receive clear signposting of the courses and modules they can enrol on in order to reach their career goals.

We will be the first country in the world to implement a system like this at scale. This places us in a brilliant position to have an education system and economy that work hand-in-glove together to produce a highly skilled, highly paid workforce. I look forward to working closely with the sector to implement this entitlement as part of the wider levelling-up agenda.

Interest rates and tuition fees

We have thought carefully about fairness for students in our consideration of the independent panel's recommendations. I am delighted to announce that we will deliver our manifesto commitment to address the interest rates on student loans, by reducing interest to inflation only for new borrowers starting their courses in academic year 2023-24. This will mean that, under these new terms, borrowers will not repay more, in real terms, than they borrow.

We will also continue to freeze tuition fee caps for undergraduate degrees up to and including academic year 2024-25, meaning the maximum fee cap will have remained at £9,250 for seven years. This will reduce debt levels for students in real terms and encourage

higher education providers to increase efficiency further. In combination, the reduction in interest rates and the two-year fee freeze mean a borrower entering a three-year course in academic year 2023-24 could see their debt reduced by up to £6,500 at the point at which they become eligible to repay. When the total seven-year fee freeze is taken into account, this totals up to £11,500 less debt, at the point at which they become eligible to repay.

Fairer system for students and taxpayers

It is now more important than ever that we have a funding system for Higher Education that is fair for both students and taxpayers. Without intervention, the student loan book is estimated to reach over half a trillion pounds, in financial year 2020-21 prices, by April 2043, up from £161 billion in April 2021. Only 23% of borrowers who enter full-time higher education in academic year 2023-24 are forecast to repay their loans in full. This is not fair for taxpayers, many of whom will have chosen not to go to university. This is not a sustainable basis upon which to maintain a world-class university sector.

Further changes to student loan repayment terms are necessary to keep higher education accessible for students with the ability and desire to benefit from it, while keeping costs down for the taxpayer. The annual income threshold above which post-2012 student loan borrowers are required to make repayments on their loans will be kept at its current level of £27,295 until April 2025. For new student loan borrowers who start their studies from September 2023 onwards, there will be a repayment threshold of £25,000, rising with inflation from April 2027 onwards, and a loan term of 40 years. With the current 30-year loan term, graduates who finish their course in their 20s will have unpaid loans written off in their early 50s, a period when the earnings premium for most borrowers is still likely to be significant. These changes will increase the proportion of 2023-24 entrants who are forecast to repay in full to over half, as well as enabling the significant reduction in interest rates for new loan borrowers.

We have considered carefully how we can support disadvantaged students with this package of reforms. We want access to higher education to be dependent on attainment and ability to succeed rather than background. Our proposals to reduce the fees and loans for foundation years will help make them more affordable for those who would benefit from another chance to access high-quality higher education at lower cost. Our flagship national state scholarship worth up to £75 million will help support high-achieving young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve their dream, regardless of course or university.

The changes to student finance and funding are detailed in full in the higher education policy statement and reform consultation.

Investment in higher education

In addition, we are putting almost £900 million of new investment into our fantastic system over the next three years. This includes the largest increase in Government funding for the sector to support students and teaching in over a decade. £750 million will be invested in high-quality teaching and facilities including in science and engineering, subjects that support the NHS, and degree apprenticeships.

Consultation proposals

We are consulting on policies that will help to ensure every student can have confidence that they are on a high-quality course that will lead to good outcomes. These policies build on the significant regulatory reform we are taking forward with the Office for Students to drive up quality and standards, and tackle pockets of low-quality provision, setting expectations on completion rates and progression to graduate jobs or further study, and taking action where provision does not meet these expectations. These are key priorities which we recognise the importance of taking forward. We are also working to improve transparency in course advertising, so that in next year's admissions cycle, adverts provide comparable data on the percentage of students who have completed their course, and the percentage who have gone into professional employment or further advanced study.

Our consultation on low-level minimum eligibility requirements and limited student number controls will seek views on how we can ensure everyone who goes to university will be able to reap its benefits and help us to deliver real social mobility. This means shifting from a focus of simply getting students through the door, to ensuring they complete their course and secure good outcomes after they graduate.

It is therefore right that we have the conversation about low-level minimum eligibility requirements, which could for example be a return to the old requirement of two E grades at A-level, or a grade 4 in GCSE English and Maths. These could also include a number of exemptions on which we are consulting. We should not be pushing young people into university if they are not ready.

Bringing further education and higher education closer together

Higher technical skills are vital to meeting the needs of the economy now and in the future. As a result, and as a pathway to the lifelong loan entitlement, we are rolling out higher technical qualifications (HTQs). These are level 4 and 5 qualifications approved as providing the necessary knowledge, skills and behaviours that employers need. Higher technical qualifications are approved by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, drawing on the advice of their employer panels, using the same framework of employer-led standards which underpin higher apprenticeships. They will be offered by further education colleges, universities, independent providers, and institutes of technology.

Higher technical courses can lead to better life chances for those who take them. We are addressing financial barriers for learners and moving towards the flexibility envisaged by the lifelong loan entitlement by placing the student finance package for higher technical qualifications on par with degrees, from academic year 2023-24. This means extending student finance access to higher technical qualifications and allowing part-time learners to access maintenance loans, as they can with degrees. Together these reforms will help to bring together further and higher education, in line with the independent panel's recommendations.

Post-qualification admissions

While we are considering and implementing a range of reforms, after careful analysis of responses to the separate consultation on post-qualification admissions, we have decided not to proceed with this at this time. I

want to thank the sector for their considered input and assure them that we will work to address underlying problems that underpinned calls to introduce post-qualification admissions.

As a whole, I believe that these reforms are fit for a dynamic and growing economy. I am confident they will set up the sector for great success in the years to come. These reforms will keep our student finance system future-proofed and fair for students and taxpayers and help to ensure that higher education remains open to anyone with the ability and desire to benefit from it.

[HCWS630]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Coronavirus Test Device Approval

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): The UK is developing one of the most rigorous regulatory regimes in the world for coronavirus tests. The coronavirus test device approval regulations set high bars of specificity and sensitivity to ensure only high-quality tests are available on the UK market.

I have been impressed by the number of applications that the validation process has received to date. This figure currently stands at 212 applications across all antigen and molecular test devices. This is a testament to the willingness of businesses to rise to the public health challenges set by this pandemic. However, some manufacturers have struggled to provide sufficient evidence in time.

In order to ensure the greatest possible number of high-quality tests are available to the public, we have worked closely with applicants to support them through the process, which inevitably slows the validation process overall. As of 24 February 2022, 31 devices are on the approved products list and officials continue to work closely with applicants to support them through the process.

To avoid the serious public health risk posed by a shortage of covid-19 tests, I exercised my power under regulation 39A of the Medical Devices Regulations 2002 to permit certain tests with a pending application to remain on the market up to 28 February 2022, or until their validation application is determined, as a temporary protocol.

With the current end date of the protocol being 28 February 2022, this means some useful devices would have to be temporarily removed from the market while they complete their validation under the CTDA process. This will likely create a contraction in supply to the market, particularly of self-test lateral flow devices. This presents a serious risk to supply chains and testing used by vulnerable people. Therefore, the creation of two new protocols is needed to address the public health risks presented by the ending of the current protocol, otherwise, these devices would be removed from the UK market.

From 1 March 2022, I am now intending to create two new protocols, one for three months for certain devices until 31 May 2022 and one for six months until 31 August 2022. These new protocols would replace the current protocol which expires on 28 February 2022.

The tests that are permitted to remain on the market with a pending validation application are listed in the protocol on gov.uk. These tests have been selected because they have been through similar validation previously by a public sector body and have an existing CTDA application. There is, therefore, a reasonable expectation that the performance of these tests can be trusted to protect the public from the risk posed by false results.

I have placed copies of both protocols in the Libraries of each House of Parliament and they have been published on the gov.uk website.

[HCWS637]

Early Medical Abortion: Extension of Temporary Arrangements

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maggie Throup): Today I am announcing a six-month extension to the temporary arrangements for the provision of early medical abortion put in place during the covid pandemic. The Government will end the temporary approval put in place at the beginning of the pandemic that allows women to take both pills for early medical abortion up to 10 weeks gestation at home. The temporary approval will end at midnight on 29 August 2022. From this point, the pre-covid regulatory requirements for the provision of early medical abortion will be reinstated.

At the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, the Government put in place a temporary approval in England, enabling women to take both pills for early medical abortion up to 9 weeks and 6 days gestation in their own homes if they chose to do so. A telephone or e-consultation must have first taken place with a clinician. However, women did not need to physically attend a hospital or clinic. Prior to the pandemic, only the second pill for early medical abortion could be taken at home and women were required to attend a clinic to take the first pill.

This temporary measure was put in place at the start of a public health emergency, to address a specific and acute medical need, reducing the risk of transmission of covid-19 and ensuring continued access to abortion services. At the time, a decision was made to time limit the approval for two years or until the pandemic was over, whichever was earliest.

After careful consideration, the Government's view is that the provision of early medical abortion should return to pre-covid arrangements. The wellbeing and safety of women requiring access to abortion services has been, and will continue to be, our first and foremost priority.

Thanks to the success and impact of the national vaccination and booster programme, we are in a very different position compared to the beginning of the pandemic. However, health services and the workforce have been under increased pressure in recent months. A short-term extension of the temporary approval will be made to enable a sure and reliable return to pre-pandemic arrangements and continued access to services.

The replacement temporary measure will end at midnight on 29 August 2022.

As with any healthcare service, this measure will be kept under review.

I am depositing a copy of the summary of responses to the Government's consultation on this issue in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS629]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures (TPIM) Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of her TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

TPIM notices in force (as of 30 November 2021)	4
Number of new TPIM notices served (during this period)	0
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 30 November 2021)	4
TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period)	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period)	5
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period)	0
The number of subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (during this the reporting period)	2

The TPIM Review Group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. The fourth quarter TRG meetings were held in January 2022.

[HCWS632]

British National Overseas Immigration: Hong Kong

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): The Government are today announcing changes to the British National (Overseas) immigration route.

On 31 January 2021, the UK launched a bespoke immigration route for British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) status holders and their family members. The route reflects the UK's historic and moral commitment to those people of Hong Kong who chose to retain their ties to the UK by taking up BN(O) status before Hong Kong's handover to China in 1997, and followed China's passing of the national security law which significantly impacts the rights and freedoms of the people of Hong Kong.

The route has already been a great success and as of 31 December 2021, there have been 103,900 applications since the route launched.

The current rules enable adult children of a BN(O) status holder to apply as a dependant if they apply at the same time as their BN(O) parent, are part of their

parent's household in Hong Kong, the UK or the Crown dependencies and were born on or after 1 July 1997. However, some of this cohort cannot currently access the BN(O) route because their BN(O) parent does not wish to apply, because they are not part of their parent's household, or they are unable to apply at the same time.

It was right to think about the family unit of the BN(O), but this is creating unfair outcomes for the families of BN(O) status holders with some children able to access the route independently as they were old enough to be registered for BN(O) status, while their younger siblings aged between 18 and 24 are unable to access the route. It is right and important to address this so the Government have made the decision to enable individuals aged 18 or over who were born on or after 1 July 1997 and who have at least one BN(O) parent to apply to the route independently of their BN(O) parent.

This cohort will still be required to meet all of the other suitability and eligibility requirements for the route, including six months maintenance funds and the requirement for the applicant to be ordinarily resident in Hong Kong, the UK, or the Crown dependencies. Applicants will also need to pay the existing application fees for the route (£180 if applying for 30 months leave or £250 if applying for five years leave) as well as the immigration health surcharge. They will be able to be joined in the UK by their partner and children under the age of 18. After five years in the UK those on the BN(O) route will be able to apply for settlement, followed by citizenship after a further 12 months.

We intend to lay the changes to the immigration rules in September with the changes expected to go live in October.

This Government are committed to ensuring those planning to make the UK their home feel fully supported and welcomed when starting their lives here. As with those who have already come to the UK on the BN(O) route, this additional cohort will have access to the provisions available through the UK-wide Welcome programme led by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which consists of a package of support with up to £43.1 million made available so far.

We look forward to welcoming applications from those individuals who wish to make the UK their home.

[HCWS635]

Disclosure and Barring Regime

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): On 21 July 2021, the Government published their "Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls" strategy. The strategy sets out a raft of measures capturing activity across Government to prioritise prevention, support victims and survivors and ensure perpetrators are brought to justice. The strategy also set out measures to strengthen and ensure the systems and agencies in place both take action to tackle violence against women and girls and work together to do so. This included the commitment that the Home Office would undertake a review of the disclosure and barring regime to provide assurance on its effectiveness in safeguarding the vulnerable. The regime helps employers

to make informed and safer recruitment decisions through the disclosure of relevant criminal records. The review will assess the effectiveness of the regime in England and Wales in safeguarding the vulnerable.

I am pleased to announce today that I have appointed Simon Bailey, ex chief constable of Norfolk Constabulary and National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection and abuse investigation, to lead this review. With over 35 years of experience serving with the police and working on those areas to protect those most vulnerable within society, including the creation of a project to change the way the police service responds to vulnerability, exploitation and abuse, Mr Bailey brings with him a wealth of experience and knowledge.

To further support the review I have also appointed Stephen Linehan QC, who holds extensive experience of dealing with victims, witnesses and defendants and has worked on cases related to rape and serious sexual offences, including those involving children, young persons and vulnerable adults. Mr Bailey will also engage with those offering expert knowledge on areas linked to those delivering the regime, a representative of victims and survivors and an independent representative to provide input on policy delivery.

The review will commence immediately and will aim to report to me in the summer of 2022. Its focus will be to identify key issues of concern about the current regime; consider current responses to them; assess and advise on risks and opportunities; and make recommendations for improvement.

I will place a copy of the terms of reference for the review in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS633]

Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation: 2019 Report

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): In accordance with section 36 of the Terrorism Act 2006, Jonathan Hall QC, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, has prepared a report on the operation in 2019 of the Terrorism Acts, which was laid before the House on 23 March 2021.

I am grateful to Mr Hall for his report and have carefully considered the recommendations and observations included within. I am today laying before the House the Government's response to the report (CP 623). Copies will be available in the Vote Office and it will also be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS634]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Rough Sleeping: Annual Snapshot

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): Today the annual rough sleeping snapshot is published which shows that the number of people estimated to be sleeping

rough on a single night in autumn has fallen to an eight-year low and almost halved since 2017, with a reduction of 49%. This year the numbers have fallen by 9%, with falls seen in every region across England.

These figures are the result of remarkable work and dedication from local authorities, charities and other local partners, backed up by significant Government funding and support. This year alone we are investing £800 million to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, including £202 million for the rough sleeping initiative which is empowering local areas to deliver tailored local solutions for rough sleeping. It also includes funding for the rough sleeping accommodation programme, which is delivering 6,000 homes for rough sleepers—the biggest ever investment in housing of this kind. We are also investing up to £52 million for rehab and detox services for people with drug or alcohol issues. The statistics released today are proof that this approach is working and is helping thousands of vulnerable people to turn their lives around.

At the local authority level, the three largest decreases are in Westminster, Manchester and Exeter. Westminster faces a significant flow of new rough sleepers to the borough, and has focused on immediate accommodation, triaging cases for support and rapid, effective move on into more settled accommodation. In Manchester, its partnership working alongside an assertive outreach approach has contributed to its reductions in the number of people sleeping rough. Exeter has focused on a flexible off the street offer and has worked to minimise returns to the street. These areas are all fantastic examples of what can be achieved when local partners and local leaders work with central Government to develop ambitious plans. We look forward to seeing further progress in the coming years, particularly through local areas' rough sleeping initiative 2022 to 2025 plans.

We have also published today further monthly management information for February to December 2021, which shows numbers of people on the street, numbers in emergency accommodation and their nationality, and numbers moved on into settled accommodation. Publishing this additional data provides greater transparency about rough sleeping levels across the year and helps also to track progress in providing individuals with safe accommodation.

Since May 2020, thousands of people have been helped into long-term accommodation. Our figures show that as at the end of December 2021, 40,240 individuals have been supported into long-term accommodation. Both the annual rough sleeping snapshot statistics and the additional management information published today show positive progress and demonstrate the impact of the significant support Government has put in place to support rough sleepers off the streets, including throughout the pandemic.

We want rough sleeping to be prevented wherever possible and, when it does happen, to ensure that rough sleeping is rare, brief and non-recurring. To deliver this we will bring forward a bold, new strategy to end rough sleeping. The strategy will set out how we will ensure rough sleeping is prevented in the first instance and is effectively responded to in the rare cases where it does occur, but also that our police have the ability to intervene where needed and to keep people safe.

We know that we cannot end rough sleeping without a whole system, cross-Government approach, which is why working together is critical to providing individuals with the range of support and services that they need—working with relevant Government Departments, local authorities, police forces, the health sector and the voluntary sector to achieve this. This will be supported by the £2 billion we have committed to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping over the next three years.

Every person brought off the street represents a life that has been turned around, thanks to the dedication and hard work of local partners. This Government are committed to ending rough sleeping, and we will continue to work with local and national partners to achieve this.

[HCWS638]

PRIME MINISTER

Machinery of Government: UK-EU Relationship

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): Responsibility for the United Kingdom's relationship with the European Union, including oversight of the implementation of the trade and co-operation agreement and the withdrawal agreement, is being moved to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The transfer of responsibilities to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office aligns the UK's European strategy and bilateral relationships with the Department's diplomatic expertise, as we continue to build a new relationship with the EU and its member states as sovereign equals, underpinned by trade, our shared belief in freedom and democracy and co-operation on common global challenges.

[HCWS636]

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