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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 21 April 2022

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Trade with African Countries

1. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): What steps she is taking to help increase UK trade with African countries. [906449]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): Overall UK-Africa trade stood at £32 billion last year. We will increase that and achieve our investment goals. By 2030, Africa will have 1.7 billion consumers, and our post-Brexit trade policy will enable those nations to grow their economies and create opportunities for UK businesses.

Mr Robertson: I thank the Minister for that response. In all my visits to Africa on trade missions, it has been clear that people there really do want to do business with British companies, perhaps in preference to doing business with the Chinese. Will we do everything we can to make British companies realise the opportunities that exist in Africa?

Penny Mordaunt: First, let me place on record our thanks for everything my hon. Friend has done to improve trade with the continent and with Ethiopia in particular. He is right to say that there are massive opportunities there, but our great businesses face tough competition, including from China's growing influence and impact on the region, particularly through soft infrastructure at the moment. In recent months, we have strengthened our situational awareness of what China is doing and are actively supporting UK businesses to reach those opportunities early. We are doing that through providing competitive finance and support across the continent.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): As many African countries depend in normal times on Ukraine, Belarus and Russia for almost 100% of their grain, we find ourselves in a situation where we are trading in the same commodities markets as African countries, pushing up the prices for some of the poorest people in the world. Will the Minister acknowledge that, look again at the Government's cut in aid and put that back to where it was? Will she also perhaps consider that the best way we can deal with that situation is by backing British farming, so that we can feed ourselves and not be robbing the food that should be feeding the poorest in the world?

Penny Mordaunt: Let me put the aid budget in context. If we trebled the aid budget, it still would not be enough to deal with some of the situations that that continent is facing at the moment. A group in Whitehall is looking at all these issues, including food security, both in Africa and in Ukraine. Within that, there will be opportunities for other nations to start being able to supply, to step in and fill that gap. Obviously, we will want to ensure that Ukraine's food security is looked after as well. A huge amount is going on in Whitehall, and if the hon. Gentleman would like some more information, I am sure we could supply him with the detail.

British International English Language Schools

2. **Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): What steps she is taking to help support British international English language schools recover from the covid-19 pandemic. [906450]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): I thank my hon. Friend for, and congratulate her on her tireless work to support the sector. The Department will continue to support the English language training sector with both international student recruitment and the delivery of training overseas. We are supporting English UK's "English with Confidence" campaign, which recognises the value of the sector to the UK economy—it supports more than 35,000 jobs and generates over a billion pounds each year.

Caroline Ansell: I thank my hon. Friend for his response and for all the excellent work being done. Free of restrictions, English language schools in Eastbourne are beginning to power back after the pandemic, and it was a joy to see students return to Eastbourne over the Easter holidays. However, there are some concerns in the sector, specifically on group travel and visa requirements, which have led to fears that we could lose out to rival destinations such as Malta and the Republic of Ireland. What discussions has he had with his Home Office counterparts to tackle any of those potential barriers, to make sure that this remains one of our strongest exports?

Mike Freer: I know the strength of the Eastbourne English language sector, and I believe my hon. Friend met alumni out in the United Arab Emirates; the spread of Eastbourne goes far and wide. The Department continues to work with the Home Office to work closely and constructively with the sector to support its recovery. That has included the introduction of a six-month allowance to study English at an accredited centre under the standard visitor route, meaning that EU students, together with nationals from more than 50 locations, can study for six months or less as visitors. We continue to work with the sector to ensure that we continue to remove barriers to it.

UK's Green Industries: Foreign Direct Investment

3. **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): What steps her Department has taken to increase foreign direct investment in the UK's green industries. [906451]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): First, I thank my hon. Friend for her efforts in boosting our nation's trade with Norway and Iceland as the Prime Minister's trade envoy.

Last year, on behalf of the Prime Minister, we delivered the global investment summit, which saw almost £10 billion of foreign investment into our offshore wind, hydrogen and electric vehicle sectors. Meanwhile, the Office for Investment landed almost £18 billion of further green deals, and just last month the Prime Minister met Australian investors, who committed more than £20 billion to clean energy projects across the kingdom.

Felicity Buchan: I am proud that the UK is a leader in the G7 in the transition to net zero. I am the trade envoy to Norway and Iceland, where there are huge opportunities to do more to further that transition to net zero. Will my hon. Friend update the House on the discussions we have had specifically with companies in Norway and Iceland?

Mr Speaker: Can I just say to the Minister that he has his fan club up there in the Public Gallery? It is a pleasure to see his family watching him.

Mr Jayawardena: Thank you, Mr Speaker. They were delighted when you waved at them last time.

The United Kingdom is committed to deepening her partnership with Norway and Iceland, which was reinforced by the trade deal that I signed in July last year. It is one of our greenest deals ever and preserves our right to regulate to reach our net zero targets. Twin-tracking alongside that free trade agreement, we continue to collaborate on the development of green technologies such as the North sea link interconnector, which links the electricity systems of the United Kingdom and Norway and will increase the capacity of our renewable markets.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the SNP spokesperson, Drew Hendry.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The recent ScotWind announcement from the Scottish Government cements Scotland's place as the world leader for floating offshore wind energy. It represents an incredible opportunity for unparalleled levels of inward investment while also taking meaningful action on climate change. Will the Minister join me in congratulating the SNP Scottish Government on making Scotland a global leader in offshore wind energy? Will he pledge to do all in his power to support this fantastic international trade and transition opportunity?

Mr Jayawardena: I am not sure about wind power, but there is already a lot of hot air in the House. I am delighted that the SNP now supports the British energy security strategy, which champions the power of offshore wind energy. I am also delighted that foreign investors are already responding to the United Kingdom Government's proposals, including in the form of a sovereign investment partnership with the United Arab Emirates, which is investing £10 billion, including funds for energy transition.

Drew Hendry: I will forgive the Minister for showing off to his family, but this is an important issue. A net exporter of energy, Scotland has 25% of Europe's offshore wind potential and is perfectly placed to step in to help Europe to pivot away from dependency on Russian oil and gas and towards renewable energy. Indeed, it is estimated that up to 30 GW could be available to export through ScotWind and INTOG—the innovation and targeted oil and gas process—and on top of that a manufacturing superhub at Nigg and Cromarty firth could export components throughout Europe, thereby reversing the historical position across the UK of importing technology, and so boosting trade. Specifically, will the Minister commit his Government to working with the Scottish Government to maximise this massive transition and international trade opportunity?

Mr Jayawardena: I am delighted to say that next week the Secretary of State will be in Aberdeen, demonstrating this Government's commitment to the whole of the United Kingdom. We work with devolved Administrations across the kingdom to make sure that every corner of the country benefits from international trade. The truth is that while we are battling for every corner of the country, backing British businesses and supporting Scottish jobs, the SNP wants to cut Scotland off from its largest market, which is the British internal market.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Foreign investment in our green industries is extremely beneficial and welcome, as my Cleethorpes constituency can bear out. Equally, British-based companies have great opportunities to export our expertise in the green sector. What initiatives is the Department taking to develop those opportunities?

Mr Jayawardena: I always welcome my hon. Friend's support for our agenda. The Department has already launched interventions to support international investment into all corners of the country. Those interventions include the high potential opportunities programme and the trade and investment hubs. The hub in Darlington assists more than 1,000 foreign direct investment projects throughout the country which will drive the technology forward.

Departure from the EU: Effect on UK Global Exports

5. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment the Government has made of the effect of the UK's departure from the EU on UK global exports. [906454]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): For the first time in decades, the UK has an independent trade policy. We have secured FTAs with 70 countries plus the EU, covering nearly £800 billion-worth of bilateral trade in 2020, creating new opportunities for our UK exporters. To take these and more—building on an over £56 billion increase in nominal exports between 2016 and 2021—our export strategy is focusing on the needs of exporters, including a new export support service for exporters to Europe.

Mr Sheerman: I can never be nasty to this Secretary of State as we are old friends. The fact is though that, as I trained at the London School of Economics as an economist and I like looking at the data, I can see that

we have lost £20 billion in exports since we left the European Union. The Office for Budget Responsibility and everyone else says what great damage has been done to small and medium-sized manufacturing enterprises, which Mr Speaker has in his constituency and I have in Huddersfield, the heart of SME manufacturing. Those businesses are hurting. The Secretary of State's website says for them to get in touch with her if they need help. What help can she now give to small businesses in this country to enable them to cope?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Although there was indeed a drop in exports during covid, we have seen a 10% increase in the last quarter, which is very welcome. I am always happy to meet the hon. Gentleman, as he knows, to discuss any particular businesses, but the export support service, which has now been running for a number of months, is there to support SMEs in particular if they have issues with a country in Europe with which they want to trade. The team has also been focusing on supporting businesses with Russian and Belarusian activities in the past month, especially on supporting them to find alternative supply chains. The export strategy, which we published in October last year, is bringing together a whole series of tools to help those SMEs to discover new markets, and, indeed, to use the ones that now have more prospects thanks to the FTAs that we have.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State and her Department on their success in lifting the US 232 tariffs on UK steel and aluminium. Does she not agree that this flexibility to boost global trade afforded to us by our departure from the European Union is exactly why my constituents voted for Brexit?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his recent marriage, which is very exciting. Let me just note that those of us on the Front Bench begin to feel very old when our youngest Members start taking this great step of confidence, which exactly reflects how my hon. Friend has campaigned for his constituents on the matter of steel. It has been a real pleasure to be able to bring the section 232 tariffs to a conclusion so incredibly quickly, working with my US counterparts and understanding that our UK-US relationship is critical not only to trade, but across so many of those inter-related activities. We are working closely together on trade and security matters as we deal with the terrible challenges in Ukraine.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the International Development Committee.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): It is good to see the Secretary of State in good health.

With what the Secretary of State calls the UK's independent trade strategy, the UK cannot even export a chicken leg to any country in the world without the commensurate weight of paper and bureaucracy going with that chicken leg. When she sees the lorry queues in Kent and what used to be an easy market for the UK, I wonder whether her Department has catalogued the hurdles of paper that exporters now have to cope with to trade with the European Union, especially as the *Financial Times* reports that, in "cut-off" UK—to quote the Minister—exports have fallen 14% compared with a rise in the rest of the world of 8.2%. This independent trade strategy is looking pretty woeful.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I have already set out, the export support service, which we launched at the end of last year, is there to support those SMEs that have experienced technical issues when trading with the EU. Many of those issues have now been resolved, and we are helping businesses to deal with them. We are also helping those SMEs in all our constituencies that are considering exporting for the first time to look at how they can discover markets within the EU, across the wider European nations and in the rest of the world.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Front Bench, with shadow Minister Gareth Thomas.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I take this opportunity to wish Her Majesty the Queen a very happy birthday, and all the great people of England a very happy St George's day at the weekend.

With the Chancellor's having accepted a report from the Office for Budget Responsibility confirming an ongoing 15% hit to British exports to Europe, and given, as my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) alluded to, the continuing extra red tape, customs checks and costs that businesses here face thanks to the Prime Minister's poor trade deal with Europe, when will the Secretary of State publish a plan to put right some of that damage, to help British business and to make Brexit work better?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I will set out just some of the areas the export strategy is bringing forward, to help the hon. Gentleman to see exactly the strategic work we are doing. There is the export support service, which I have mentioned, and financial support for exporters, working through the shared prosperity fund to include export support through local investment plans. UK Export Finance is there to help and will look at supporting SMEs, where historically it has only supported large contracts. Having run a successful regional pilot of the UK Export Academy, we are rolling that out across the UK, providing digital tools. That is proving very popular, as businesses can educate themselves before launching into new markets.

Gareth Thomas: The Department's own research shows that export-related jobs pay higher than average, so the hit to our European exports, which the Secretary of State seems so complacent about, will prolong the cost of living crisis. It also underlines that since 2010 British exports have significantly underperformed compared with the rest of the G7, notably the United States and Germany. Businesses tell us that other countries have more ambitious export support programmes, while the Prime Minister blames our exporters for a lack of "energy and ambition". Where does the Secretary of State think the blame lies?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I have set out the export strategy, which is bringing forward these tools, which goes exactly to the hon. Gentleman's point. We are the opposite of complacent; we are here to support, through a dozen different routes, businesses to grow the export markets they already have or to discover exporting for the first time. One in seven businesses that could export does not yet, and we are keen to help those businesses find those markets across the globe, not only across the EU. Free trade deals such as the comprehensive and progressive

agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, which we are negotiating this year, will give us the opportunity to open up nearly \$8 trillion-worth of new markets. We want to ensure that businesses can access those through all the tools we are providing for them.

Reducing Barriers to Global Trade

6. **Ben Everitt** (Milton Keynes North) (Con): What steps her Department has taken to reduce barriers to global trade for British businesses. [906455]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): Bulldozing trade barriers enables countless British businesses to export goods and services around the world with greater ease and at lower cost. We resolved more than 200 barriers in the year ending April 2021—a 20% increase on the previous year. From securing British access to Japan’s poultry market, estimated by industry to be worth up to £13 million per year, and lifting the decades-long ban on British lamb exports to the US, estimated to be worth £37 million over five years, to cutting costs in services trade, an export of £304 billion in 2021, by up to 7% annually, we are getting on with the job.

Ben Everitt: Getting on with the job indeed. Breaking down barriers to trade and providing businesses with the right tools and support to reach global markets is exactly what we should be doing. I welcome the Department’s regional trade advisers and the role they play in supporting companies such as Carlton Packaging in Milton Keynes. To build on that support, will my hon. Friend work with me to bring together business in Milton Keynes, the Department and those regional trade advisers to support those business opportunities now that we have left the European Union?

Mr Jayawardena: I am very pleased to know that businesses in my hon. Friend’s constituency, including Carlton Packaging, are receiving support from this Department. Milton Keynes has not only exports worth over £3.4 billion, but a great champion of our trade deals in him. I shall be delighted to work with him to help businesses to use those deals to create jobs and boost wages while lowering prices for consumers.

Outstanding EU Trade Issues

7. **Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Streatham) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on resolving outstanding EU trade issues. [906456]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): This Government have delivered the first free trade agreement the EU has ever reached based on zero tariffs and zero quotas. Our collective focus is now on implementing that agreement, ensuring that it delivers for our citizens and businesses. We have established the export support service as the first point of contact for UK businesses looking to export to the EU. Since its launch in October, it has received over 8,000 unique enquiries.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: The export support service is clearly not working. In 2016, the Vote Leave campaign promised us tariff-free trade with the EU with minimum bureaucracy, not another support scheme. We find ourselves in a

bureaucratic nightmare with freight delays and red tape blocking what was once hassle-free trade. SMEs in my constituency simply cannot afford the legal advice that is needed to navigate all that red tape. That is no surprise because HMRC data has shown that British trade with the EU has fallen significantly. Can the Secretary of State tell us when the Government will finally deliver on hassle-free, tariff-free trade like we were promised, or will she finally admit that this was never going to happen and that this trade fiasco is going to be the norm for us from now on?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I said, the agreement reached has zero tariffs, which is exactly what the hon. Lady asks for. If there are specific businesses in Streatham that have issues and have not been able to get support from the export support service, she should contact me and my team, because 96% of all those who have used it have said to us that they would recommend it to others, which I take as a sign that the system is working. It is there not only to support those who have trouble but to help with discovering how to access new markets. Exporting is often considered difficult, but if we talk to those who do it, they say that they want to champion others. Our export champions, which are businesses that volunteer to speak to others and encourage them to export, are there to help those who are considering it. I would be happy to put some of her local businesses in touch with them as well.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): Supply chain resilience is very important to EU trade. Will my right hon. Friend advise us on how often she has conversations with our colleagues in the Department for Transport and how helpful they have been?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that I have discussions with many colleagues across Whitehall on a regular basis. The supply chain resilience question has obviously exercised all of us, and our businesses, ever since the problems when covid hit and we had to have so many new ways of thinking about our supply chains. We are now having to support our businesses, including those that have had supply chain issues through Russia and Belarus and are struggling to find new supply chains. There is a very strong and continuing thread throughout Whitehall to make sure that we support all our businesses. If anybody knows of any businesses that are struggling, they should contact us directly or through the export support service.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Minister Nia Griffith.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I very much hope that the Secretary of State will agree that her Department’s business is not just about making deals but about making sure that those deals work for UK businesses.

This month, again, the British Chambers of Commerce has cited Brexit red tape as a cause of export stagnation, while IT systems failure has contributed to massive gridlock in Kent, the Road Haulage Association has warned of perishable goods going bad, and the Cold Chain Federation has said that Britain is being seen as too much hassle to deal with. So what exactly are the Secretary of State and her Cabinet colleagues doing to clear up this mess and to provide the efficient, smooth-flowing export routes to the EU—our biggest trading partner—that our businesses and hauliers deserve?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: A number of factors have contributed to short-term delays at different points, including ship refitting, roadworks, bad weather, and the loss of a DFDS ferry due to damage, as well as checks for operators and issues on the other side of the channel. The volume of traffic through Dover means that some queuing is commonplace. I and those across Government continue to monitor that situation. The Department for Transport, in particular, is engaging very closely with the port of Dover, the ferry operators, industry groups and local stakeholders to ensure that the smooth running of trade can continue.

SMEs: Support for Export to Global Markets

8. **Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support small and medium-sized enterprises to export to global markets. [906457]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): Our export strategy's action-led 12-point plan will support SMEs to thrive in the global market and raise the UK's exporting culture in the long term. It includes our Export Academy, which has already received over 7,000 business registrations, and our export support service, which has dealt with over 8,000 enquiries, 1,000 of which are from businesses around my hon. Friend's constituency in the south-east. We have the trade access programme, the international trade advisers, the export champions, and a whole range of support that we can provide, including UK Export Finance, to help SMEs to get on and export.

Rehman Chishti: I thank the Minister and the Department for all they are doing in championing British exports. Jubilee Clips in Gillingham in my constituency is a fantastic local family-run business that employs over 100 people and exports hose clips to over 90 countries around the world. A real issue that it is facing is the uncertainty at the channel border crossing, which is leading to delays in delivering on its contracts. These delays are having a significant impact on local businesses and their ability to export. Will the Minister clarify what steps are being taken to address this specific challenge facing businesses in Kent and Medway?

Mike Freer: The export support service notes all complaints about delays and raises them with HMRC, because the DIT is not responsible for the border. Where we find that there are different interpretations of the rules on either side, we work with our bilateral partners to eradicate those issues. On Jubilee Clips, if my hon. Friend wishes to write to me or bring the company in, I would be more than happy to discuss the matter in more detail.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Will the Minister detail what impact the Department's 12-point strategy, entitled "Made in the UK, Sold to the World", has had on SME exports from Scotland and how any progress can be further built on?

Mike Freer: I do not have the details for Scotland, so I will write to the hon. Lady. We have opened an office in Scotland to ensure that we work closely with our partners to boost exports, but I will have to write to her on the details.

Trade with Israel

9. **Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): What recent steps her Department has taken to increase trade with Israel. [R] [906458]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): I am thrilled that our two Prime Ministers have agreed to negotiate an ambitious free trade agreement, with exciting new provisions in digital, data, technology, services and innovation. We have completed our consultation and are analysing the responses now, with a view to launching formal negotiations, along with others, later this year.

Robert Largan: I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I welcome the Government's commitment to negotiating a trade deal with our great friend and ally Israel, which will be of huge benefit to lots of businesses in High Peak and across the country. May I urge the Minister to go further and ensure that any deal does not just include products but looks at services, which make up around 70% of both the UK and Israel's economies? It is an area in which we are both world leaders, and there would be much mutual benefit.

Mr Jayawardena: Absolutely. My hon. Friend correctly points out that our two economies have strong service sectors but our current deal predominantly caters for trade in goods. That is why we intend to negotiate a more ambitious, comprehensive and innovation-friendly trade deal, which will open up opportunities for British businesses in areas such as tech, data and digital. My hon. Friend will be aware that next month we are hosting the first ever joint innovation and investment summit between our two countries. That will be a key moment as we deepen our relationship, creating opportunities to increase trade and investment between our nations, create new jobs and boost wages.

Exports of Renewable Energy Services

10. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase exports of renewable energy services. [906459]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The DIT champions the UK's green exporters all around the world. At the beginning of this month I was in Norway, where I promoted the UK's green energy offer, and Lord Grimstone spoke at WindEurope in Spain on 6 April. Renewable sector teams within the Department are also working to establish export capability guides, to highlight the UK's strengths. In our Australia and New Zealand trade deals, we have agreed the removal of tariffs on UK exports of products such as electric vehicles and wind turbine parts, and we have also secured the most substantive climate provisions that Australia and New Zealand have ever committed to in an FTA. UK exports in energy saving and sustainable energy systems increased by over 20% between 2016 and 2019.

Peter Aldous: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. The offshore wind industry in East Anglia is a great success story, and there are more and more examples of local businesses working all around the world. There is a worry that this may only be

short-term and transitory as other countries set up their own local industries. I would be grateful if my right hon. Friend outlined the strategy that is being pursued to ensure that the sale of UK equipment and services is a permanent feature of offshore wind's global supply chains.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: In 2020, the Prime Minister announced that £160 million would be made available to upgrade offshore wind ports and manufacturing, and the money has now been invested. We announced £1.6 billion of investment in our offshore wind sector just last year, including seven new major manufacturing investments and two new offshore wind ports, creating 4,100 jobs by the end of the decade. Alongside that, we have agreed the removal of tariffs on UK exports of products such as wind turbine parts, knowing that we will continue to grow and invest in our manufacturing as well as the service and support aspects of the offshore wind sector, in which the UK continues to be world-leading.

UK Steel Exports

11. **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to help increase exports of UK steel. [906460]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): Since 2018, the US Government have imposed tariffs of up to 25% for steel coming into the US. Last month I was pleased to reach a resolution with the US Government, and the tariff-free volumes that we have secured on steel and aluminium will mean that UK steel and aluminium exports to the US can return to levels not seen since before section 232 tariffs were imposed. The deal will deliver for our steel and aluminium industries across the country, and for the 80,000 UK jobs supported by the sector.

Geraint Davies: I am glad that it took only four years. May I, as the trade rapporteur for the Council of Europe, turn the Secretary of State's attention to EU carbon border taxes? Does she agree that they will help boost UK exports to countries that export steel manufactured products to the EU? Will she also pursue a UK carbon border tax so that Chinese dirty steel, which has twice the carbon footprint of British steel, does not undercut our steel, and work in harmony with the EU so that we can help protect our jobs and exports and, indeed, the planet?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The Treasury is looking closely at all those questions. Indeed, they are also the subject of discussions that I have had in some detail with my counterparts in the US and other nations. Thanks to the leadership that the UK offered at COP26, the question of how we manage these global questions is now right at the centre of all discussions. The EU is putting forward proposals, and I will continue to work with the Treasury as we think about how the UK wants to fit with that. If the hon. Gentleman wants more detail and information, I refer him to the Treasury.

UK Sanctions on Russia

12. **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): What assessment she had made with Cabinet colleagues of the effectiveness of UK sanctions on Russia in reducing international trade with that country. [906461]

21. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): What assessment her Department has made of the effectiveness of UK sanctions on Russia in reducing international trade with that country. [906471]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I am very busy today, Mr Speaker. In co-ordination with our allies, we are introducing the largest and most severe economic sanctions that Russia has ever faced, to help cripple Putin's war machine. We are denying Russia most-favoured-nation treatment relating to hundreds of key products, ramping up the pressure on Russia's economy by making it more difficult for it to trade by imposing punitive tariffs of 35%. We are prohibiting the export of certain goods, including critical technologies and luxury goods, and finally we are also phasing out the import of Russian oil and coal to deny it access to lucrative energy revenues. Details can be found in the impact assessment on gov.uk.

Tom Randall: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. Last week I visited Poland with Conservative colleagues as part of Project Maja, the Conservative social action project. It included a visit to the Russian border, and what is usually a very busy border crossing with lots of commerce on both sides was, obviously, eerily quiet. The economic impact of this war is going to be long lasting for the neighbours in that region for some time, so does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that we do all we can to boost trade with them?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank my hon. Friend for his commitment to our eastern European neighbours and allies. This is an incredibly difficult time for all of them, not only in security terms but in terms of economics and trade as well. I will meet the Ukrainian ambassador this afternoon to discuss further ways in which we can support them and help Ukrainian businesses to continue to trade as easily as possible, and we are working very closely with CBIs in the region to help them find solutions. This is a very difficult situation, and the UK, working in concert with the US and the EU, will do all we can both to stop the trade and opportunities for Putin to raise cash to fund his war machine, and to ensure that those countries that are standing by Ukraine, providing it with defensive support and incredible humanitarian support to keep its citizens safe, will be able to trade as easily as possible through this difficult crisis.

Mr Speaker: Let us move on to Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: You almost caught me out there, Mr Speaker. May I, on behalf of the Democratic Unionist party, wish Her Majesty the Queen a very happy birthday on this special day?

I thank the Secretary of State very much for her response to the question. This United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is united in its campaign to put sanctions on Russia. The effects include some companies across the United Kingdom, but companies in Northern Ireland in particular are having to find alternative places to sell their products and alternative sources to purchase products that they usually buy from Russia. What has been done to help those UK companies, including those in Northern Ireland?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, this is difficult for some businesses. Our export support service has been focused on supporting those businesses with difficulties created by their Russian or Belarusian supply chains. It is a pleasure to be able to say that it has been extraordinary to witness so many businesses taking such decisions, even though it is economically difficult for them, because it is the right thing to do morally to step away from anything to do with Russia. Huge credit and thanks to all the businesses taking those very difficult economic decisions.

Looking at Northern Ireland, while some businesses are suffering, businesses such as Thales in Northern Ireland have been extraordinary in helping to provide support by providing the NLAWs—next-generation light anti-tank weapons—and defensive equipment that can help the Ukrainians fight the Putin war machine. Enormous thanks to all those businesses that are helping to support us and are working with the Ministry of Defence in particular to make sure that we can support the Ukrainians with the defensive equipment they need.

UK Trade Agreements: Workers' Rights

13. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure that workers' rights are maintained in all UK trade agreements. [906462]

23. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure that workers' rights are maintained in all UK trade agreements. [906473]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): Both agreements with Australia and New Zealand commit parties to maintain international labour standards.

Chris Elmore: The Minister will be aware that the TUC was first promised a seat on a trade advisory board in November 2020, and 18 months on it has still not been offered that seat. It was quite right that life sciences, transport, financial services and various other bodies have seats on these trade boards. Why do the Government have a problem with the TUC or any of our trade unions, which do an enormous amount of work in protecting workers' rights in this country?

Penny Mordaunt: The issue is that the unions have not taken up the seat they were offered, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has included dialogue with unions in our trade negotiations at every opportunity—most recently, with the work she has been doing to secure a US FTA—and we will continue to do that. They are important stakeholders, and they will always be offered a seat at the table.

Liz Twist: Can the Minister tell the House whether the issue of labour standards in supply chains has been raised with India during the trade negotiations?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Member will know from the trade negotiations that we have concluded already, that this always forms a part of those negotiations through our discussions and consultations. I can get her chapter and verse on that and some details. It is not one of the FTAs I look after, but I can assure her that that is a core part of our negotiations.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Ruth Cadbury.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): In 2019, the UK signed a trade deal with Colombia. Two years after that deal, Colombia remains the deadliest country for workers and trade union members, with 22 assassinations in the last two years alone. However, the UK's trade deal has no clear enforcement mechanisms to protect the rights of workers or trade unionists. Will Ministers learn anything from this failure, especially when they negotiate future trade agreements with Gulf states?

Penny Mordaunt: I refer the hon. Member to some remarks on this issue that I made last year in Westminster Hall, where I took the time to list some of the activists—trade union activists, environmental activists—who have been brutally murdered. I listed those people on the Floor in Westminster Hall because it is important that we shine a spotlight on those issues. She will know that we have also taken great efforts to raise this issue at the UN, and I think we are upholding our obligations to those people in doing that.

Support for UK Manufacturing Exports

14. **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support UK manufacturing exports. [906463]

16. **Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support UK manufacturing exports. [906466]

19. **Suzanne Webb** (Stourbridge) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support UK manufacturing exports. [906469]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): In 2021, the DIT launched a new export campaign for manufacturing businesses—"Made in the UK, Sold to the World". The campaign, in line with our refreshed export strategy, celebrates the quality of the UK manufacturing sector and its global demand. We are supporting businesses across all the UK regions and nations to amplify and boost export opportunities throughout the manufacturing sector.

Chris Green: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. Would he join me in celebrating the success of the port of Liverpool, which had its busiest month in March, when it handled 52,000 containers? Would he also continue to do all he can to ensure that we make more use of these amazing facilities, especially to export British manufactured goods?

Mike Freer: I congratulate the port of Liverpool on its busiest ever month and look forward to the record being beaten regularly as exports from the north-west continue to grow. The Department continues to help exporters across the Liverpool city region and the wider north-west. Indeed, last month I joined a joint mission to Ireland with the Mayors of the Liverpool city region and Greater Manchester—the first of its kind. The mission allowed us to showcase 15 exporters from the north-west, who were able to talk about the strength of the region, to boost the future trading relationship between our two countries.

Gareth Bacon: Will my hon. Friend update the House on how manufacturing exports are considered when negotiating free trade agreements?

Mike Freer: We are proud to advance UK manufacturing exports through our free trade agreements programme. For example, with Australia and New Zealand, we eliminated tariffs for 100% of UK manufacturing exports. In almost all cases, tariffs will be eliminated the day that the agreement comes into force. That will save, for example, £34 million of duties for UK car exports to Australia from day one, supporting our levelling-up agenda.

Suzanne Webb: My constituency has a long history of manufacturing excellence, whether in iron and steel or in producing the best glass in the world. I have fantastic companies, such as Quality Metal Products. How is the Department ensuring that UK manufacturers remain competitive in attracting inward investment to help companies in my constituency to support growth?

Mike Freer: The UK has a proud reputation as one of the most attractive economies in the world. In 2020, the UK secured the most greenfield foreign direct investment in Europe, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Last year, the £1.4 billion global Britain investment fund announced aims to increase our attractiveness, especially to manufacturers. I am more than happy to link up with my hon. Friend's manufacturers to see what we can do to boost manufacturing in her constituency.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The figures reported for UK goods exports show that they fell by 14% in the three months to January compared with the same period in 2020. That is in contrast with an 8.2% global average rise over the same period. When the Minister and the Secretary of State announce a range of initiatives to help exporters, will they admit that the capacity is simply not there to deliver the additional support for exports that especially our small and medium-sized enterprises need?

Mike Freer: I wholeheartedly disagree with the hon. Gentleman: the capacity is there. We provide the export support service, the international aviation fund, international trade advisers, the export academy, export champions, the tradeshow access programme, the international market support programme, UK Export Finance—all of which were showcased at the parliamentary export showcase, which I am not sure the hon. Gentleman attended. He could have found out more details if he had come to it.

Topical Questions

T1. [906474] **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): As part of the UK's leadership on sanctions against the Putin regime, we have raised tariffs by 35% on hundreds of Russian goods worth £900 million in trade. By the end of 2022, the UK will end all dependency on Russian coal and oil, and end imports of gas as soon as possible. We have banned the export

of key oil refining equipment and catalysts, and we are banning the import of steel and iron products and the export of luxury goods.

On a more positive note, during my recent visit to the US, I was able to secure the removal of the section 232 tariffs, meaning that we now have tariff-free access to the US market for the first time since 2018. I also chaired our first UK-US joint dialogue on the future of Atlantic trade, whereby the UK and the US can build and deepen our co-operation on trade. I will be welcoming my US counterparts to Aberdeen next week to continue those discussions.

I have also launched the FTA negotiations with Canada. Both countries want a new and modern trade deal, befitting our close and historic relationship. I will provide further updates to Parliament as those negotiations progress.

Simon Jupp: The south-west is known for not only its food, but its wonderful drink. Thousands of acres of orchards across the west country produce some of the world's best cider, supporting around 12,000 jobs. What steps are the Government taking to help our drinks industry get their products on shelves across the globe?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We are striving for tariff-free drinks exports through our FTAs, and the Prime Minister promoted that when he hosted a food and drink showcase in Downing Street last November. We are opening new markets and extending our network of 100 overseas food and drink advisers by recruiting eight new specialist agriculture attachés. So I hope that the multi-award-winning Ventons Devon Cyder, Courtneys of Whimble cider and the Smedley family's Four Elms ciders will take full advantage of those opportunities.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State, Nick Thomas-Symonds.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): In recent weeks, the Government announced the suspension of all tariffs and quotas on trade between the United Kingdom and Ukraine. Labour supports that, but may I press the Government to go even further? The political, free trade and strategic partnership agreement between the UK and Ukraine was signed back in 2020. Will the Government commit to updating that agreement to make the scrapping of tariffs and quotas not just a temporary measure but a permanent one to support the Ukraine's recovery from this appalling illegal invasion in the years ahead?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I am grateful that the Opposition support the Government's work to help Ukrainian businesses to continue to trade in an incredibly difficult time for them. We will continue to look at how we can both support Ukraine and its population to defend its territory—that will involve ensuring that its economy can thrive—and tighten the sanctions and trade pressures on Russia and those such as Belarus who work alongside it. In the short term, we will bring that forward through the existing FTA. We will also continue to work with the Ukrainians. As I said, I am meeting the Ukrainian ambassador later today to discuss how we can further support that country.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I have met the Ukrainian Business and Trade Association, as I am sure has the Secretary of State, and I know that there were already issues with how the quota system worked before the invasion occurred. Having any trade restrictions back in place will only cause further problems for Ukraine's economic recovery. Any permanent, updated trading arrangement with Ukraine will be supported by Labour, so will the Secretary of State set an urgent date to bring a permanent arrangement into effect to give desperately needed certainty to Ukrainian businesses?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As I said, we are continuing to work very closely with our Ukrainian counterparts, and after questions the Minister for Trade Policy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), will meet the business group to continue those discussions and ensure that we are both targeting in the short term and thinking about long-term ways in which we can support Ukraine and help it recover from this illegal invasion.

T2. [906475] **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): In spite of the ongoing conflict in Tigray, a number of businesses have contacted me to say that they want to increase the amount of business that they do in Ethiopia. Will the Minister keep the dialogue going with the Ethiopian Government? That will help our businesses and may help to bring the conflict to an end.

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): I completely agree with my hon. Friend. UK exports to that country were up 7.2% on the previous year. He will know that recently we have had a UK-led consortium committing \$8 billion of investment into telecoms, which will significantly increase growth and jobs and help the digital economy in that country. I thank him again for the role that he played in securing that investment.

T5. [906479] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): This morning, much has been made of our links with Ukraine, and that comes at a time when the Prime Minister is in India for trade talks. We also hear reports of a \$2 billion increase in India's trade with Russia. What implications does that have for our relationship with India and for our sanctions on Russia? Will that be taken into account in the Prime Minister's dealings? Will he be putting pressure on India to sanction Russia?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I am really pleased that the Prime Minister is able to be in India today and tomorrow to discuss broad matters of trade and to support the Department's work to bring together a really comprehensive trade deal with India in the months ahead. He is also there to discuss the international situation. He has a good relationship with Prime Minister Modi, and I know that he will discuss all these issues. The UK, the US and the EU have been working in close concert to bring together a series of sanctions, limitations and export bans, and the Prime Minister will discuss with Prime Minister Modi what we have been doing in the UK, with the US. They will continue to take the direction that they need for their economy.

T3. [906477] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): Following on from my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp), across the Tamar, Cornwall is famous for its exceptional produce. What

additional help has the Department given to firms from Cornwall so that they can make the best possible use of international trade deals?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): Locally based trade advisers, as well as support through the UK export academy, can help businesses such as Cornwall's Ideal Foods take advantage of all free trade agreements. Cornwall's very own tea grower and producer, Tregothnan, will benefit from tariffs being removed on all UK food and drink exports to Australia.

T7. [906481] **Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Figures indicate that Chile is the UK's 60th largest export market. Will the Secretary of State update the House on the work being undertaken to create an updated and bespoke trade deal with Chile? As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Chile, I hope that the group can meet the Department to support that work.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): It is always a pleasure to meet the hon. Lady. I am happy to confirm that we are committed to bulldozing trade barriers. I am pleased that Chile has been able to approve British pork producers exporting into a market that is worth over £200 million as part of our total trade in goods and services of £26.5 billion. There is more to do; I am happy to meet her.

T4. [906478] **Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): The Gulf states are an important trading zone for businesses based in Warrington South, particularly given the excellent links through Manchester Airport to the Gulf. What progress is my hon. Friend making in developing trade and investment links between the UK and the Gulf Co-operation Council?

Mr Jayawardena: The six GCC nations form together one of our largest trading partners, with total trade standing at over £31 billion in the four quarters to September last year. In January, we completed a public consultation in support of a trade deal with the GCC that gets the best deal for British businesses and consumers. We aim to start those negotiations with others later this year. In the meantime, we are driving forward investment, including £1 billion from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia supporting sustainable aviation in Teesside, and, as I referred to earlier, £10 billion from the United Arab Emirates in a sovereign investment partnership.

T8. [906482] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): Vivarail showcased its world-beating, self-charging battery trains to delegates at COP26 in Glasgow. What steps is the Minister taking to promote UK manufacturing, especially green manufacturing, and win export orders for excellent businesses such as Vivarail, which is located in my constituency?

Mike Freer: We are always looking for companies we can showcase. We can sell companies such as Vivarail around the world. Whenever we talk to our partners abroad on bilateral agreements looking for investment in green and renewable energy, including on transportation, we will always do our best to push forward expert companies such as the one the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

T6. [906480] **Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): States in the USA such as Texas and California have a larger GDP than many European nations. Aside from the UK-US trade negotiations, will the Minister say what progress is being made on trade deals between the UK and individual states in the USA?

Penny Mordaunt: We are making considerable progress on that. We are in discussions with around 20 US states. I have just returned from Texas, which if it were a country in its own right would be the seventh largest economy in the world. We are going to do a state-level agreement with Texas, we hope, by October this year. We will start signing those agreements with US states next month. The first eight we have in the pipeline will be equivalent to 20% of the United States economy.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): During the recent British-American Parliamentary Group trade and security delegation to the US, we received the unequivocal message that any US-UK trade deal would have to be worker-centric. We also heard that the Secretary of State had said during the Baltimore dialogues that levelling up was the British equivalent of worker-centric and that therefore any levelled-up trade deal would have workers at its heart. Can she confirm whether that is the case and, if so, how she will ensure a worker voice at every trade meeting and discussion?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The Baltimore dialogues—the first of our trade dialogues, held just a few weeks ago—was exactly that: a gathering together of voices from across businesses, industry councils and trade union groups from both sides of the Atlantic. It was an incredibly constructive discussion. We were pleased, obviously, that our voices were there, as they always are at all our tables. It was interesting that the US was really pleased to be bringing its trade union voices to the table with industry for the first time. It was a very positive discussion, which embedded clearly how everybody will be at the table as we move forward together.

T9. [906483] **Ruth Edwards** (Rushcliffe) (Con): The global surge in energy prices has highlighted the importance of securing both inward investment in green energy generation in the UK and related trading

partnerships. Will my hon. Friend set out what the Government are doing to accelerate both those things?

Mr Jayawardena: We are driving unprecedented investment in green industries, with the British energy security strategy announcing further cuts to the red tape that hampers growth in some of these sectors. My noble Friend Lord Grimstone is leading our new Office for Investment, and I am delighted that our friends across the Gulf are as keen as we are to back innovation in this area. For instance, £100 million has flowed in from Qatar to support small modular reactors and net zero technology.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in 2019—now the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—insisted to the public that food and welfare standards would be maintained under UK trade deals struck after Brexit. Indeed, the Prime Minister has said so frequently, but the Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency is reported as saying yesterday that he wants to see food regulations slashed. Who is right?

Mr Jayawardena: We have always been crystal clear that our food safety, animal welfare and environmental standards are not for sale.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): Can we have an update on our joining the trans-Pacific partnership? That is important not only because of the growing markets, but because of the international challenges, stability and defence in the region.

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; we have reached a major milestone on that accession process by moving to market access negotiations with that trade bloc. In addition to opening up a new market, this will also help us on such matters as maritime security and meeting the goals of the integrated review. CPTPP has strong rules against the unfair trade practice whereby some countries—China has been mentioned—give unreasonable advantages to state-owned enterprises or discriminate against foreign investors. Our vision for that part of the world has trade at its heart.

Business of the House

10.31 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): It will be a pleasure. The business for the week commencing 25 April will include:

MONDAY 25 APRIL—Consideration of Lords message on the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, followed by consideration of Lords message on the Health and Care Bill, followed by motion relating to the appointment of the chair of the UK Statistics Authority, followed by consideration of a business of the House motion relating to the carry-over of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, followed by consideration of a business of the House motion relating to the carry-over of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, followed by consideration of a carry-over motion relating to the High Speed Rail (Crewe-Manchester) Bill.

TUESDAY 26 APRIL—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Judicial Review and Courts Bill, followed by general debate on childhood cancer outcomes. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee. That is followed by a general debate on Ukraine, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords messages.

WEDNESDAY 27 APRIL—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Elections Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of a Lords message on the Nationality and Borders Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords messages.

THURSDAY 28 APRIL—If necessary, consideration of Lords messages.

Depending on the progress of business in the coming days, the House will be prorogued on 28 April, subject to Royal Assent being signified to all Acts.

Thangam Debbonaire: There is a good showing for business questions today, isn't there, Mr Speaker? I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. I am pleased to see, and thank him for, the rapid rescheduling of the debate on childhood cancer.

May I start by wishing a very happy birthday to Her Majesty the Queen on behalf of the official Opposition? Also, although this is not the birthday slot, I could not possibly get through my speech without mentioning the birthday of my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Welcome back, one and all, after Easter. I hope that everyone was able to spend time with loved ones. After two years of separation, people across this country value time together more than ever, and it is because of that feeling that revelations of the Prime Minister's actions are such a betrayal. We in the Labour party cannot stand by and ignore that, because we know that this shambles is not good enough. Our cross-party motion today appears to me to be a House matter, so on a technical point, will the Leader of the House confirm or deny whether his colleagues have been whipped to block our motion on what appears to be a House matter? If the Prime Minister's case is referred to the

Privileges Committee, will the Committee have access to the information it requires? Will the Conservative party recognise that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has recused himself from any such inquiry, accusations of partisanship are entirely inappropriate now?

This Government's response to our entirely proper motion is reminiscent of another attempt they made to meddle with proper processes in order to save themselves and their mates. Does the Leader of the House recognise that this looks awfully like Owen Paterson mark 2? On 8 December last year, the Prime Minister said to the House:

“there will be disciplinary action for all those involved”—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 372.]

in the parties, not-parties or whatever they are now called. Will the Leader of the House find out whether that has happened?

The arguments made by Conservative Members for keeping the Prime Minister rather fall apart. They cannot say that they cannot change the leader during wartime—although they do—because, in the last century, so many Prime Ministers changed during wartime. They also know that a change of Prime Minister would not dim support across this House for Ukraine and our NATO allies. Surely in wartime it is even more important that the Prime Minister be beyond reproach. I invite hon. and right hon. Members to reflect on what my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition will say, and to ask themselves what it is about the Prime Minister that they are so willing to defend.

On a practical note, may I ask the Leader of the House to confirm whether or not the card readers in the No Lobby will be working sometime today? None of us wants a repeat of last night, although I salute the Clerks for their valiant attempts with the papers.

On Tuesday, the Home Secretary gave a statement on her shameful proposal to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda, an unethical policy that would cost taxpayers billions and make it harder to get fast and fair asylum decisions. As far as I can see, it has no support from specialist organisations, but nevertheless the Home Secretary insists on pushing it forward. At the same time, however, Members from across the House are reporting to me significant delays because of a Home Office backlog across all policy areas, from passport applications—delays to which will affect all our constituents—to visas and everything in between. MPs cannot update constituents. The Home Office seems to be in a state of meltdown. This is not about civil servants; it is about leadership from the top.

Will the Leader of the House ask the Home Secretary to explain how visa applications are being processed by the Department, what she is doing about the unacceptable delays to passports, and how she intends to carry out her unworkable policy to send asylum seekers to Rwanda? In fact, does she understand that the term “illegal asylum seekers” does not even make sense, as by international law asylum seekers are allowed to come here to seek asylum, and if they have not been assessed, they cannot be illegal by definition?

While we are on the subject of the Home Secretary, it took me three months to get a response from her last year, but at least I got one. As the Leader of the House will know—I know he is sympathetic to this cause—other

[Thangam Debbonaire]

Members are not getting timely responses from Ministers, either to parliamentary written questions or to letters. They must be answered in a timely manner. We seek these responses on behalf of our constituents. The right hon. Gentleman will know that that is a reasonable request. As we go into Prorogation, may I have his co-operation on ensuring that Members on both sides of the House have letters and questions to Ministers answered in a timely manner?

Let me make a quick interjection about the Online Safety Bill, a landmark piece of legislation. Time was squeezed and many colleagues were not called to speak on Tuesday. Will the Leader of the House ensure that when we return from any recess, similarly important, big business is not scheduled for the first day back, when urgent questions and statements are inevitable?

The British people deserve leadership, and a Government who hold themselves to the highest possible standards and diligently follow the rules. They deserve better than this.

Mr Speaker: Before the Leader of the House responds, I might be able to help on the question of the readers last night. The Chair of Ways and Means reported the issue this morning. I have gone to the Clerks, and I am expecting a report back. This will be looked into over the weekend, and I will come back on Monday and share what I learn with both the shadow Leader of the House and the Leader of the House.

Mark Spencer: Thank you for that update, Mr Speaker. I am sure that this evening, should the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) wish to enter the No Lobby, the readers there will be working.

Let me start by joining the hon. Lady in wishing both Her Majesty and the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) a very happy birthday; I think the hon. Gentleman is slightly younger than Her Majesty. The hon. Lady went on to talk about the Prime Minister and this afternoon's debate. The good news is that she will have five and a half hours in which to debate whatever she wants, and to make all the party political points she wishes. I think that the Prime Minister has been pretty clear—he came to this Dispatch Box and apologised for the mistake he had made—but he is wholly focused on what matters to the hon. Lady's constituents and to mine: dealing with the rising energy costs in the world following Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. That is what our constituents want him to be focused on, and that is what he is doing.

Thangam Debbonaire: He is in India.

Mark Spencer: Moreover, as the hon. Lady has indicated from a sedentary position, the Prime Minister is demonstrating global leadership, working with our international colleagues and promoting the economic welfare of the United Kingdom through our relationship with India. That is what he should be doing, and is doing.

The hon. Lady talked about Rwanda. She will be aware that the Home Secretary was at the Dispatch Box on Tuesday making a statement on that subject. This is a new migration and economic development partnership, the first in the world to tackle head-on the imbalance

between legal and illegal migration routes. It is the right thing to do, because it breaks the model set by those who are exploiting very vulnerable people, and endangering them by putting them in vessels that are not seaworthy to cross the English channel. We are developing safe routes for the people who do find themselves in those circumstances, and that is the right thing to do.

I will, however, join the hon. Lady in her comments about timely responses. She is wholly right to hold Ministers to account. They should respond to Members on both sides of the House in a timely fashion, and I will write to Cabinet colleagues to ensure that the situation improves. I hope the hon. Lady will recognise that the global covid pandemic has put a huge amount of strain on a number of Departments and has increased the volume of correspondence that they have received, but Members are nevertheless entitled to receive that timely response.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Online Safety Bill. Tuesday was a busy day, featuring three ministerial statements. The timing of statements is, of course, entirely a matter for you, Mr Speaker; it is for you to decide how much time you allow for them, but it did allow for—

Mr Speaker: Order. If the Leader of the House is serious about the business, he should not put three statements on, but he should not hang it on me when Members want to speak after those statements. I think that that is totally unfair. Come on!

Mark Spencer: Thank you, Mr Speaker, but I know you would acknowledge that the timing is a matter for you. The issue of online safety is obviously very important, which is why so many colleagues wanted to speak about it, and why the Government are introducing the Bill. I have a number of times heard the hon. Lady ask, at the Dispatch Box, "When is the Online Safety Bill coming?" When we finally deliver it, she is still not happy. I can only deliver what she has asked for. The good news is that there will be plenty of opportunity to debate online safety, and I am sure that the Government will supply time for those debates.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): May we please have a debate about raising the quality of our bathing water? So many of my constituents love swimming and doing water sports on the Solent throughout the year, and I thoroughly recommend it, Mr Speaker, if you would like to try it. However, the bathing water regulations specify that testing is necessary only between May and September. May we have a debate on how we can improve the testing of our seas and rivers, so that more people can enjoy them all year round?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend has raised an important matter. Indeed, I have seen the Prime Minister bathing in the sea fairly recently. Of course, we introduced the landmark Environment Act 2021, which is intended to improve our environment, but my hon. Friend is right to raise the issue, and hopefully there will be an opportunity for her to raise it directly with Ministers on Thursday, during questions to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Scottish National party spokesperson, Pete Wishart.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I too would like to wish a very happy birthday to Her Majesty, and also to his majesty the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), as we on these Benches always refer to him.

I thank the Leader of the House for giving us a full day's debate on the privilege motion. We cannot wait to see the hordes of Tory Back Benchers getting to their feet to say what a wonderful, truthful and honest character the Prime Minister is. Of course, he is not here; he is in India. I do not know who is advising him, but apparently the first thing they got him to do when he arrived was to spin some yarn. I see that the Government's amendment is jointly in the Leader of the House's name, in what must be a supreme effort to kick the can down the road. I say again to colleagues on the Tory Back Benches that they had better be absolutely certain of what is in that can, because I suspect that, when they eventually have to open it, it will be packed full of the most rancid, noxious contents that they will then have to feast upon. This is not going to save the May elections. At some point, they are going to have to decide whether they get rid of him or whether they go down with him.

We are also going to have to have a debate about the type of language we use in this House, because it cannot go on like this. We cannot refer to the Prime Minister with the one word that the public now most closely associate with him. We cannot even refer to a fictitious Disney character who is associated with the word that the public most use about him. The public think we are absolutely mad, and that view will only have been compounded by the activities of last night. We had one hour to debate countless important amendments and two hours to vote on them. Then the card readers broke down, and we were back to pen and paper. Some cartoon classics may indeed be out of bounds in this House, but at some point this Disney wonderland is going to have to enter this century.

Mr Speaker: Can I just say for clarification—and I think we ought to be a little bit more honest—that we have very good Clerks and that two card readers were still operational? All those in the other Lobby were operational. Please let us not discredit a system that did actually work, and it worked quite well.

Mark Spencer: I will not comment on the card reader. Occasionally things break, and the House authorities responded rapidly to ensure that the Division could continue. I know it was a little frustrating for colleagues having to queue up, but we should give credit to those individuals who stepped in to help us. I am not sure that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) asked any other questions at all, to be honest. He made his point about the debate this afternoon, and he has only another 40 minutes to wait until the Paymaster General gets to the Dispatch Box. I am sure he will be interested to hear what the Paymaster General says, and he will be able to make his party political points at that time.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): The Leader of the House will recall from his time as Chief Whip that I greatly struggled with the lockdowns, and the legacy of covid has pumped so much poison into this country and into the veins of this place. Can we please try to find a way today not to have a fractious debate

and a Division? I believe genuinely that the Prime Minister is a good and decent man, and he can make the case to the Privileges Committee directly without having to divide this House and have yet more poison pumped into public life. Please can the Chief Whip find a way of making that happen?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He is right to highlight the fact that language matters in this place. It has an impact on people in the outside world and on how they perceive politicians, and getting the tone of this debate right will be absolutely crucial. I know that the Chief Whip will have heard his comments and I am sure he will reflect on them.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for rescheduling this afternoon's debate on childhood cancer outcomes for Tuesday. That is an important debate and it will be really good to get it in before the end of the Session. The Backbench Business Committee met for the last time on Tuesday gone; we could not see any point in meeting next week as our business runs out at the end of the Session. We will be writing to the Leader of the House with our legacy list in case there is any time for Backbench Business debates before the Committee is re-established in the new Session of Parliament.

Many of my constituents are reporting extensive delays in receiving passports, and they are also finding it exceedingly difficult even to contact the Passport Office to find out what is happening. Could the Leader of the House use his good offices to try to get the Home Office to do something about this? It is becoming quite serious.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman not only for his question but for his work throughout the Session in providing great topics for Back Benchers to debate. There have been some fantastic debates in this Session, and I give credit to him and his Committee for supplying those topics. I will look at his legacy list with interest, and I will certainly liaise with the Chief Whip on what we can do to provide time should there be a gap in parliamentary business before the Backbench Business Committee is re-established as quickly as possible.

I hear the hon. Gentleman's comments on passports, and I will pass them on to the Home Secretary. I know this causes enormous frustration to constituents who are planning summer holidays for the first time in a long time. They want to have their passport quickly so that they are able to travel.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am 100% behind the Prime Minister, but what a wonderful democracy we live in: he had to come here this week to make a statement, and today we have the opportunity to decide whether he should be referred to the Privileges Committee.

One question asked by the shadow Leader of the House that the Leader of the House did not answer is about whipping. In his new role, will the Leader of the House make it absolutely clear that it is a great privilege and honour to be a Member of Parliament and that we exercise our vote not as delegates but as representatives? The Whips' advice is what it is: advice. Members put their country first, their constituency second and their party third. Most times, for Conservative Members, the

[Mr Peter Bone]

three are in line. Can we have a debate next week on the role of the Whips Office? By the way, the Leader of the House was an excellent Chief Whip, and so is the current Chief Whip.

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I thoroughly enjoyed my time as the Government Chief Whip. I was blessed with former Chief Whips not commenting on whipping, and the current Chief Whip deserves that privilege, too. Whipping is a matter for the Chief Whip.

The Prime Minister has made some comments from India on this afternoon's debate. The Paymaster General will be here in about 40 minutes, and those messages are being received. Let us enjoy the debate when it comes.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The Leader of the House will remember that there were three questions at yesterday's Prime Minister's questions on hospital rebuild schemes that have been agreed and approved but where the money has not come through from the Treasury. One of those schemes is at Whipps Cross in my constituency. We can all guess what the hold-up is in the Treasury, but can we have a statement from a Treasury Minister at the Dispatch Box to explain exactly what is going on?

Mark Spencer: I will pass on the hon. Gentleman's comments to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Treasury. Huge commitments have been made to rebuild a number of hospitals across the country and to get those projects running as quickly as possible. We stand by those strong commitments, and the rebuilding and investment in our NHS over the past five years is unprecedented. We will continue with that investment.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I assume the Leader of the House will be very busy conveying requests from hon. and right hon. Members in relation to the forthcoming Queen's Speech. May I please add two items to that list, and perhaps we can have a debate before the Queen's Speech? First, I have previously raised with him the long-promised Bill to ban the import of hunting trophies. Secondly, will he add the recommendations of the fan-led review of football governance, which I understand require primary legislation, so that a situation such as happened at Derby County will never happen again?

Mark Spencer: As my hon. Friend says, the Queen's Speech is not far away. We have committed to banning the import of hunting trophies from nearly 7,000 species, and we will shortly publish further information on the response to the fan-led review. I recognise that it is hard for hon. Members to contain their excitement, but I urge her to wait a little longer. All will be revealed.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House assist me with an urgent issue relating to the Ukraine family visa scheme? My constituent's mother has thankfully made it out of Ukraine and to the UK, and she has been granted a visa. However, she is now struggling to get any proof of address, without which it is difficult to register with a general practitioner to receive the cancer care she needs or to open a bank account. Home Office staff have told

my office that they are unable to issue a document proving her address without a change of policy from Ministers. Will the Leader of the House ask Home Office Ministers to look into this and to make a statement to the House?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. If she writes to me with details of the individual case she is talking about, I will make sure it is put in front of the Home Office as quickly as possible. I hope she would recognise that the Government have already issued 56,000 visas. It is a huge commitment to getting a number of people in. However, I hear the concern she has about that individual case, which sounds like a challenging one, and I will make sure the Home Office responds to her in a timely way.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): If I walked down to the Front Bench and smacked the Leader of the House, I would possibly be done for assault. If I smacked a dog, I would possibly be done for cruelty to that dog. Yet when we talk about smacking children, we say that it is a nanny state if we question that, even though we tell parents that they must put seatbelts in the back of cars for their children's safety. I am not calling for an outright ban on smacking children, and I recognise that parents bring up children in the best way they can, but I do think that the Children's Commissioner is courageous and right to raise these matters in *The Times* as she has done. We need to discuss these matters carefully and have a debate. So can we have a debate after the Queen's Speech about the smacking of children and whether it should be permitted?

Mark Spencer: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question on something that is worthy of debate. Colleagues from across the House would want to engage with that debate. On a personal level, I do think that parents have the right to chastise their children in a way in which they see fit, but there clearly is a line where that stretches into abuse, and the authorities are robust in making sure that children are safe in the UK. However, this is worthy of debate and I encourage him to apply for an Adjournment debate or a Backbench Business debate.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Although established 160 years ago, the Land Registry has been able to establish the ownership of only 83% of the land of England; the ownership of the other 17% is unknown. Unlike Companies House, the Land Registry does not have an open access register and anyone wishing to establish who does own the 83%, by purchasing copies of all the registered titles would have to pay £72 million for the privilege. So can we have a debate on the Land Registry?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We should celebrate the fact that 160 years have passed since the introduction of the Land Registry, which is important. I understand his concerns. I hope he would recognise that there are bits of land everywhere whose ownership is difficult to establish, as often they are not claimed by anybody. We usually find that the local authority will deny ownership if there are costs associated with the land, until there appears to be huge value attached to it and then everybody wants to claim it. However, I think that is worthy of debate and perhaps he ought to apply for a Backbench Business debate.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If it is not too indelicate to raise this today, Mr Speaker, may I ask the Leader of the House whether it would be possible to have a debate on the radical proposals to change the Accession Council? I am sure that we in this House can come up with less radical proposals, touching on the venue rather than the admission.

Mark Spencer: It probably is too sensitive to raise that matter today. These are matters for the palace to decide upon. I am sure the palace will have heard my right hon. Friend's comments but it will decide those matters.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Can I just help Members? We are going to finish this at 11.30. I do not think we will get everyone in, but we can help each other by speeding up. I call Nick Smith.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Last year, Ministers said they would

“reset the dial on women's health”,

but we still have no date for the hormone replacement therapy prescription changes in England. May we have a statement on HRT changes, to show that the Government are taking women's health seriously?

Mark Spencer: This is absolutely an important issue that the Government recognise and that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is currently looking at. It has been debated a number of times in the House, but I certainly recognise the challenges in respect of HRT provision and supply for many ladies up and down the country and the issue is worthy of further debate.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): It is about not just the HRT prescription changes but supplies of HRT. Pharmacies in Romsey and Southampton North have completely run out, which leaves women of a certain age—and before my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) makes a comment, yes, I declare an interest—without access to the oestrogen gel that enables us to sleep and to work competently. Please will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in this place, following on from the brilliant debate secured by the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), so that we can make sure that pharmacies work hand in glove with the DHSC so that we can get the supplies we need?

Mark Spencer: Following that question from my right hon. Friend and the one from the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), inspiration has hit me, so I can say that the Department of Health and Social Care is aware of the supply issues that are affecting a limited number of HRT products. Most HRT products, including alternatives to those for which we are experiencing supply issues, are available. The Government are working closely with suppliers and stakeholders to resolve the issues as quickly as possible and to ensure that the NHS is informed on a regular basis. It is an important matter and I will raise it with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on my right hon. Friend's behalf.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Some of the mighty structures in the North sea were fabricated in yards in the north of Scotland—I myself worked in two of them: Kishorn and Nigg. Offshore wind energy is going to be a vital part of the UK's future energy mix and we do not want such structures to be built abroad; we want them to be built in the UK. Would it not be a good idea to have a debate in this Chamber about the future of offshore wind and a close look at where in the United Kingdom we can build such structures?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy came to the Dispatch Box on Tuesday to make a statement on our energy supply network. It is important that we have a balanced network of supply, including from offshore wind, which will be a vital way forward. As the hon. Gentleman indicates, there are huge numbers of opportunities for employment in the United Kingdom in respect of not only renewables but other sources of energy, and the Government will continue to push forward on them.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Rugby is a fast-growing town and expects a population of around 135,000 by 2031, but currently 83% of my constituents are more than 15 minutes' drive away from an accident and emergency department, which is significantly longer than the journey for people in the vast majority of constituencies in England. Recently, I carried out a survey on urgent and emergency care to which 3,000 constituents responded, and 98% of them say they believe that Rugby should have its own full accident and emergency department. May we have a debate to consider how increases in healthcare provision should go hand in hand with the growth of a community?

Mark Spencer: I am happy to raise that matter with the Department of Health and Social Care on my hon. Friend's behalf. It is important that our constituents can access urgent care when it is needed. I am sure my hon. Friend will be aware that the Government have committed to build 40 new hospitals across England by 2030, to transform services for local communities, and that there has been significant investment in the upgrade of existing A&E facilities.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I am sure the whole House has been horrified, as I have been, by the violent scenes in Jerusalem in recent days. Attacks on civilians, including worshippers, have been deeply distressing to see. Will the Leader of the House explain why the Foreign Secretary has not yet come to the House to deliver a statement? Will he confirm what conversations are taking place among the Government to ensure that arms provided by the UK are not used in the conflict in violation of international law? Will he also outline what steps the Government are taking to secure lasting peace in the region, which will include an independent Palestinian state?

Mark Spencer: These are of course delicate issues that need to be handled in the right way. The Foreign Office engages with the Israeli Government and the interested parties in the area. Violence is never the answer and we should do all we can to promote peace in that area. I am certain that the Foreign Office will have heard the hon. Lady's comments, but if it has not, I shall make sure it is aware of them.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Earlier this week, I was privileged to attend an event with colleagues about diabetes. At that event, I met sufferers, and, as you will know, Mr Speaker, many people live with type 1 diabetes and cope with that condition. Many more are affected by type 2 diabetes—up to one in four of us I learned at that event. Information and understanding—awareness—are critical. Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about the strategy of the Government who I know take this matter seriously? Given that so many of our constituents will be so affected, I think that this would attract widespread interest from across the House. We must do more to help those living with diabetes.

Mark Spencer: Unfortunately, my right hon. Friend missed Health questions this week and the opportunity to ask the question of the Health Secretary himself, but I am sure that there will be further opportunities to do so. He is right to highlight the plight of those who suffer with diabetes, and also those who may have mild diabetes without realising it. He has contributed today in highlighting that so that more people may think about their health and get checked by a GP if they feel any symptoms.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Liverpool has a long-established Somaliland community and they were devastated when fire destroyed the Waheen market in Hargeisa. Can the Leader of the House explain how the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is supporting Somaliland, and can he call on the Foreign Minister to consider granting diplomatic recognition to bring positive changes to the country?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Somaliland is an important part of Africa. I am sure that the FCDO will continue to engage with the Government there. She will have the opportunity to raise this matter at the next Foreign Office questions, but it may be something that is worthy of an Adjournment debate, so that she can take more time to lay out her concerns.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): It is right that the Prime Minister is visiting India at the moment to secure a closer partnership with our friends and allies. In that context, can we consider having a debate on the protection of Asian elephants, as their habitats are being reduced in that country and they are also subject to some cruel practices, particularly with regard to some very questionable “tourism”? I would be grateful if such a debate could be considered.

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is a long-time campaigner on animal welfare issues, and is recognised across the House for his work in that area. He is right to once again draw attention to the plight of elephants in Asia. There may be an opportunity for him to raise that directly with the Minister at the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions next Thursday, but I know that, should he secure an Adjournment debate on the matter, a number of colleagues will want to engage with that debate.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): This weekend marks the anniversary of the mass trespass of Kinder Scout, which paved the way for the establishment

of our precious national parks. Yet 90 years on, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 still only allows the public to access around 8% of the land in England. The evidence of the importance of nature for our health and wellbeing continues to grow, so it is profoundly disappointing to learn today that the Government will not be releasing the results of the Agnew review—the Access to the Outdoors Commission. Can we have an urgent debate on the right to roam and the importance of extending that by amending the CRoW Act as soon as possible?

Mark Spencer: I join the hon. Lady in recognising the huge contribution that access to the open countryside can have on people’s physical and mental health. We are blessed in this country with hundreds of thousands of miles of public footpath to allow people to access the countryside, but I hope that she also recognises that, as well as a place of leisure, the countryside is also a place of food production and business. At this time of year, there are lambs in the fields, so it is quite important that people keep dogs on leads when accessing the countryside. Food production is a very important part of the UK economy and, as I have said, we must recognise that the countryside is a place not just of leisure, but of business and food production.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): The collapse of funeral plan provider Safe Hands has left 46,000 people facing the loss of their funeral prepayment plan. Moneys that should have been safely ring-fenced in a trust have been distributed to directors and shareholders in the form of loans and dividends. That amounts to financial misconduct. Can the Leader of the House ask a Treasury Minister please to work with the funeral plan industry and the Financial Conduct Authority to ensure that Safe Hands plan holders do not lose out, and to make a statement?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for her question on this important matter. The Treasury continues to monitor the implementation of regulation in the sector closely, to ensure that the transition to regulation is smooth. Dignity, one of the largest funeral plan providers, has committed temporarily to provide funerals to Safe Hands customers until 22 April, which addresses the short-term risk to consumers. The FCA is working closely with the sector to ensure a good outcome for Safe Hands customers over the long term. I will of course pass on her concerns to the Treasury.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Can we have a debate on geography and history lessons? I gather that one Conservative Member has recently stated that we are sending refugees to “a safe European country, Rwanda”.

Another Conservative MP said that the Church of England was disestablished many years ago, which will come as news to the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, Her Majesty. Many Government Ministers have also said that we cannot change the Prime Minister during a time of war, despite the fact that we changed Prime Minister four times during the Afghan war, once during the first world war, the second world war and the second Boer war, and twice during the Peninsular war. Can we have a debate on the intelligence of Conservative Members?

Mark Spencer: I recognise that the hon. Gentleman has asked a question. He will have five and a half hours this afternoon to make the party political points he wants to make. He made a great effort to make them just now. The House of Commons is blessed with a number of very bright MPs, and he should gently reflect on the language he uses sometimes. The level of debate in this place needs to be lifted sometimes, and he can assist us in delivering that.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Following what the Prime Minister said on arrival in India, can the Leader of the House give an update on what the whipping arrangements for Conservative MPs will be this afternoon?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend will see the Chief Whip in his place. The Prime Minister has indicated that he is keen for the House to decide on the business later today. The vote on the unamended House business will be a free vote to all Conservative MPs and that will be the case this afternoon.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): It was remiss of me earlier not to wish Her Majesty a happy birthday and English friends a happy St George's day on Saturday, but it was even more remiss of the Department for International Trade to glide over and ignore the appalling export trade figures. To remind the House, the UK is down 14% on exports while the rest of the world is up 8.2% in the same period. Can we have a debate on which is failing—Brexit, the Department, or perhaps both?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman had the opportunity to ask the Secretary of State for International Trade at departmental questions. The UK has a great opportunity following Brexit to reach out, and that is what the Prime Minister is doing today in India. Some 11,000 jobs have been created by the trade deal and trade negotiations that he is talking to the Indian Government about today. There is a huge opportunity for the UK Government now that we are outside the EU, and the hon. Gentleman should celebrate and welcome that investment around the world.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend believe, as I do, that a debate would be useful to discuss the actions the Electoral Commission might take in directing all local councils to use simplified postal voting forms, which would be beneficial in ensuring fewer technically spoiled ballot papers and increase turnout figures at local elections across the country?

Mark Spencer: Such a debate would be very timely, given the upcoming local elections. We hope we will have Lords amendments to the Elections Bill next week, and there may be an opportunity for my hon. Friend to raise the matter directly with Ministers during that debate.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I have visited the local food bank in Barnsley, which has seen record levels of demand in recent years, with the main reason for referral being low income. As bills and prices rise, can we have a debate in Government time on how this Government are failing working people and failing to tackle the cost of living crisis?

Mark Spencer: I hope the hon. Lady would recognise that Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine has caused huge ripples around the world in terms of energy prices and food prices. The Government do take that seriously. That is why we are supplying huge amounts of investment to try to protect those families who are most vulnerable from the cost of living increases. That is why we have changed the tapers on universal credit to allow those people who are in work and who claim universal credit to keep more of their money. That is why we have reduced the tax on fuel so that people can try to afford the increasing cost of petrol. The Government are doing a huge amount to try to support those families who are most vulnerable but also to spread the cost of taxation to those who have the broadest shoulders.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Residents constantly contact me about the state of roads and pavements in the London Borough of Harrow. I put this down to the inefficiency of the Labour-run council. However, on Saturday *The Sun* published the real reason, with £2 million of council tax payers' money being given to contractors, contractors not actually doing the work, and then council staff receiving kickbacks. There is an ongoing police investigation on this issue. I understand that every member of the department has now either resigned, retired or been sacked. The council tax payers naturally say, "Are councillors involved? What has been going on?" This has been covered up for eight months. Can we therefore have a debate next week on corruption in local government and transparency? Whether it is Liverpool, Croydon or Harrow, Labour-run councils are corrupt.

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. It is an important principle that local government is independent of central Government. I understand that the council is co-operating with the police on this matter. The Government will take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that a good record of transparency, probity, scrutiny and accountability is maintained across councils in this country. My hon. Friend is doing an excellent job of shining a light on the woeful track record of the Labour-run council in Harrow. I encourage voters there and across the country to vote Conservative on 5 May.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): In keeping with the theme of today being menopause questions, can I highlight that despite promises by the Government to introduce reduced charges for women in England, it still has not happened? My attempts to get answers for these women about costs and shortages have been thwarted by the Department of Health and Social Care. It has taken three weeks to respond to an urgent letter. Responses to named day questions have arrived 10 days late, the answer being nothing that would not have been available at the time of asking. This shows a total disregard for women. We must stop treating women in this way. Will the Leader of the House please help me to help the 13 million menopausal women in this country who deserve our respect?

Mark Spencer: Yes, I will assist the hon. Lady. I recognise and pay tribute to the work that she has done in this area. She is a huge campaigner on these matters and I recognise her contribution to this debate. I will write on her behalf to the Secretary of State for Health.

[Mark Spencer]

I recognise that we do need to do better in responding in a timely way to matters raised by colleagues across the House, and I will assist her in that matter.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): I have always been a strong supporter of the Scouting movement, both as an MP and prior to that. Indeed, my son achieved the Queen's Scout Award. However, last week the district commissioner asked me not to attend an event, saying:

"The Scouts is a non-political movement—I would not want this positive message to be muddled by recent controversial incidents and policies."

Can the Leader of the House advise me on how I go forward in continuing to support the Scouting movement?

Mark Spencer: I am disappointed to hear that. I think that colleagues across the House will recognise the great contribution that Scouting makes to young people in this country. As a former cub and scout myself, I thoroughly enjoyed my time there. It is a non-political organisation that should not get involved, and traditionally has not got involved, in politics. I hope that the leader who wrote to my hon. Friend will reflect on his comments and encourage colleagues across the House to engage with the Scouting movement.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I hope that Chester Zoo's success in becoming the second most popular tourist attraction in the UK will not overshadow some of its important scientific work and achievements, such as protecting rainforests through its palm oil campaign and the outstanding work in developing a treatment for elephant herpes, which will save thousands of elephants. Can we please have a debate on the work of zoos in promoting science, sustainability and environmentalism?

Mark Spencer: I think that is something that is very much worthy of debate. I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to apply for a Back-Bench business debate or an Adjournment debate on that matter, and I join him in congratulating not only Chester Zoo but zoos up and down the country, which are informing the next generation on such matters and contributing to the debate.

Robert Lorgan (High Peak) (Con): Recently the Egyptian-born hate preacher Omar Abdul Kafi went on a UK tour, giving lectures at Finsbury Park mosque in London and a number of venues in Leeds, Liverpool and Mayfair. Abdul Kafi has previously given sermons about killing Jews and advanced antisemitic conspiracy theories, and he is known to have directly inspired the Stockholm suicide bomber, Taimour Abdulwahab. Given these facts, can we have a debate on how on earth such an individual was allowed to enter the country and how that is compatible with the Government's wider Prevent strategy?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Antisemitism has absolutely no place in our society. We expect anyone involved in spreading hate to face the full extent of the law, which is why the UK has robust hate crime tools to support the investigation and prosecution of those who incite racial and religious hatred. I am aware that the individual has made shocking remarks in the past, and I will raise my hon. Friend's concerns with the Home Secretary.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Mariana and her three-year-old son Nestor fled the war in Ukraine to Poland. My constituent is sponsoring them under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. They completed their application on 25 March and are still waiting for a decision. With nowhere to stay in Poland, they have had to return to Ukraine and spend five hours a day sheltering from air raids. The delays in expediting visas are putting innocent civilians at risk and do not match the generosity and compassion of the British public. Can we please have an urgent debate in Government time on this issue?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She is right to highlight the generosity of the British people in welcoming refugees from Ukraine. I know that Lord Harrington meets MPs on a regular basis and I am sure he would be available to her, should she request such a meeting to try to expedite the visa application that she mentions. We have issued 56,000 visas already. A number of schemes are up and running, and we continue to keep our borders open to people who find themselves in the most difficult of circumstances.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating my constituents Rory and Cheryl Thorpe, who—with your fantastic support, Mr Speaker—have become the first small gin producers to have their gin, Ruddy Fine gin, stocked here in Parliament under the new guest gin scheme? Can we have a debate in Government time on how we in Parliament and Government can best showcase Britain's fantastic small food and drink producers to the world?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I am personally committed to showcasing how we can support and sample the many superb food and drink producers across the United Kingdom, but especially those in Nottinghamshire. I had the pleasure of meeting Rory and Cheryl from the Ruddy Fine gin company last night. I can highly recommend the gin, and I pay tribute to them and my hon. Friend for promoting UK food. There is a great opportunity for the UK around the world, and the Ruddy Fine gin company is a great part of that.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House may be aware that tomorrow marks the fourth annual Stephen Lawrence Day, following the tragic racist killing of Stephen Lawrence in 1993. The day was established by the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). The Independent Office for Police Conduct recently released a report stating that stop and search was causing trauma and damaging confidence in policing, despite the police's promise of reform. Correct stop and search works—it helps—but a number of black people still do not have confidence in stop and search and the powers that the police are using. Can we please have an urgent debate on the police's use of stop and search?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady is right to once again draw the attention of the House to this important matter. The Metropolitan police clearly work as hard as they can to protect all communities across London, but I recognise the concerns of some of those communities about these measures, and that is something that is worthy of debate. I encourage her to apply for a Westminster Hall debate.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): My constituents and those in neighbouring constituencies are being greatly inconvenienced by the appalling service provided by TransPennine Express on its south trans-Pennine route. It should be an hourly service, but its website shows that this afternoon there will be four hours between trains. Could the Leader of the House arrange for the Rail Minister to give a statement to the House on how the rail operating companies are meeting their franchise commitments?

Mark Spencer: I understand my hon. Friend's concern. As we enter the summer period, I am sure that a lot of people will want to visit Cleethorpes and experience all it has to offer as a tourist destination, and rail transport will play an important part in getting people there to celebrate all that is Cleethorpes. I will make sure that the Secretary of State for Transport is aware of my hon. Friend's comments and responds to him directly.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On behalf of my constituent Ailsa MacKenzie, the Government placed a remedial order during summer recess to extend the eligibility for widowed parent's allowance and bereavement support payments, but they now appear to have laid the remedial order again, without any explanation. Will the Leader of the House provide an update on progress made on extending the eligibility for widowed parent's allowance and bereavement support payments to cohabitantes with children, so that people who have waited three years will soon get their payments?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know that he has raised this issue in the past. I will make sure that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions writes to him directly with an answer and assists him in getting the answers he requires.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House make good a real deficiency? We have just had a recess and there is a war going on in Europe. A democratic country has been cruelly invaded and President Putin has said this week that sanctions are not helping Russia. This House has had very few chances to talk about and be briefed on the war in Ukraine. Can we make that better next week and in the future? We need regular updates.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, but I am not sure that he is entirely accurate. There will be a debate on Tuesday, of course, where he will be able to raise such matters. We have had 10 oral statements, six urgent questions, three Opposition Day debates, a Backbench Business debate on the UK's relationship with Russia and China, a general debate on Ukraine, an hour's debate on Russian sanctions, departmental and oral questions and PMQs. The House has had huge opportunities to debate such matters and, as I have said, there will be another opportunity for the hon. Gentleman to participate again next Tuesday.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Last weekend was a massive weekend for British boxing, because as Stokies were singing "Delilah" to their hearts' content, Stoke-on-Trent's incredible sporting talent, Nathan "Hitman" Heaney, retained his IBO middleweight title, despite hitting the canvas for the very first time in his career. But as Nathan says:

"You can't keep a Stokie down!"

Will my right hon. Friend congratulate Nathan on his fantastic achievement and on continuing to make Stoke-on-Trent proud? Can time be found for all of us across this House to debate the sporting heroes and icons in our local communities?

Mark Spencer: I think that the House realises that you certainly can't keep this Stokie down! I of course join my hon. Friend in congratulating Nathan "Hitman" Heaney on retaining his title. I am sure that Members across the House would welcome a debate on sporting heroes in our constituencies. It would provide an opportunity for the newly formed all-party parliamentary group on Nottingham Forest to discuss the best team in the country.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Many of my constituents are living in shared ownership flats and are facing the multiple whammy of rising rents and mortgage payments, rising tax bills, and rising service and heating charges over which they have no say. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate after the Queen's Speech on the cost of living crisis facing those in shared ownership?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and this is of course something the Government take seriously. We are providing a lot of help to people who find themselves in those circumstances by maintaining the uplift of the local housing allowance in cash terms and providing £100 million through discretionary housing payments, on top of almost £1.5 billion in discretionary housing payments to local authorities since 2011. There is an enormous amount of support for people who find themselves in those circumstances. We recognise the challenges driven in markets around the world by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and this is something the Government take very seriously.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): In my brilliant local hospital, the Royal United Hospital in Bath, about 100 beds at any point are occupied by patients who should be discharged but cannot be because there is no one to look after them in the community or at home. Can we have a statement on what the Government are doing about the urgent crisis in social care recruitment?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I hope she will recognise that this is actually the first Government genuinely to try to tackle the challenges of adult social care in the country. That is why we have introduced the levy to support the NHS in fighting its backlog, but also to break down the barriers between healthcare and adult social care. It is something the Secretary of State for Health is working on as we speak, and I hope that, as the Health and Care Bill progresses through the House, she will support the Government in delivering on that challenge.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The covid pandemic has led to a revolutionary change in the way we work, with many jobs able to be successfully completed remotely. Could we have a debate in Government time on how the benefits of remote working can increase productivity, especially in areas such as Hull, because it means people do not have to leave the area they love for the job they want?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and this is something very much worthy of debate. I know a number of people have found working from home convenient to them, but we need to get the balance right between productivity in the workplace and delivering for the UK economy. Of course, there may be opportunities for the Government to save taxpayers' money by reducing the number of desks in Westminster and exporting some of those jobs up and down the country.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The al-Aqsa mosque is one of the holiest sites in Islam, and it is one of the very few places where Palestinians can exercise a degree of sovereignty. Recently, during this holy month of Ramadan, we have seen violence, with over 150 Palestinians injured in clashes with Israeli police. The conflict has the potential to escalate further, so will the Leader of the House make way for a debate in Government time on the rights of the Palestinian people?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I think it should be the right of every human being to live in security and peace. These are of course delicate matters, and I am sure there would be an opportunity at Foreign Office questions for her to ask Ministers directly how they can assist in bringing peace to the area.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I am sure the Leader of the House is as excited as I am about last week's announcement by WWE that it plans to bring its first UK stadium tour to the Principality stadium in September. This will I hope be a massive boost to the south Wales economy and inspire a new generation of British wrestling superstars and fans. With that in mind, will the Leader of the House commit to a debate in Government time on the benefit of these big cultural and sporting events to the UK?

Mark Spencer: I join the hon. Lady in celebrating that investment in all that is WWE. It is clearly a great sport, and if it brings investment to south Wales, that is great news. I am sure she will continue to champion her area in this Chamber.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. That ends business questions.

Points of Order

11.33 am

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise to Members for delaying the debate, but this is the first opportunity I have had to do this, and it has to be done promptly after the event itself.

Yesterday, I was on a Statutory Instrument Committee dealing with a Department for Work and Pensions matter, and I simply asked a question about the rationale of the urgency of the proposal brought forward by the Government. The Minister's response was that I would know more if I visited my local jobcentre more frequently, and to accuse me of not visiting it for about five years. That is completely untrue; I am a regular visitor to the jobcentre, as I am to other institutions. However, the issue this raises is one of privilege. Does this mean that the Government are now monitoring the visits of Members of this House to Government Departments for use in political debate? If that is the case, let me just say that I have a brilliant working relationship with my local jobcentre, where the staff work incredibly hard, but most of our communication is via emails, telephones and so on. However, if our visits to Government offices are to be monitored, it will no longer be emails or telephones: I will insist on a meeting at the tax office, the jobcentre, the border office and every other Government agency in my constituency. This is a matter of parliamentary privilege, Mr Speaker, and I would like you to look into the matter.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for notice of that point of order. The incident he recounts is indeed surprising and I note that the Leader of the House has heard it. We will leave it there for now, but I will follow up on it.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister's comments on Tuesday night to his Back Benchers were briefed to journalists by his spokesperson. Those comments were reasonably interpreted by several media outlets, including *The Daily Telegraph*, as being criticisms of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the BBC for their comments on and coverage of Ukraine. Ministers were out on broadcast rounds yesterday and they did not seek to correct that interpretation, but since then, the Government have corrected the record and said that the Prime Minister's comments referred only to the Archbishop and not the BBC. I am more than happy to echo that correction and withdraw my comments of yesterday.

Mr Speaker: That draws a line under that.

Referral of Prime Minister to Committee of Privileges

Mr Speaker: Before we begin, I believe it would assist the House if I remind Members of the decision in question and the procedure on this motion. The decision before the House is whether or not to refer the matter to the Committee of Privileges at this time. It will be for the Committee to report back on whether it considers there has been a contempt. While it is perfectly in order for hon. Members to question the veracity of the Prime Minister's responses to the House cited in the motion, it is not in order to challenge more generally the truthfulness of the Prime Minister or any other hon. or right hon. Member. Good temper and moderation must be maintained in parliamentary language.

Much of what might be said today has already been said in response to the Prime Minister's statement on Tuesday. Previous debates on such motions have been relatively short. Since 2010, the longest such debate has been for one hour and 29 minutes, and debates have been as short as seven minutes. That said, an amendment has been selected and the motion is of great importance. The debate may continue for as long as it takes unless either there is a successful closure motion to bring the debate to an end or we reach 5 o'clock, in which case the debate will be adjourned to a future day. I would also say that if the debate becomes very repetitive, we may have to consider whether to do closure earlier, but I will leave that to how the debate develops. Any Members who wish to speak need to stand to ensure that they catch my eye at the beginning of the debate.

The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has tabled a motion for debate on the matter of privilege, which I have agreed should take precedence today. I inform the House that although I have selected the amendment in the name of the Minister for the Cabinet Office, I understand that it is now the Government's intention not to move it. I call Keir Starmer to move the motion.

11.38 am

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I beg to move,

That this House

(1) notes that, given the issue of fixed penalty notices by the police in relation to events in 10 Downing Street and the Cabinet Office, assertions the Rt hon Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip has made on the floor of the House about the legality of activities in 10 Downing Street and the Cabinet Office under Covid regulations, including but not limited to the following answers given at Prime Minister's Questions: 1 December 2021, that "all guidance was followed in No. 10", Official Report vol. 704, col. 909; 8 December 2021 that "I have been repeatedly assured since these allegations emerged that there was no party and that no Covid rules were broken", Official Report vol. 705, col. 372; 8 December 2021 that "I am sickened myself and furious about that, but I repeat what I have said to him: I have been repeatedly assured that the rules were not broken", Official Report vol. 705, col. 372 and 8 December 2021 "the guidance was followed and the rules were followed at all times", Official Report vol. 705, col. 379, appear to amount to misleading the House; and

(2) orders that this matter be referred to the Committee of Privileges to consider whether the Rt hon Member's conduct amounted to a contempt of the House, but that the Committee shall not begin substantive consideration of the matter until the inquiries currently being conducted by the Metropolitan Police have been concluded.

The motion seeks to defend the simple principle that honesty, integrity and telling the truth matter in our politics. That is not a principle that I or the Labour party have a special claim to. It is a British principle. It is a principle that has been cherished by Conservatives for as long as their party has existed. It is embraced by Unionist and nationalist parties alike and still guides members from every political party in this House.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I lost my mother to covid in the first lockdown. It was a very painful experience because she was in a hospital bed and, as we obeyed the rules, we could not be by her side when she passed. I have made my disquiet known to the Prime Minister a couple of times, and he has taken that on board. I am deeply unhappy about how No. 10 performed over the period in question. However, I suggest to the right hon. and learned Member that it is perfectly natural in this country to weigh all the evidence before deciding on intent. As the central issue is whether the Prime Minister misled Parliament, does he agree that, in us all accepting that the matter should be referred to the Privileges Committee, that Committee needs to weigh all the evidence before coming to a decision, and that that includes the Sue Gray report?

Mr Speaker: Order. May I say to Members that interventions are meant to be short? If you are on the list to speak and you intervene—I know that the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) is not and would not want to be as he has made his speech—you will go down the list.

Keir Starmer: I am sorry for the loss in the hon. Member's family. We all send our condolences. I know how difficult it has been for so many during this period. In relation to the substantive intervention, I have two points, which I will develop later. First, there is already a clear case before the House: the Prime Minister said "no...rules were broken", and 50 fines for breaking the rules and the law have already been issued, so there is already a reasonable case. Secondly—I understand the sentiment behind the intervention—if the motion is passed, the Committee will not begin its substantive work until the police investigations are complete, so it will have all the evidence before it, one way or the other, to come to a view. That is within the body of the motion and is the right way; the way it should work. I hope that addresses the concerns raised.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Further to the point made by the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), many of us in the Chamber have lost loved ones in the last period of time and feel greatly aggrieved that we have not had our day in court, if that is perhaps the way to put it. We feel the need to have justice seen for all those who have lost loved ones—those who passed away and whom we miss greatly. Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman feel that, when it comes to justice, while we do need to see all the evidence, there must be accountability in the process, and accountability means that people have to answer for their actions?

Keir Starmer: Again, I express my sadness at the loss that the hon. Member and his family have endured. I was particularly struck—I think we all were—by how he spoke about that in this House just a few months ago.

[Keir Starmer]

On the substantive point, which is the point of the motion, this is about honesty, integrity and telling the truth in this place. It is an important principle, and one that we all share—as I say, I do not claim it as a Labour party principle—because we know the importance of it. That is why it is a matter for the House to consider. But it is a principle under attack, because the Prime Minister has been accused of repeatedly, deliberately and routinely misleading the House over parties held in Downing Street during lockdown.

That is a serious allegation. If it is true, it amounts to contempt of Parliament. It is not, and should never be, an accusation made lightly. Nor should we diminish the rights of Members to defend each other from that accusation. But the Prime Minister's supporters do not seek to do that. Instead, many of them seek simply to dismiss its importance. They say, "There are worse crimes," "He didn't rob a bank", "He only broke the rules for 10 minutes" and, "It was all a long time ago." Every time one of those arguments is trotted out, the status of this House is gradually eroded and our democracy becomes a little weaker. The convention that Parliament must not be misled and that, in return, we do not accuse each other of lying are not curious quirks of this strange place but fundamental pillars on which our constitution is built, and they are observed wherever parliamentary democracy thrives. With them, our public debate is elevated. When Members assume good faith on behalf of our opponents, we can explore, test and interrogate our reasonable disagreements about how we achieve our common goals. Ultimately, no matter which Benches we sit on, no matter which Whip we follow, fundamentally we are all here for one reason: to advance the common goals of the nations, of the peoples, that make up our United Kingdom.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am grateful to the Leader of the Opposition for giving way. He mentioned some of the arguments around, "Well, it was just nine minutes." I met a woman, the daughter of a serviceman who lost his life the week before that birthday party. She said to me, "What I wouldn't give for just nine more minutes with him." I congratulate the right hon. and learned Gentleman on the way he is rising above party politics here. To diminish nine minutes as just anything diminishes us all across both sides of the House. Would he not agree?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention, because it goes to the heart of the matter. Some have tried to suggest equivalence between these fixed penalty notices and speeding. That just does not understand the enormity of the difference. It is very rare that the whole nation goes through something together—a trauma together, that was covid. There are awful cases of funerals, of weddings that were missed, of parents who did not see the birth of their children. They are awful cases, but I think almost every family was marked during this period, including my own, by things we did not do that we would have liked to have done—usually visiting elderly parents and seeing children. There was a huge sense of guilt that we did not do it, including in my own family: guilt that because we followed the rules, we did not do what we thought was actually right by our elderly relatives. That is why it hurts so much. That is

why anybody trying to say, "This is just like a speeding ticket" does not understand what this goes to politically and emotionally.

Going back to the principles, I want this debate to be about the principles, because that is where I think the debate should be. The Committee will be charged, if the motion goes through, with determining whether there was any misleading. But this is about the principles we all care about. That is why I think everybody should simply vote for the motion this evening to uphold those principles. Those principles, that we do not mislead the House and in return we do not call each other liars in this House, ensure that we make good decisions and avoid bad ones. It is what makes our democracy grow in ways that reflect the hopes and tackle the fears of those we represent. It is what makes our democracy thrive. It is what makes this House thrive. It is what makes Britain thrive.

Mr Speaker, we do not have to look far to see what happens when that faith is lost and there is no hope of reason resolving disagreements. When nations are divided, when they live in different worlds with their own truths and their own alternative facts, democracy is replaced by an obsession with defeating the other side. Those we disagree with become enemies. The hope of learning and adapting is lost. Politics becomes a blood sport rather than a quest to improve lives; a winner-takes-all politics where, inevitably, everyone loses out.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition was big-hearted enough to say that he unwittingly misled the House. I am sure he would agree that it is very important to stick to the convention that we do not call each other liars, and there is a good reason for that. Two of our colleagues have been killed and there have been a lot of attacks on colleagues. In this debate, can we just accept that everybody here is an honourable Member and that when they speak here, although they may unwittingly mislead the House, they think that they were, for instance, abiding with the rules? Can we tone down the whole nature of this debate?

Keir Starmer: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention; I will try to keep within those parameters and elevate this debate to the principles that we apply when we debate in this Chamber.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am grateful for what my right hon. and learned Friend said about the fact that we do not want Opposition Members to have a monopoly on truth. He makes a very important point, but does he agree that the fundamental point is about whether we as Members of Parliament are fit to hold our powers to hold people to account or whether politics will always get in the way? It was disturbing to hear that Conservative Members might vote against the motion because a Labour Chair was involved, and it is disappointing that my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) felt that he had to step down. The principle of whether we either have an independent process or do it ourselves is very important.

Keir Starmer: That is very important. We have these procedures to hold us all to the rules of the House, and it is very important that they are applied in the right way with the right principles.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The right hon. and learned Member is making a very powerful speech. On procedures, does he agree that there is a bigger point about Parliament's governance structures? Our whole system of checks and balances is completely out of date. It is beyond ludicrous that the arbiter of whether the ministerial code has been broken is the person who is accused of breaking it—in this instance, the Prime Minister. Does the Leader of the Opposition agree that we also need a wider look at those governance structures, which are simply not fit for purpose?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention, because it raises a very serious point. A lot of our conventions, rules and traditions are based on the principle of honour and on the fact that Members of this House would not, other than inadvertently, mislead the House. That is why the rules are set, and they are set on that proposition. If a Member of the House—whoever that is—does not abide by those honourable principles, we have that stress test of the rules.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will take one more intervention and then I will make some progress.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I understand completely the point made by the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) about toning down the rhetoric—[*Interruption.*] I understand that position, but let me make this point, because I have known him over the years: we cannot tone down the seriousness of this matter. I was in the Prime Minister's constituency earlier this week; it is the neighbouring constituency to mine and we are campaigning for the London Borough of Hillingdon in the election. There is some shift in the vote from Tory to Labour because of this issue, but that is not the significant point. What is significant is the number of people we found who were totally disillusioned, who had had enough of the system and who were blaming the system itself. That is what we are fighting and campaigning for. We are campaigning to restore the credibility of our country's democratic processes.

Keir Starmer: That is a really important and powerful point, because if we do not pass this motion and take this opportunity to restate the principles, we are all complicit in allowing the standards to slip. We are all complicit in allowing the public to think that we are all the same, that nobody tells the truth and that there are alternative sets of facts.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Will the right hon. and learned Member give way?

Keir Starmer: I will in a minute; I have given way a lot and I want to make some progress, but I will try to come back to the hon. Member.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Will the right hon. and learned Member give way?

Keir Starmer: I will make some progress and try to come back to hon. Members when I can.

The conventions and the traditions that we are debating are not an accident. They have been handed down to us as the tools that protect Britain from malaise, extremism and decline. That is important, because the case against

the Prime Minister is that he has abused those tools, that he has used them to protect himself rather than our democracy, and that he has turned them against all that they are supposed to support. Government Members know that the Prime Minister has stood before the House and said things that are not true, safe in the knowledge that he will not be accused of lying because he cannot be. He stood at the Dispatch Box and point-blank denied that rule breaking took place when it did, and as he did so he was hoping to gain extra protection from our good faith that no Prime Minister would ever deliberately mislead this House. He has used our faith and our conventions to cover up his misdeeds.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will just finish this point. After months of denials, absurd claims that all the rules were followed and feigned outrage at his staff discussing rule breaking, we now know that the law was broken. We know that the Prime Minister himself broke the law, and we know that he faces the possibility of being found to have broken it again and again and again.

As the police investigation is ongoing, we do not need to make final judgment on the Prime Minister's contempt of Parliament today. When the time comes, the Prime Minister will be able to make his case. He can put his defence—of course he can. He can make his case as his defence that his repeated misleading of Parliament was inadvertent; or that he did not understand the rules that he himself wrote, and his advisers at the heart of Downing Street either did not understand the rules or misled him when they assured him that they were followed at all times; or that he thought he was at a work event, even while the empty bottles piled up. He can make those defences when the time comes.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con) *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will give way in just a minute.

We already know that he has a case to answer. The Prime Minister said that no rules were broken, but more than 50 fines for breaching the rules and the law have now been issued, including to the Prime Minister. Anybody who denies that simple fact has their head in the sand or has given up any interest in the truth and in the traditions of our nation in order to prop up a lawbreaking Prime Minister.

Today's motion would refer the matter to the Privileges Committee, a Committee that has a Government majority. No one can say that the Prime Minister is not being judged by his peers. The Committee would investigate the Prime Minister for contempt only once the police had concluded their investigation. No one can say that there is prejudice to the rest of the inquiry. And, of course, any findings the Committee comes to and any sanctions it might propose would then come back before the House as a whole, so no one can say that it is too soon for the House to decide. It is a system of self-governance, and it should be, because with the great privilege that comes from sitting in this place comes the great responsibility to protect the conventions that underpin our democracy.

Jacob Young: On conventions, does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that language is equally important? Will he therefore take this opportunity to

[Jacob Young]

distance himself from the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who said that he wanted to lynch another hon. Member, and from the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who is sitting right next to him and who called Members on this side of the House Tory scum? He should distance himself from them.

Keir Starmer: That is a shame. I thought that we were having a reasonably serious debate—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) needs to sit down. In fairness to the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), he has taken a lot of interventions, but I certainly do not need her standing up and waiting to catch somebody's eye.

Keir Starmer: If the debate descends into a shouting match, Mr Speaker, we lose the principle that is there to defend all of us, including all the Conservative Members. We are not claiming a principle to support those on the Opposition Benches and not those on the Government Benches; it is a principle that supports us all. If we fail—

Sir William Cash *rose*—

Keir Starmer: I will take the intervention from the hon. Gentleman.

Sir William Cash: The Leader of the Opposition has just said, quite rightly, that this issue affects everyone in the House. Does he accept that at this moment there is a complication, namely that the Committee on Standards is conducting a report, under the aegis of Sir Ernest Ryder's recommendations, which raises questions about whether a fair trial and natural justice are possible at this juncture? That is currently under discussion in the House. The same rule applies with regard to the question of the Committee of Privileges, which has already been criticised. I was on the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege, and I can assure the Leader of the Opposition that serious problems arise in relation to the need to rectify those omissions in procedural fairness.

Keir Starmer: I have heard the hon. Gentleman put his case on natural justice a number of times, and of course he has every right to do so. I disagree, but that is the point of the debates we have. However, a debate about natural justice, or due process, need not hold up the current process. This motion can and should be passed today, and everyone should support its being passed today to uphold the principles to which I have referred. There is a discussion to be had about natural justice—an interesting debate, in which we will take different views—but it need not hold up this process.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The right hon. and learned Gentleman is entirely correct to prosecute the case on the basis of principle, but there is still an amendment on the Order Paper, even if the Government will not move it, which would indicate that not everyone in the House shares his view of the importance of these principles. Does he share my view that at the conclusion of this debate there should be a Division, so

that we know where every single Member of this House stands on the principles? At a time like this, on an issue like this, there should be no hiding place for anyone.

Keir Starmer: I agree. We have a duty here today, in relation to this motion and these principles. If we fail in that duty, the public will not forgive and forget, because this will be the Parliament that failed—failed to stand up for honesty, integrity and telling the truth in politics; failed to stand up to a Prime Minister who seeks to turn our good faith against us; and failed to stand up for our great democracy.

It is not just the eyes of our country that are upon us. There will also be the judgment of future generations, who will look back at what Members of this great House did when our customs were tested, when its traditions were pushed to breaking point, and when we were called to stand up for honesty, for integrity and for truth.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

12.2 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Part of this is about the Prime Minister. My habit over 46 years has been not to make a public or private comment about a party leader, whether mine or someone else's, and I do not propose to change that now. If I have something to say to a Prime Minister, I say it directly, as I did first with Harold Wilson, and have done with most other Prime Ministers since then.

My preference would be to back the amendment, but if it is not going to be moved, I cannot do so. This is not the right time for the House to make a decision. The words in the amendment are ones that I would support, and I am sorry that the House will not be able to consider them. I may be in the minority in that, but that is not a problem in the House; it happens to a lot of people.

The words in the third paragraph of the Prime Minister's statement on Tuesday spell out the situation: he said that he did not think, in effect, that it was a party, or that the rules had been broken. He now accepts that the situation has been judged differently by the police. I do not think we should build a great big cake on top of that admission and acceptance; the House would do better to leave it like that.

It would also be better—I am not challenging you, Mr Speaker—if the House decided that the reference to the Committee on Privileges should be made when all the information is available from the Cabinet Office report and the results of the police investigation.

The last thing I want to say—without attacking the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting)—is that those who heard the “Today” programme this morning heard repeated references to the local government elections on 5 May. Whatever the Leader of the Opposition says, part of what is before the House today is a straightforward attempt to gain party political advantage, and I intend to have no part of that.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the leader of the Scottish National party, Ian Blackford.

12.4 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a day like this, we think of all those who made so many sacrifices over the covid pandemic and those who lost

so many loved ones. Our thoughts and our prayers today are with each and every one of them. There is one reason why it is so important that this motion be debated and passed today. At the very heart of the scandal, there is one thing that needs to be said and heard, and it is the very reason why we all need to act. The reason is this: the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom is a liar. I genuinely do not say that lightly, and I do not say it loosely. I honestly believe that it is right that we are slow to use that word, but equally, I consider it right that we should never be slow to say it, and to call it out, when it is so obviously true. Members across this House know it to be true, and the public have long known it to be true. That is why it needs to be said today, and why we all need to act.

Every single day, motions come before this House that are complex and nuanced. There are usually two sides to the argument, and valid reasons for any position that is proposed, but I think we can safely say that this definitively is not one of those debates. The evidence in the motion speaks for itself. It is as clear as day. If there ever was an open-and-shut case, this is it.

Last December, the Prime Minister came to this House and denied that there were any parties in 10 Downing Street during the long covid lockdowns. Typically, and tellingly, he hid behind his staff in saying that. He told us that he was given firm reassurances that no parties had happened, and that no rules had been broken. Every Member of this Parliament witnessed that; the public saw it with their own eyes; and, shamefully, to this very day, it is still on the record of this House. But we know the truth, and the truth contains no ifs, buts or maybes. The House was misled, and so were the public. We were all misled deliberately, because the Prime Minister knew the truth. Not only were parties happening, and not only was the law broken, but the Prime Minister was at the very parties that he denied had even happened. The truth is simple: he lied to avoid getting caught, and once he got caught, he lied again. There is no other way to describe it. There is no other word for it.

I can understand that this may be a terrible truth for those on the Government Benches to hear, but it is a truth that they need to hear, and that they need to live with. I say to the Father of the House, for whom I have the utmost respect, that this has nothing to do with any elections. This is about the behaviour of a Prime Minister in office. Much more importantly, the uncomfortable truth that the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom is a liar is exactly why those on the Government Benches finally need to act and remove him from office. Other Prime Ministers, including all his predecessor Conservative Prime Ministers, would have been long gone by now. Members on the Government Benches put the Prime Minister in power; they have the power to remove him, and the public expect them to act. We have reached this point. A motion of contempt for a sitting Prime Minister is shocking, but unfortunately it is no surprise.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My right hon. Friend makes an important point about Conservative Members being here to listen and watch. Regardless of the number of flushed or drained faces on the Conservative Benches, what does he say to those who previously called for the Prime Minister to resign, but who, as things got worse, changed their position, and are not here today?

Ian Blackford: I will come on to that in a little more detail, but the Tory MPs who are here, and those who are not here for whatever reason, should show some moral fibre and show a backbone. They should recognise what this Prime Minister is doing to the very fabric of our democracy. Today of all days, they should do the right thing and support this motion in the name of the Leader of the Opposition and of the leaders of so many other parties in this House.

We should not forget that, when the Tories put this Prime Minister into Downing Street nearly three years ago—[*Interruption.*] Actually it was the Conservatives who elected Boris Johnson as their leader. The important fact is that the Tories knew exactly the kind of person they were putting into the highest office in the land. They knew his track record; they knew his character; they knew who he was and what he was; and they still chose him as their leader. Conservative Members know better than anyone else in the House that a trail of scandal and lawbreaking was always going to define his time in office.

In three short years, those who made those predications have unfortunately not been disappointed. The sleaze and the scandal has been ten a penny. From lying to the Queen to illegally proroguing Parliament—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have to be careful. I have asked for moderate, more temperate language. I am not having the Queen brought into it. Withdraw that point.

Ian Blackford: In deference to you, Mr Speaker, I will do so.

Let us not forget the fact that the Prime Minister was found by the highest court in the land to have illegally prorogued this Parliament.

Mr Speaker: Order. I said this at the beginning, and I know the right hon. Gentleman will want to stick to what I said. We cannot go beyond the terms of the debate. I know he is very good and can stick to the script that I have explained.

Ian Blackford: I will happily take your guidance, Mr Speaker. Of course, we will reflect on the Supreme Court's judgment.

Stuffing the House of Lords with Tory party donors, VIP lanes for covid contracts, and even dodgy donations to decorate Downing Street—this is who the Prime Minister is. It is who he has always been. As Prime Minister, he has done exactly what it says on the tin. The real point is that as the days pass with him staying in power, it is who the entire Conservative party has become.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): My right hon. Friend is making a very measured and powerful speech that will strike a chord with the electorate in my area, where people of all political persuasions have been writing to me calling for the Prime Minister's resignation. They are not surprised by his repeated pattern of behaviour and the lame excuses, but they are surprised that Conservative Members are keeping him in office. Why does my right hon. Friend think that is?

Ian Blackford: I hope Conservative Members listen very carefully to what my hon. Friend says, because the power to remove the Prime Minister rests with them. They can submit letters to the 1922 committee, and they

[*Ian Blackford*]

can recognise the damage that the Prime Minister is causing to the fabric of our democracy—and, yes, to the integrity, honesty and decency of this House.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman sit down?

Ian Blackford: Here we go. Once again, the Conservatives want us to sit down and shut up. They do not wish to hear the voices of those of us, here to represent our constituents, who are frankly appalled at the way the Prime Minister has laughed at the people of these isles with his behaviour during covid. If Conservative Members vote down this motion, not only will they be endorsing all those scandals and all that sleaze, but they will be handing the Prime Minister a blank cheque to do it all over again. I would be surprised if the hon. Gentleman accepts the scandals, the sleaze and the corruption and is prepared to give the Prime Minister a blank cheque. I do not want to do that. If he does, he can explain why.

Mr Baker: The right hon. Gentleman is right to be surprised, because of course I am appalled; that is why I encouraged him to sit down. If he would let us speak, he might advance his own cause. Some of us are actually extremely disappointed. The right hon. Gentleman heard what I said on Tuesday. He is a brother in Christ. Does he not believe in redemption?

Ian Blackford: I believe in truth and justice, and I believe that a Prime Minister who has misled the House should face the appropriate sanctions.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) talks of contrition. Does my right hon. Friend think that, when the Conservative party attacks the very foundations of the Church of England—the Conservative party at prayer—we should take no lectures from them on being contrite or reconciled sinners?

Ian Blackford: We have had the usual deflection from the Prime Minister over the past few days. To see the Archbishop of Canterbury, the leader of the established Church of their nation, being traduced in the way he was by the Prime Minister, my goodness. How utterly shameful.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I wonder whether it is worth pointing out to the House that, before we can have Christian forgiveness, we must first have confession and contrition, neither of which we have seen from the Prime Minister.

Ian Blackford: How we get confession from a Prime Minister who denies everything, I just do not know.

Mr Speaker, I know you will understand that I cannot let this moment pass without a special word for the spineless Scottish Tories. In fairness, the Scottish Tory leader is probably the only person in the Conservative party who finds himself in a deeper hole than the Prime Minister. In fact, he is so far down a political hole that he obviously found it impossible to dig his way out and make it down to London to vote his boss out tonight. I understand that plenty of people back home are looking forward to the Scottish Tories being given a straight red in the council elections in a few weeks. [*Interruption.*]

There we go again. I hope people in Scotland are watching, because what we see is the Conservatives trying to shout down parliamentarians in this House. That is what is happening.

For most people, it is very understandable—[*Interruption.*] There is Scotland's answer from the Tories: "Let's shout Scotland down." That is what they are doing this afternoon. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Can we just calm down? I want to hear the right hon. Gentleman, and I know he wants to get back on track. He does not want to distract from this important debate.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

It is understandable that most people's main reaction to the flip-flopping Scottish Tory leader and his support for the Prime Minister is disbelief and justified anger. I have to admit that, when I reflect on the position of the Scottish Tory leader, my main reaction is something I know he will appreciate far less. I actually feel sorry for him, because he is by no means the first person to have his career ruined by the Prime Minister. That pile of people is a mountain high. Everybody, and I mean everybody, is eventually thrown under the Boris bus. As we saw yesterday, not even the Archbishop of Canterbury is safe. Clearly, the days of the Church of England being the Conservative party at prayer are long gone. The Prime Minister's party is obviously praying to another god these days, although no doubt even that will not guarantee its salvation.

But in all seriousness, that unjustified attack on the archbishop gives another toxic insight into the thinking and methodology of this Prime Minister. His modus operandi is very simple: when he finds himself under political pressure, he finds someone else to blame—anyone else, just as long as he never takes responsibility himself, because nothing and nobody else matters. The only thing that does matter is that this Prime Minister will stop at nothing to save his own skin. That is why Conservative Members should not save him today. Think about it: he would not even lift his finger to help them. So if they have any self-respect, they need to ask themselves why they should even be contemplating walking through the Lobby for him.

Let me end on this point. It might surprise hon. Members to hear, from a party that is unapologetically seeking out of this very institution and out of this Parliament, that I actually do care how it acts and operates, and about the values it holds. I care deeply for this reason. Today's motion is not just about this Parliament or about this place. We should all know by now that democracy and decency are under assault the world over. If we fail to defend these values in every single institution we are part of, these values will decay and decline. It was George Orwell who famously said:

"Political chaos is connected with the decay of language".

I know that people are deeply fearful about just how real that prophesy has felt in the last few years because, when language decays, so does the truth and so does trust in our politics. A Prime Minister who cannot be trusted with the truth marks the end of that dangerous decline. So if today is about anything, it has to be about finally ending that decline.

That decline did not start with this Prime Minister, but it needs to end with him. We should all be very clear as to what the consequences are if this House fails to act today. If we don't act—if we don't stop—this Parliament will be endorsing a new normal in this Parliament and across our politics: a new normal where no one is held responsible, no one is held to account and no one ever resigns. That is exactly why this motion matters, because it can and it will only ever become a new normal if we put up with it. It only becomes normal if those responsible are not held to account and are not made to answer for their actions. So I genuinely say to Members from across the House, but especially those Members opposite: if they have any interest in maintaining some dignity and decency in public life, they should finally hold this Prime Minister to account for his actions and remove him from office. They should support this motion, they should submit their letters of no confidence and they should finally show this Prime Minister the door.

12.22 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Thank you for calling me so early in this debate to deliver my sermon, Mr Speaker. If I may, by means of parish notices, let me wish Her Majesty a happy 96th birthday.

My intention was to vote against the Government's amendment and that would still be my intention were it to be moved. I appreciate the efforts by my right hon. Friend the Chief Whip to find a way through—he is somebody we are lucky to have in his role—but we were at risk of making a mistake. The original motion is perfectly acceptable and allows for much of the spirit of the amendment. For example, the publication of the Gray report would be automatic upon the conclusion of the Metropolitan police's work. There was no need to complicate matters.

The Ukraine situation is of huge importance, but the invasion of a sovereign nation by a dictatorial aggressor should not be a reason why we should accept lower standards ourselves. I have told the Prime Minister to his face that I think he is doing a good job in robustly supporting the Ukrainian Government. Her Majesty's Government, along with our nation, can be proud of their role and generosity. Let us give credit where credit is due. However, much as I may have tried, I cannot reconcile myself to the Prime Minister's continued leadership of our country and the Conservative party. I say this by means of context, so that everyone, particularly my constituents and colleagues, can understand my position, without hiding my views with ever more elaborate disguises. To those constituents who disagree with me, I say that I appreciate their anger, just as I can appreciate the anger of colleagues. However, say what you mean and mean what you say.

I submitted my letter of no confidence to my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) in December last year. I did so for the following reason. It followed the leak of the Allegra Stratton mock press conference video. I believe that in that video she did nothing wrong. She nervously laughed and sought to make light of an embarrassing situation. To see her crying on her doorstep, feeling the full weight of responsibility and anger of a country, was deeply moving and I felt immensely sorry for her. I hope that she is well and will be able to continue her distinguished career. But what alarmed me most was that, later that

evening, a press preview of the winter covid plan B measures was brought forward to try to move matters on. We debated those measures at length, but we can agree, if not on their extent or importance, that they none the less sought to compel or restrict what people in this country could do. I therefore thought to myself: if a Government were prepared to bring such measures forward earlier in order to distract from their own embarrassment, the Prime Minister was no longer fit to govern.

I care deeply about my colleagues. I know that a number are struggling at the moment. We have been working in a toxic atmosphere. The parliamentary party bears the scars of misjudgments of leadership. There can be few colleagues on this side of the House who are truly enjoying being Members of Parliament at the moment. It is utterly depressing to be asked to defend the indefensible. Each time, part of us withers.

I have questioned my place in this party in recent months and perhaps that is symptomatic of a swathe of our voters in the country, but I tell them firmly that I am not going anywhere and I urge them to stick with us in the forthcoming elections. But for us to maintain their trust and confidence, we must be seen to do the right thing. It is our responsibility—it is the Conservative parliamentary party's responsibility. We must stop delegating and delaying our political judgment. We each only have our own limited and imperfect integrity. We cannot keep spending it on others whom we cannot be sure will not let us down.

I have great empathy for all those who worked at No. 10 and in the Cabinet Office. They bore an immense burden and worked under the most intense pressure. They worked hard and made sacrifices. I extend that same empathy to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who knows more than most the personal challenges and personal battles that came from the pandemic. But the matter before us is one at the heart of this institution, of our Parliament.

I love this place, believing it to be a place of high ideals and purpose. What is said here matters. Quite apart from the Facebook clips about roundabouts and drains in our constituencies, or indeed the confected anger to wind people up, it should be a place venerated by those of us given the singular honour of being sent here. Of course it can be a pantomime, a farce, turgidly boring and obscure, but it should always be reasonably honest. It is for that, I hope not naive, principle that I cannot support the amendment and I will vote for the motion. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Come on, Mr McDonnell—you have been here longer than most people! We do not want to clap after every speech.

12.29 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I warmly commend the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for the speech he just gave. He did so with great courage and honesty and, frankly, with the integrity that a lot of us have seen him show in his chairmanship of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. This House knows that serving on and chairing Select Committees is not always easy, because quite often people come to Select Committee meetings with fixed views. They are not all that interested in the evidence

[Chris Bryant]

that is presented to them and resolutely hold the same view after the meeting that they held at its beginning, even though everything has been proved to be quite the opposite of what they thought. I know from those who serve on the hon. Gentleman's Committee that he listens to the evidence, and he is a very good parliamentarian as Chair of the Committee.

It all got a bit religious earlier and I felt like I was back at theological college. Being, I think, the only person in the House who can actually pronounce absolution on anybody, I thought I was suddenly going to get a new job!

I also warmly commend the work that the Chief Whip has done this week, because he has got us into a much better place today than the House would have been in if he had not made the decisions that, doubtless advised by others, he has made today.

I had not expected to speak in this debate. I will be very straight with the House—if you see what I mean—in saying that it is sometimes difficult being the Chair of the Committee on Standards and of the Privileges Committee, because one is asked to comment on literally every single Member of the House at some point. I am absolutely scrupulous in making sure that I never comment, in public or in private, on anything that might possibly come to either of the Committees. I did not think this matter would come to the Privileges Committee, which is why I commented on it. Consequently, it is quite right that I recuse myself: I will not take part in the deliberations of the Committee on this matter if this motion is passed in any shape or form. I think I could have done it fairly—I chaired the Standards Committee when we had the Prime Minister before us in respect of a different matter and we disagreed with the Commissioner for Standards and found in the Prime Minister's favour—but I understand that the House needs to know, absolutely for certain, that the process will be fair. In a strange way, that means that I can actually say something today.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Chris Bryant: Oh, all right.

Joanna Cherry: I commend the hon. Gentleman for his speech and thorough sense of decency. Does he think the same principle should apply to other members of the Privileges Committee?

Chris Bryant: I will say something about the Privileges Committee later but, having recused myself, I do not think it is really for me to tell its members what to do or how to behave.

One thing I am very keen on is this: I passionately care about Parliament. I believe in Parliament. I believe in democracy. The only way that I can get change for my constituents is through the democratic process. Anything that undermines trust and confidence in Parliament damages my opportunity to do anything useful in my life at all. That is why I always want to urge the House to be extremely careful in these matters of standards and privileges. Each generation of MPs has a responsibility to burnish, not tarnish, the reputation of this House, because we hand democracy on to a future generation, and if we have undermined it, it may not last.

I draw to the House's attention the fact that in this Parliament, two MPs have been found guilty of serious offences in a court of law, and another two are awaiting trial; four MPs have been suspended for one day; a Minister was suspended for seven days; seven MPs have been required to apologise to the House for breaches of the code of conduct; three MPs have resigned their seats in the face of convictions; and the Independent Expert Panel has suspended a Member for six weeks for sexual harassment, made another apologise for bullying staff, and found another guilty of such terrible sexual harassment that he resigned his seat before he was sanctioned. All that is without any consideration of whether any right hon. or hon. Member has lied to the House. And it is not yet six months since the Owen Paterson saga, which I do not think covered the House in glory.

In a very short period of time, two of our colleagues have been murdered, and others are wearing stab vests. We have to take the reputation of the House extremely seriously. We have to burnish it, not tarnish it.

I have heard Ministers argue, quite rightly, that there must be due process. I say to the House that this is the due process. It always has been the due process. When there has been a claim that a member of the public or a Member of the House might have committed a contempt of Parliament by lying to the House, breaching the confidentiality around a Select Committee report or whatever, the standard process is that it is sent to the Committee of Privileges—or, as it used to be, the Standards and Privileges Committee, and before that the Committee of Privileges—so this is the due process.

I have absolute confidence in the other members of the Committee and that they will do a good job. They will think very carefully about, as the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) said, making sure that there is a fair hearing. The court of public opinion is not very good at providing a fair hearing, I find; the House should do a great deal better than the court of public opinion. We try to uphold the rule of law—that is one of the duties for all MPs—so it is particularly important that we make sure that there is a fair process. I am sure that the other Committee members will do that.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Steve Baker *rose*—

Chris Bryant: I am not sure where that came from. I give way to the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker).

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful and important contribution. This mostly relates to Members of Parliament, but he will know that occasionally somebody feels it necessary to use parliamentary privilege to say in the House things over which those outside the House might otherwise sue for defamation. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that he will consider whether the public ought to have a right to reply, so that if we use privilege, they have some chance to put their side of the story?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Member makes a good point. We have had some discussions about that issue outside the Chamber. The difficulty is that I am not sure that is a matter for the Standards Committee or the Privileges Committee; I think it is a matter for the Committee on Procedure. There is a good argument for putting something

in place so that there is a right of reply. I cannot go further, for reasons of which the hon. Gentleman may be aware—

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not want to open up that area of debate. I know exactly what is going on—we can leave that part of it there.

Chris Bryant: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

My second point about fair process is that it is actually quite a high bar that the Privileges Committee will have to consider. As the Leader of the Opposition said earlier, I do not think it is debated that the House was misled. I think even the Prime Minister admits, in effect, that the House was misled. It was said that rules were not broken and it is self-evident that rules were broken, so the House was misled—it got a false impression. The question is whether that was intentional. The Committee will have to devise ways to investigate whether there was an intention.

Hannah Bardell *rose*—

Sir William Cash *rose*—

Chris Bryant: I think I ought to give way to the hon. Lady first.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent and poignant speech. Does he not find it strange and deeply worrying that we seem to be in a position in which the Prime Minister seemed unable or incapable of following his own rules and his own laws, yet he is using the rules and processes of this place to frustrate the course of, as the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) said, natural justice?

Chris Bryant: I would normally agree with the hon. Lady on these kinds of things, and I sort of would have agreed with her last night, but I think we are getting to a better place now. In a sense, sometimes the Back Benchers persuade the Front Benchers of a better course of action—I am looking intently at the Government Chief Whip at the moment.

As the Clerk advised in the case of whether Stephen Byers had misled the House on a single occasion in 2001:

“In order to find that Mr Byers committed a contempt in the evidence session of 14 November 2001, the Committee will need to satisfy itself not only that he misled the Sub-Committee, but that he did so knowingly or deliberately.”

As I said, that is quite a high bar, but it is for the Privileges Committee to decide that.

Sir William Cash: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, because what he just said is what I was going to raise with him. The “Ministerial Code” says that it is open to a Minister to correct

“any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity. Ministers who knowingly mislead Parliament will be expected to offer their resignation to the Prime Minister”.

The question rests on “knowingly”, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point clear.

Chris Bryant: I think the hon. Gentleman is agreeing with me, so—

Mr Speaker: We will leave it at that.

Chris Bryant: The only difference I have with the hon. Gentleman is that he was talking about the “Ministerial Code”. The “Ministerial Code” is for the Prime Minister. This House adjudicates on its rules, its code of conduct and contempts of Parliament, so they are different matters. This is about upholding a simple principle around making sure that Ministers speak honestly.

I will say one other thing about the Committee: it is very important that the six members of the Committee are not pressurised by anybody. Members may not be aware of this, but the Attorney General and the Solicitor General can attend those meetings and take part in the deliberations, but they are not allowed to move amendments or to vote. It is very important that the Committee is able to do its business without being leaned on by anyone.

My final point is why I think all of this is important. I care far more about what is happening in Ukraine and on the cost of living crisis than about this—far more. I have constituents who are in tears about their finances at the moment. They have absolutely no idea how they will pay their bills, how they will pay the rent, and how they will be able to provide school uniforms and things such as that. They are in tears. All of us have seen the horror in Ukraine. In 2014, I said that if we did not take Putin far more seriously and if we did not impose far stricter sanctions, he would end up coming for the rest of Ukraine. I care far more about those things than I do about this motion today, but they are not alternatives. I would argue that, in the coming months, the Prime Minister may have to come to this House and say that we will have to change our strategy on Russia. We may have to consider offensive weaponry. We may have to consider British troops being put in a place of danger. Similarly, the Prime Minister may have to come to this House and say, “I have to ask the British people to make further sacrifices because the economy is in a very difficult place, and the public finances are in a very difficult place.” At a moment of national and international crisis, we need a leader of completely and utterly unimpeachable moral authority. We do not have that at the moment, not by a long chalk, but that is why these two things are intimately connected and not separate. It is why I believe that this must be referred to the Committee of Privileges.

12.42 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I appreciate and respect the seriousness of tone that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the Chair of the Privileges Committee, just brought to the debate. I respect the work that he does as Chair of the Committee, and I respect the work of the other members of the Committee, too. That seriousness of tone is important and it is one that we should try to adhere to. It is inevitable that there will be a party political overlay to this, and it is inevitable that, with the proximity of important local elections, party political elements and electoral considerations will intrude, as they have today, and as they will do in the way that whatever is decided will be reported later. None the less, at the end of the day, the debate that we are dealing with is about a very serious matter, and it therefore deserves a serious tone.

The hon. Gentleman referred to his past calling—if I may put it that way—as influencing his approach, and I respect that, too. Perhaps I can do the same. I am very conscious of the fact—I am very proud of the fact—that

[*Sir Robert Neill*]

I was a lawyer before I became a politician, and I will be a lawyer after I finish being a politician. Therefore, I hope to approach decisions such as this from the perspective of a lawyer.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) *rose*—

Sir Robert Neill: Perhaps I can make a little bit of progress before I give way.

That may cause me, in the view of some, to be cautious, but I would rather be accused of being cautious than of acting on inadequate evidence or without a full and proper process. That is the preamble to what I am about to say.

Wera Hobhouse: Let us assume that the Prime Minister inadvertently misled the House. Is not the problem that, from the beginning, he was not straight with us? Even if he knew that he was at a birthday singsong with a birthday cake, why did he delay being straight with Parliament for such a long time? Is it not the case that we are here today, so close to the local elections, because of the delay that has been caused by him, not by those of us on the Opposition Benches?

Sir Robert Neill: I do not think that that intervention reflects the tone of the debate thus far. With respect to the hon. Lady, although I will touch on some of those matters, I will not follow directly down that route, because what we are talking about is an important and serious matter. It is important because it relates not just to the incidents that are reported, and, to some degree anyway, are accepted to have happened at No.10 Downing Street, but to a general culture and attitude. It is important for this House because it relates to three important things, which I—and I hope the whole House—hold dear: the first is the issue of public trust; the second is respect for the rule of law, and that in the context of adherence to the laws and the fact that the laws made by this House must be adhered to by all equally—

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Robert Neill: May I just finish the phrase? There is always a tendency to intervene while someone is part way through a sentence.

The third point is that respect for the rule of law also means respect for procedural fairness, which is what I will come to in a moment.

Jamie Stone: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I wish to put it on the record that he has been extremely courteous to me on a personal level ever since my first appearance here and that I have great respect for him.

I suspect that the hon. Gentleman, like me—I speak as a Scot—is a Unionist, and those on the SNP Benches in front of me know that. I believe in the United Kingdom and in the benefits of the Union between Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales. Part of the reason why that Union works is exactly to do with what the hon. Gentleman was talking about, which is respect for this place and the way that we do things. Does he think that the continuation of the Prime Minister in office will strengthen or threaten that precious Union?

Sir Robert Neill: As I will make apparent shortly, I will come to my conclusion on the position of the Prime Minister—as I am entitled to as a Conservative Member of Parliament—once I have heard the full evidence. The importance of the respect of this institution in the various parts of the United Kingdom is, of course, well made, and I take that on board.

Sir William Cash: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I also commend the Justice Committee and him in his role as Chair for the investigation that took place in respect of fixed penalty notices. The Counsel for Domestic Legislation, as he will remember, says that there was a great lack of clarity over what regulations apply to specific situations at what times and so on, and I shall refer a bit more to that if I am called to speak a bit later. The bottom line is that I am sure that this very distinguished Chairman of that Committee appreciates that, in relation to the rule of law question that he has just raised, it is by no means clear exactly what the law is on these subjects.

Sir Robert Neill: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his observations. That brings me on to the point that I was about to make. The subject of the motion is not of itself the fixed penalty notice that was accepted by the Prime Minister, or any of the other fixed penalty notices. It is, as is rightly said, the question of whether there was a deliberate misleading of the House. I think that that is the common ground. Of course, the fixed penalty notices are part of the factual background that gives rise to that, and he is quite right to say that the Justice Committee was critical of the fixed penalty regime that was brought in on a number of counts, and in particular of the confusion that existed in many people's minds—ordinary individuals whose cases would never be the subject of any comment in this House or in the media—of the distinction, or non-distinction sometimes, between guidance and law. We were critical of that, and critical also of the use of fixed penalty notices for what were specifically described—it is worth putting this on the record—as criminal offences.

I took the trouble to look again at the regulations. The original regulations, the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020, which were amended shortly before the incident with which we were concerned, specifically set out in terms that a failure to comply with a restriction under the regulations creates an offence, and the word “offence” is specifically used in the regulation.

We should not minimise that. We should not say, “This is a civil matter. This is equivalent to a parking ticket.” It is not. That is a simple question of fact. The Ministry of Justice accepted that in the statement it made when the regulations were brought in, and the Justice Committee, in carrying out that inquiry, heard that from the noble Lord Wolfson of Tredegar and Sir Jonathan Jones QC, the former Treasury Solicitor when they gave evidence to us. That is common ground.

I will equally accept, as I am sure anyone else with experience in legal matters would, that within the range of fixed penalties, a fixed penalty notice of £50 is at the lower end of the scale of available penalties. The Select Committee raised the question whether the level of fixed penalty notices imposed were appropriate to be dealt with via fixed penalty rather than fine, but that is by way of background. That is all very well. We are

dealing with something that was an offence. Accepting the fixed penalty discharges and deals with a criminal matter, but it does not change its nature, so we should not try to minimise it, and I do not.

I will say, without having come to a final decision about the Prime Minister's position, that I am profoundly disappointed in what happened at No. 10 Downing Street. People were badly let down. My constituents feel badly let down. I feel personally badly let down by what happened. There must be consequences that follow from that. I think anyone would accept, in fairness, that what that consequence is depends on an ultimate assessment of the measure of culpability. That is why I would prefer, both in making my personal decision and ultimately in the House's making a decision, to wait until we have the full evidence and information before us.

Had the amendment in the Government's name been moved, I would happily have voted for it, because I think that full evidence includes not just the conclusion of the police investigations and the issuance or otherwise of any other fixed penalty notices, but the content of the Sue Gray report. As anyone will appreciate, the Sue Gray report is likely to include material that gives background and context beyond the strict requirements of the statement of facts that go with a fixed penalty notice. It is important to have that.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) *rose*—

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con) *rose*—

Sir Robert Neill: I am being very generous with my time, and I know many want to speak, but I will give way.

Dr Lewis: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. Does he appreciate that what he has just said about the Sue Gray report explains why some of us at least have asked time and again for it to be published in full, unredacted, immediately?

Sir Robert Neill: Yes, and I agree with my right hon. Friend in that respect. It was unfortunate—I say no more than that—that the way the police investigation has been handled has led to a delay that may not have been needed in terms of prejudicing any ongoing investigations. As a matter of fact, I believe the report should be published in full at the earliest possible opportunity.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Gentleman is making a very sound legal argument, and I acknowledge where he is coming from. Does he agree that, in politics as in life, very often there comes a point where one needs one's closest friends, one's strongest allies, one's wisest counsel, to put a hand on one's shoulder and say, "Enough. What you're doing now is going too far. It's damaging yourself, in this case your party, and potentially the country. Stop. That is what is in the best interest."?

Sir Robert Neill: That was a little more of a mini speech than an intervention. I will simply say this: I will speak for myself and the advice I give to my friends, my constituents and this Chamber. As I have made clear, I would have preferred to have the Sue Gray report as well as all other material before taking a decision on

reference to the Committee, but I will not stand in the way of this unamended motion, because matters of important public interest arise.

Personally, I will withhold my final decision until I have all that material. You will understand, Mr Speaker, an obvious reason for that: a course of conduct may very properly attract a different judgment and different consequences from an isolated incident, particularly if it were one that were immediately admitted to and no more occurred. That context will be really important to me, and ultimately I think it will be important to this House, to the broader community and to the country as a whole.

That is my word of caution. That is why I would have supported the amendment and I understand and appreciate the spirit in which the Treasury Bench brought it forward, but I will not stand in the way of this motion's proceeding, because there are important issues at hand. I will then, in due course, reach my final conclusion, and when I do, I will not be backwards in coming forwards about it. However, I hope I will manage to do so loyally, but, in the way I have tried to do politics, in a spirit of genuine calmness, based on the facts and the evidence. At the end of the day, the country deserves an assessment based calmly upon the evidence and the facts, applied to the relevant tests of this House or the other appropriate bodies.

12.56 pm

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I will start by going back to the excellent speech by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). In his concluding remarks, he talked about the economic crisis facing our country and our constituents. He is right to bring that context to the debate today, because it speaks about the need to have a Government with a leader who can command respect.

With inflation at 7%—its highest rate for 30 years—and rising still, with families facing the deepest fall in their living standards since the 1950s, with the pain of energy bills and rising food prices compounded by the Government's unfair tax rises, we know that our constituents are facing real hardship. It is not just a cost of living crisis; it is a cost of living emergency. At such a time, the country needs a Government that will be focused on tackling that economic emergency. Crucially, it needs a Government that it can trust—with, as the hon. Gentleman said, moral authority.

I do not believe this Prime Minister and this Government have that. I believe that the Prime Minister's behaviour has been profoundly damaging to that trust. He broke the very laws he himself introduced: laws he was telling everyone else to follow, laws that he rightly said were essential to save lives and protect our NHS, laws that forced countless families to make enormous sacrifices.

I believe it is time that Conservative MPs listened to the British people, the people who kept to the rules and made those sacrifices. For example, a small business owner in Bramhall said:

"Whilst I had to sit and watch the business I had built up for thirty-five years collapse because my customers and I obeyed the rules, the Prime Minister decided he would ignore them. My family and I will never forgive him and those that treated us like fools."

[Ed Davey]

The hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) would do well to reflect on her constituent's words when she continues to support this lawbreaking Prime Minister. Or there is this message to the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) from a constituent of hers, who attended his father's funeral just four days after the Prime Minister's birthday party:

"We sat apart. We didn't hug each other. We weren't allowed to have a wake to celebrate his life. I just came home and cried that he was gone... When the next election comes around, I will remember."

A constituent of the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) said:

"My parents were unable to attend my uncle's funeral. This pain will remain with them. The conduct and subsequent untruths of the Prime Minister are disgraceful and only add insult to their hurt."

That is the key point. It is not just the fact that the Prime Minister broke his own laws, but that he thought he could get away with it by taking the British people for fools. He stood at the Dispatch Box and told this House and the country, repeatedly, that there was no party—that all guidance and rules were followed at all times in No. 10. The fact that he thought he could get away with such absurd claims—claims that, let us be honest, we all knew were false at the time, and that the police have now confirmed were false—speaks volumes. It says clearly that this Prime Minister takes the British people for granted. He thinks the rules that apply to the rest of us simply do not apply to him.

As a constituent of the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) says:

"The Prime Minister seems a man without shame and devoted to one principle only: staying in Number Ten. He is a disgrace to the office of Prime Minister and an insult to the millions of the electorate who played by the book."

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I would be grateful to understand where that quote comes from, because I do not recognise it.

Ed Davey: If he has not written to the hon. Gentleman, I will make sure that he does.

The fact that Conservative MPs have let the Prime Minister get away with all this until now speaks volumes about them. They could have kicked this Prime Minister out of Downing Street 10 months ago and begun to restore the public's trust and confidence in the Government and in our democracy. Instead, Conservative MPs have so far—

Stephen Hammond: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Unless I misheard the right hon. Gentleman, he has just said that I wrote something—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. He says he did not, so that clears that mess up.

Ed Davey: Instead, Conservative MPs have so far ducked their responsibility, only eroding that public trust and confidence even further.

The Solicitor General, for example, once said that his red line for resignation from the Government was if there was a "scintilla of a suggestion" of unlawful

action. Well, the Prime Minister has been fined by the police, yet the hon. and learned Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) is still drawing his Government salary. By keeping the Prime Minister in his job, Conservative MPs have made themselves guilty by association. They should know that if they vote to kick the can down the road again, if they vote to bend the rules to let one of their own off the hook again, if they do not hold this Prime Minister to account for his law-breaking and lies by voting him out, their constituents will hold them to account at the ballot box.

Perhaps the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) should listen to the vet in his constituency who says:

"If I broke the rules and lied about it, I would get struck off. So why hasn't the Prime Minister been?"

Lifelong Conservative voters in Guildford are saying they cannot vote for the Conservatives any more. Conservative Members complain about elections; the problem is that if they will not hold this Prime Minister to account, the electorate will have to hold this Prime Minister to account.

A constituent of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) tells me that his MP—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are mentioning a load of Members and Members' constituents. I hope the Members were notified that they were going to be namechecked.

Ed Davey: I am sorry but I have not notified them. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Shh. So I would suggest that we do not name any more unless the Members are aware of it. It is only fair that we do that.

Ed Davey: I take your ruling, Mr Speaker. I was quoting from their constituents. That was the point, so that their voices could be heard in this House.

The past 24 hours have shown that the Government are in total disarray. Conservative MPs are clearly too ashamed to back the Prime Minister but still too complicit to sack him. The people each of us represent know the truth. They know the Prime Minister deliberately misled them and deliberately misled this House. It is an insult to their constituents, especially bereaved families in their seats, and it will be another Conservative stain on our democracy. If Conservative Members fail to sack this Prime Minister, they will leave the British people no choice. In the council elections on 5 May, let alone the next general election, it will become the patriotic duty of every voter to send this Conservative Government a message that enough is enough by voting against them. The Prime Minister has held this House, and the whole country, in contempt for far too long. Now it must be this House's turn to hold him in contempt.

1.4 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): The whole House can now see that this matter has moved far, far beyond law into matters of deep politics and fundamental values. As we consider both the motion and the issue at hand, every last Member of this House might remember some very old wisdom: if anyone ever says that they never fall short, never break a rule or never harm someone else, they deceive themselves and truth is not within them.

I am very grateful that we live in a society where there is the possibility of redemption and the possibility of mercy—where if somebody fulsomely apologises in a spirit of humility, going on for some hours, there is a possibility of redemption. That, of course, is not to excuse what has been done; it is not to defend it or condone it, or in any way to say that what went on was okay. It is to accept that it was wrong and nevertheless forgive—and forgiveness is difficult; no one should pretend otherwise.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Baker: I think the hon. Lady is going to enjoy the rest of my speech, but I give way for a moment.

Wera Hobhouse: The hon. Gentleman talks about redemption and forgiveness, but should not things be done at the earliest point possible rather than drawing them out like the Prime Minister has done? This is his main problem. Had he come here immediately and at least expressed his doubt about maybe being at something that he did not consider to be a party, it would have been better, but the fact that he denied everything is the main problem that we in this House find so difficult to swallow.

Mr Baker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I think she will recognise the spirit and inspiration of what I am saying, as people did on Tuesday, but I do not wish to be drawn excessively into theology about the timing of one's repentance, and I will move on.

Many Members of this House—I can see some of them on the Opposition Benches—choose to live their lives under certain commands: to love even their enemies, to bless those who curse them and, yes, to forgive as they are forgiven, sometimes for grave matters. So when I sat here and listened to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister say the words he said in the House of Commons—which I will not put back on the record, because people know what he said—and when I read them again in *Hansard*, I think that is an apology worthy of consideration of forgiveness for what went on, because this has moved beyond law. As far as I know, no one else in this country is being investigated by the police for retrospective offences—it is gone, it is behind them, it is past—but those in No. 10 Downing Street are being held to a higher standard in ways that other members of the public are not. [*Interruption.*] I can hear Members barracking, but that is right.

When we imposed these not merely draconian but barbaric rules on other people, everybody in the centre of power should have understood that they had to obey not merely the letter but the spirit of those rules. There should have been no cake in No. 10 and no booze in No. 10; these things should not have happened. I do not defend or condone in any way what happened.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I am mesmerised by the hon. Gentleman's psychic powers if he does not understand that all offences are retrospective—unless he knows someone who is going to commit an offence. To err is human and to forgive divine, but to transgress repeatedly, as the report already shows us, is something else. Is it not important that we have this inquiry now to understand whether that has happened and there has been a repeated offence against the House?

In the past year, half of the public have lost what little trust they had in politicians. The longer this goes on and the more repetition there is, the more all of us are besmirched. Is it not right, in the spirit of forgiveness and redemption, that we are all given the opportunity for salvation?

Mr Baker: Not for the first time, the hon. Lady tempts me to give her references. On the point about repeated offences and forgiveness, I would encourage her to look at Romans 7. She invites me to clarify what I said. Of course all offences are retrospective. My point is that the police are treating Downing Street staff especially harshly in a way that the rest of the public are not being treated. [*Interruption.*] If the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) wants to say that is not true, I will take his intervention.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): There are people up and down this country who have received fines way beyond what was imposed on those in Downing Street. The hon. Gentleman has to get his facts straight before he stands up and says they have been treated more harshly. That is simply not accurate.

Mr Baker: Of course people up and down the country have been fined, punished and all the rest of it, and the hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that I have stood here and complained about those things far more than he or any Opposition Member has. The point I am making is that the police are going back some months to offences committed some time ago in a way that they are not doing for other people. I think that that is accurate and that my hon. Friend the Minister was nodding along earlier.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies) *indicated assent.*

Mr Baker: Indeed, she nods again.

When I sat here and listened to the Prime Minister's words, I was deeply moved. For all that I have said that if he broke the law, acquiesced in breaking the law or lied at the Dispatch Box, he must go, I still felt moved to forgive. But I want to be honest to the House, and to my voters, and say that that spirit of earnest willingness to forgive lasted about 90 seconds of the 1922 Committee meeting, which I am sorry to say was its usual orgy of adulation. It was a great festival of bombast, and I am afraid that I cannot bear such things. This level of transgression and this level of demand for forgiveness requires more than an apology in order to draw a line under it and move on in the way that the Prime Minister sought to do overnight with his interviews.

I am sorry to be saying that on the record like this, but I am afraid that the Prime Minister and those who advise him need to understand that this is a permanent stone in his shoe. Those of us who want to forgive him have to see permanent contrition, a permanent change of attitude and permanent acknowledgement of people such as my constituent who did not get to see his wife in a care home on their 50th wedding anniversary. I think he saw her only through a window on her 75th birthday. I have been married for only 25 years, but I know what that would mean to me. What am I to say to that man, who did not see his wife before she died? I could say, "You and I are Christian men, and forgiveness is hard."

[Mr Steve Baker]

I do not like forgiving the Prime Minister. My spirit is much more full of wrath and vengeance. I feel much more Ezekiel 7:3 about this issue, and I invite everybody to look that up. I do not want to forgive our Prime Minister. The trouble is that I like him and helped him to get where he is—I will come back to that in a moment—and the problem is that I am under a command to forgive.

I will talk about what the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) said. When I and others went out of our way not only to make my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, but to do our bit—in my case, systematically—to help get an 80-seat majority, of course we did not think that he would exhibit a meticulous grasp of tedious and boring minute rules. But we did know that he had two jobs: he had to get us out of the European Union, which he was fully committed to doing, and he had to defeat the radical leaders of the Labour party. He had to do so in an environment in which everyone was exhausted, we were testing our constitution to destruction, and the internal stability of the United Kingdom was at stake. That is the job we gave him to do, and by goodness he did it. For that I am thankful, and he will live with my thanks forever. He deserves to be lauded in the history books.

The problem that I now have, having watched what I would say was beautiful, marvellous contrition, is that the Prime Minister's apology lasted only as long as it took to get out of the headmaster's study. That is not good enough for me, and it is not good enough for my voters—I am sorry, but it is not. I am afraid that I now have to acknowledge that if the Prime Minister occupied any other office of senior responsibility—if he were a Secretary of State, a Minister of State, a Parliamentary Under-Secretary, a permanent secretary, a director general, a chief executive of a private company or a board director—he would be long gone. The reason that he is not long gone is that it is an extremely grave matter to remove a sitting Prime Minister, and goodness knows I have had something to do with that too. It is an extremely grave matter and an extremely big decision, and it tends to untether history. All of us should approach such things with reverence, awe and an awareness of the difficulty of doing it and the potential consequences.

That is why I have been tempted to forgive, but I have to say that the possibility of that has now gone. I am sorry, but for not obeying the letter and the spirit of the law—we have heard that the Prime Minister knew what the letter was—the Prime Minister should now be long gone. I will certainly vote for the motion but, really, the Prime Minister should just know that the gig is up.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The House will be aware that a great many people wish to speak this afternoon. If we are to continue in the spirit of fairness to one another, I hope that we will manage without a time limit. I am testing the integrity of hon. Members: please stick to around five minutes. That way, everybody will have the chance to participate more or less equally. If it does not work, I will put on a time limit, as usual.

1.15 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I intend to speak for less than five minutes. This is probably the most unusual debate that I have had the privilege of speaking in since I was elected to this House in 2010. It is unusual because when I suggested on Tuesday that the electorate had already concluded that the Prime Minister was either a liar or an idiot, I was called to order by Mr Speaker, who was perhaps right to do so; but the truth is that we have good reason to suggest that we have been misled by the Prime Minister, because he repeatedly said that no rules were broken and that no parties had taken place. He then suggested that he did not understand the terribly complex rules that had been written by him and his Government, and that he could not get his head around them.

Contemptuously, the spin men and women of Downing Street then suggested that the Prime Minister's fine was a bit like a speeding offence. As the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) said, it is nothing like a speeding offence; it is a criminal sanction. In fact, if we want to talk about speeding offences, there is something called the totting-up procedure. If someone gets one speeding offence, they receive three penalty points. If they manage to end up with four offences in three years, they are disqualified from driving for a minimum of 12 months. If a newly qualified driver does not understand the rules and gets two speeding penalties, they are disqualified from driving. In fact, they have their driving licence revoked.

I had rehearsed a speech that I was intending to make today, but I have binned it because my constituent Wendy Phillips contacted me while I was waiting to be called. She is watching the debate and said:

"Your constituent Lily Camm, Tory voter for over 50 years, fell ill with Covid exactly 2 years ago—4 weeks later died in care home whilst PM partied. Family feel so guilty as she was only in care home for her safety for 5 months. We let her down.

Am watching this in tears—I let her down, I was her voice & I persuaded her to enter this care home for her own good. I carry the guilt daily."

I pray in aid Conservative Members, who should think very carefully about the decision that they take on behalf of their constituencies. They should look in the mirror and see who is looking back. Is it someone who is honourable, and who is not prepared to put up with a Prime Minister misleading the country? If they do not, I am afraid to tell them that the electorate, who have already decided, will make their anger known at the next election.

1.19 pm

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I want to put on the record that many of my constituents are angry, upset and hurt by the activities in Downing Street. I have heard many harrowing tales of the sacrifices my constituents have made.

I want to address one point. The Leader of the Opposition refused to take my intervention; I want to say what I was going to say. He implied that he wanted to rise above party politics. That is a noble sentiment, but I dispute that that was what was happening, for two reasons. First, I understand that last night a Labour party spokesman was briefing that Conservative MPs who did not vote for the option in the motion would "pay a price", and have individual campaigns launched

against them in their constituency. That is threatening, bullying, toxic talk, and I sincerely hope that that does not happen. The second reason why I think that this is not entirely above party politics is that the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) trailed the studios today, talking about local elections and the superior leadership shown by the Leader of the Opposition. I remind the House that the Leader of the Opposition twice campaigned for the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) to be put into the highest office in the land—a man who was later censured by the Equality and Human Rights Commission for antisemitism. Think what would have happened had he been leader when the situation in Ukraine arose. Let me tell you: that is leadership that I can do without.

1.21 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): We often see the worst of Parliament—we certainly have in recent weeks and months—but this afternoon, particularly in the speeches by the hon. Members for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), and for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), we have seen at least some of the best of Parliament.

I want to be clear about what is at stake in today's debate. This is not just about parties, cake or a fixed penalty notice akin to a parking ticket. What is up for debate today is our most profound democratic principles, and the very concept of decency in public life—leading by example versus hypocrisy; truth versus lies; and respect versus contempt. That is because the Prime Minister has sealed his place in history as the first lawbreaker to have been fined while occupying our premiership, proving beyond doubt that he misled this House when he told us repeatedly that no rules were broken. We now know that they were broken, and broken by him.

Our democracy depends on the truth being told by Ministers. That is why resignation is expected when this basic and fundamental standard is not met. This is not about cake in a box, or the number of minutes spent at a gathering. This is about a Prime Minister failing to hold himself to the highest standards at a time of unprecedented national sacrifice and then covering it up. This is about a Prime Minister holding both Parliament and the public in contempt, a Prime Minister trashing decency in public life and undermining the foundations of our democracy.

When last night the Prime Minister tried to brush off the importance of today's debate by saying that "you're better off talking and focusing on the things that matter", he could not have been more misguided. Being able to trust our Ministers and, above all, the Prime Minister matters in this place more than anything, because without it the whole edifice collapses. Parliament has many roles, but surely its most important is the role we play in providing a check on Executive power through our ability to scrutinise the actions of Government Ministers. Without that, they would be free to exercise their powers as arbitrarily as they pleased. Our ability to play that role is totally undermined if we cannot trust what Ministers tell us—if we cannot rely on the accuracy of the information that Ministers give to Parliament. If Ministers can get away with misleading answers, what is the point of asking the questions? If we hollow out the scrutiny process because the answers could be lies, we hollow out this whole place.

If MPs do not launch an investigation when the Prime Minister has been found to have personally broken a law that he repeatedly told this House had not been broken, it is not just the Prime Minister's credibility that is damaged; it is the credibility of Parliament, and indeed the credibility on which our entire system of democratic governance is built.

This whole sorry episode has demonstrated that Parliament's governance structures—our systems of checks and balances—are in urgent need of reform. It cannot be right that if the Prime Minister makes a misleading statement and commits a contempt against Parliament, it is up to the Prime Minister to determine any consequences. It is beyond ludicrous that the arbiter of whether the ministerial code has been broken is the person accused of breaking it, the Prime Minister. It is preposterous that if MPs want to recall Parliament to discuss a matter such as this, only the Prime Minister can initiate that. MPs are unable to require Ministers to correct the record if they mislead the House. We cannot compel an investigation into such actions or impose sanctions. Old boys' club rules that simply assume honour are manifestly not adequate, and as a result a rogue Prime Minister is running rings around us.

Surely this is a moment when we must review those archaic procedures, which have been so clearly demonstrated to be unfit for purpose. We need independent oversight of the ministerial code. We need new mechanisms to call to account a Prime Minister who deliberately misleads the House—a Prime Minister who, in the words of the respected constitutional historian Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield, has

"shredded the ministerial code, which is a crucial part of the spinal cord of the constitution."

That code includes an overarching duty on Ministers to comply with the law, and if they have broken their overarching duty, it is clear that they have an overarching responsibility to go.

Our system is broken. The glaring flaws in how the ministerial code functions were investigated recently by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, chaired by Lord Evans of Weardale. It reported on the importance of high ethical standards just one month before we found out about the rule-breaking in No. 10. The chair made it clear that

"a system of standards regulation which relies on convention is no longer satisfactory."

The report is quietly damning and on point. The House must urgently act on the committee's key recommendations that

"ethics regulators and the codes they enforce should have a basis in primary legislation, and that government has a more thorough and rigorous compliance function."

In other words, we can no longer leave this in the Prime Minister's hands.

On the ministerial code, the committee found that meaningful independence for the independent adviser

"is the benchmark for any effective form of standards regulation and current arrangements for the Adviser still fall below this bar."

That must urgently change if we are to restore any respect for this place. In particular, we urgently need to implement the call for the independent adviser on the code to be appointed by an independent panel, rather than by the Prime Minister. It is vital that it be able to initiate its own investigations and have the authority to

[Caroline Lucas]

determine breaches of the code. We must also grapple with the question of who should decide and issue sanctions in the event of a breach by the Prime Minister. The vested interest of a rule-breaker who is deciding their own sanction cannot be discounted any longer.

Finally, I want to say a few words about the war on Ukraine. It is the centrality of truthfulness to our democracy that makes it such a serious misjudgment to seek to put our democratic standards on hold because of the brutal war on Ukraine, as some hon. Members have suggested we should. Attempts to corrode democracy and promote the politics of division are exactly what run through Putin's war strategy, which means that it is more urgent than ever that we have a Prime Minister with unquestionable moral authority.

The resignation letter of Lord Wolfson of Tredegar, who resigned from the Government as a Justice Minister, had it exactly right. The Government can only

“credibly defend democratic norms abroad, especially at a time of war in Europe...if we are, and are seen to be, resolutely committed both to the observance of the law and also to the rule of law.”

Putting decency on pause and bending our rules plays into Putin's hands, because his brutal war on Ukraine is not just a battle for territory, but about democracy and the rule of law. We have a long tradition, as other Members have said, of removing war leaders and the ability to change a leader during a crisis is a strength of our system.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Caroline Lucas: I will.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the hon. Lady gives way, I did ask for five minutes and she has taken nine. She may wish to consider whether she is giving way or might be concluding soon.

Caroline Lucas: Madam Deputy Speaker, on that note, I will not give way. I had not realised it was nine minutes and I will bring my comments to a close. Simply to say again, this matter could not be more important, and that is why it matters so much that the motion is passed later today.

1.30 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I want to open by acknowledging what I thought was the fair, measured spirit in which the Leader of the Opposition opened this debate. I thought he spoke in a fair-minded way, as have many other hon. and right hon. Members on all sides, including those friends of mine who have, sadly, decided that they can no longer support the Prime Minister, but I want to speak in his defence today, because somebody has to.

I acknowledge, in all seriousness, how big a mistake the Prime Minister made. Of course, he should apologise for it, take responsibility and accept the verdict of the police, whether or not he was surprised by that verdict. If he lied to this House, of course he should resign, but he did not—patently he did not. Patently he did not break the law deliberately, so patently he did not deliberately mislead this House, any more than the Leader of the

Opposition deliberately misled the House when he said that the PM had slandered the BBC. I welcome the sort of apology that he made earlier. We can now all move on from that mistake and remember that only those who are without sin should be casting stones.

I do not minimise the importance of this scandal. Many people are outraged by what has gone on and have written to me to that effect. Many are just the usual haters who always despised the Prime Minister, but many are the respectable tendency of our country—often Conservative voters—who just want a steady, decent, respectable Government. I think particularly of my councillors in Devizes and party members who have written to me in despair at what the Prime Minister has done. They are right to want a steady, decent, responsible Government; we do not have to have a soap opera in Downing Street. But we do need a Government and a Prime Minister who can see the big picture and make the big calls—one who does not always play for safety, does not always do the conventional thing that officials suggest and does not always think, “What would John Major do?”

Let me finish with a word about the character of the Prime Minister, who I have known a little for many years, and with whom I had the privilege of working closely in Downing Street in those crazy months in the second half of 2019, when he and my other old friend Dominic Cummings drove through the strategy that finally got Brexit done. There was a lot of smoke and noise in those months, but in the midst of it all I saw the Prime Minister in relentless pursuit of the mission, with total flexibility about the methods to be used, including a proportionate response to the tactics taken by the other side in its attempts to subvert the democratic process. The European Union saw how serious he was at that time, and it is because of that that it finally accepted a deal that we could also accept. The country saw it, and it responded with a landslide election victory for our party, and I do not believe that any other leader would have done it.

None of this would justify lying to this House, but I do not believe that the Prime Minister did lie, and those are the reasons I follow him in spite of everything—in spite of his accepting a slice of birthday cake when he should not have, in spite of overseeing a No. 10 operation that let the country down, in spite of some policies that I am unhappy with. I support him because he was anointed by the people in 2019 to deliver a great mission to unite and level up the country, and because he can make the big calls that are needed at this time.

1.34 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger), but may I politely and respectfully point out the difference between the approach of the Prime Minister and that of the Leader of the Opposition? When the Leader of the Opposition erred, he came straight to the Dispatch Box and amended the record, and that is what we are asking the Prime Minister to do. There is a huge distinction between the two cases.

We are at a crisis point for our democracy. The Nolan principles provide clear guidance as to conduct in public office, but they are being honoured more in the breach than in the observance. We know that, when the Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box and told this House

that there had been no parties and that all guidance was followed at all times, neither of those statements were true. They were palpably untrue, and this matters. It is beyond the realms of credibility that the Prime Minister could possibly have thought that either of those things were truthful when he said them. He has gone through his life with the rules not applying to him, but the public have made their mind up. In opinion poll after opinion poll, the public have said very clearly that the Prime Minister of our country has lied, and this sorry issue has to be resolved.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this boils down to trust, and that the motion refers to trust within this House, trusting a Committee that reflects the proportional balance of the House to deal with the matter in a proportionate way once all the evidence is in?

Andy McDonald: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. It all comes down to trust in this place. As other Members have pointed out, it is trust that we need if leaders are going to make important decisions about the cost of living crisis and interventions that may be demanded of us in Ukraine as we go forward. That is why trust matters.

It is bad enough that a serving Prime Minister has broken the law, but the public are certain that he lied when he denied that he had broken the law, and his lame defences as to what he believed are now in tatters. It is therefore imperative that the appropriate mechanisms of this House are engaged, as so expertly described by colleagues and as on the Order Paper, and that this behaviour be referred to the Committee of Privileges to see whether the Prime Minister is in contempt of this place and, indeed, in contempt of the country.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): To go back to the hon. Gentleman's point about this sorry issue having to be resolved, he knows I had the privilege of serving as the cancer Minister in this House. Right now this House should be discussing childhood cancers. If one were a parent of a child with cancer, I suggest one would rather the House were discussing that than this. That is not to minimise this. This issue needs to be resolved and we need to move on. For that reason, I will be supporting the motion—with him, I suspect—this evening.

Andy McDonald: I am grateful to the hon. Member, who speaks so wisely. He is right that we all want to move on from this, but we will find that, unless this issue is resolved, we will be back to it forever until such time as the Prime Minister accepts the consequences of his actions. We need that leadership, and we are robbed of it at the moment. That is the entire point. Of course, cancer in children is critically more important and we want to get on to that, but we cannot have this issue hanging over us.

Sadly, this wanton disregard for the principles of public office is part of a wider malaise and we see it in many of our public offices. I will not stray to recite them, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I plead with Conservative Members to actively vote for the motion. I am pleased that the Government have made the movement they have thus far today, but we have heard so eloquently

described how the people need to have trust in this place and democracy is at stake. It is therefore imperative that people come forward and actively support the motion.

I will finish with this, Madam Deputy Speaker. I do not know whether you heard it, but on LBC there was a heartbreaking interview with a veteran. That man could not contain his emotions as he spoke not only of his own service, but of the loss of his son serving this country in Afghanistan, and his anger at the lying of the Prime Minister overwhelmed him. He wrongly criticised himself for sacrificing so much for his country and felt that it had all been for nothing.

In the excellent speeches of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and, indeed, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), who spoke so courageously, we have heard that people in this place care deeply about this nation and its democracy. We all do. For that reason, we should stand up for its integrity and reputation, which, I regret to say, is trashed on a daily basis by this disreputable Prime Minister. I urge Members across the House to vote for the motion.

1.40 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): As I indicated in my response to the Prime Minister's statement on Tuesday, the entire issue, the legal status of fixed penalty notices and what the law really is remain on the table. It is, unfortunately and regrettably, an extremely complex matter, which is charged with political and understandable emotional underpinning.

For example, the Justice Committee has had a great deal of importance to say in seeking clarification of those matters of law and the rule of law itself in this context. Even now, the legal situation remains immensely unclear and inconsistent. Despite the presumption that one Opposition speaker after another makes that the Prime Minister has lied, there is lack of clarity and inconsistency between different police authorities, different circumstances and different locations.

The Counsel for Domestic Legislation to this House said in evidence to the Justice Committee that

“there has been a lack of clarity as to what regulations applied to specific situations at what times, there is evidence that local authorities and police forces have on some occasions misunderstood” the circumstances and so forth. It is even arguable that, under section 73 of the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984, the regulations did not apply to No. 10, as part of the Crown Estate, anyway. Resolving that issue will be a massive test, even before a court of law.

On contempt and the role of the Committee itself and the current procedures whereby privileges or contempts are referred to it, the great constitutional authority, “Bradley and Ewing”, states that the Committee's procedures have “been criticised” in the Nicholls report of 1999. As I have said in previous debates on the Committee on Standards, and again today, all that is currently under review, here in this House, with Sir Ernest Ryder's important report relating to the principles of natural justice and fair trials before that Committee. Indeed, it will need some very good legal advice.

In 1999, it was concluded that the Committee on Standards should devise an appropriate procedure to ensure natural justice and fairness. As I said in my

[Sir William Cash]

exchanges with the current Chair, all that is being undertaken by Sir Ernest Ryder's report. How the Committee of Privileges will cope with the situation is one thing, but it is crystal clear that not waiting until the Sue Gray report has been delivered, as well as the conclusion of the Metropolitan police's investigations, will lead only to further confusion and the need for the Committee to suspend its proceedings before they have begun.

The question remains: has there been a contempt? What is the proper procedure that should be applied? Are the proposed procedures fair as a matter of natural justice? That depends on the evidence, the facts and an understanding of the law. The Committee will have to address all that before it can even sit and draw conclusions with any degree of competence.

1.44 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Before I start my main points, I want to mention a couple of things that I have been listening to. First, many of us on this side were aware that the Government were trying to kick the issue down the road with their abandoned amendment. We are two weeks away from the local elections, and their action begs the question of whether desperation to ensure that the way their MPs voted was not on the record was their motivator.

Secondly, the Government's approach is that they live in hope that the public's memory is ruled by the news cycle and that the public interest will move on. I believe that they are fundamentally wrong in that assumption. Everybody who made a personal sacrifice during covid will remember their loss, pain and grief for the rest of their lives. It is engraved on our hearts. We are not going to forget. The Government may kick this down the road, but they are wrong if they assume that their safety is tied up with the news cycle. The Prime Minister's behaviour will not be forgotten.

Today we have a chance to correct the record, to reinstate credibility in our system and hold Conservative Members—and, indeed, all of us—to account, not only for their or our misdeeds but for our preparedness on occasion to defend the indefensible. Today is a chance for all Members, of all parties, to do the right thing, and our names should be on record when we want to do the right thing.

Public trust in our democratic system is plummeting as we careen from one scandal to another, and the very reputation of our democracy, ourselves and the function that we are honoured with here is seemingly at stake.

Some 73% of the British public are in favour of a Bill that would criminalise politicians who willingly lie to the British public. Plaid Cymru has been calling for stronger measures to ban politicians from lying in their public role, not just in the past few months, but for 15 years.

We all know that we live in an age of public disenchantment. From that same poll, conducted by Compassion in Politics, we learnt that 47% of people have lost trust in UK politicians during the past 12 months. If we look back at the momentous events over the period, from the fall of Kabul to the pandemic to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the cost of living crisis, what other conclusion can we draw than that we have failed in our duty to uphold the public's trust?

That sense of failure is not just a rhetorical gambit, a professional nicety or an optional extra for us here. From anti-vaxxers to the Putin regime, when we fail to confront mistruths, we create a truth vacuum in which division takes hold. When any "truth" is as good as any other, division along political lines comes to matter more than agreement on the common ground of facts. That matters.

We work in an institution where we cannot call out the lies of another Member, regardless of their position of responsibility—lies that are broadcast around the country, recorded for posterity and therefore impressed on the memories of millions of people. We have no way of addressing that effectively.

Although I defer to the Speaker's judgment in this matter, partygate has demonstrated conclusively that our self-regulating system is no longer fit for purpose. The ministerial code has been proven not worth the paper it was written on. Gentlemen's honourable agreements depend on the existence of honour. We must do better. If we cannot do better, because we make a mockery of the public's concerns by shrugging our shoulders and accepting that it is merely part and parcel of modern politics, we must be compelled to do better.

We as legislators must legislate to uphold our good names, and, by extension, the good name and efficacy of democracy itself. A first step would be a Bill; a second would be rebuilding our political model, much as Wales and our Co-operation Agreement has done, so that politics is built around what we share, rather than that which divides us. Honesty is the most important currency in politics. We have to restore it before we here are responsible in part for bankrupting our society.

1.49 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Much has already been said about the police's investigation, as a result of which the Prime Minister was issued with a civil penalty. He paid it immediately and came to this House at the earliest opportunity to give a heartfelt apology. Not only that: it is clear that he and the Government do not oppose moving the matter to the Privileges Committee, which shows that his contrition is right and true.

Let me be clear that the Prime Minister's apology was the right thing to do. Each and every single Briton across the length and breadth of our beautiful country has made sacrifices during the pandemic. When my first daughter was born, my wife was seriously ill and, because of that, I could not see my daughter for five days. I made sacrifices. All my residents made sacrifices. Even the Prime Minister made sacrifices when he almost died from covid and, as we know, when his family members died, he could not attend their funerals.

All politicians should be held to the highest standards, be that the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) or the Scottish First Minister, and all of them have been caught and photographed in covid-compromising positions. They should all be referred to the Privileges Committee to be investigated.

The Prime Minister paid the fine, and rightly so. He has been unequivocal that he respects the outcome of the police's investigation and that he will always take

the appropriate steps. The central issue is whether he intentionally or knowingly—those are the vital words—misled the House. I point to an article published in *The Times* on Saturday 20 June 2020, the day after the event in question in Downing Street. It reads:

“Boris Johnson celebrated his 56th birthday yesterday with a small gathering in the cabinet room. Rishi Sunak, the chancellor, and a group of aides sang him Happy Birthday before they tucked into a Union Jack cake. The celebrations provided a brief respite after another gruelling week”.

The Prime Minister has said that it did not occur to him then or subsequently that a gathering in the Cabinet room just before a vital meeting on covid strategy—to save lives—could amount to a breach of the rules. That event in No. 10 was reported the next day in a national newspaper and did not then prove controversial. It is unfathomable that the Prime Minister’s team would have alerted journalists to the event and incriminated him if he believed that it was against the rules. That does not make sense. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister apologised and has been punished. Further, for transparency, he has welcomed the matter being moved to the Privileges Committee.

I also want to briefly address an article yesterday in *The Times*, which reported that

“Sir Keir Starmer had warned Tory backbenchers that they would pay a price for blocking an investigation”

including personal attacks for supporting the Prime Minister. It is outrageous that the Leader of the Opposition came here on a day on which we talked about tolerance in politics to lay out such a threat of bullying against Members of this House. We all have our own minds. We may all disagree, but I and many colleagues have had death threats and to threaten people and to try to stoke that is incredibly dangerous.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): There were no threats of bullying made. What we are talking about is an electoral threat. I have had to take two death threats to the police that directly quoted words said in this place by the Prime Minister of our country. People have attacked my office on the basis of the words of our Prime Minister and, when that was raised with him, he said, “humbug”.

Alexander Stafford: We must be honest that we face death threats on both sides of the House—[*Interruption.*] No, this is an important point. No one should get abuse in their job. My point is that only yesterday—a day when we were talking about debates—the article said:

“Tory backbenchers...would pay a price”

through personalised attacks. I am sorry that the hon. Member received death threats; she should not have done.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Is not the point that we all face abuse from being in this place—as one of the youngest Members in the Chamber, I fear every day for the bullying and harassment that I will receive—and that all targeted attacks do is stoke the flames so that we receive more abuse?

Alexander Stafford: Indeed, they do. We should all rise above that and treat each other with the courtesy that everyone needs in a place of work. Sadly, we have witnessed the violence that colleagues have been exposed to and, ultimately, the deaths of two colleagues.

Going forward, the Prime Minister has clearly taken significant measures to improve how things are working in No. 10, and there are more changes to come. We have talked about Christian forgiveness. I am a Christian—a Catholic—and this is a Christian country. Forgiveness is at the core of what we believe. The Prime Minister has offered a heartfelt apology and his contrition. He has come to the House, and he is happy for the matter to go to the Privileges Committee; he does not oppose that. He has apologised. We need to look at that.

It is now time to crack on with the priorities for our country. We have an obligation to deliver on our election promises, and I look forward to the Government focusing on important issues for my constituents in Rother Valley, including getting the Rwanda illegal immigration scheme up and running as soon as possible and winning the war against the fascist Putin. The Rwanda scheme will save lives, defeating Putin will save lives and, through covid, the Government have saved many lives in this country.

1.55 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): There has been a lot of talk about apologies. I remind the House that the motion is not about whether the Prime Minister has apologised but whether he knowingly lied to the House. He has not apologised for that—he has not even admitted it. In fact, he has persistently and consistently said that “there was no party”, that there was no cake and that there was a party but there was no cake—I could go on. I welcome those apologies, but let us be clear about what the motion says.

Earlier, the leader of the SNP, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), reflected the words of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) about the Prime Minister’s modus operandi: he leaves a trail of chaos in his wake and lets other people pick up and take responsibility for the problems that he has caused. The latest victim of that—I told him that I would mention this—is Mr Speaker and the office of the chair. Recently, when he had to chuck out the leader of the SNP for calling the Prime Minister a liar, he got huge amounts of public opprobrium, saying, “What on earth is Speaker Hoyle doing? Why is he chucking out the leader of the SNP when we know what the Prime Minister is up to?” The Prime Minister does not mind because somebody else takes the criticism for that. He is undermining not simply Mr Speaker but this House and, as hon. Members have said, our democratic system. The public cannot understand what on earth is going on when one person gets thrown out and the person who is the root of the problem is happy to stay there smirking on the Front Bench. That is his modus operandi, and it is dragging our democratic system down.

We all make mistakes. I make mistakes, and I have had to correct the record. We have heard about apologies and about the Prime Minister being contrite, but I do not recall one occasion on which he has come back to the House and corrected the record. Not one. I think that there is an outstanding letter to him from the UK Statistics Authority about a misleading claim that he has yet to come back to correct. The bottom line is that the Prime Minister will say whatever is necessary at one point to get out of whatever situation he is in, with no sense of obligation to the truth or to whatever promise he has just made. I have scribbled down a list of five or

[*Christian Matheson*]

10 promises he has made and broken, but, as I do not want you to call me up, Madam Deputy Speaker, as we are talking specifically about the occasions when he denied there was a party, that list will have to wait for another occasion—but there will be another occasion.

As I have said, the Prime Minister is damaging the UK's reputation abroad. Outside this Chamber, our partners abroad—as well as our adversaries and enemies—can see that he is losing credibility and they cannot necessarily work with him because his word cannot be trusted. That damages the UK, and that is serious at a time of international crisis.

I finish by quoting an article from *The Guardian* by Simon Kuper about the Oxford Union and a younger version of the Prime Minister who wrote an essay on Oxford politics for his sister's book, "The Oxford Myth":

"His essay tackles the great question: how to set about becoming the next prime minister? Johnson advises student politicians to assemble 'a disciplined and deluded collection of stooges' to get out the vote."

Remember that this was just after he left university. The quote from the Prime Minister in his earlier days continues:

"The tragedy of the stooge is that...he wants so much to believe that his relationship with the candidate is special that he shuts out the truth. The terrible art of the candidate is to coddle the self-deception of the stooge."

Those were the Prime Minister's views then. They are apparently still the Prime Minister's views today. The British people have made up their mind and for them the penny has dropped. I say to hon. Members on the Conservative Benches that it is time for the penny to drop for them as well. They need to search their feelings. They know it to be true. This is the manner of the Prime Minister and today is the time finally to put a line underneath that.

2 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I would like to make three brief observations.

First, Mr Speaker was quite right to decide that there was an arguable case to be examined by the Committee of Privileges. That is the issue in front of us today, not whether the Prime Minister intentionally misled the House. That is for the Committee to decide. While in many respects this situation is completely unprecedented, there have been similar cases which confirm that such a referral is the right course to pursue: the 1947 case of Mr Garry Allighan; the 1977 case involving Reginald Maudling, John Cordle and Albert Roberts; and the 2005 case of Stephen Byers, which I shall comment on further shortly.

The second point to decide is the timing of the consideration by the Committee of Privileges. The motion states that that should not begin in a substantive way until the inquiries conducted by the Metropolitan Police have been concluded. The amendment, which will not be moved, states that any vote should wait until the police investigations have been completed and Sue Gray's report has been concluded. In many respects, we could go round and round in circles as to which of those courses is the right one to pursue. Thus, it is welcome that the amendment is not being moved.

Finally, I return to the case of Mr Stephen Byers and the manner in which that equivalent debate, on 19 October

2005, took place. The then Leader of the House, Geoff Hoon, concluded the debate by stating:

"The Government support the motion because it is necessary for the House to refer possible breaches of the rules to the Standards and Privileges Committee for investigation. The Government respect the privileges of the House and we will uphold them. They are crucial to the independence of Parliament and the strength of our democracy."

He concluded by saying:

"I urge Members to refrain from treating the matter as a party political question."—[*Official Report*, 19 October 2005; Vol. 437, c. 849.]

The motion was passed without Division.

I acknowledge that in this instance the stakes are much, much higher and that hon. Members from right across the Chamber quite rightly, as we have heard this morning, hold passionate views on this matter. But that approach, I would suggest, is the right one for us to pursue.

2.3 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I want to start my remarks by paying tribute to the powerful contributions by the hon. Members for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). One thing that has come out of recent events is that, owing to the Prime Minister and the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), we now have a name for the post-truth movement: Pinocchio politics.

If this matter was only about parties, the motion would stand very clearly. Actually, however, it is about much more than the parties; it is about the environment in which they happened. Every choice we make in life has consequences. I know more than many that we have to live with the consequences of the choices we make. Some Members seem to want to make me feel as uncomfortable as possible, but I am quite happy with that consequence because I did not come here to feel comfortable. I came here for a very different purpose. The compelling and central part of the argument is around the honorific titles we bandy about in this room, whether right honourable or honourable, and whether they actually mean anything of substance. There needs to be congruence to the use of those titles and the actions of the Members of this place. That congruence is absolutely essential.

When it comes to leadership, I could talk about lots of leadership theories, emotional intelligence and all that stuff, but there are two fundamental standards of leadership: where the buck stops and from where the tone is set. The tone set from the Prime Minister is woefully inadequate. It has sullied the good name of his office, it has tarnished the Members of this House and it has distorted the importance of truth across the countries of the United Kingdom.

I made some notes during the Easter break and I headed them up. As I started to add to them, my list became clear. The heading of that list was, "What an absolute mess." It is an absolute mess that people are suffering a cost of living crisis driven by 10 years of Tory austerity, cuts to welfare, rising taxes and changes to the energy price cap when in Scotland we are energy-rich but fuel-poor. Pensioners have to survive on the lowest pension in the developed world. Most of us, certainly myself, can speak very clearly about being left on hold for up to seven hours a day waiting to get through to the

Home Office to deal with urgent visa applications for people fleeing war in Ukraine. The same is true for people trying to leave the UK because they cannot get their passport application sorted.

This is a Government without conscience, compassion or courage. They have absolutely lost the moral authority to lead. This Prime Minister's demands and commands are built on sand. Defending him is complicity in all those failings.

I want to return, before I conclude, to the leadership of the Prime Minister. No one in my constituency is surprised by his behaviour. In fact, the greatest insult in my inbox is that on the back of partygate the Government made a ham-fisted attempt to distract people, which has driven a new vein of rage across my constituency: the costly people-trafficking scheme that is supposed to stop people trafficking, which is the reintroduction of transportation from the UK in 2022. We are sending some of the most vulnerable people in the world across to Rwanda to be processed. That is an absolute disgrace. The only thing the Prime Minister is delivering is misery.

The Prime Minister might pull the wool over the eyes of right hon. and hon. Members on the Government Benches and he may be able to use the Whip to save his bacon on this occasion, but his mealy-mouthed apology only damages his office and this House. It is simply not to be believed. It is, as has been said, not going to cut the ice.

2.8 pm

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): When there are questions about the conduct of any Member in this place, it is right for the Committee of Privileges to take a look at that case. It is right for it to investigate, it is right for it to make a judgment and it is right for that to happen whoever the Member is. That is the correct procedure for our House, and has been the case for a significant time. If any matters of privilege come to the House for a decision to trigger an investigation, it is right for that to happen. I support privileges investigations. It is our due process.

I want to see more focus on standards across Parliament. Since I became a Member of Parliament, seven—I think—current or former Labour MPs have been given a custodial sentence, as have one Conservative Member, one Liberal Democrat Member and one SNP Member. One political party is having its accounts investigated by the police. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) gave a very good speech in which he detailed suspensions and other issues that have happened because of bullying or harassment. Given all that, it is hard to argue that there are no problems with standards in our politics. Higher standards would benefit all parliamentarians.

Let me comment on my support for the privileges investigations. Those investigations require facts and evidence. The motion and the amendment both recognise that and state that the police must conclude their inquiries before a Privileges Committee investigation. I had hoped that some consensus might break out on that across the Chamber, because that is obviously fair and right. The amendment also stated that the Gray report should be published before an inquiry takes place. That also seems right and fair, but now that that amendment will not be

moved, attention moves to the Privileges Committee investigation. The Committee must have all the evidence on any issue that it investigates.

I have called for the Gray report to be published in full and as soon as possible. That is still my view. I recognise that the Met needs time and space to complete its work, but every effort must be made to bring this matter to a conclusion as fast as possible. Colleagues are making comments when we have not seen all the evidence. I can understand that, because I have done so, too, but the Privileges Committee must be allowed time and space to conclude its investigation and colleagues should not prejudge that.

The hon. Member for Rhondda, who chairs the Privileges Committee and who spoke with great eloquence about its work on previous occasions, has had to recuse himself from any investigation after having made public comments. I do not want to see the Committee's work compromised. I am also not absolutely sure that all the Members who have spoken in this debate have lived up to some of the claims and values of its purpose. For example, some said that the debate was nothing to do with the local elections but then spent their time talking about the local elections.

In summary—I am conscious of time—the Privileges Committee does valuable work in upholding standards, and there is a problem with standards in our politics. The Committee's work is evidence-based, which is why we should have the evidence published first. I want to see that evidence published fully, as soon as possible, because, frankly, upholding standards benefits absolutely everyone.

2.12 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Several hon. Members have referred to the collateral damage that the Prime Minister leaves in his wake, as he has done throughout his career. For example, the Paymaster General, who is on the Front Bench today, said on 9 December during a statement on the Christmas party at No. 10 Downing Street:

“The Prime Minister has been repeatedly assured since these allegations emerged that there was no party and that no covid rules were broken.”—[*Official Report*, 9 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 561.]

We now know that there were several parties, not just one, and that the rules were broken, because fines have been issued, one of which the Prime Minister has received. Part of the collateral damage, therefore, is that the Paymaster General came here to make a statement, based on the same information that allegedly was given to the Prime Minister, and misled the House. I accept that the Paymaster General did so inadvertently, but what has he done about that? The record needs correcting. Surely he should be investigating how he came to be misinformed and to misinform the House.

This has happened on too many occasions for ignorance to be the defence. There is this idea that, throughout lockdown and all the occasions on which these parties took place and the rules were broken, none of the bright young things who had been invited ever thought that any one of those events might break covid rules. Is it conceivable that no one raised a single question about whether they might be breaking the rules? Some of those events were drinks events for people who were

[Clive Efford]

leaving. In our constituencies, people missed funerals and cancelled weddings and birthday parties. However, the people in No. 10 thought that it was okay to have leaving drinks. Where are they? What were they thinking? How out of touch with our constituents can they be to think that they can have a leaving drinks party and are more important than our constituents?

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a good speech, and that is a good point. I want to make a point about the impact of breaking the law, and how it hurt people and continues to do so. My constituent told me:

“Boris Johnson broke the law partying with his colleagues while I watched my father die through a care home window. My father gave up on life because he could not have any proper connection with much-needed family during recovery from a stroke. I think he could still be alive today if I was able to break the law by having a close connection with him”,

but, they say, they were not in the privileged position of the Prime Minister.

Clive Efford: What my hon. Friend read out speaks for itself. She has demonstrated, as have many others, through the cases they mentioned, that the problem starts at the top. The workers who organised the parties would not have done so if they thought that their bosses would be upset, would come down on them and say, “You are breaking the rules. Stop it.” We now know that on at least six occasions, the Prime Minister was present at these parties, so this problem comes right from the top.

The Prime Minister’s defence has been different on many occasions. He started by saying that no rules were broken. He then said that there was a party, but that he was not present—but then he was. Then he said, “I wasn’t warned that it wasn’t a work do.” I did not see anything about a work do in the rules, but perhaps I missed that. The person who writes the rules cannot misunderstand them so fundamentally.

Setting that aside, if the Prime Minister’s defence is, “I didn’t understand the rules; I needed them explained to me” and “I was misled at the outset about there having been a party, because people told me that there wasn’t one,” who misled him? What has happened to them? Are they still in their posts? Have they moved on? Have they signed non-disclosure agreements? Where are those people who misled the Prime Minister, which led him to him inadvertently misleading the House? We cannot have this both ways: either the Prime Minister knowingly came to this House and lied, or other people lied to him, which led to him misleading the House. Either way, we need to identify those people.

The worst crime of all, however, is failing to feel the pain that our constituents felt throughout lockdown. No one who felt the agony and understood the pain that people were going through, as in the example that my hon. Friend read out, could have attended the events that happened in No. 10 Downing Street and other places. The question for Tory MPs today is this: do you stand by the people who felt that pain and vote today for—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The hon. Gentleman knows that he must not use the word “you”.

Clive Efford: This applies to you too, Madam Deputy Speaker. Will Tory MPs stand by the people who felt that pain throughout the past two years? They deserve answers. As others have pointed out, this is about fundamental trust in our politics. When Tory MPs vote today, they should think about the damage that they are doing to the trust in our political process, because the public deserve better. They should think about that before they vote. This matter should go before the Privileges Committee. They know that, so they should vote for that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I remind colleagues that we have advised that they should stick to five-minute speeches in order to be fair to others.

2.19 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): It is rather unsettling to speak from what might now be known as rebel row. I am perhaps the wrong Member to follow the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford), as I happen to believe that we should support the motion, but I am desperately sorry that we are here. I am desperately sorry because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) said, we need to be talking about the need to deal with cancer backlogs. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) talked about the need for us to address the cost of living.

I am a new Member in this place, relatively speaking, and I have probably made a perfect pain of myself to the Government over the past two and a half years, voting against them on a number of issues, but I love this place and I love being a Member of Parliament. I have seen some of the best things happen when Members of this House work together cross-party. When we do that out of lens shot, in the back rooms of this place, on a range of issues that matter in every one of our constituencies, that does not reach the public, which is a shame.

On 2 February, I decided to submit my letter of no confidence. There is no great secret in that; I was fairly public about it. I said that I did it because there was no point in being here to lie to the British public, or to be lied to by my colleagues. I felt then, as I do now, that there is a standard that we have set in this place for the way we speak to one another, debate with one another and treat one another in this Chamber, outside it and in the Committee Rooms. All too often, I have seen it be an enormous success and it has worked, but just occasionally I have seen it fail.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) made an extraordinary speech, one that I could not possibly hope to top, but I am afraid that I am not one of those Members of Parliament who dislikes being here or being an MP. Every day that I see issues and rules broken in this place, it reaffirms my belief that we need to stand up and make it clear that dishonesty, inaction and misleading the House cannot be tolerated from anyone.

When I put that letter in, I asked for changes to how No. 10 was organised, and to how the whipping system works. I am pleased to say that some of those changes—but, unfortunately, not enough of them—have come in. My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker),

who has a religious zeal that I do not, made a point about forgiveness. I forgive the Prime Minister for making those mistakes, but I do not forgive him for misleading the House, as I see it.

I am pleased that the Government have worked with the Opposition and those of us on the Government Benches who disagree with them on the motion. I am disappointed that the motion kicks the can down the round. I welcome it and I will support it, but I think it will be a hook for people to say, “Not yet”. When do people decide to act—on five two, three, four or five? Deciding when to act is for each individual’s good conscience; it is not for me to persuade them.

I have to say that I welcome the motion. I will support it, and I look forward to the findings. I know that the Opposition will support the findings, whatever they may be, and I look forward to ensuring that those who come after the Prime Minister for many years to come will learn from this that the conventions of the House must be respected.

2.22 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): When we entered the pandemic, the Government, led by the Prime Minister, rightly called on the British people to do the right thing and protect each other by following the law and the rules. That is why this affair has been so devastating for so many of us, including my constituents. We all, in different ways, have had to make sacrifices. Some of us lost loved ones and have not been able to mourn them properly because of the restrictions. That applies to many of our constituents up and down the country. I know that from first-hand experience. In my family, we lost friends and relatives and were not able to see their family members or to attend services and support the bereaved.

I want to highlight a few of the many cases raised by those who wrote to me about this affair. Craig wrote to me about his grandmother. He said:

“My grandmother was my best friend. She was admitted to hospital on the day the first cases of Covid were identified in the UK. She died in hospital in early June 2020.

She spent the vast majority of her time in hospital alone, confused, with no visitors. It was terrible for us all and the first Covid lockdown will be forever remembered as one of the worst times of my life.

I and the rest of my family closely adhered to all lockdown advice and the new laws put in place. My nan’s funeral took place the week of the Prime Minister’s birthday party. We were only allowed a handful of people in the service, most of our family and friends forced to line the street outside the crematorium...I cried while writing this email to you, reliving these memories. I cannot allow the Prime Minister and this government to re-write the history of the pandemic and dismiss our collective trauma as ‘just a slice of cake’ or ‘no worse than a speeding ticket’. The nation should not be gaslit into thinking that the pandemic was not so bad.”

Another constituent said:

“My mother was taken to...hospital...for a blood test in April 2020, a week after lockdown began. The test showed that she needed treatment before she could come home, but...we were given the totally unexpected news that she only had days to live.

This devastating news was made worse because my father (who was then almost 90 years of age) and my three sisters and I knew that the lockdown rules meant that we would not be able to see my mother again and that she would die (as she did, two days later) with no-one from her family with her.

So, how do you think my father, my sisters and I felt when the news broke of the partying in No 10, whilst we were adhering to the rules so strictly? I now feel even more angry when I hear government ministers, who I would hope would have some standards of integrity, coming forward on an almost daily basis to say that it’s not an important matter, that the Prime Minister is not to blame, that he has apologised so that makes it all right...I hadn’t intended to write to you. What has led me to do so is Ministers comparing ‘Partygate’ to parking and speeding fines, and the fact that the Prime Minister is going to issue another full apology as though that will make it all right. For me, it doesn’t!”

Another constituent said:

“I just wanted to add my voice to those asking for the Prime Minister’s resignation. I buried my mum about a week before he attended that party that broke the law. We couldn’t even hug at the funeral, which was only allowed ten attendees. No political story has ever made me this furious. I feel like I’ve been scammed by my own government, taken for an absolute fool for obeying the very laws they set...If the Prime Minister can’t even uphold a standard so basic as the rule of law, what are we as a country?”

The final story I want to share is of a health and social care worker. She said:

“I know first-hand the impact Covid has had on vulnerable people and the front line...We should not be living in a country where there is one rule for the PM and government ministers and another one for everyone else.”

Those are voices of pain amid so many messages, emails, cards and letters I received. They are voices of agony and sacrifice—so many cries of pain from the British people, who deserve better. The public rose magnificently to the task of tackling the pandemic. We need to ensure that the motion is supported today. I will support it, and I am glad that some Government Members will. I hope that others will hear the voices of people up and down the country, and will support it, too.

2.28 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): We are all human. We are all fallible. We all make mistakes, but how we deal with those mistakes is a measure of our integrity and character. The British people have overwhelmingly judged the Prime Minister to have dealt with his mistakes disastrously. They overwhelmingly believe him to be a liar, and they have lost trust and confidence in him. That is a problem not just for this Government but for the British political system, and I caution some Conservative colleagues to be less cavalier in trying to dismiss those public concerns.

The narrative coming from the Government seems to be that these breaches were just a consequence of living with the regulations. They were bound to happen, part of normal life, and they were happening in all sorts of places. “They have paid the fine; let’s move on—nothing to see here.” That will not wash. First, the overwhelming majority of people in this country did not breach the rules. They accepted the mandate put on their behaviour, often at great cost and personal consequence. I have hundreds of emails from constituents; I wanted to read some out, but there is not time. People were unable to be present when their children were born or when their parents were buried. They know, and are angry about, what was happening in No. 10 Downing Street while that was being done to them.

The other reason why that will not wash is that many people have paid for their actions with much greater consequences than this Prime Minister. Many people have written to me asking why he has only been given a

[Tommy Sheppard]

50 quid fine while others are being fined up to £10,000 for breaches of the rules. Many in public office have already lost their jobs because of their transgressions, and they are right to sit back and wonder why the holder of this one office should be immune from that consequence.

These people are suggesting that they did not really know that the rules were being broken at the time. That really does beggar belief. We heard from the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) earlier. We know that he and his colleagues within the parliamentary Conservative party were waging a fierce and vicious argument about the consequences of these restrictions. The idea that people sitting in Government offices drinking and socialising after hours did not think that they were in breach of the rules that they themselves were making is risible and we should dismiss it.

I think there is a simpler explanation for all of this. I genuinely believe that we have a Prime Minister whose conceit of himself is so great, and whose sense of entitlement so profound, that he genuinely did not think that the rules applied to him. That is why, when exposed—when found out at the end of last year—he did not come to the House and offer contrition; he did not come and say sorry. He came and he dissembled, and he misled, and he tried to do everything to cover up the breaches that had happened. That, to my mind, more than the attendance at a party, is what he stands charged with today. It is not the fact; it is what he tried to do to conceal his actions. That, in my view, is unforgivable.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The hon. Member is making an excellent speech, and I agree with everything he is saying. More than 170,000 people have died from covid in the United Kingdom. That means that it has affected so many friends and so many families, and there has been a devastating sense of remorse for people's loss. If the Prime Minister were really showing his own great remorse for breaking rules that he had set, surely his actions would speak louder than his words and he would resign. Does the hon. Member agree?

Tommy Sheppard: I could not agree more. I think that the Prime Minister would have resigned if he had any integrity. I consider it remarkable that rather than his giving an apology and any demonstration of contrition when these events came to light, it was not until he was dragged kicking and screaming into the light of truth by the criminal justice system and the forces of law enforcement that we actually received the apology that we heard this week, and that is not enough.

I want to spend one minute talking about the situation in Scotland. The hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) leads the Scottish Conservatives. At the start of this year in the Scottish Parliament, he and his colleagues took, I believe, the right decision—they called on the Prime Minister to go—but somehow, miraculously, they have now been whipped into line by Central Office and changed their minds on that question. In commenting on that, I can do no better than quote Professor Adam Tomkins, a very senior Conservative and, until recently, a Conservative Member of the Scottish Parliament. He says that the hon. Member and his colleagues

“have now reduced themselves—and made their former position of principle look not only empty but risible—by insisting that the prime minister is now somehow fit for office and that being fined by the police makes no difference... The Scottish Conservatives are in terminal decline, again. And, this time, it is their own fault.”

That comes from within the Conservative party in Scotland itself.

I know that many people throughout Britain will look with horror at the way in which this Government have traduced public service and denigrated many of the democratic institutions in their country, but people in Scotland look at it too and see it as further evidence of a British state that is in decline and does not represent their interests. They are increasingly attracted by the opportunity to create a new country, an independent country with a different constitution.

Let me end by saying that I will vote for the motion, and I caution Conservative Members to do so as well. They are right—there is no room for personal attacks in this place or in politics—but let them understand this: actions do have consequences, and what goes around will come around. If the parliamentary Conservative party tries to sweep this under the carpet and tries to acquiesce in the actions of this Prime Minister any further, it will pay a very heavy political price.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I must reiterate that it is important to think of others in this debate and try to stick to five minutes. It is possible, and I know that every Member present is capable of it. If you could all do that, everyone will get in.

2.35 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I am sad that the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) is not present, because I want to heap praise on his speech. Oh, there he is; he is not in his usual place.

Before I was elected, I had been in this building twice. When my husband came down with me on the day of my election, it was only the second time he had been to London. I was raised by rebellious people—people who would make some of those in the House who are considered to be rebellious look very, very tame—and I came here with a chip on my shoulder about what this place was and what it could achieve. I came here with an “I’m going to rip up the rulebook” attitude. My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) once described me as the “Rizzo of Parliament”.

What happened then was that I fell in love with this place and with what it can achieve. I fell in love with the job of being a Member of Parliament, and watching as people came into my surgeries, and saying to them, “Together, you and I can try to change this law.” I have never once changed a law in this place without doing so in concert with people in every part of the Chamber. I have never changed a law on my own. Every single thing that I have ever achieved in this place I have achieved with members of the Conservative party, and with members of the Scottish National party, and indeed with members of all the parties represented today. That does not get a view, but it deeply, deeply matters.

It is considerably more popular for us to talk about how we are friends than about how much we hate each other. It is much more popular with the public than we give it credit for. So that is what I want people to see more of. I spend a lot of my time trying to talk to the public about that element of politics, and to explain why 99% of people in this building came here. Whether or not we agree on the means by which the journey is travelled, we all wish to change the world for the better, and I think that that is deeply important. I am afraid to say, however, that it is the very rare 1% who we are discussing today, because I do not believe that that is true of the Prime Minister.

Nine months have passed since any of this came to light. I could have had a baby in the time it has taken for the apology to come, and it would have been less painful. In those nine months, what we have seen is someone taking actions not in a desperate attempt to preserve the thing that we all came here to do, but in a desperate attempt to preserve his own position. That, to me, is unforgivable. It does not matter how many times someone says sorry in those circumstances, and you can bet your bottom dollar that should this have been any one of us it would have been different.

I have made mistakes, and no doubt I will make mistakes, and I accept people's apologies. However, there is no way that what the Prime Minister has done in trying to stick a pin in things—we are on something like the 700th pin in this particular case—has ever been about trying to make the country better, or to make the lives of his Members of Parliament better, or even to make them more electable. I do not know why people have undermined elections today, talking about them as though they were not a route to democracy. I find that quite weird. I like elections. That is the game that we play—it is the thing that we do here. We ask the people what they think, and that is ok. But all along the way, everything he has sought to do has been about him. He cannot answer a simple question. He did not have to wait for the police investigation. I asked him about four months ago whether he went to a party in his flat on that date. He said he could not answer because there was a police investigation. Well, I could say that I did not go to a party at his house on that date and it would not affect the police investigation. What he has done shows a lack of contrition because it was not up front. It has never been up front, and it has never been about anyone in this building or without this building; it has always been about him. He would not do the same for a single person in this room, so I ask all Members to vote for the motion.

2.40 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I say at the outset that apologies are one thing, but apologies that are made in the wholesale absence of any evidence of repentance are not worth a button. I am pleased to stand and speak for the many Angus constituents—almost 100 now—who have written to articulate their outrage at this debacle of accountability at the feet of this Prime Minister. He was always a questionable choice to lead the Conservative party because he would inevitably have become—indeed, he immediately became—Prime Minister under the politics of that time. He was the indiscreet, verbose showman that the Conservatives seemingly required to unlock the Brexit impasse in this place. It was always going to be a high-risk strategy, and the chickens have now come

home to roost. If the Tories claim to have got Brexit done—which in itself is a questionable assertion that rests uncomfortably with the truth—why are they so reluctant to dispose of their one-trick-pony leader?

I say this in all candour: with this train crash of a Prime Minister, it was always going to be a question of when, not if. If the reputational capital and parliamentary respect that the Prime Minister is furiously feeding off to keep himself on political life support is a function of a zero-sum game, that which he is gorging upon is coming at a direct and equal cost to all Conservative Members, because they have the ability to stand up for what is right and remove him. More seriously, it is also coming at a cost to the public's faith in political leadership, such as it is, except, I am pleased to say, in Scotland, where Scottish Tory voters—including in my Angus constituency—needed to take only one look at this Prime Minister for Tory seats in Scotland to fall by 55% at the 2019 election. Only two Scottish Tory MPs were present for this debate today. They are not in their place now, and the Scottish Tory leader never showed up at all.

The Prime Minister's vacuous claim that he must stay in office to help with the cost of living crisis and the crisis in Ukraine is a grotesque contortion of reality and history. In reality, the UK Government under this Prime Minister are adding to the cost of living crisis with tax increases heaped upon soaring fuel and food prices. In France they are in the final throes of a presidential election while supporting Ukraine. Politics is not displaced by conflict; quite the opposite, in fact. In historical terms, the UK and other nations wasted no time in changing leaders ahead of or during two world wars, so this charade is little more than a disgraced Prime Minister desperately seeking to attach himself to a convenient cause to distract from his now trademark injudicious character.

I know that Conservative Members get this. We heard earlier from the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), who is no longer in his place. His excellent speech highlighted the risks to the parliamentary and democratic reputation if the Prime Minister does not take responsibility. Similarly, the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) made his position on the Prime Minister clear earlier this week. The public have not forgotten the nature and letter of the rules or the immeasurable constraints on their lives and freedoms during lockdown. As other hon. and right hon. Members have said, it is inconceivable that there was any grey area over these parties and bring-your-own-booze-ups.

The Prime Minister's refusal to go is beyond acceptable. These views are shared by constituents up and down these isles, not just in Angus. My constituent Nicola Livingstone has pointed out:

“The Prime Minister's refusal to go and the Conservative party's acquiescence undermine the rule of law and any trust in political institutions. The Conservative party's tawdry self-preservation is an insult to the nation and to the behaviours we expect from our leaders. It will be profoundly damaging to our faith in Government at a time when it is already dangerously low.”

I deeply regret that the Government have weakly withdrawn their amendment. I look forward to ensuring that we can put on record our position on this matter in the voting Lobby today.

2.45 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): In our arcane system, the Prime Minister can sit as judge and jury on himself. As other Members have pointed out, this is a ridiculous system. I am willing to bet that the Prime Minister will not find himself guilty, even though the Metropolitan police have found him guilty of at least one breach of the covid rules, and my guess is that there are more crimes to come. This is a breach of rules that his own Government wrote, and that he then took to the airwaves to defend.

The Prime Minister

“sometimes seems affronted when criticised for what amounts to a gross failure of responsibility. I think he honestly believes that it is churlish of us not to regard him as an exception, one who should be free of the network of obligation which binds everyone else”.

Those are not my words, but those of his former classics master at Eton. It is not hard to draw the conclusion that those words still stand, so it is natural that we have had no proper apology to the British people for his multiple breaches of covid rules. This Prime Minister is both capable of multiple lawbreaking and incapable of genuine contrition. This attitude to the rules has marked his entire career, both in journalism and in this House. For him to say “I am sorry for any offence caused” is not an apology for repeated wrongdoing. For him to say, “I was not aware of my own rules” is the defence of the ignorant, which does not stand in law. And for him to claim, “I have not misled the House”, “All the rules were obeyed” and “No rules were broken” is a serious cover-up. I could use another word, but I will refrain out of respect to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

For the Prime Minister to say there were no parties at No. 10 when 50 financial penalties have been handed out, when he attended many of those parties and stood barman for at least one of them, insults the intelligence of the people of Britain. The issue with the Prime Minister is that he clearly believes there is one set of rules for him and his cronies, and another set of rules for the rest of us, including the electorate. These were not just rules but orders from the Prime Minister and his cronies, who consider themselves to be better than the ordinary people of this country.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, while the Prime Minister was organising parties in No. 10 and showing complete contempt for his own rules, working-class communities and young people in overcrowded flats all over Britain were in lockdown? The mental health crisis that we still have around us was intensified by the very strict operation of those rules, and many young people faced massive £10,000 fines for organising parties. Is it not just one law for Boris Johnson and his mates, and a different one for everybody else?

Ms Abbott: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. We are told that we must rely on the integrity of the Government if the rule of law, the principle that no one is above the law and, even more importantly, people’s respect for the political system are to be upheld in this country. Well, we shall see.

Conservative Members have complained that the Opposition are engaging in politics, and of course there is a political dimension. My email inbox has been

deluged with complaints about this matter, and I am sure I am not alone. I am sure many Conservative Members, if they dared admit it, could say the same. The Prime Minister has to accept that this is not just a Westminster row that nobody outside SW1 is concerned about.

The public—Tory voters, Labour voters and those who have never voted at all—have had to endure untold misery during the Prime Minister’s premiership. No fewer than 190,000 people have died from covid, and more than 1 million people have long covid. Because of the rules, as we have heard, so many people were unable to be with their loved ones as they were dying. These are the people the Prime Minister is scorning. These are the people to whom the Prime Minister thinks he can get away with making a manifestly ingenuine and mealy mouthed apology. It did not have to be that way.

The background of this issue is that living standards are plummeting, the NHS is in crisis and the spring statement rubbed salt into the wounds, making tens of millions of people worse off. I do not believe the public are in a mood to forgive and forget. The Prime Minister and his acolytes like to say he was at the party for only nine minutes. Many people would have liked to have been with their loved ones for nine minutes when they were dying.

The country wants the Prime Minister gone and these Benches want the Prime Minister gone. He broke the law. The question for Conservative members is very clear: are you just going to do nothing, today and in the future, while Boris Johnson sacrifices you to save himself, as he has done throughout his life and career?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

Two quick reminders: we do not use the word “you” when speaking through the Chair; and colleagues should not refer to other hon. Members by name.

2.52 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): The motion refers to the Prime Minister’s comments in this place on 1 and 8 December 2021, but these are simply specimens. It could have referred to many other occasions when the Prime Minister may have inveigled this House by using the fact that no one could challenge his veracity because of the protection afforded to him by parliamentary etiquette.

The Prime Minister has form. First, there were the early warning signs way back in 2019 and earlier, such as when he refused the invitation from my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) to apologise for his dreadful *Spectator* article arguing that people affected by the Hillsborough disaster were wallowing in their “victim status”.

Secondly, what about the Prime Minister’s absurd claim in this place on 29 January 2020 that the Conservatives have grown the economy by 73%, a claim that relies on data stretching back to 1997? Thirdly, he made a false assertion on 4 March 2020 that his Government have provided free hospital parking for all, a comment that still stands uncorrected on the parliamentary record.

Fourthly, he said on 11 March 2020, “We are cutting”—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I remind hon. Members of what Mr Speaker said at the beginning of the debate:

“While it is perfectly in order for hon. Members to question the veracity of the Prime Minister’s responses to the House cited in the motion, it is not in order to challenge more generally the truthfulness of the Prime Minister or any other hon. or right hon. Member.”

I am sure the hon. Gentleman will adjust his speech accordingly.

Peter Dowd: In September 2020, the Prime Minister stated in relation to covid guidance:

“There is nothing more frustrating for the vast majority who do comply...than the sight of a few brazenly defying the rules, so these rules will be enforced by tighter penalties.”—[*Official Report*, 22 September 2020; Vol. 680, c. 798.]

Those were his words. On 16 December 2020, he said:

“This Christmas it’s vital that everyone exercises the greatest possible personal responsibility.”

That was on the same day that London went into tier 3 restrictions. Two days later, there was a party at No. 10 Downing Street. The Prime Minister promised the House that he would publish all his personal exchanges with Sir James Dyson in relation to covid-19 contracts, but those have never appeared.

This list goes on. Those at Downing Street tell us that he “follows the ministerial code” and principles to the letter. The Prime Minister then told the House that it is “common sense” for people to wear a mask “in confined spaces”, but, surprisingly, he was photographed later the same day at Wembley stadium without a mask on. He stated in relation to covid that

“all guidance was followed completely in No.10.”—[*Official Report*, 1 December 2021; Vol. 704, c. 909.]

Was it? He then said at Prime Minister’s Question Time:

“I have been repeatedly assured since these allegations emerged that there was no party and that no covid rules were broken.”—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 372.]

As hon. Members have said, either the Prime Minister was not being candid or his staff were not. So who was not? Possibly, it was both. He said he was “furious” to see the clip of his own staff discussing No. 10 parties, as though somehow he did not live there—he did! On 15 December 2021, at a Downing Street press conference, he said:

“I follow the rules. Everybody across politics should follow the rules.”

Indeed, they should, but the Prime Minister did not. And so it goes on.

What we are trying to do today is set in train a process whereby this House really does need to look into the concerns of so many Members and, more importantly, of the many constituents who have written to each of us about their concerns. They deserve answers. They are not that interested in parliamentary protocols often; they just want answers to their deeply held concerns and questions. This House, and surely Members opposite, cannot allow allegations of the Prime Minister’s insouciant and nonchalant attitude—allegedly—towards the truth to go unchallenged. We need to send a message to the country that when all the police inquiries have been completed, this House will through its own processes, the very ones that have protected the Prime Minister from blunt assertions on the Floor of this Chamber, and consider those allegations thoroughly and openly. Finally, let me say that the mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa approach from the Prime Minister does not wash with my constituents.

2.57 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): A few people have said today that this has been a curious debate, and indeed it has been. It has been variously sombre, angry, reflective and even at times quasi-religious. Most of all, it has been necessary. When a sitting Prime Minister has been served with a fine for breaking a law that he himself set, particularly when that same Prime Minister had come to this House and said that no law had been broken, it could not possibly be ignored by this place. This House could have chosen to do a number of things in response to what it has been presented with. It could have done what the Government hoped: another apology could have been made and it could have hoped everybody would move on. But Conservative Members know there is real anger out there and that was never going to be enough for our constituents. At the other end of the scale, they could have replaced the Prime Minister and ended this with him having taken full responsibility and gone off into the embers and ether; that would be the end of it, he would go down with this incident and then we could fully move on. But that is going to be a matter for Conservative Members, and I have seen no indication that they are prepared to do that just now. We have instead chosen, as inevitably we will this evening, as it now looks as though this motion will be passed overwhelmingly, to refer this matter to the Privileges Committee. Although I personally find that a bit meh, it will do as a reasonable start in order that we deal with some of the issues around all of this.

I do not think the House will ever fully move on from this matter until we fully appreciate the sheer significance of what has happened and its profound impact on our constituents. Our constituents are genuinely upset and sincerely believe that the Prime Minister has lied—in fact, YouGov has just published an opinion poll that shows that 78% of the public think he has. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) was absolutely right in his speech to reach for the L-word. After 20 years of sitting on the green Benches in this House, I still find it shocking to hear the L-word in this place, but no other word is appropriate. No other word could be used in the context of what the Prime Minister has said and done. Our constituents would be bewildered if we were not using the word that they now most commonly associate with his behaviour. We will never move on before the Government accept that.

I made my maiden speech on the same day as the Prime Minister back in 2001—in fact, I spoke after him. I remember his speech quite clearly: he compared himself to little Simba putting his paw into the huge footprint left by Michael Heseltine’s Mufasa. I should perhaps leave that reference there, because after the Pinocchio incident I do not want to mention the title of the feature film that features Simba.

Conservative Members know what the Prime Minister is like: they have known him for 20 years—for as long as I have. I found him a curious, dishevelled, odd type of character, but they must have known him better than me and they went and elected him as their Prime Minister. They knew what they were doing. This is no ordinary Prime Minister; this is somebody who profoundly believes that the law is for someone else and not for him. No other Prime Minister in history would have thought

[Pete Wishart]

for a minute that they could possibly survive having been given a fine for breaking a law that they themselves set.

The main question is: did the Prime Minister mislead the House? I think the answer to that, on both sides of the House, is yes, he did mislead the House. The next question, therefore, is whether it was inadvertent: did he mean to mislead the House? Let us look at the evidence for that. First, he said there was no rule breaking. Then he claimed he was not aware of any parties. Then he said he was outraged by the parties he was not aware of. Then he said he was aware of “events” but believed they were not against the rules. Then he admitted he was at these events but did not know what they were. He was then fined for attending these events that he variously did not know anything about, was outraged over and did not realise were illegal. Then he apologised, a lot—again and again—but the time for that apology has passed.

I am not going to be reticent about the elections. The police have just put out a statement saying that no more fines will be issued and there will be no more comment until after the council elections, so they are now definitely in the mix. The elections are a feature of all this because of that police statement. I say to my Conservative colleagues: “You are going to get absolutely hammered in May.” The public are outraged. My local authority in Perthshire is Conservative, and we have one message on our leaflet: “As you obeyed the rules, the Tories partied. Kick them out.” I suspect that will go on most leaflets in subsequent elections until the Prime Minister is replaced or removed—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that he needs to stick to what is in the motion.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Absolutely, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would never dare move away from the motion before the House, and I find even the suggestion that I would quite shocking!

Let me conclude. This is a pivotal moment. Conservative Members can decide to resolve this issue and move on, for their own good as well as for themselves. Surely they are not going to go down with somebody who is now so full of the contempt of everybody across this nation. This motion will not be the end of it, but it could be the beginning of the end. I believe that this will truly end only when the Prime Minister goes, but that is all up to them.

3.4 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I remind colleagues from all parties that I stand in this place today, in this privileged position, representing the wonderful people of North Shropshire, partly because the great British public, whom we are here to represent, really do care about standards in British politics.

I ask colleagues on the Conservative Benches to cast their minds back to Tuesday 7 December last year when the sensational news broke that Allegra Stratton had been filmed practising giving answers to difficult questions about lawbreaking. Perhaps they will remember the morning of Wednesday 8 December when the only

Conservative party politician facing the media was the unfortunate candidate in the North Shropshire by-election. They may remember the early hours of Friday 17 December when the verdict of the people of North Shropshire was announced; for them, the party of more than 200 years was most definitely over.

The motion before the House is that the Prime Minister may have deliberately misled the House and, as such, should be referred to the Committee of Privileges. We all know that it is not credible that the Prime Minister told the truth to the House when he said that the rules had been followed at all times. The only possible explanation for the claim was that he had been unable to understand the detail of the rules that he himself had written. I will touch briefly on some of the other reasons that have been given to let him off the hook.

The first is that a fixed penalty notice is no more serious than a speeding ticket. We all know, I think, that that is rubbish, and that was pointed out by a colleague in an earlier contribution. The Prime Minister, members of his Cabinet and the country’s most senior public health officials appeared live on TV almost every night to remind us of the gravity of these laws. Reminders of the importance of following these laws from the Prime Minister’s own social media accounts were repeatedly posted. Suggesting that these laws were trivial is beyond disrespectful to all those who got us through those dark days of the pandemic—whether they were key workers, community volunteers or just ordinary members of the public making huge sacrifices to save other people’s lives.

A second argument that we have heard today is that the country needs stable leadership to tackle the cost of living crisis at home and the desperately needed support for Ukraine abroad. I think that a change of approach is needed for the cost of living crisis. We need an approach that protects those in need, not the super profits of companies extracting oil and gas, and an approach that gives a VAT cut to struggling families rather than a tax hike on hard working people. To suggest that the Prime Minister is focusing on the cost of living is ridiculous, because he is focusing his behaviour on escaping from a trap that he has laid for himself.

Let us consider for a moment the grave situation in Ukraine. We are largely united across this House on the need to support the brave Ukrainian people, to sanction those who prop up Putin’s murderous invasion force, and to welcome those fleeing the tragedy of war. We also all know that it is possible that, in the coming months, our leader will be required to make decisions of the most serious nature—decisions that none of us would want to be forced to make. Should that happen, this House and the British public will need to have the utmost confidence that the Prime Minister is telling the truth, but he has irrevocably damaged that confidence. No-one believes that he has told the truth, because he has become entangled in a web of lies.

I will not repeat the timeline of events; we have heard it enough in this Chamber. None the less, it makes a mockery of all of us to suggest that he did not understand his own rules, and that the rules that he set were not broken when the police have concluded that they were.

That brings me to the third argument, which is that the public have just moved on and that they do not care, and here I return to my opening remarks. The public of this country understand the importance of a code of

conduct. They understand that, if a Prime Minister breaks that code of conduct, that code says that he should resign—resign to uphold those fundamental basic standards in public life. They become really angry when the Prime Minister tries to bend those rules to save himself or indeed his friends.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The police may still have a hand in the twists and turns of this story. Given the events that have taken place, the House would look very stupid indeed if it did not refer the Prime Minister to the Committee of Privileges. The party won the vote on the Member for North Shropshire, Owen Paterson, but it very quickly regretted winning that vote. It might want to learn its lesson, because it does not want to regret its actions again; as the hon. Lady knows, that vote on Owen Paterson ultimately ended up with her taking her place in the House of Commons.

Helen Morgan: Indeed, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. My seat in this House is proof that the British public really do care. If colleagues on both sides of the House also cared about the importance of conserving the valued institutions that underpin this mother of all democracies, they would certainly back the motion.

3.9 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): It is often said that people are the products of their environment. Where I come from, empathy, tolerance and a sense of decency and fairness are all characteristics that many of our people in Liverpool hold dear. We struggle with the concepts of self-entitlement, haughtiness or selfishness. We pride ourselves on looking out for one another—our family, our friends and our communities—above all else.

By and large it is our commonality as human beings that has seen the British people come through difficult years. Contrary to the words of Margaret Thatcher, there is such a thing as society, and it has been on show each and every day of the pandemic. It is the food bank volunteer, the supermarket assistant, the care worker, the nurses and doctors who held the hands of the dying, and those who did the right thing and played by the rules as their mental health plummeted, who bit the bullet of loneliness and separation because the Prime Minister said that was what we had to do. However, what he meant to say was, “Do as I say, not as I do.”, because he was ripping up the rules and partying.

The pain endured by our people over the past two years has left a deep emotional scar on our collective psyche. The British people are now struggling to overcome the fact that their Prime Minister is incapable of the very sacrifices that they made for their loved ones and for the loves ones of people they had never met. No person like that is fit to be Prime Minister of this country. The Teflon has come off.

I am sure the Prime Minister will attempt to reinvent himself, for he covets power above all else. Before I entered this place, I asked myself why, as I suspect many hon. Members across the House did—“Why do I want to do this? What difference can I make?” I am still asking those questions today, hoping to leave a small mark on this place and on my constituency. I do not believe the Prime Minister has ever asked himself those fundamental questions. The “Why?” and the “Who

for?” were never important to him. He has spent his whole life chasing power for power’s sake, leaving a trail of destruction in his wake. He has no interest in my Liverpool, Wavertree constituents, and the people of Uxbridge and South Ruislip will decide whether he has any interest in them.

The Prime Minister could fall on his sword, but of course he will not. The choice for Conservative Members is simple. Will they do the right thing today, in the interests of this country and of the office of the Prime Minister, or will they stick with the rotten apple? As the Prime Minister is so fond of a party, the right and proper thing for this House to do today is to give him a party he will never forget—a leaving party. Anything less simply undermines our democracy, and that is not good enough.

3.13 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): I had intended, as I am sure had many other hon. Members, to be in the Chamber this afternoon for the scheduled debate on childhood cancer, particularly because of a very moving story of some constituents of mine and the long, hard road they have been on with a child with very serious cancer.

I emailed the family last night to tell them that that debate would not now take place and this one would instead. I do not know them personally; I did not know their politics or whether they would be annoyed that such an important attempt to discuss cancer research and care was to be disrupted by this attempt at accountability.

Bella’s dad replied to me saying that he hoped the PM, “can take some ownership for his actions. For context, in the same period the parties took place we were held to a strict one-parent bedside rule, and were only allowed to swap every 5 nights.”

That meant that for six weeks that family, as they managed a child with very serious cancer and a baby at home, saw each other for only five minutes every five days as they swapped over at the bedside. That reminded me of all the things that people across our countries and regions were going through.

There have been many very powerful and effective speeches from Members from across the House. I particularly welcome those from the Conservative Benches that show that this is not a partisan issue. I do not want to repeat all the points about the timeline, leadership, the distorting and degrading effect of dodging accountability, and this Prime Minister’s unfitness to lead at any time, but particularly in these turbulent times. However, I want to put on record the views of the many people from across South Belfast, and indeed Northern Ireland, who have expressed to me their revulsion at and rejection of the mendaciousness and lack of integrity displayed over the past couple of years by the Prime Minister, and by the praetorian guard of MPs and Ministers who debase themselves and their constituents every time they repeat the wild excuses put before them.

As hon. Members have pointed out, politics does not work without trust, integrity and confidence in good faith, and we have heard outlined the corrosive effect of this saga on politics. There is also the impact that the Prime Minister has had on relationships in Northern Ireland and Anglo-Irish relations, as we scramble to

[*Claire Hanna*]

manage the carnival of reaction that has followed the Prime Minister's decisions and pronouncements on Northern Ireland, and the gap between those decisions and those pronouncements. By promising one thing and doing another day after day, and by threatening every few days to pull the pin on article 16, he has regressed the region I represent by many, many years, and he has been untruthful to us and about us. Whatever people's views on the politics and the constitutional issues of the past five years—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I remind the hon. Lady that we are talking about the Prime Minister's conduct with regard to the motion before us, rather than going into much wider issues.

Claire Hanna: I am trying to give a sketch of the impact of the Prime Minister's character on the politics of the region I represent.

As Members know, this is not just about the parties, although one of the few things I have in common with Boris Johnson is that we share a birthday, so I know exactly where I was—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady needs to refer to the Prime Minister or the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, not Boris Johnson. We do not refer to each other by name—apart from me; I am allowed to do that.

Claire Hanna: I know where I was on 19 June, and it was not at the 40th birthday party I had intended to have with family and friends. Like other people, I was following the rules, as I think most people in this House did.

This is an inflection point. Hon. Members have an opportunity to put down a marker about the long-term and increasingly irreparable damage that is happening to the public conversation, trust in democracy, and relationships within these islands. I hope that we will all be able to put down that marker today.

3.17 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I will not speak for long, as I do not want to delay the House. I will merely give a perspective on both the principle of the motion and the standing of the House in relation to the motion. The motion hinges on whether there should be due consideration by the Committee of Privileges of whether the Prime Minister's conduct amounted to contempt of this House. The gravity of the charge is great. Although the hard power of this House is to legislate, it also has a great deal of soft power at its disposal, but that entirely rests on its standing with the public—not just in the United Kingdom but, as my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) said, right around the international community. Once the public no longer believe that the House is a place where honest answers are given, the credibility of its role in public life will continue to diminish—and it has taken an awful battering over the past two years. The hard power of the House is also undermined, as people take less notice of the rules we make if we break them, and then, worse, deny knowledge of breaking them.

The public rely on many different services for our society to function, and all those services' ability to function emanates from the writs given to them by this place. During covid, that was doubly important, as we needed the consent of people to stop the spread of infection. The fire service did an incredible job in supporting people during the pandemic, as did the magistrates courts. Both had to enact the rules that we made, and both were central in that task.

I will briefly mention my friend Jules, who served for nearly 30 years as a firefighter and 20 years as a magistrate. Julian Jenkins was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2019. He was making good progress with his recovery and was in good spirits when I saw him during last year's May recess with his partner Helen, with whom I attended university, and who has been a lifelong friend. However, he contracted covid in August 2021 and tragically passed away. Jules was only beginning to enjoy his retirement after a lifetime of public service, but that was snatched away from him.

I will now directly quote Helen, so I will make use of Members' names, but these are her words, not mine. Helen said:

"I always feel sadness at the loss of my partner but at the moment my overriding emotion is anger and frustration. Anger at what Boris Johnson, Rishi Sunak and other government officials have done and frustration that they still won't accept responsibility. If you make the laws, then immediately break the laws you made and are then found guilty and fined, you have no credibility to govern. Johnson and Sunak lack any moral authority, which is essential when making future legislation, not just Covid-related but in general."

We need to restore credibility to this House, and sunshine is the best disinfectant, so we must vote in favour of the motion for Jules, Helen and all the families affected by covid. If rule makers become rule breakers, they must be held accountable, which is what the House must do. That is why we must pass the motion today.

3.21 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I was made an hon. Member of this place on 7 May 2015, and I know that this place means a lot to many Members. Personally, I have no real interest in this place but for one reason: to represent my constituents and help them to see my vision of an independent Scotland. I do not believe in the archaic traditions of this place, but I work hard to represent my constituents, who elected me. They have recently written to me again to ask me to ask the Prime Minister to resign, and I have to tell them that I do not have the power to do that. I cannot make the Prime Minister resign. I can ask him, but I know that he will not do so just because I have asked. However, it is important that we pass the motion, which may well lead ultimately to his dismissal, if not his resignation.

My constituents had a hard time over covid, and so did I, as I lived mainly by myself, but I was most struck by a constituent who wrote to me because she knew that I was returning to this place last June. She asked me to visit the covid memorial wall, where there was a heart for her mother. She was not able to travel from my constituency of Motherwell and Wishaw to London. That had a profound effect on me. It also reminded me that a number of constituents had emailed me during lockdown, when they missed births and deaths, marriages were postponed and people lived a bleak existence. Many of them had to go out and work in very low-paid

jobs, because they had absolutely no other way to support their families. Many people suffered, and are still suffering, because of the lockdown.

It is hard for people with privilege to understand how many of my constituents lived. It is hard for such people to understand the impact of missing a funeral when nothing has happened to any of their family, and it is hard for them to understand how people eke out an existence on benefits. When people then find out that the Prime Minister of this country broke his own laws and went to parties, which they were not allowed to do, it is really hard, so I was not surprised by the flood of emails in my inbox asking for his resignation.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): People right across East Dunbartonshire are sickened by the Prime Minister's behaviour. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Prime Minister should not be trusted to run a menage, never mind the United Kingdom?

Marion Fellows: For those who are non-Scots, a menage is a savings scheme for people who are usually extremely poor and save on a weekly basis, and if someone is first in the menage, they get the total amount contributed. I was in many a menage before I came here. I totally agree with my hon. Friend.

I said that I did not care about this place. In some ways I do not, but there is one thing that I do care about. I care about truth. As a councillor, I was subject to the Nolan principles, and I am still subject to them. I am not fantastic—I have made mistakes in my life—and I do not have the memory to lie, but I think that truth, especially from the Prime Minister, is absolutely one of the most important things. If we cannot trust the word of the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—much as I want not to be part of that Union—all is lost. I therefore urge Members on both sides of the House to vote for the motion.

3.26 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Listening to this debate, I am reminded of the Conservative party leadership election during the summer of 2019. I was surprised that a number of my constituents approached me to ask who I thought should become leader. I said, in all honesty, that I really hoped that it would be the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), because I feared what might otherwise happen, and I believe that our country must always come first.

Whether we are Back Benchers or Front Benchers, and whether we are Government or Opposition Members, we must be steadfast in our commitment to the truth and the principles of the law. That is certainly the case for the person occupying the most powerful elected position in the land—that of Prime Minister, a great public office that has been respected for centuries, but which is, we fear, in danger of being debased. The position of Prime Minister is the most elevated of all. The public always has and always will look up to it for leadership, and throughout the pandemic we have seen how important the roles of the Government and the Prime Minister are. The public looked to them not just for leadership, but for how to behave. The public have reacted to what has happened with ridicule. We have seen the memes online, and we have seen and heard children talking online about the Boris parties.

This is a question of the Government's credibility. Virtually every night, the public watched their screens or listened to their radios to hear the Prime Minister tell them—he implored them—how to behave. They also saw the advertisements telling them to obey the rules. Then for months we had rumours and speculation about how the Prime Minister had behaved, but the Government's counterpoint was that he had not misled Parliament or the public. That resulted in a corrosion of public trust and a change in behaviour. It became almost impossible to reverse what was happening in society because, given the behaviour of the Prime Minister and the Government, people did not trust or believe what was being said.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The issue of trust is the important point that we have to consider today. The public have made their mind up. We have seen the opinion polls, and it is overwhelmingly clear that the public do not trust the Prime Minister in these affairs. This is also about trust in this House. If we are not able to police our own rules and bring to task those who break them, whoever they are, the resulting lack of public trust will damage not just the holder of the office of Prime Minister but all of us.

Matt Western: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is absolutely right. This notion of trust is so fragile and so precious. For those who were around in the 2000s, in the run-up to the expenses scandal and other issues that have affected this House, the primacy of trust in this place is critical to how it operates.

If we are to restore faith and trust in this place, we cannot defend the indefensible. The Government tried that with the Owen Paterson affair. I really felt for Conservative Members, the Back Benchers particularly, who were humiliated by what they were led through by the Prime Minister. We must restore the standards and principles of this place and we must have adherence to the ministerial code, which has to be brought on to a different legal setting.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I think the big distinction with Owen Paterson is that, when outside investigation showed what he had done was wrong, he did not accept it.

Matt Western: I thank the Father of the House for his intervention and I accept the point he makes, but I am not entirely sure that the Prime Minister has fully accepted that he has misled this place.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I appreciate the point made by the Father of the House, but surely the issue here is the persistent breaches of the rules that seem to have taken place, the fact that that contrasts in such an appalling way with the sacrifices made by the British people, and that we all expect so much better.

Matt Western: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am actually going to come on to that point. The first offence was in summer 2020, and by then in Warwickshire alone we had already had 436 excess deaths in Warwickshire care homes, 347 due to covid. Thousands of people were unable to visit their relatives. Of those many cases, perhaps I could just cite one—that of Jill. Her dad, who had been a naval commander in

[*Matt Western*]

world war two, was a very proud serviceman, and she was unable to visit him between March and his death in July.

The Government claim that the Prime Minister was under exceptional pressure. I think we can say that about all the frontline services—all the people working in healthcare, our teachers; it was across the piece—working to keep us safe. I am sure many people here would not have celebrated their birthdays, did not have parties and did not have office parties. I certainly did not, and I do not believe the Prime Minister should have at all.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The Prime Minister was certainly not under pressure in December on those matters when he did mislead the House. As the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) highlighted earlier, this is not the only time. The entirety of Northern Ireland was misled on paper, or a lack of paper, on the borders and the protocol, so there is a pattern going on here. The House has to take this one seriously: it was in here it happened.

Matt Western: I think the hon. Member may be deviating from the subject and I do want to keep to the motion itself, but I understand the point he is making.

The defences being used to defend the Prime Minister are not really worthy of this place or those who espouse them—ambushed by cake; a work event, not a party; or the comparison with a speeding ticket. This is really all indefensible stuff, and then they talk about Ukraine. Of course, we are all concerned by the situation in Ukraine, but I do not believe that should be used as a smokescreen for the failings of this Prime Minister.

In referring this to the Committee of Privileges, it is vital—and I really hope—that there will be great support on the far side, because it is essential for every one of us that we restore public confidence in this place. That is why, of course, I will be voting for the motion.

3.34 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): Much has been said about the Prime Minister's character, but I shall not go there today, other than perhaps to reflect on the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and suggest that he is less like Simba and more like Scar, if we are making comparisons with that film. However, we are where we are. Having reached out to people across Midlothian and sought their views, it has been interesting to see some of the words they have suggested for this situation. One person simply said, "I have no words". Another said, "The word I would use, you would be thrown out of Parliament for trying to use—and it's not the 'I' word."

The Prime Minister has broken the law. He was dragged kicking and screaming to make an apology of sorts. While that has happened, he has continued to go about his business, undermining every single one of us in this place. His actions have an impact on every one of us. The public look at what happens in this place and every one of us is tarred with the same brush. It is critical that we have the opportunity to hold those in the highest offices to account.

All the lawbreaking, criminality and evasiveness have been able to go unpunished, not because of a glitch in the system, but because the system is inherently unfit for purpose. If a Prime Minister were to lie, they would be untouchable for as long as they had their party on their side and a healthy majority—although, given the lack of movement on the amendment today, perhaps "a healthy majority" could be called into question by some.

If a Prime Minister breaks the law, the people are powerless to remove them and we on the Opposition Benches are largely powerless to do anything about it. It is absurd that a tiny minority of Members in this place have all the say over who holds that position. Our system—the whole way in which this place works—needs to change. The situation illustrates that the system of governance is broken to its core.

At the end of the day, it does not matter who the Prime Minister is. Whoever is in charge has unfettered power. If they do not have integrity, honesty and the ability to follow the laws that they set, Parliament cannot do a thing about it. If the Government have a majority and they continue to support that Prime Minister, that is all that matters to them. Some would use another word to describe that, but perhaps that is for another day.

Conservative Members absolutely have to find a backbone and remove the current Prime Minister. Many names have been suggested for him, but we need to recognise that there is nothing stopping whoever comes next from doing exactly the same, unless we do something about it.

I do not want future generations of Scottish politicians to be sitting here—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I do not want Scottish politicians to be here at all, full stop, but I do not want them to be sitting here in a few decades' time, having the same arguments over and over again about yet another scandal in the British system. That is what a future in the UK holds—scandal after scandal, and never any justice.

The chaos has been non-stop for a decade under the Tory Government. For as long as Scotland is tied to this system, the chaos will continue. My constituents deserve much better than that. While other democracies have matured and moved forward, this whole saga simply shows that in many ways we have done nothing but move backwards.

At times today, the Chamber has been furious. My constituents in Midlothian are absolutely furious.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I think that everyone in the Chamber has heard from so many constituents who feel that way. I have had emails from innumerable constituents. One that I received overnight pointed out the unbearable sacrifices that people have made. That constituent had lost her mother to covid and, because there is a big family, and only one of them was able to be with the mother, they cannot get beyond this. That is what we need to focus on when we look at the situation.

Owen Thompson: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. So many people in so many constituencies across our countries have made huge sacrifices to help and support those around them to look after loved ones and do what they can, because they all wanted to follow

the rules, which were in place to help all of us to get through the pandemic. While so many followed the rules, we had a Prime Minister who simply laughed in our faces.

I have yet to meet a single person who thinks the Prime Minister's actions were in any way justifiable. There is one word that persistently comes from their lips. Thirty-four constituents have gone so far as to email me about the matter, some in anger and some in despair. For every one who has written to me, thousands are discussing it with their families, friends and neighbours. One email simply says:

"I fear for democracy and our futures if this Prime Minister is not held to account".

Another says:

"I ask you to do everything in your power to challenge this and convey my disgust at the actions of his office at a time of huge sacrifice for everyone, not least the nurses and the teachers who have been dragged through the muck."

That is before we even start to consider the countless other workers in jobs across our countries who had to keep working and get on with it while the Prime Minister partied.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: With less than 2% of the Conservative parliamentary party in the Chamber, it must be beyond debate that the Prime Minister will be investigated by the Privileges Committee.

Owen Thompson: I agree. It has to be now the case that the Privileges Committee will have that opportunity.

I agree with the comments of so many here today and so many who have contacted me in Midlothian to express their disgust about the events of the past few months, which have done nothing but undermine the key principles of our democracy. The motion is perhaps an opportunity for us to start to move forward from this and to put right the wrongs of the recent past.

3.41 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate, but I would like to begin by wishing Her Majesty a very happy birthday—96 years of service and commitment to our country and the Commonwealth. It is my birthday on Saturday. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I thank Members. I very much welcome and acknowledge the birthday spirit—of course, all the best people are born in April—but we are here to talk not about birthdays but about a Prime Minister who broke his own laws—the laws that he expected the British people to follow to the letter, but that he had no regard for himself.

I am speaking on behalf of the many people who have written to me about the latest scandal caused by the Prime Minister. Will Foley, a former constituent of mine, also wrote to the Prime Minister to express his outrage and disgust. He feels that he has been misled by the Prime Minister and taken for a fool.

The people of this country, including Will Foley, know that the Prime Minister is not above the law. He made them follow those laws—directly, as residents in England, or indirectly, like many in Newport West—but he did not follow them himself. We all remember how, at 5 pm every day, he stood before us to recite the rules and plead that we should follow them, but when he walked

back through those wooden doors, he was partying. I do not care whether it was 9 minutes or 9 hours—it was a blatant and unacceptable way to behave and totally unbecoming of a Prime Minister. I would like the Minister to explain to the House and the British people how on earth we can expect the Prime Minister to govern this country if he feels no consequences for his actions.

Consequences for the Prime Minister's actions—his lawbreaking—are so important, as is the truth, because the truth is absolutely vital to what we do in this place and what we were sent here to do. Without the truth, we are merely men and women in a big green room shouting at each other—some louder than others. It is imperative that we preserve, defend and protect the truth. By proposing the amendment, the Prime Minister was forcing his hon. Members to stand in the way of us finding the truth, so I am glad to hear that the Government have changed their mind and withdrawn it.

The motion is not about partisan games. It is about doing the right thing, leadership and right and wrong. It is about decency and respect, democracy and following the law that we set. It is about good government and setting an example to our children and grandchildren. That is why the motion, tabled by my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition, is supported by the leaders of the SNP, the Lib Dems, Plaid Cymru and the Social Democratic and Labour party and the hon. Members for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) and for North Down (Stephen Farry). Their support tells us everything that we need to know.

Our country is tired of a Prime Minister who will not take responsibility for breaking his own laws—the laws of this land. When we say it out loud, it beggars belief: the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom has been fined for breaking the law. He is a disgrace to his office and must be forced to face the consequences. I say to Conservative Members: let us help you to help yourselves. The motion allows them to be objective, to ensure that the rule of law is respected by those of us who set the laws and to set an example.

Ministers are trotted out to repeatedly refer to the Sue Gray report. In her report—I pay tribute to Sue Gray for her hard work and patience—Ms Gray says directly:

"There is significant learning to be drawn from these events which must be addressed immediately across Government. This does not need to wait for the police investigations to be concluded."

It follows, therefore, that we do not have to wait for further evidence to refer the Prime Minister to the Committee of Privileges, as the motion states. We can just get on and do it.

Let me be clear: I genuinely wish we were discussing issues of importance to people in Newport West and across the world, such as, to name a few, the war in Ukraine, the cost of living crisis and the climate emergency, but we cannot focus on those issues until this lawbreaking Prime Minister shows the courage, the decency and the respect for all those who died in Newport West and across the United Kingdom, and just goes. It is important for all of us that he goes, because as things stand he is spending each day focusing on keeping his job rather than actually doing it. That is why my constituents in Newport West are paying more than in living memory. That is why they are struggling to pay their bills, feed their families and heat their homes. It is not rocket

[Ruth Jones]

science. It is simple: we have a Prime Minister focused on his job rather than theirs. We need a Government free of the partygate scandal, free of lawlessness and free of arrogance, so the Prime Minister must go now.

I will be voting for this motion today. I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend, the Leader of the Opposition for tabling it and for holding the Prime Minister to account.

3.46 pm

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): As a relatively new Member of this House, I often get asked what it is like to be an MP. I tell people that this place is steeped in tradition and that we are often having to drag it into the 21st century, and at times it can become a little bit challenging, tiring and, I am sorry to say, a little bit boring as well. With no disrespect to the Clerks, it can feel a bit dysfunctional at times too. But there is one word that I always use and people are so surprised when I use it: collegiate. I find this House to be at its very best when it is collegiate. The stark reality, however, is that this lawbreaking Prime Minister does not help how parliamentarians are viewed. We know that MPs—most of us—work incredibly hard on behalf of our constituents, but the reality is that the actions of the lawbreaking Prime Minister further push the false narrative that all politicians are the same.

My inbox is full of inquiries from my constituents in Airdrie and Shotts, and some of them have asked me to share their stories. This one came anonymously: “At 72, my dad was the life and soul of the family, with 13 grandchildren whom he adored. He was young and fit, with a heart of gold. Dad was put on a ventilator on 9 April 2020. It was eventually turned off on my sister’s birthday, where he died alone. I weep every night and the sadness feels like it is never going to go away. I sit by his grave playing his favourite songs. My dad believed there was good in people, and always showed compassion and kindness to others. What is happening at Westminster has made me lose faith in people to do good or the right thing.”

Arran from Airdrie also wrote to me. He said: “A week before his 94th birthday, my papa, Frank Bell, died alone in a care home. His memory was frail and he remarked to his carers that nobody came to see him any more. He couldn’t understand why none of us would come to see him in his final hours. My papa, having lived his entire life with the love of his life, was forced to die lonely, sad and, from his view, forgotten by his family. Of course I am upset that I didn’t get to say goodbye. However, I feel Frank’s story runs much deeper. A man who lived his life with family died alone while the Prime Minister and his pals lived with parties in disobedience. It sickens my stomach that people try to pass off what the Prime Minister did, when people like my papa sacrificed so much. I would be grateful if you could speak of him tomorrow, not for my own pain but for the fact that he died alone while the lawmakers did as they pleased.”

When I joined the House, one of the first things I was told about was the mannerisms of this place and that I have to refer to everyone as an “honourable” Member or Friend. However, I am not sure that I am seeing much honour now. I will vote for this motion, and I say

to Government Members that they should think very carefully, because the public and their constituents are watching.

3.50 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): It is a great privilege to speak in what must be one of the most momentous occasions in the House’s recent history, because one of the most fundamental principles of any democracy is at stake today: does honesty and integrity in public office matter and are our leaders accountable to the people who put them there? The answer from Members on both sides of the House must be a loud and resounding, “Yes”.

Throughout this whole sorry saga, the Prime Minister has stood at the Dispatch Box time and again to deny breaking the lockdown rules that he set. He has happily dispatched political advisers, civil servants and Cabinet colleagues who confessed to breaking lockdown restrictions, all while thinking that he is above them. Even when he was challenged with photographic evidence of him partying away while millions were stuck at home, he absurdly pleaded his innocence.

Not even the stories of the families who were torn apart or of the parents, spouses and children who died alone could stir in him the decency to come forward and tell the truth. We are today forced to face the fact that our Prime Minister, the most powerful man in our country, thought that he was above the law. We now know the truth: the parties happened and the Prime Minister was there. He will forever be judged by history as the first holder of his office to be found guilty of breaking the law while serving in No. 10.

We are here to decide whether the Prime Minister’s conduct in this place should be referred to the Privileges Committee to examine whether he is guilty of contempt of Parliament. I believe that the argument for doing so is overwhelming. The time has come for Conservative Members to decide where their loyalties lie: to the Prime Minister or to the constituents who put them here.

For two long years, we have been subjected to the tawdry spectacle of Conservative Members scrambling to defend the Government as they lurched from scandal to scandal, whether that was the billions handed out to Ministers’ friends for dodgy covid contracts, the Owen Paterson lobbying scandal or the Chancellor’s questionable tax affairs. Although we pledge allegiance to Her Majesty the Queen and not to our constituents when we first enter this place, it is our constituents to whom we are ultimately responsible and by whom we are ultimately held to account. It is time to put the national interest first.

My constituents can count on me to do the right thing by them today. I ask Conservative Members: can yours?

3.53 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I start by wishing Her Majesty a very happy birthday, not just because it is the right thing for us to do, but because we reflect on a lifetime of service and the kind of leadership that we all aspire to emulate, putting duty and self-sacrifice before everything else for the country that she so obviously loves and has served so well for many decades.

It looks as though the motion will go through today, as it should. What a shame we are even having this debate; as some Members have mentioned, it feels like a waste of time. We should be talking about the cost of living and how we can help our constituents to make ends meet and to afford the rent, mortgage, bills and to put food on the table. We should be talking about the outrageous onslaught on Ukraine by the evil, murderous tyrant Putin and how we can support the Ukrainian people. So many other issues are equally important to each of our communities, yet here we are talking about this issue because we have a Prime Minister who will not take responsibility. That is deeply sad.

We have heard many offensive things over the past few months. The most offensive is, “People have moved on. Can’t you just get over it?” I had Easter Sunday off. I went to church in the morning and then a few of us went for a beer at a café at Levens Hall in my patch. It was very sunny, as it always is in the Lake district, as Members all know—that might be knowingly misleading the House, actually. Anyway, it was a lovely day and we sat outside. An elderly couple came up to me, and the gentleman said to me, “My wife’s sister died in June of 2020. She died alone, we could not visit her. Please don’t let him get away with it.” That is a reminder that what we are talking about, as much as anything else, is justice being done.

Earlier on, the Father of the House was the first of a number of people to say that we should not be talking about this as a local election issue as somehow that diminishes it.

Sir Peter Bottomley: It may have come across like that. The Leader of the Opposition repeatedly said that it was not party political, and I was drawing attention to what his colleague had repeatedly said on the “Today” programme this morning. That is all I said.

Tim Farron: I am grateful to the Father of the House for that clarification. My point absolutely stands: this is only a local election issue—and it is—because the Conservative party has not delivered the justice that it was in its hands to deliver.

My patch has an interesting history. It was Conservative for 100 years until we won it in 2005. We had some great wins and some narrow wins, and there is one ward that we have never won, even in my best years—although perhaps they are ahead of me, who knows? I was knocking on doors in that ward and met a couple who had sometimes voted Conservative, had normally voted UK Independence party and had voted Brexit party but had never voted for us. They told me that they were going to vote for us in the local elections because it was the only way they could think of to deliver justice. They felt weak and powerless because of a man with whom they agreed on many issues who they felt could no longer lead the country because of that lack of integrity.

We are two years on from when many of those things took place. Our memories can play tricks on us, we move on and we do not live in the moment of those times. They were not pleasant, and we choose to forget them to a degree, don’t we? However, it is important that we do not forget what that meant, not just for the elderly couple I spoke to on Sunday, but for many others—for hundreds of people that we know. For weeks on end, I wrote letters of commiseration to

people who had lost loved ones. We all did that. There were people who could not be with a dying parent or a dying child. There were people who spent Christmas alone, and for many of them it was their last Christmas. It was so hard to explain to young children why their birthday parties could not take place. We went through all sorts of privations.

Gill Haigh, the chief exec of Cumbria Tourism, and I argued to stop people visiting the Lake district, even though we knew it was ruining our economy, because we believed in the health, safety and wellbeing of the people who would have come and of those who work in the community. Sacrifices were made and the Prime Minister made laws that we agreed with and that were important. Why? To save lives, to protect the NHS, to do the right British thing and look after one another, and to love our neighbour. Yet within hours, it appears, the ink drying on his edicts, he was habitually breaking them. There is no question but that this was and is a resignation matter.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point. Does he agree that some of the defences offered for the Prime Minister have been hugely insulting to the other people who worked throughout the pandemic? A dentist in my constituency said that,

“we did not have drinks after work because this would have been unprofessional and irresponsible.”

Does he agree that the fury that health professionals feel because of the sacrifices they made during the pandemic is entirely understandable?

Tim Farron: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. It is deeply offensive. One reason why the story has not gone away is that some of the defences are even more offensive. Some Government Members—a minority, I will absolutely state—have said that teachers were up to it, nurses were up to it, and that everybody broke the rules. I did not, I am pretty sure that most people in the Chamber did not, I know that most of my constituents did not and I know that those in the caring professions, in particular, absolutely did not. In one sense, they did it gladly because we were loving our neighbour and doing the right thing by protecting people, not because of slavish obedience to authoritarianism. I am a liberal; I do not like these laws or rules, but I knew that they were necessary to protect lives. So did the Prime Minister, yet he broke them.

As I think we have a little bit of time—I will not go on for long, I promise—I want to address the issues of forgiveness that have been discussed. As a Christian, I want to reflect on those. I was deeply affected by the speech made by the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), and by the comments of some other Members, about the extent to which we should be seeking to forgive the Prime Minister.

I do not know how contrite the Prime Minister is. I do not know how sincere his repentance, or his apology. Only two beings know the answer to that question, and I will not make any assumption that I know it, because I am definitely not one of them. I will say this, however. I believe—and this is one of the most radical and offensive things about Christianity—that forgiveness is available for everything and for everyone. However, even forgiven sins bear consequences. My reading from The Bible last night was Luke 6:27—“Love your enemies.” I am careful

[Tim Farron]

not to think of Members on the other side of the House, or members of any other party, as enemies. They are sometimes a colleague and sometimes an opponent, but they are not my enemy. There are times, though, when you disagree with someone so very much—as I do with the Prime Minister on so many issues—that you can, in your mind, make them an enemy, and I need to repent of that. Am I bitter, and seeking my vengeance on the Prime Minister? No, and it would be wrong if I did.

What I think we need to remember is this: in forgiving somebody, we must not let them stain the reputation of this place and of our politics. To say sorry is one thing, but we should remember the story of Zacchaeus. As Jesus comes into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Zacchaeus, a tax collector who has ripped off his kith and kin for many years and is a great sinner, repents—great—but then he also makes recompense. He does more than just say sorry; he gives back four times what he has taken.

I think we need to remember that accepting an apology does not mean that there is not a consequence. The Prime Minister has not borne the consequence. What does not bearing that consequence mean? It sets the bar for what is acceptable in our public life at a subterranean level. What a shocking example this is for all of us here, for all those who might follow us, and for everyone else in the country. It tells us that it is possible to do things that are not honest, and to set rules for others and choose not to follow them, because you are somehow better than the people whom you lead. That is not acceptable, and it is not right.

What is also not right is to hide behind the suffering of the people in Ukraine as an excuse not to take action now. It is fundamentally weak for some Conservative Members to say that we must wait until some indeterminate time when that suffering might be over to take the action that needs to be taken. The simple fact is that Ukraine is a reason why the Prime Minister should go, and should go now, because we are in a state of paralysis. We know that every decision he takes is coloured by his desire to survive, and affects our own position as a country. We are diverted by this ongoing soap opera, this saga, this sorry state of affairs.

The sad conclusion I have reached is that we now have a Conservative party that is too ashamed of the Prime Minister to defend him, but too weak to remove him. Today is the day when the Conservatives need to discover their backbone.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I am about to call the last Back Bencher to contribute before the winding-up speeches, so I suggest that any Members of Parliament who are in their offices should make their way to the Chamber now. I call Florence Eshalomi.

4.3 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): In my maiden speech, I said that it was an absolute honour to be elected to this place, because never in my wildest dreams had I thought that a working-class girl from a council estate in Brixton would sit on these green Benches. To be honest, I still pinch myself.

One of the things I am most humble about is the fact that it is a privilege to be in this place. It is a privilege to serve as the Member of Parliament for Vauxhall, an

area in which I grew up and went to school. It is a privilege to be able to represent my constituents. However, I also know, in the context of that word “privilege”, that some things are not afforded to me, as a female black MP, because of the scrutiny that I face. I am very careful in debates, making sure that I state the truth and the facts, because—as a result of being a woman, sometimes—I am not afforded the privilege of doing otherwise. We are not allowed to make mistakes; we are not allowed to mislead people. It is that privilege, unfortunately, that our Prime Minister wants to continue to use to defend the indefensible.

One of the best bits about my role is going out and meeting the young people in my constituency, because I see myself in so many of them. They ask me what it is like and how I got involved in politics. They ask me if politics matters. Politics matters because we have to continue to uphold the rule of law. Politics matters because we can make a difference for our constituents. Politics matters because being honest and truthful about what we are doing as parliamentarians is a privilege. Politics matters because when we work together we can address some of the key issues. But many of my constituents who contacted me throughout the pandemic and the lockdowns, and who continue to contact me, feel that politics does not matter, because they are seeing our Prime Minister demean the role and office that he holds.

Many Members have mentioned cases of constituents who have written to them, and I want quickly to reference two of mine. One of them is my constituent Jan O’Malley, whose husband John O’Malley died of covid on 1 April 2020 in St Thomas’ Hospital. Jan wrote to me:

“While the Prime Minister partied, we made unbearable sacrifices to protect others. I wasn’t able to accompany John when he went to hospital or visit him there. I couldn’t comfort my daughters at his funeral...and we were only able to have 10 people there. While the Prime Minister continues to lie about breaking the law, he undermines respect for Parliament. More importantly, he undermined the public health message”.

Another constituent, John Cormican, wrote:

“I am a 61 year old, immunosuppressed single parent with an 18 year old daughter. We rigidly followed all the rules, including my mum’s funeral in 2020 with just 6 people...I lost my sister last year, to a late diagnosis of stage 4 lung cancer. All whilst following and often going beyond the rules...But Florence it’s the blatant deceit from Boris Johnson that I just can’t get close to not being incandescent with anger about. I feel that the government have brought a culture where lying, breaking the law and division rule the day. And I look on in utter dismay and hurt. How did we get to this?”

Restoring faith in our politics matters if we want people to engage in the political process. Restoring faith in our politics matters if we want people to do the right things if, God forbid, we should ever have another pandemic. Restoring faith in our politics matters because every person who died in the pandemic and whose heart is painted on the covid memorial wall in my constituency—I wear my badge with pride—reminds us of the sacrifices that people make. This motion today is important because it reminds us that no one, including our Prime Minister, is above the law. It reminds us that the rules are there for us to follow, and that when people inadvertently mislead the House, they have to be held to account. I hope that Members will remember that and support the motion today.

4.7 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): It is a pleasure, if not repetitive, for me to stand opposite the Paymaster General. I welcome him here today but I hope this is the last time he is wheeled out to defend the indefensible. Hon. and right hon. Members across the House have spoken at length about the heart-wrenching sacrifices that their constituents have made throughout the pandemic. They have spoken about the principles of integrity, honesty and dignity, which are all at stake. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) spoke about the special responsibility of every MP to uphold and defend the reputation of this House for all future generations. I welcome the similarly important speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), who spoke of her constituents' and her own family's painful experiences and how they felt that they had been taken for fools.

I value the typically forensic contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) and the typically passionate and heartfelt contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). I also welcome the brave words of my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), who we have just heard, and the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg). They made powerful and moving speeches stating that, as parliamentarians, we all have a responsibility to uphold the democratic principles of trust and integrity, no matter what party we are from.

As the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) said, this is not about cake at all; it is about trust. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) made it clear that the brutal war unleashed on Ukraine is no reason to put our democratic standards on hold today.

As my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition laid out, the motion seeks to uphold the pillars of British democracy: honesty, integrity and truth. Politicians, political parties and Prime Ministers come and go, but the basic principle that elected representatives must tell the truth and act with integrity remains the very foundation of our democracy. The Prime Minister and his supporters have tested that principle to its limit.

Actions speak louder than words. If Conservative Members choose to stand by this lawbreaking Prime Minister, they will send a very clear message that they do not care about their duty to uphold the rule of law. They will be failing to respect the privilege it is to serve as a Member of Parliament in this great country of ours.

As the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) said, the Prime Minister would be long gone by now if he occupied any other office of senior responsibility. Those who continue to defend him are defending the indefensible and weakening the pillars of our democracy.

This is a historic moment, and today we face a choice. This motion is about the crucial question of whether the Prime Minister intentionally misled the House. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition stated, the processes by which we uphold the rules and ensure honesty in Parliament are crucial. Our conventions and traditions are not an accident. They have been handed down to us as tools that protect Britain from extremism and decline, but the Prime Minister has abused those tools, as many hon. Members

have outlined today. He has broken the rules while expecting everyone around him to follow them.

When Allegra Stratton joked about the Downing Street parties, the Prime Minister accepted her resignation. Professor Neil Ferguson broke the rules, so he resigned, which the Prime Minister said was the right thing for him to do. The former Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), broke the rules. He, too, resigned, and the Prime Minister tried to claim he sacked him. Why does the Prime Minister think everyone's actions have consequences except his own?

Over the last 24 hours we have seen desperate attempts by the Government to delay, distract and duck scrutiny. They have pulled every trick in the book to kick this down the road, but they have run out of road. It is now decision time. Actions do speak louder than words, so the question is: what action will Conservative Members choose to take? Will they continue to defend the indefensible, or will they choose to recognise this historic moment and do the right thing?

Although the Ukraine situation is of huge importance, as the hon. Member for Hazel Grove said, the invasion of a sovereign nation by a dictatorial power is no reason for us to accept lower standards here. We expect better, and Britain deserves better.

Our key workers have sacrificed so much through this pandemic, in the name of keeping us all safe. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) outlined, they stuck to the letter of the rules. They had no other choice. For our care workers, breaking the rules for just 15 minutes would have risked lives, so they confined themselves to care homes up and down the country, unable to see their loved ones, and unable to attend weddings, funerals and births. This was all to protect those they looked after. They care deeply for the people they care for. They value their work, and take great pride in it—I know that because I used to do it myself—but the Prime Minister's actions have mocked their sacrifice.

Rightly, the majority of the nation feel that the Prime Minister disregarded and belittled their sacrifice. As a care worker, I know the sacrifices care workers made in the pandemic on the frontline, putting themselves at risk to care for others. We have all heard stories today of how people did that. The least they deserve is for the Prime Minister to be held to account for his conduct. While the Prime Minister was partying, they, because they were following the rules, were unable to be with their loved ones in their dying moments, or unable to attend miserable funerals at which only a handful of people were present. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition said, after all the Prime Minister's rule-breaking, those people have been left with an empty feeling of guilt—guilt because they stuck to the law and did not bend the rules, and so missed some of the most precious moments, from births to funerals. But all those people the length and breadth of the country had no reason to feel guilty; it is the Prime Minister of this country who has broken the law and dishonoured their sacrifice.

Many of us will recall seven-year-old Josephine, who sent a handwritten letter to the Prime Minister on her birthday in March 2020 to let him know that her mummy and daddy had cancelled her birthday party. She said she would be

“staying at home because you asked us to”.

[Angela Rayner]

She did not mind cancelling her birthday because she wanted “everybody to be ok”. The next day, the Prime Minister replied to Josephine, saying:

“We have all got to do our bit to protect the NHS and save lives, and that is exactly what you are doing”,

but clearly it was one rule for him, and another for Josephine and the rest of us. What message does that send to Josephine and all the rest of her generation? Now we know that the Prime Minister did not shut down his own birthday party just a few months later; he spent it breaking the law. We have a Prime Minister who is sorry only that he has been found out.

Today is our chance to protect the institution of Parliament, at the heart of our democracy. Patriots cherish our great institutions, but this week the Prime Minister has degraded them. He wrote the rules, and he broke the rules. He flouted his own law. He thinks the rules apply to everyone except him. He thinks actions have consequences for everyone except him. Today, he will be shown that the rules apply to him, too, and that his actions have consequences. Honesty, integrity and the truth matter in politics—they are British principles. Today, all Members have the opportunity to defend those principles and to vote to uphold our democracy. If they do not, I fear that they will not be forgiven. I urge all Members across the House to do the right thing: to respect the sacrifices that their constituents made during the pandemic; to say that the public were right to follow the rules; and to vote to defend our parliamentary democracy.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove gave a powerful, brave and honest speech and has shown great integrity. I have known him for—I think we go back two decades. He told us he was no longer willing to defend the indefensible, and drew a line in the sand. He is a man who embodies the principles of public service.

I urge Conservative Members to follow the lead of the hon. Members for Hazel Grove, and for Wycombe, today. The Prime Minister is leading the Conservative party into the sewer. It is now up to Conservative Members to decide whether they follow him. It is up to Members to decide whether it is a red line for the Prime Minister of this country to break the ministerial code, break the trust of the British public, and get away with it.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda said, the only way to get to the bottom of this issue and regain public confidence in our democracy is by respecting the processes that have been created to enshrine the rules of our Parliament. I point out that the process we are following today is in place only because the Prime Minister has failed to do the decent thing and resign. I repeat: honesty, integrity and the truth matter in our politics. Today, MPs across the House have the opportunity to defend those principles and to vote to support our democracy. I commend the motion to the House.

4.21 pm

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): May I start by saying that today is, of course, Her Majesty the Queen’s 96th birthday? I know that the whole House will wish to join me in wishing Her Majesty many happy returns.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss this important issue on the Floor of the House, and it is a pleasure to appear opposite the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner). The Government recognise the seriousness of the issues under consideration. Let me say at the outset that the Prime Minister has always been clear that he is happy to face whatever inquiries Parliament sees fit to hold. He is happy for the House to decide how it wishes to proceed today, and therefore will not be whipping Conservative Members of Parliament. They are free to vote according to how they believe we should move forward on this issue.

Last night, we tabled an amendment to the motion because we wanted to be explicit that Sue Gray should be able to complete and publish her report without any further delay, and because we wanted to allow the Metropolitan police to conclude their investigations. We now recognise that in practice those things are almost certainly likely to happen, so we are happy for the Labour motion to go through, if that is the will of the House.

The Prime Minister has apologised repeatedly for what has happened. He is mortified by it. He wishes he could have done things differently, and that the clock could be turned back. He has apologised—as this House has heard him do this week—repeatedly for what has happened. He has asked for the House’s forgiveness, and to be able to get on and serve the people of this country by delivering the opportunities brought about by his getting Brexit done, by our leading the world on covid vaccines and the vaccine roll-out, and by his clear leadership on Ukraine.

I wish to make it clear to the House that while the Metropolitan police investigation is ongoing, it is right that neither I nor this House speculates on the detail of matters that are still under investigation. It is of the utmost importance that police processes can continue without the risk of prejudice from this place or elsewhere. I acknowledge the points made by many Members, but it is important that the House understands that we cannot pre-empt the outcome of an investigation that must be allowed to finish.

As the motion before the House acknowledges, the proper time for the Privileges Committee to consider this matter is after the police have completed their work, when all the facts have been made clear. That is in accordance with the principles of natural justice, an ancient principle that the Leader of the Opposition understands full well. Natural justice includes the principles that allegations have to be known to the person accused, that there must be an unbiased tribunal, and that no one should be a judge in their own cause.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said that he did not believe the Prime Minister. He has made a judgment and that is fine, but let us be clear that this is not a neutral, objective viewpoint. It is in the interests of natural justice that its principles be followed by all. That is in the interests of the House, too. The Leader of the Opposition spoke of principles, and of how consideration of them should affect the tempo of this debate, but his party spoke of drafting personalised attack ads against Conservative Members of Parliament in their constituencies. Moreover, before he opened the debate, he apologised for unwittingly misleading the House during Prime Minister’s questions yesterday, and in his next breath moved a motion

against the Prime Minister for misleading the House. The truth is that there is a political tempo to this matter.

As the House knows, the Prime Minister is on his pre-planned visit to India, in order to deepen our long-term partnership for peace and prosperity with a fellow leading democracy in the face of global economic challenges and threats from autocratic states. Tomorrow, he will meet Prime Minister Modi for in-depth talks on the United Kingdom and India's strategic defence, diplomatic and economic partnership, because the visit is aimed at bolstering our close partnership and stepping up security co-operation in the Indo-Pacific. Many Members in this House will understand that given events in Ukraine, it was of the utmost importance that this important visit went ahead. At no time, though, has the Prime Minister said that the issue that we are debating is not important; it is important. Other things are also important.

At all times, the Prime Minister has set out his understanding of events, just as he did again in the House on Tuesday. He has no concerns with this issue being considered by the Privileges Committee, if that is what the House decides should happen. Nevertheless, Members of this House will be aware that, as I have said, the Government tabled an amendment last night, setting out specifically that consideration of this matter should take place after both the conclusion of the police investigation and the publication of Sue Gray's report, because Members should have all the facts before taking a decision. We are, however, now content that, in practice, any parliamentary process would take place after both the Met's investigation has concluded and the report from Sue Gray has been published. As a result, Members of Parliament will be able to vote as they see fit on the motion, as the Government remain committed to publishing Sue Gray's report as soon as possible after the Met police investigation has concluded.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Yet again, I have sympathy with the right hon. and learned Gentleman, given the Back-Bench duties he finds himself having to fulfil. He talks about us having all the facts before us. Will he reassure the House that all the photographs taken by the official photographers will be available to us to peruse as these judgments are made, so that we can make sure that we have all the facts before us?

Michael Ellis: I cannot comment on the particulars that the hon. Lady mentions because, of course, the matter is under police investigation, so she presupposes a state of affairs that I cannot speak to.

Pete Wishart: The Prime Minister was asked this question yesterday and he failed to give a reply, but I am pretty sure that his human shield will be able to answer this today. Why did Allegra Stratton resign?

Michael Ellis: That is not part of this debate, and it is not part of my function here. The hon. Gentleman wishes to make political points, but this is a matter of principle, as the House knows.

While the Prime Minister is not here, he has already addressed the issue in the House earlier this week. I reiterate what the Prime Minister came to this House to say on Tuesday. As he said then, we understand the strength of feeling that we have heard and the expectation

from the public for more from their elected representatives. That is why the Prime Minister has apologised wholeheartedly and unreservedly to this House. Again, I refer the House to his statement on Tuesday on specific matters relating to the notice issued to the Prime Minister, but he has already committed to making public any outcome of the investigation into his own attendance at any event, including any further fixed penalty notices. The Prime Minister has said that once the Metropolitan police have concluded their investigation he will immediately ask the second permanent secretary to the Cabinet Office, Sue Gray, to update the findings of her report. The Prime Minister will, of course, come back to this House to address the outcome of the investigation once we reach that point.

As the Prime Minister said on the issue of whether he misled the House, his comments made to the House were in good faith. He has responded to the event for which he has received a fixed penalty notice. He made clear that he did not think at that time that the event was in contravention of covid rules. However, he has apologised for his mistake, paid his fine and accepted the findings of the Metropolitan police. There is a difference between a deliberate and an inadvertent situation and I think most people would accept that.

I understand the strength of feeling in the House, but the Metropolitan police investigation is ongoing. Once that investigation is complete, the Prime Minister has made it clear that he will return to the House.

Karl Turner: I am confused here, to be honest with the Minister. Is it the Prime Minister's position that he did not understand the rules, or that the rules did not apply to him? What is it?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Gentleman's question is not worthy of a response. He knows full well the difference between a deliberate and an inadvertent situation—it happens every day of the week. When talking about inadvertence, I will say this, which my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) pointed out in this House: no one made an issue of the report in *The Times* of the birthday party at that time. That is powerful evidence that no one believed it was a crime or an offence. That supports the assertion—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman asks, and I am telling him—that supports the assertion that the Prime Minister did not knowingly mislead the House. If he is asking for evidence, that is some of it.

Clive Efford: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Ellis: No, I do not think so.

I will close my speech by reiterating what the Prime Minister said yesterday: this Government's focus is and always will be

“to deliver on the priorities of the British people”.

We will continue our efforts to work with our allies

“to face down Putin's aggression abroad”.

We will address

“the toughest problems at home,”

as we have been doing,

“helping millions of families with the cost of living, making our streets safer and funding the NHS to clear the covid backlog.”

[Michael Ellis]

The Prime Minister is focused every day on making “the British people safer, more secure and more prosperous”.—[*Official Report*, 20 April 2022; Vol. 712, c. 48-49.]

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House

(1) notes that, given the issue of fixed penalty notices by the police in relation to events in 10 Downing Street and the Cabinet Office, assertions the Rt hon Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip has made on the floor of the House about the legality of activities in 10 Downing Street and the Cabinet Office under Covid regulations, including but not limited to the following answers given at Prime Minister’s Questions: 1 December 2021, that “all guidance was followed in No. 10”, Official Report vol. 704, col. 909; 8 December 2021 that “I have been repeatedly assured since these allegations emerged that there was no party and that no Covid rules were broken”, Official Report vol. 705, col. 372; 8 December 2021 that “I am sickened myself and furious about that, but I repeat what I have said to him: I have been repeatedly assured that the rules were not broken”, Official Report vol. 705, col. 372 and 8 December 2021 “the guidance was followed and the rules were followed at all times”, Official Report vol. 705, col. 379, appear to amount to misleading the House; and

(2) orders that this matter be referred to the Committee of Privileges to consider whether the Rt hon Member’s conduct amounted to a contempt of the House, but that the Committee shall not begin substantive consideration of the matter until the inquiries currently being conducted by the Metropolitan Police have been concluded.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, Yulia and her daughter Daria fled Ukraine as it was being bombed. They managed to get to Poland and applied for a visa to come to the UK on 1 April. My office has been in constant contact with the Home Office, which has advised us that the checks have been completed and the application is with the decision maker. Yulia and Daria were unable to board a flight to the UK this morning to get to safety with one of my constituents. They are now stranded. They have no food, no accommodation and no money. We have been advised by the Home Office that they should seek advice from the consulate because there is no direct flight back to the UK until next week, and no visa will be with them before Saturday. What can I do, Mr Deputy Speaker, to ensure the safety of Yulia and Daria?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and her notice of it. Clearly this is a very important matter. Those on the Treasury Bench will have heard what has been said, and I implore that the message gets put through to the Home Secretary in order that this can be immediately looked at.

Digital Persecution

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Michael Tomlinson.)

4.35 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): On 5 and 6 July in London, the largest international gathering hosted by the UK Government this year will take place—the 2022 international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief. Government representatives from over 50 countries have been invited, together with faith and civil society representatives, to discuss the concerning global trend of increasing restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, and also, it is hoped, to commit to practical steps to tackle that. A session including digital persecution should be at the cutting edge of that conference. My purpose in calling this debate is to highlight why.

Each year, millions of people around the world are increasingly having their freedom of religion or belief restricted, and to devastating impact. A key reason is the increase in persecution by authoritarian regimes, including through the misuse of technology. Right across the world today, people are losing their jobs, education, homes, livelihoods, families, freedom, access to justice, and even life itself, simply on account of what they believe. People are being discriminated against, marginalised, beaten, threatened, tortured and killed, and too often by their own Governments—the very Governments with a duty to protect their freedom of religion or belief. The gross scale of this as a global issue is both under-recognised and under-addressed. One of the aims of this July’s conference in London is to change that.

The Pew Research Centre indicates that 83% of the world’s population live in countries with high or very high restrictions on religion. The campaigning charity Open Doors, in its 2022 world watch list, states that the persecution of Christians has now reached the highest levels since the world watch list began nearly 30 years ago—that across 76 countries, more than 360 million Christians suffer high or very high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith.

Of course, persecution affects not only Christians but those of all faiths and none. In Nigeria last month, the humanist Mubarak Bala was sentenced to 24 years in prison, now on appeal. Recently, the plight of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Ahmadiyya Muslims and Baha’is across the world has been highlighted by the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance of 35 countries, which I have the privilege of chairing in 2022. Details can be found on the US State Department website.

Why is freedom of religion or belief so important? We need to ask this question, and try to answer it, to set in context this debate on digital persecution and why addressing it is so critical. FORB is important for several reasons. It is important in itself, for us as individuals, because what we believe gives us a sense of worth, purpose and meaning, and of dignity and identity. It goes to the heart of what makes us human.

Respecting freedom of religion or belief is important because it is so closely connected to other human rights, such as free speech, the right to assemble, the right to work and even the right to life itself. When freedom of religion or belief is not respected by those in authority, all too often, other rights crumble, too. FORB is also important for communities, which are stronger, including

economically, when they include everyone. Societies cannot fully develop when they oppress members of minorities.

Freedom of religion or belief is one of the foundations of a stable and secure democratic society. Countries that respect FORB are less prone to violent extremism. Not to put too grand a point on it, promoting and defending freedom of religion or belief is an important element of promoting peace globally. Indeed, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt, one of the driving forces behind the establishment of the UN, envisioned a world of peaceful co-existence between nations, he stressed the importance of four freedoms: freedom of expression, freedom from want, freedom from fear and freedom of belief. How tragic it is that we reflect on this today as the very opposite is occurring less than a three-hour plane flight from here. Let us be under no illusions: freedom of religion or belief is very much a live issue in the plight of the Ukrainian people.

Permit me to take a moment to refer to that. In Luhansk, a Russian rebel-held area of Ukraine taken by pro-Russian separatists in 2014, freedom of religion or belief is now severely restricted. Religious communities need to register to have permission to gather, following a restrictive law that makes it illegal for any religious community to congregate without such permission. As a result, all Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, Pentecostals and other Protestant communities have been denied that permission. Such unregistered groups therefore meet to worship in a climate of fear. They are subject to surveillance and at risk of repeated raids, with their social welfare activities in their local communities banned and an increasing list of allegedly extremist books banned, including an edition of the gospel of John from the Bible.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on all that she does in her role as the special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, and I express an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for freedom of religion or belief. She is right to highlight the issues in Ukraine, which I am sorry to say also unfortunately include incidents of Baptist pastors who have disappeared and never been located—their whereabouts are unknown. Churches have been destroyed. People from my constituency are actively involved in Faith in Action Missions in eastern Ukraine. What they have expressed to me goes along with what she has said.

We have to highlight these things in this House. It is not just the murder of innocents, but the persecution of Christians and those of other religious beliefs. Russia has to be held accountable in the highest court of the land for the genocidal campaign that it is carrying out against Ukrainians in Ukraine.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Member, who is chair of the all-party parliamentary group for freedom of religion or belief, makes excellent points and I thank him for doing so. It is so important that we highlight that the Ukrainians' right to freely practise their religions or beliefs, whatever they may be, is a key aspect of what the leadership of Ukraine and its people are fighting for today. We applaud and stand with them.

Returning specifically to the subject of this debate, digital persecution, I want to put on record my appreciation and thanks to Open Doors for the recent conference it organised, partnered with the Universities of Birmingham

and Roehampton, which invited papers on three core themes: surveillance, censorship and disinformation. I also want to thank many of those who contributed to that conference and to my speech today, and those who supplied papers. My speech is all too short to do justice to this issue, so I urge parliamentary colleagues and others listening to this debate to access the conference online—it was recorded by Open Doors—and to access the open source of papers by the contributors, including Professor Francis Davis of Birmingham University, Dr Ewelina Ochab, author Jeremy Peckham, Dr Pasquale Annicchino of the University of Foggia, Chung Ching Kwong of the University of Hamburg, Dr Daniel Aguirre of the University of Roehampton, Rahima Mahmut, UK director of the World Uyghur Congress, and others.

Technology and its extensive communication capabilities can of course be used for good, as we all saw during the pandemic, but, as Open Doors states,

“digital technology enhances state capacity for surveillance of religious minorities and censorship of their speech. It also greatly assists the spread of disinformation against religious minorities by state and non-state actors, which can have lethal consequences for those minorities.”

Misuse of technology has played a crucial role in some of the most egregious atrocities perpetrated in recent years, including the persecution of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, China, of the Rohingyas in Myanmar, and of the Yazidis in Iraq.

Religious minorities are often subject to state surveillance, often because of their very status as minorities. This can be either targeted surveillance of specific individuals or groups, or mass surveillance of large groups of people. This may include CCTV, including facial and emotional recognition; device listening; spyware; state monitoring of social networks; tracking, proximity and location apps; and large-scale data harvesting. I shall explain some of that in a little more detail later.

Examples of digital censorship include publication banning; disabling websites and applications; blocking websites, communications and social media posts, including state moderation and firewalls; punishing users who visit particular websites; hacking; cancelling of activities, platforms and public personae, often without reason or redress; and financial freezing.

Disinformation is the communication of deliberately misleading or biased information, the manipulation of narrative or facts, and propaganda, which we are becoming increasingly aware of in Russia's information war against Ukraine. Examples of disinformation include propaganda, including advertising; targeted fake news; discord bots strategically magnifying discord, including trolling algorithms; and network incitement of mob violence.

During the last few minutes, I have given many examples of the misuse of technology and have used technical terms. Perhaps I have given too many examples for anyone to absorb unless they are already engaged in this subject, so I shall give just one example of how such misuse of technology works in practice—namely, the misuse of technology to oppress the Uyghurs in China, of whom an estimated 2 million, possibly even up to 3 million, are incarcerated in detention camps.

At the conference, Rahima Mahmut's evidence about the plight of the Uyghurs set a sombre and moving tone. She told us that the Chinese Government have invested huge sums of money in advanced surveillance technology, including facial recognition software, voice

[Fiona Bruce]

recognition software, DNA and data collection, constructing a huge network of cameras and physical checkpoints. All the information gathered on people is stored in what is called an integrated joint operations platform. The data is then used to classify Uyghurs by colour—blue, yellow or red—and therefore to classify their threat level. This has not only resulted in the mass criminalisation of the Uyghur population, but led them to question their own sense of self-worth and self-belief.

How does this work? The integrated joint operations platform is used by police and officials. It is a mobile phone app used to collect data on individual Uyghurs for an assessment to be made about whether someone should be arrested. The extent and penetration of the personal data collected is deeply concerning. Data is collected on individuals as they move about in public places, including from CCTV, by voice recognition and even through their relationship with others who may have political or religious affiliations or convictions. The voice recognition software can not only monitor conversations from a mobile phone, but record a voice from 300 metres away while simultaneously blocking out the surrounding noise.

The technology is now even used in schools to record what Uyghur children say in the classroom—even those as young as kindergarten children—so that, in effect, children are unwitting spies on their own parents. Key words are recorded and then detected by the app to flag concerns to the authorities and indicate dangerous or threatening tendencies. These include words such as “prayers” or “mosque”, or even “get together” or “gather”. As soon as a key word is picked up by the app, this will be fed into the integrated joint operations platform app as suspicious activity, together with all the other data being collected about an individual.

Someone can also receive a colour for many reasons, such as simply eating in a restaurant where someone else with a red mark against their name is also eating. Once the information is gathered and reaches a certain level, an individual is flagged with a colour—red, yellow or blue—which indicates their threat level and how they will be treated, in particular as they move through the many checkpoints manned by police. Someone who is blue can pass through, though of course their colour can and may well change. If an individual is passing through a checkpoint with a yellow mark, an alarm goes off. If it is red, the police will automatically arrest the person immediately. In other words, the app—a computer—is triggering an arrest.

Once arrested, individuals can then be interrogated by computer, too. Police can place an individual not in a normal chair for questioning, but in a tiger chair, in which the body is completely locked and highly stressed, resulting in inevitable physical responses. During questioning, a computer will then monitor heightened changes in heartbeat and muscle movement, and on that basis a computer can indicate that the person must be guilty. Imprisonment can then be meted out.

An individual can be surveyed, detected, arrested, interrogated and imprisoned by technology, simply because the computer says so, and surveillance technology of this nature is being sold around the world. According to an Open Technology Fund report of 2019, “over 100 countries have purchased, imitated, or received training on information controls from China and Russia.”

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): I really want to thank my hon. Friend for bringing home the true horrific nature of this technology and the way it is being employed against the Uyghurs in China. Does she agree with me that it is important that the work she and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) do is constantly put at the forefront of the Government’s attention when we are discussing these issues, particularly when it comes to overseas development aid for countries that may be seeking to implement such measures themselves?

Fiona Bruce: I thank my hon. Friend for that point and for his active engagement with the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief. It is heart-warming to note, particularly following the publication of the Truro review slightly more than two and a half years ago, how increasingly Government are engaging on this issue, and not just expressing concern, but taking practical steps.

Let us look at a country other than China for a moment. Dr Daniel Aguirre of the University of Roehampton has explored the role of technologies in conflict and spoken about how in Myanmar, formerly Burma, the junta’s primary aim in the recent coup was to close or control digital communication, especially Facebook as the primary mode of internet communication for coup resistance. He has also detailed how the junta used misinformation to fuel ethnic tensions and violence.

We hear from other sources that the military in Myanmar has used Facebook to spread propaganda against Muslims and the Rohingya ethnic minority and to justify attacks against their communities, and that disinformation has been used to discredit or malign Christians, rouse people’s anger against them, or force people to practise rituals against their beliefs. During the covid-19 pandemic, stories of religious minorities being the harbinger of the coronavirus were spread. In Myanmar, news of Christians directly receiving foreign aid was falsely perpetuated, encouraging the view that they should not receive Government aid.

I referred previously to non-state actors—organisations other than Governments—misusing technology. An example is Daesh, the Islamic State terrorist organisation. It has used technology to recruit members and spread propaganda among minorities—in Iraq, for example, against the Yazidis, and in Africa to inflame and justify violence against communities there. It is deeply concerning that young people in particular can be attracted into terrorist groups in that way.

A statement on “Use of Technology and Religious Freedom” made at the July 2019 Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom—a precursor to the 2022 conference, which the UK is hosting this July—said that we need to “take seriously the need to counter the ability of terrorists to recruit and radicalise or inspire others to violence online while fully respecting freedom of expression.”

Three years on, as the UK hosts this year’s Ministerial on Freedom of Religion or Belief, responding to this challenge remains at a concerning initial stage.

Why is this? One reason is that the very complexity of the technicalities that I have endeavoured to describe has often inhibited human rights activists, including those who campaign on freedom of religion or belief—and I include myself in this—from tackling this subject. But we must do so because the implications of failing to do that are and, indeed, already have been, catastrophic.

As Professor Francis Davis says, “digital persecution is a challenge to the FORB community specifically and the wider human rights community because it requires them to speak together and find a common language to engage with the new institutions of persecution...this...needs new analysis and new strategies of response.”

Professor Davis adds that we need to develop new leaders who are both digitally native and freedom of religion or belief and human rights-savvy, representing a generational shift and meriting strategic investment by Government, foundations and tech companies’ corporate citizenship funds.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Michael Tomlinson.)

Fiona Bruce: I hope that the 2022 international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief in July will explore more deeply the concerns that I have only been able to touch on today and that we will commit to work together to address them. I hope that Governments, civil society activists, academics, members of the FORB community internationally and, even more importantly, technology experts and providers, including global social media companies, will work with us to address digital persecution.

A comprehensive plan to address digital persecution must be developed in a systematic and structured way. Concerns about surveillance, censorship and disinformation must become a standard element of our response to persecution of freedom of religion or belief, rather than, as at present, an afterthought. As Ambassador Sam Brownback, my predecessor as chair of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, said:

“We are entering a very serious time of digital authoritarianism. How we react to it will be key.”

5.1 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Middle East (Amanda Milling): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate, which, as she set out in her excellent speech, is an important one. I thank her for everything that she does as the Prime Minister’s special envoy for freedom of religion or belief.

I make it absolutely clear that human rights must be protected both offline and online. New technologies and online communities provide a platform to strengthen democracies and human rights, but they also provide new tools for repression, persecution and censorship, which are putting open societies and democratic freedoms under pressure.

The UK Government condemn all actions that violate human rights, whether offline or online. We share the concern of my hon. Friend and others about the growing use of digital technology to target human rights defenders and civil society. We are troubled to see the increasing levels of gender-based harassment and abuse online, and we are strongly opposed to Governments unlawfully shutting down or restricting access to the internet and social media.

Everyone should be able to make the most of the positive opportunities that the online world offers. That is why the Government are pursuing a three-pronged

approach to promote internet access and protect human rights online. First, we are pressing states to uphold their human rights obligations and working with them to spread digital access to excluded groups. Secondly, we are campaigning for media freedom and leading international efforts to promote digital democracy. Thirdly, we are working with international partners, including through the UN, to protect those whose rights are abused or violated online.

On the first, we regularly raise issues of concern with other Governments, in public and in private. We have led international efforts to hold China to account for the human rights violations that we have heard about today.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way and I join her in congratulating the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate. Just before the pandemic, as part of the International Catholic Legislators Network, I had the great honour to meet Cardinal Zen, who has campaigned for religious freedom in China his whole life. We had to meet in secret, in a secret room, at a time we could not announce because we had to run the gauntlet of Chinese demonstrations and surveillance from a hotel across the road. This was in Portugal. That is the type of behaviour going on for people who want to practise their religion. It is not good enough and the Minister is right to set out the points she is making.

Amanda Milling: I am grateful for that intervention. As I will set out, we are leading efforts to hold China to account for human rights violations and I will set out some of the conversations that have been had.

We were the first country to lead a joint statement on China’s human rights record at the UN. Last month, the Foreign Secretary expressed her deep concern, in an address to the UN Human Rights Council, about the violations occurring in Xinjiang and Tibet. We made clear our concerns about mass surveillance in Xinjiang, which my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton discussed, including in a joint statement alongside 42 other countries at the UN in October. We also raise our concerns directly with the Chinese authorities at the highest levels, and I personally raised these issues with the Chinese ambassador to London in December. Meanwhile, we continue to work with our international partners to address the human rights violations taking place across the People’s Republic of China. We have imposed sanctions on senior Chinese officials and introduced enhanced controls to block exports of technology that might facilitate human rights violations.

The UK co-founded the Media Freedom Coalition in defence of journalists. The coalition has issued statements about the deteriorating media environments in Egypt, Belarus, Hong Kong, Myanmar and Russia, among others. We have committed £3 million over five years to the UNESCO global media defence fund, which has supported more than 1,700 journalists, including many of those who have received threats online. We also support media freedom through our development aid budget and have spent more than £400 million on that over the past five years. Last December, we joined the Freedom Online Coalition taskforce, which is committed to tackling the growing problem of internet exclusion and shutdowns. We also fund the #KeepItOn campaign,

[Amanda Milling]

run by the digital advocacy non-governmental organisation Access Now. The campaign brings together a coalition of more than 240 organisations from 105 countries in a global effort to end internet restrictions and shutdowns.

We also support projects that use the online world to foster open societies. Through our digital access programme, we are closing the gap for excluded groups, strengthening cyber security and spreading economic opportunities. Our most recent figures show that, in just one year, the programme benefited 2.3 million people in almost 300 communities in Indonesia, Brazil, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa. Within the United Nations, we are working to build a coalition of states committed to promoting digital access, protecting human rights online and countering disinformation. We have co-sponsored UN resolutions to urge member states and social media companies to combat misinformation, antisemitism and all forms of hatred. We are also looking forward to hosting the freedom of religion or belief conference in July, which my hon. Friend mentioned. I thank her again for everything that she is doing to support the conference in her role as the special envoy. The impact of digital technologies on freedom of religion or belief and human rights more broadly will be on the agenda.

In order to have influence abroad, we must set an example at home. We are committed to turning our Online Safety Bill into law to require tech companies to tackle illegal activity and content on their platforms, including hate crime, harassment and cyber-stalking.

I am incredibly grateful to my hon. Friend for securing the debate. The online space and new digital technologies represent not only opportunities, but challenges for the protection of human rights. We have heard about some of the terrible abuses and violations perpetrated through digital means.

Fiona Bruce: The Minister speaks of terrible abuses and violations of human rights, including of freedom of religion or belief, and refers to a number of individuals who are being sanctioned. Will she be good enough to take back to the Foreign Office my concerns about the fact that Chen Quanguo in China—a man reportedly responsible for some of the most egregious infringements and violations of human rights against the Uyghurs there—has not yet been sanctioned by the UK?

Amanda Milling: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's intervention and I hear the points that she makes. We keep all evidence and potential listings under close review, but I could not possibly speculate on future sanctions, as that could limit their impact.

In conclusion, the Government will continue to be a champion for human rights, both online and offline, promoting freedom and openness alongside our partners and allies.

Question put and agreed to.

5.11 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 21 April 2022

[STEVE McCABE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Working Tax Credit and Universal Credit: Two-Child Limit

1.30 pm

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): Despite what might be happening elsewhere, we have a very important debate here. I call Alison Thewliss to move the motion.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the two child limit of working tax credits and universal credit.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr McCabe. You are quite right to point out that, while other debates might be happening, this debate is actually quite important. It has been six years, nine months and 13 days since the Budget in 2015, when the two-child limit appeared in the Red Book, and just over five years since it came into force. Some might be wondering why I am bothering to come here today to complain about this policy; it is because, for me, it is a fundamental injustice and deserves to be looked at seriously.

The Child Poverty Action Group and the Church of England estimate that 1.4 million children in 400,000 families are now affected by the two-child-limit policy. Unless it is abolished, the number of children affected will reach 3 million, as more children are born under the rules.

The two-child limit for child tax credits and universal credits broke the long-standing link between need and entitlement, on the basis that families in receipt of state support ought to face the same choices as those supporting themselves solely through work. This is a false narrative; it is the myth of the benefit queen. This policy has never been about fairness.

The majority of families affected by the policy are in work—low-paid jobs, working to support their families. In mentioning that fact, I do not seek to stigmatise those not able to work—many have caring responsibilities, disabilities or other reasons that prevent them from working. They ought to have the protection of the social security system, too.

In many cases, it is all but impossible for those who are working to take on more hours to make up the drop in income created by the two-child limit. The Work and Pensions Committee pointed out that the cost of childcare can also mean that families will not be able to make up the loss by working more hours. The two-child limit is a poverty trap.

Many people are just not aware of the policy, which is a significant issue. They do not know that it will apply to them. The Government intended to influence people's choices to have children, but they have certainly not been influenced in any meaningful way by a piece of Department for Work and Pensions legislation.

The latest research by Mary Reader, Jonathan Portes and Ruth Patrick on whether cutting child benefits reduces fertility in larger families establishes that the two-child limit is not leading to any major reductions in fertility among those likely to claim benefits. All the policy does is punish people for their circumstances and drive up child poverty rates.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for bringing a very important debate to this Chamber. The reality is that this Government's ideological, intentional austerity agenda, more than a decade long, has led to the biggest cost of living crisis in our generation and rampant poverty on our streets. Does the hon. Member agree that it is policies such as this that lead to children going hungry in our constituencies, and that is why it needs to be scrapped immediately?

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree. That poverty is deep and enduring, and prevents those children from reaching their full potential. We cannot forget the choices that many families are having to make because they just do not have enough money coming in.

No one can predict the course of their lives, certainly not the course of their children's lives, and nobody can plan for absolutely every eventuality—it is just not the reality of life. CPAG estimates that, during the pandemic, an additional 15,000 families, who never envisaged losing their jobs and incomes in a global health crisis, were affected by the two-child limit, as they claimed universal credit for the first time. That includes people who worked in sectors that shut down and have yet to recover, people who tragically lost their partners to covid and people who still suffer the effects of long covid. Domestic abuse rates increased during the pandemic, which resulted in some families separating for good. In each of those scenarios, families with more than two children were not afforded the dignity of the support they required, because the Conservatives made a judgment back in 2015 about the appropriate size of a family for benefit claimants.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate, which I agree is very important. In Putney, Roehampton and Southfields, families are having to go to food banks more often. I have spoken to Wandsworth Foodbank and Little Village, which helps local families, and they have said that the thing that would make the most difference in stopping poverty in my area is scrapping the two-child benefit cap. Does she agree that the Minister should look into this, assess the impact and scrap it as soon as possible?

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member, and she makes a good point about food banks. Essentially, the Government are saying that they will pay to feed and clothe only two children, and not provide for the rest of those families. Either that money gets very stretched or families cannot stretch any further and they end up going to food banks. In a country as wealthy as this one, families should not have to go to food banks just to put food on the table for their children.

I bring the debate today to highlight the enduring flaws in this UK Tory Government's two-child limit and to ask them to end it before things get even worse for families struggling today.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): An exception to the two-child limit is where the child was conceived in non-consensual circumstances, but to be eligible for this exception the parent must be able to point to either a conviction or a criminal injuries compensation claim. Does the hon. Member agree that as rape conviction rates are so low, because the bar for evidence is so high, this requirement further victimises claimants?

Alison Thewliss: That is absolutely correct. I will go on to talk about some of the exemptions to the policy and how ludicrous they are, but for a crime such as rape to have some place within Government policy on benefits is quite abhorrent.

The first difficulty with this policy is that it gives an arbitrary cut-off date, resulting in two classes of families: those with children born prior to 6 April 2017 and those with children born after that. For the arbitrary quirk of fate of bringing a baby into this world a minute after midnight, a family will find itself £2,935 worse off per year. I give some credit to the former Secretary of State, Amber Rudd, for not making the policy retrospective, as was originally intended. However, having recognised the inherent unfairness of the policy, she ought to have abolished it altogether.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The hon. Member is making a powerful speech, and she talked about changes before and after this policy was introduced. Has she seen the figure that since covid started, 27% more families now fall under the two-child-limit policy? Does she agree with the Bishop of Manchester, who said last year that the policy “defies moral justification”? When it was first introduced, 60 bishops, as well as Muslim and Jewish leaders, wrote a joint letter to *The Times* saying:

“Children are a private joy and a public good. They are all equally deserving of subsistence support.”

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member on that point and with those religious leaders who wrote that letter then and who continue to campaign on the issue now. I will touch on some of that a little later.

The effect of the two-tier policy that has been created is that a family with three children, the youngest being six, will receive support. However, a family with three children, the youngest being four, will not. The needs of these families are exactly the same, but this Government have decided that they are not entitled to the same support. Previous research on the issue has found that in some cases older siblings can come to resent the new baby in the family, because they have lost out on their activities, their sports clubs and the things they used to do because the family no longer has the money to get by. It is desperately unfair that children are already losing out on wider life experiences because of this discriminatory policy, as well as now on the very basics because of the cost of living crisis.

I will describe some of the other inconsistencies in the policy in some detail, because every time I explain them to people they are absolutely baffled; I would like to hear the Minister’s answer to the mad exemptions that exist. On the exemption policy for multiple births, if someone happens to have twins after having a single birth, there is an exemption to the policy, which is fine.

If they have twins first and then go on to have another baby, they are not entitled to support, presumably because they should have known better. There are three children in each scenario, but different support.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) mentioned, the rape clause is even more pernicious. For this exemption, a woman has to fill in a form and have her traumatic experience verified by an official to say that her third child was conceived through rape or a coercive relationship. This form exists and has to be signed off by a professional to verify that someone has had a child in that circumstance. However, it can be claimed only if the person is not living with the parent of that child.

We know that forcing a woman to leave a relationship can put her and her children in danger, but that reality does not appear to trouble the Department for Work and Pensions. Some 1,330 women claimed under the exemption in 2021. The really perverse part of this pernicious and stigmatising policy is that it applies only to third and subsequent children. If someone’s first child was conceived as the result of rape and they went on to have two more children, that is just unlucky for them as far as the DWP is concerned.

The exemptions around adoption are also perverse. There is no additional support for an adopted child if they are adopted from abroad, or if a person and their partner were that child’s parent or step-parent immediately before they adopted them. Why on earth would this Government want to disincentivise adoption? The exemption for kinship carers, who were losing out on support for their own children because they had been so good as to care for others, was only granted after the Government were taken to court. It should not take legal action for this Government to recognise and fix their mistakes, but we know the DWP repeats this pattern again and again.

The effect of this policy is well documented and well assessed, and I pay tribute to the Child Poverty Action Group, the Church of England and other faith groups including the Interlink Foundation, which represents the orthodox Jewish community. As my hon. Friend mentioned, there is a discrimination at the heart of this policy that affects people of faith. It sticks in my craw to see Easter greetings from Members of this place—the Holy Willies of this place—when their faith does not extend to supporting children, who they are instead actively pushing into poverty through the policies they advocate. How does the Minister believe this policy affects people of differing backgrounds and faiths, and how can he say the policy is fair in this context?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am normally pleased to hear the hon. Lady speak on any issue, but particularly so on this issue, given her knowledge and expertise. On her point about faith, does the hon. Lady feel that a human rights issue could well be at stake here? While that is not a direct responsibility of the Minister, it is a part of this debate that must be considered. By enforcing this rule, the Government are creating a human rights issue for people who do not want to be under that law.

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct to point that out. There are particular issues with this policy for women in Northern Ireland, related

to the rape clause and issues of abortion. When this policy was brought in and was being implemented, Northern Ireland particularly was an afterthought to this Government, just as faith groups have been. Children are regarded as a blessing—not just by people of faith, but particularly by them. Therefore, the policy of this Government to limit support to the first two children in a family has a disproportionate effect on people of orthodox Jewish, Muslim or Catholic faith, for whom abortion and contraception just are not options. We already know that this policy is forcing some of those families into significant poverty.

We all know that contraception is not infallible, even for those who actively choose it. In one of its reports, CPAG has quoted a parent who said:

“I got pregnant despite having an implant. When I found out it was too late for [an] abortion. I’m struggling since then as I had to give up my work”.

I very much support a woman’s right to choose, but a Government welfare policy should not be forcing people into abortions. The British Pregnancy Advisory Service has carried out its own research on this issue and found that it was a factor in the decision making of women who were aware of the policy. BPAS has said:

“We have warned the government that the two-child limit is forcing some women to end what would otherwise be wanted pregnancies. Since 2016, the number of abortions performed to women with two or more existing children has risen by 24%, compared with an increase of 11% performed to women with one existing child.”

I would like the Minister to comment specifically on how he is monitoring the impact of this policy on women’s decisions, and why he considers this to be an appropriate part of social security policy.

We are in a cost of living crisis, and the impact of that crisis on larger families is particularly acute. Energy and food prices are soaring, and this Government did little in the spring statement to hand out a lifeline to people who are struggling right now. Can the Minister outline what, five years in, is the ongoing monitoring of this policy? What consideration has been given to removing it altogether? What conversations has he had with the Chancellor about this policy? When the modelling of its impact on child poverty is so clear—I almost wish we were in one of those American Senate hearings where I could show the graph, because it is absolutely crystal clear—why are this Government, dystopian as they are, continuing to pursue a policy that they know has failed in its objectives? It is simply causing more hardship in every passing year. Almost half of all children living in families with more than two children are in poverty, and the Government must know that. I want to know why they refuse to act.

The Scottish Government have done their best to support families with the Scottish child payment, which we brought in and are increasing, and on which there is no two-child limit, under the social security powers we have. With 85% of social security powers still held in this place, the UK Government bear a responsibility to do what they can. In the face of the UK Government cutting giant holes in the safety net, tackling poverty and making Scotland the best place in the world to grow up in is a challenge. Our devolved powers go only so far. We need all the powers of a normal nation to ensure that we can support all our people and value every child, and not just the first two.

1.46 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I very much welcome the time allocated to this debate today. It is vital we have this discussion, because the two-child-limit policy is yet another legacy of the low-pay, low-income experience that is the stamp of the Conservative Government. We have already discussed in recent weeks in this building the impact of the real-terms cuts in social security benefits and the minimum wage, and what we all anticipate will be a real-terms public sector pay cut. The debate today has reflected on the first of those: the appalling offer of a 3% increase in social security while inflation is increasing at 7% and could well go up to 10%. That is a real-terms cut in people’s incomes. How people will survive I have no idea.

Some households do not even receive a 3% rise because, under the two-child limit, parents are not entitled to any extra support through universal credit or child tax credit to help with raising a third or subsequent child born after 6 April 2017.

Margaret Ferrier: Does the hon. Lady agree that following the Government’s decision to cut universal credit payments, with inflation rates rising astronomically and a real cost of living crisis, a decision to keep the two-child limit is actively pushing children below the poverty line, which will undoubtedly impact on the UK’s levels of social mobility?

Beth Winter: I totally agree. Action needs to be taken on all those policies, including reinstating the £20 universal credit uplift and extending it to those on legacy benefits. We need a whole raft of policies to prevent, reduce and tackle the extreme levels of child poverty that currently exist in this country.

I refer briefly to the Child Poverty Action Group and Church of England report commissioned for the fifth anniversary of the two-child-limit policy. It is very clear in saying that the two-child limit breaks the historic link between need and entitlement. The benefit should be an entitlement, but that link, which was the founding principle of our social security system, has been broken. The report is clear that our social security system should support families and give children the best start in life, regardless of how many siblings they have. They are our future and we should invest in our future generations. The report concluded that the Government must remove the two-child limit to allow all children to thrive.

April’s below-inflation benefits rise means that affected families with three children face a further £938 a year shortfall in benefits to cover the basic costs of raising them, on top of the pre-existing £6,205 shortfall from 2021, with larger families facing an even bigger hole in their income. That is absolutely appalling and devastating for millions of families throughout the UK.

The two-child limit restricts child allowances in universal credit and tax credits worth £2,953 per year to the first two children in a family unless the children were born before 6 April 2017, when the policy came into force. As the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) has already outlined, the disparities, inconsistencies and discriminatory practices in terms of who is and is not entitled are completely unfair.

Unless this two-child limit is abolished, the number of children affected will reach 3 million, as more are born under the policy. We currently have 4.3 million

[*Beth Winter*]

children across the UK living in relative poverty. That equates to around nine in every 30 children in a UK classroom.

As the two-child limit is the biggest driver of this rising level of child poverty, CPAG has estimated that it will push another 300,000 children into poverty, and 1 million more into deeper poverty, by 2023-24. By 2026-27, over 50% of children in families with more than two children will be living in poverty—half of the population in poverty.

We already knew in 2019, from the Work and Pensions Select Committee report on the two-child limit, of concerns that it breached not only the Government's wider responsibility and international commitments to equality but human rights, including the European convention on human rights and the United Nations convention on the rights of the child. Breaching such human rights commitments appears to come easily to this Government, however; we only need to look at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' comments on yesterday's Nationality and Borders Bill for another example of that.

One of the core authors of the Child Poverty Action Group report, Dr Ruth Patrick, says:

"the two-child limit is a poverty-producing policy and one which should be removed",

but what about the voices of the parents who have contributed to those pieces of research? I will quote just one, who says:

"We wear extra layers of clothes as I cannot afford to put the heating on. We shower on a Wednesday and Saturday to reduce energy bills but we shouldn't have to live like this."

Nobody should have to live like that, and I am sure the Minister would agree on that point.

As in Scotland, the Welsh Government have tried to take action to counter some of the worst aspects of this policy, the cost of living crisis, and child poverty in Wales, for example through the commitment to extend free school meals to all primary school pupils from September 2022. However, unfortunately, the main problems causing child poverty lie here in Westminster. The Welsh Affairs Committee, on which I sit, recently looked at the benefits system in Wales.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Lady on making a very powerful case during her speech. However, ultimately, has she come to the position that I have, in my political life, that a just and fair economy and society for Wales will never be created by Westminster? The only solution for us is to take control of those powers ourselves. As the hon. Lady outlined in her speech, where we have those levers, we are making a positive difference, but ultimately, we need all of those levers. Surely, that should be the normal position for her to take now.

Beth Winter: I was just coming on to that. The Welsh Affairs Committee quite strongly recommended that we should be exploring the possibilities of devolving the administration—at the very least—of social security and benefits to Wales. We are still awaiting the Minister's response to the report.

The Committee also recommended an urgent review on ending the £20 universal credit uplift, and on the five-week wait for universal credit, the benefit cap, the

bedroom tax, and—crucially, for the purposes of this debate—the two-child limit. We would be very interested to hear the Government's response to that report.

This policy is having a devastating impact on a large number of my constituents in Cynon Valley, where wages and household incomes are already well below the UK and Welsh averages. The two-child limit therefore has an even deeper impact on my neighbourhood. I recently commissioned some research from the Bevan Foundation on the economy in my constituency. There were some alarming findings on people's incomes and the levels of benefit-dependent families. They are being impacted drastically by this pernicious policy, and we all know that it will get worse—and already has—with the cost of living crisis, which is having a devastating impact on so many people.

A fortnight ago, I launched in my constituency a survey on the cost of living crisis. Within 48 hours, I had received in excess of 400 responses. I am in the process of collating and analysing those responses to produce a report, but at first glance, the stories coming through from local people are absolutely harrowing—the way people have to live, not having food on the table for their children, not having the heating on. It is absolutely appalling and needs to be addressed urgently. A lot of those people are affected by the two-child limit. I will share that report with the Minister when it is completed—within the next month, I hope.

I very much look forward to the Minister's response outlining why the Government remain determined to pursue their low-pay, low-income agenda, despite the misery that it imposes on millions of people and their children across the country. *Diolch yn fawr.*

1.56 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I am very glad to follow my friend, the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter), and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss).

Ahead of the debate, I asked people what they thought of the two-child limit, and the responses were interesting, revealing and quite varied. People thought that it had been a short-term measure; that it had been withdrawn; that it had had little effect; and, most revealingly, some said, "I had just forgotten about it." The point is that it had become supposedly normal; it had disappeared from public debates.

The two-child rule has indeed disappeared as a matter of public concern. It has become the unquestioned common sense of the system, but it remains an excruciating burden on families, particularly innocent children, who are subject to its evil effects and sometimes suffer as a consequence of the voluntary or involuntary actions of parents driven by religious or social beliefs on polygamy, contraception or abortion, for example; as a consequence of contraceptive failure or accidents; more sinisterly, as a consequence of patriarchal attitudes and oppression; or, even worse, as a consequence of the rules around rape, as we have heard.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow Central on securing the debate and for shining a light on a cruel and oppressive measure, bringing it into the light, if not the comfort, of truth's flame—as the poet R. S. Thomas said in another case. I join her, the hon. Member for Cynon Valley and others in calling for the two-child rule to be withdrawn forthwith.

I hope hon. Members will forgive me, but this matter has a particular resonance for me as one of seven children, one of whom died in infancy. We were brought up in a council house—a very good council house built to high post-war standards—and we were fortunate in many ways, three of which I will refer to. First, my parents were extremely hardworking at a time of full employment, so we lacked for nothing. Secondly, we lived at a time of consensus on wide-ranging social provisions, so we had the health service, vitamins, glasses, free school milk and all the rest of it. We all went on to further and higher education, initial and higher degrees, professional qualifications, and professional careers, all of which was grant aided.

The third point about my family is that we were not subject to the two-child limit. Otherwise, I would scarcely be standing here today. There is always a danger of idealising the past in comparison with the wretched present. In Welsh, we say, “Teg edrych tuag adra”—it is a fine thing to look back at one’s home—meaning to look at the past with rose-tinted glasses.

The evidence shows a change in the provision, and it is very much a change for the worse. The two-child limit is a particularly bad case. The real point of my speech is that there has been a change in attitudes since 1979, I suppose—I referred to school milk a moment ago, and I do not have to emphasise the significance of that debate. There has been a change in the accepted common sense that we all owe a duty to each other—that a provision for one is a provision for all. That is, with very few exceptions, a common provision. The exceptions in earlier times would have been made on the basis of the violation of legal requirements, social and religious norms or on the judgment of moral turpitude. That was the accepted common sense, and there has been a change.

I will digress for a moment to mention part of my earlier career. Years ago I was a mental health social worker and would visit the psychiatric hospital at Denbigh, which served all of north Wales. In the back ward of that mental hospital there lived a dozen or so older women, mainly in their late 70s. They had been there since the 1930s; they were totally institutionalised and unable to leave. They were initially detained on the basis of “moral imbecility”; that is why they were locked up. They had had illegitimate children. Supposedly we do not make those sorts of moral judgments these days. However, I have to say that some of the arguments for the two-child rule—which will be familiar to many of us and I will not rehearse—have that flavour of moral condemnation. Those arguments are based supposedly on the common sense that they—that is, the generalised other—should take responsibility for the exceptions that prove the rule here. Well, those exceptions are surely irrelevant, and hence, so are the children who suffer—they are irrelevant as well.

I could make many further points about this general argument and I could talk about the practicalities. As we have already heard, Wales has the highest rates of child poverty of any part of the UK, at 31%. In 2021 14,800 households were affected by the two-child limit; 570 of those households were in Gwynedd, the county where my constituency is located. The Welsh Affairs Committee has published its report on the benefits system in Wales, which raised concerns about the two-child limit. It said that devolving powers to Wales—equivalent to those in Scotland—would mean that we could take real measures to tackle child poverty, such as the additional

child payments for low-income families introduced in Scotland. I concede that that affects only a small part of the social security system, but it is much better than the situation that we face in Wales.

I could refer to the rationale behind the policy of ensuring that families receiving means-tested benefits should face the same financial choices about having children as those supporting themselves through work. However, we know that the majority of claimants—that is 56%—are actually employed. The arguments around people working or not, and having lots of children, are entirely bogus to my mind. My request to the Minister today is fairly simple. I ask him to signal a desire to move away from the supposed common sense of this policy and from the rationale that underpins it—the cruel rationale of less eligibility.

2.3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in Westminster Hall, but it is a special pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). The hon. Lady and I have many things in common—apart from the independence of Scotland, of course. However, when it comes to social issues we are on the same page on just about everything; I can comfortably support her on those issues. I thank her for setting the scene, and I thank all other Members who have contributed.

I love accents. I love the accent of the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter). I hope I have pronounced that correctly—I probably have not. I think the Welsh accent adds to this Chamber; there are a number of Welsh Members who, through their voice and accent, add to the Chamber. I hope that my Ulster Scots accent from Northern Ireland also adds in some way to the Chamber, bringing the cultural values of all four nations together. It is always a pleasure to do that.

I fully support the comments of the hon. Member for Glasgow Central, and indeed those of everyone who has spoken and will speak afterwards. Hopefully, the Minister will give us some succour and support. Opposition Members’ comments are clear, and we look to the Minister in hope of a response. I am going to take a slightly different angle. I think the hon. Lady probably knows this, because she is always well versed in the subject matter, but the London School of Economics has been very clear. Its research set out to explore how the policy, in operation since April 2017, has affected fertility of third and subsequent births, and it said:

“Using quantitative methods, we find the policy led to only a small decline in fertility among those households directly affected. This implies that the main impact of the policy has been to reduce incomes”—

this hits on the issue that the hon. Lady referred to—“among larger families who are already living on a low income”. There are therefore two issues to this debate. It continued: “and hence to increase child poverty.”

Those are the things that this debate and my short contribution will address. That is why I am very much opposed to the two-child policy and its effect on tax credits and universal credit.

Margaret Ferrier: Research from the New Field Foundation found that the limit does not discourage families from having more children, and has only worsened

[Margaret Ferrier]

their financial difficulties. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Ministers must actively engage with charities and organisations with expertise in policy impact to understand the real-terms impact of such policies?

Jim Shannon: I wholeheartedly support the hon. Lady's comments.

I am going to say something fairly harsh. I am not a harsh person, or I try not to be, but I always had a fear about the two-child limit—perhaps others agree with me—which is why I opposed what I dubbed at that time the “Chinese limit”. We do not have an authoritarian state just yet, but in China they have—I know they are going to change the two-child rule, or at least they are hoping to change it—and in a way that is the authoritarianism of this DWP directive, which inadvertently or directly has put in place the Chinese limit.

I was talking to the hon. Lady before the debate, and I said that if there had been a two-child limit when our parents were born, I would not be here because my mother would not be here; she was the fourth child out of five. The hon. Lady and others—perhaps even the Minister—would not be here either. If the two-child limit were enforced here with the regularity that it is in China, but with an income base that makes it almost authoritarian, there would be children who are not born—people who would not be here. I want to highlight that dark perspective, because that is where I see this draconian, dictatorial and very authoritarian directive from the DWP going.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman mentions China, and he knows that it is having huge problems now because there is an expectation of low numbers of children. It is having difficulties with its birth rate. It is interesting that since 2012—since austerity kicked in—the birth rate in the UK has dropped by 12%. That is significant, and it has huge implications for pension contributions and for many jobs.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. It is about not just the two-child limit on its own, which means that a person cannot have a third child because there will not be the same structures in place to help them. It is also about issues such as the impact on income and pensions. She is absolutely right. The Minister in his place is the man who is placed to answer all these questions. I hope he will give us his thoughts on how this situation can be corrected. I go back to my point of a few moments ago about the Chinese Government. The policy does not simply impact the third child—it impacts every child in that home.

I have three sons. The first two each have two children and made a decision themselves not to have a third one. The third boy has one child and another one on the way. That is not because China's limits are impacting upon the Shannon family, because they are not—it is a decision made by families themselves. If a family was to have a third child, why should they not be allowed to? Why should we not look at the issue of income of all the other families, and maybe say to those who said that the policy would cause there to be fewer births and cause people to use birth control, that that is proving not to be the case? We are simply taking money from households.

I referred to the fertility aspect of the two-child limit in the research summary, and want to quote further from the research:

“This raises the question of whether the two-child limit reduced the overall fertility of third and subsequent births in the UK. Survey evidence from the British Pregnancy Advisory Service found that 57 percent of women who were likely to be affected by the two-child limit said it was a relevant factor in their decision to have an abortion”.

I know some may not agree with me—I know others who do—but I am very clear in my mind. We have a duty. That is how I have always voted in this House, though others may have a different opinion. I believe in the sanctity of life—the life of the mother and the life of the child—and this policy has done something that I think is morally wrong. I think it is wrong that people should have an abortion because they cannot afford to keep the child that they carry. It is as simple as that. I very much disagree with the policy.

The researchers say that the 57% is a random sample, but also that it is bigger than that. They took it a wee stage further on income and divided

“adult women of childbearing age into those who are on benefits (or are likely, given their socio-economic status, to be on benefits) or not; and those who already have two or more children or not.”

The stats provide an evidential base for the Minister; I am happy to make them available to him, if he thinks they would be helpful. I think they would be, including for civil servants, when it comes to looking at the bigger picture.

Data published in April 2021 shows that 1.1 million children were affected by the two-child limit—237,000 more than the previous year. Updates for 2022 are not yet available. The number of children affected will continue to grow as nearly all low-income families with three or more children eventually become subject to the limit. What we are doing—I say “we”, but it is not the people here; it is the Government—is imposing an income limit on those who already have three children or more.

I have already discussed in this place on several occasions the need for the child benefit limit, set in 2013, to be uplifted, because working families are affected. Someone who earned, for example, £49,000 in 2013 was on a good wage that would allow their partner to work part-time hours to take care of their children. They are in a completely different scenario today, with energy costs. The hon. Member for Cynon Valley spoke at some length about energy costs and the impact on income. It is no different in Cynon Valley from Strangford or Glasgow Central, or anywhere else.

With gas, electric and fuel at treble the price of 2013, now more than ever we need to do the right thing by families—review, change and abolish this rule. We need to give some decency, compassion and understanding back to families, who are under incredible pressure. A review of the policy and then its abolition are essential.

The data also suggests that the probability of having a third or subsequent child declined by some 5% after the reform, which suggests that the two-child limit has led to a decline in the number of third and subsequent births of approximately 1%. The evidential base is there. This measure has a success rate of only 1%, while children in our homes are suffering. If it has only achieved a change of 1%, why pursue it? Some might say that if a party wins an election by 51% to 49% they have still won it, but as I understand it, the whole idea behind this policy was to focus on saving money. The savings

are not there, so it comes down to the critical question of what this policy is really all about. Five years on from its implementation, research has found that the policy has a very marginal impact on families having more than two children but has deprived low-income families of approximately £3,000 per year—the hon. Member for Cynon Valley referred to that at some length, and the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) spoke about it as well. They both did surveys in their constituencies, so they have done their homework. They have got the evidential base; they have got the proof.

I am conscious of time, so I will conclude with this: given the pressure that families are under, we in this place must take appropriate steps to alleviate that pressure. The Minister is an honourable man and is always incredibly friendly; it is his nature, and he does take on board the issues that we bring to his attention. However, today we are not just looking for the decent side of the Minister—which we will always get—but for concrete evidence that some of the changes that we on the Opposition side of the Chamber seek, which we feel are important, will be made. I can foresee a time when working families will be unable to make ends meet, and we in this place have a duty to the vulnerable and to the children who are suffering as a result of policies that do not reflect the issues that people have but are outdated and based on wrong assumptions. In my opinion, that 1% figure means that a wrong assumption has been made, so it must change. The time is right to make those changes, so again I look to the Minister, not just for reassurances but for a change in the law.

2.17 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for having secured this debate. More importantly, I thank her for the tireless campaigning she has done on this two-child policy, which victimises and stigmatises families and children. It is worth putting on the record that my hon. Friend was the first Member to identify the pernicious rape clause, on Budget day in July 2015, and her speech shows just how much she has immersed herself in highlighting the unfairness of this policy and the ludicrous exemptions that go with it. As she has said, it is a poverty trap. The fact that children born beyond the midnight deadline are not deemed worthy of support, and that we now have two tiers of families—two families might be the same size, but by virtue of when one child was born, one family gets more support than the other—is absurd.

I also pay tribute to all other hon. Members who have contributed or made interventions. As the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) said, this is about the need to support all children and ensure basic fairness; why do this UK Tory Government find it all too easy to breach human rights? The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) made a powerful speech, talking about his own circumstances and how political attitudes have changed. The example he gave about the moral condemnation in the past of people stuck in mental institutions, and how we are returning to moral judgments of people having children, should make the Minister sit up, because it certainly made me sit up.

Then, of course, we had a fantastic contribution from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). It did start with his “better together” comparison, but

apart from that, I agreed with every word he said. When the hon. Member for Strangford uses such strong language and condemns a policy so much—I genuinely think that was the best speech I have heard from the hon. Gentleman; that says a lot, but it was a really powerful speech—if the Minister does not take note, something is far wrong. The hon. Gentleman gave the example of the Chinese limit, and how it would have impacted families and people here had such a policy been implemented, but he also spoke about the dark perspective of this policy. It is morally wrong, and not just that: it has been an abject failure in its aims. That really summed it up, so I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his speech.

It is disappointing that there are no Tory Back Benchers here to back up the policy. Maybe that says how bad the policy is, or maybe they are just choosing to back the corrupt Prime Minister in the “other place.” The point is that agreeing to provide welfare support for only two children is a horrible policy, backed up by dog-whistle politics. The concept clearly was that people should be able to afford children, just like those who rely solely on work for their income and therefore do not need additional welfare support. That is language designed to imply that anyone on benefits is a scrounger, and that people have children just to screw the welfare system. It is truly awful, and it actually puts a price on children.

As we have heard, in affected families, who suffers the most? The children. Hungry kids cannot learn in school. They will be disadvantaged and less likely to have a positive outcome, so whatever circle the Tories think they are breaking, they might be condemning more people to underachieve and have a higher chance of unemployment, and to be less likely to participate in higher and further education and more likely to end up in lower-paid, semi-skilled work. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, if some children suffer, others do. It is not just the ones directly affected.

Worst of all, the entire concept is based on politics and prejudice and not evidence. What we now have, clear as day, is evidence of how the policy works for those affected by the two-child policy. The Library briefing confirmed that of the 317,500 families affected in April 2021, 56% had somebody in the household working. The majority, also 56%, were in dual-parent households, so the majority of families affected are dual-parent households with somebody in employment. That is proof that the policy is based on falsehoods and proof that the bigger issue is that too many people are in low-paid, insecure jobs, and that is the issue that should be tackled.

What about the people who have lost jobs or faced reduced income due to covid? They now find that the so-called safety net of the welfare state is a lot smaller than they would have anticipated. The Tory Brexit has also impacted jobs, too. The Tories deny that, but I have a meeting tomorrow with somebody who runs a haulage company, and he is close to going under, which will take other jobs with him, because of the ludicrous cabotage rules that the Tory Government signed up to.

Covid unfortunately gave us fire and rehire—another policy that the Tories have done nothing to eliminate, but a policy that is vastly reducing the incomes of thousands of workers or seeing them sacked. Workers that the Tories might otherwise have seen as model families who were able to afford their children without welfare support will now need that support, and it might not be there for them. Families and people who

[Alan Brown]

have lost jobs are now having to readjust their outgoings accordingly, and now find that they have been categorised as scroungers by the Tory Government.

Another key issue of the two-child policy is that, as others have said, it disproportionately affects orthodox Jewish and Muslim families who may have religious or ethical views on family size. I agree with the intervention by the hon. Member for Strangford that the religious aspect in terms of discrimination has possible human rights implications as well.

We have heard that some women have considered abortion because they worry about not being able to afford a child. There are debates about how many women have actually undertaken an abortion because of that, but the reality is that women are having to face that choice, and they should not have to. Again, that is something the Minister needs to look at and review.

Carol Monaghan: There are debates about that, but the statistics are clear. The National Audit Office numbers show that since 2016, since the policy came into being, there has been a 24% increase in the number of abortions in England and Wales.

Alan Brown: I thank my hon. Friend for that. I will not disagree. The hon. Member for Strangford also referred to evidential work done by the LSE. This is evidence that the Government should look at. We are discussing a Government who talk about family values. How can they talk about family values when they are forcing women to consider abortion?

That takes us to other evidence of the impact of this policy. Since 2013-14, child poverty among larger families has risen dramatically; almost half of all children living in families that have more than two children live in poverty. Also, recent research for the report “Benefit changes and larger families” by largerfamilies.study shows that most of the recent rise in child poverty overall has been driven by rising poverty among those larger families.

Sara Ogilvie of the Child Poverty Action Group has said:

“The two child limit is a brutal policy that punishes children simply for having brothers and sisters. It forces families to survive on less than they need, and with soaring living costs the hardship and hunger these families face will only intensify.”

Also, according to CPAG:

“Removing the policy would lift 250,000 children out of poverty”, doing so immediately. So, surely the Minister must review the evidence, act accordingly and take that action to “lift...children out of poverty”.

Then, if we look at the rape exemption clause, it is apparent that it was thought up on the hoof at the time. It was probably some loose nod by the Government towards thinking that they were adding a moral, even noble, exemption to support children born after their mother’s traumatic experience of being raped. However, it is no wonder that Ministers at the time could not even explain how the policy would be implemented, because it was so absurd. No thought was given to the traumatic psychological effects of a woman having to relive such an experience and being asked to fill in forms to justify financial support for her child. Also, the bizarre logic of the exemption only applies for subsequent children,

beyond the two-child limit, born of rape. So, as if the clause in itself is not abhorrent enough, it is somehow seen as being morally okay to decide which child born from rape is worthy of support, which is truly disgusting.

The other big thing aligned with this policy and other policies at the time was the whole “balancing the books” mantra. This debate made me revisit the 2015 summer Budget Red Book. I looked back at that and honestly it is truly horrifying to see how evil that Budget was. The two-child clause was estimated to save £3.4 billion by 2021; freezing benefits, £11.3 billion; benefit cap reduction, £1.7 billion, clawed back from the poor; and increasing the tax credits taper to 48% while reducing income thresholds for tax credits and work allowance was estimated to save—astonishingly—nearly £20 billion by 2021. So, there was a complete and utter hatchet job on the welfare state, and there were also incoherent policies, given the attack on some of the job-related welfare support—so much for “making work pay”. That was an awful Budget and I have to point out that it was shameful that Labour abstained on it.

However, what about the “balancing the books” mantra? Clearly, as I have just illustrated, it is “balancing the books” on the poorest, the most infirm and the lowest-paid in society. But what it also allowed in subsequent Budgets was tax giveaways to those who the Tories deemed worthy of benefiting from them.

Previously, I had the Library conduct analysis on some of the key Budget decisions that were implemented from 2016 to 2018. The Library extrapolated those figures, which were based on figures that were presented in the Budget books, up to 2025, and it estimated that, up to 2025, the Treasury was giving away £80 billion. Increasing the higher rate threshold was estimated to be a giveaway worth £5 billion; changes to individual savings accounts, or ISAs, £7 billion; inheritance tax changes, a £6 billion giveaway; and the personal allowance increase and further raising of the higher threshold to £50,000 of income was estimated to be an £11 billion giveaway by the Tories. There was also a £50 billion giveaway in corporation tax, although at least they realised the error of their ways on that one. All of that shows that plenty of money was found for giveaways, rather than for continuing to balance the books properly. And those figures show that the Tories could easily afford to reverse this two-child policy, if the political will to do so was there.

Returning to the here and now, another issue with universal tax overall is of course the removal of the uplift, or—more appropriately—a cut of £1,040 a year. As the hon. Member for Cynon Valley said, if the pandemic merited an uplift to allow people a more dignified life, then surely—with inflation running at 7% to 8%, the energy cap up 75% compared to April 2021 and petrol at record prices—there is a clear need for a permanent increase in universal credit.

I cannot finish without comparing this with what is happening in Scotland with the Scottish Government, just as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central did. The Scottish Government introduced the game-changing child payment, doubling it to £20 a week, and it will increase to £25 a week when the benefit is extended to under-16s at the end of this year. As that has been done on a fixed budget in the Scottish Parliament, it cannot have the positive impact it otherwise would have had because we are still living with the impact of Tory austerity. That is proof that whatever the Scottish

Government do is undertaken with one hand behind their back. It is interesting that there was a strong theme earlier in the debate about the Welsh Government needing more powers too, so Tory policies are clearly having an impact on the Union, which should make the Minister take note.

Will the Minister pledge to review the effects of the impact of the Scottish Government's child payment policy and the support it has received from charitable organisations? The Scottish Government have shown that they are treating all children equally. That should not be too much to ask of any Government, and surely it is time for the UK Government to think again.

2.31 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on introducing it. We have heard some very strong contributions from Members, both speeches and interventions, outlining the community impact of this policy and drawing on personal life experiences, which should inform debates such as this.

Tackling child poverty should be a moral imperative. This policy and others introduced by the Government over the last 12 years are major impediments to our moral imperative to end child poverty. Five years on from the introduction of the two-child limit, we are finally beginning to see the results of that social policy experiment and to be in a position to evaluate whether the policy achieved the purposes set out for it, and whether it had impacts that were foreseeable but were not what the Government explicitly sought to achieve.

As we have heard, as of April last year, 317,500 families and over a million children were affected by the policy. We are now able to understand just what a damaging impact it is having. For a few minutes, I will focus on what the Government sought to achieve and the arguments that were set out when the policy was introduced in the 2015 legislation, and how it has measured up.

Let us look at the Government's attempt to define the problem. The former DWP Minister, Lord Freud, speaking in the other place, said:

"Currently, the benefit system adjusts automatically to family size, while many families supporting themselves solely through work do not see their budgets rise in the same way when they have more children."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 December 2015; Vol. 767, c. 1328.]

The 2015 Budget said:

"The government believes that those in receipt of tax credits should face the same financial choices about having children as those supporting themselves in work."

The fact that benefits adjust "automatically to family size", as Lord Freud said, might be seen as a positive feature of the system rather than a bug, but the phrase that keeps recurring is

"supporting themselves solely through work",

in contrast with being

"in receipt of tax credits".

What is meant by supporting oneself "solely through work"? It tells us a great deal about this Government's attitude towards our society and our welfare state, and their lack of interest in or concern about them. At the time those statements were made, two thirds of families in receipt of tax credits were in work—yes, that goes for

families with three or more children as well. It is clear that the Government were predominantly referring to working families when they contrasted them with those "supporting themselves solely through work".

The word "solely" is carrying awful lot of weight in that sentence.

I have three points. First, the group that is, in the Government's view, not supporting itself "solely through work" now comprises 42% of all families with children. That is the share of all families with children that are receiving tax credits or universal credit. How plausible does the Government's problem definition sound when we are talking about nearly half of all families, rather than an unspecified minority?

Secondly, the Government's idea of what it means to support oneself solely through work needs examination. Why are tax credits and universal credit the only parts of the welfare state that are singled out? The Office for National Statistics publication "Effects of taxes and benefits on UK household income" shows that most families with children—60%—receive more from the welfare state in cash benefits and the value of services than they pay in taxes. Even after taxes, the value of benefits and services received by families with children in the fifth decile is equivalent to 23% of their market incomes.

Our welfare state redistributes resources towards families with children on a large scale, and that is exactly how it should be. However, it means that most families with children cannot be said to be supporting themselves solely through work, but through a combination of work and state support, because we believe that the state has a role in supporting children. That is absolutely the purpose of the welfare state. This is not a permanent situation for most families. Over the life cycle, most of us move between being net beneficiaries—not supporting ourselves only through work—and net contributors at different points. That is also exactly how the system is supposed to work. That brings me to my third comment on the purported problem that the two-child policy was supposed to address: the Government simply ignored the fact that people move on and off tax credits and universal credit all the time. Instead, they want to treat recipients as an immobile group of benefit recipients, as if it was a permanent characteristic of some people.

Surely, after the huge rise in universal credit claims during the pandemic, even the Government must realise that whether a family will have to rely on social security benefits is something they cannot predict. The most charitable view possible is that the Government got themselves in a muddle by trying to impose a disastrously over-simplified vision on to a reality that it did not fit. A less charitable view is that they decided on a policy for whatever reason—austerity, they would say, although I might be more inclined to believe that it was political opportunism—and then set themselves to manufacturing a rationale for it.

Even if we suspend our disbelief and take the Government's rationale seriously, we now have evidence against which it can be assessed. If tax credits incentivised people to have large families, the policy should have led, by now, to measurable changes in the number of births to families that already have two or more children. That has not happened, as the thorough and fair-minded research by Mary Reader, Jonathan Portes and colleagues has shown.

[Ms Karen Buck]

If any good has come out of this awful policy experiment, it is that the hypothesis on which it was based can be firmly rejected. Meanwhile, the situation for families with three or more children continues to worsen. As Ruth Patrick and her colleagues at the LSE have shown, those families are particularly vulnerable to changes in social security policy. The record over recent years shows just how severe the impact of austerity has been.

As the Government do not like the standard relative poverty measures that everyone else talks about, I will refer to their favourite measure: so-called absolute poverty, where the poverty line is fixed in real terms at 2010-11 values. The reason this Government like that measure so much is that it tends to show a downward trend over time as real incomes rise—although the downward trend since 2010 has been remarkably weak. For families with three or more children, the trend in absolute poverty after housing costs was in the opposite direction, with 300,000 more children in absolute poverty between 2016-17 and 2019-20. Some 38% of all children in those families are in poverty, measured against a threshold that was set 12 years ago. Measured against a contemporary poverty threshold, 47% are in poverty after housing costs, up from 41% in 2016-17. It is not solely due to the two-child policy; the whole raft of austerity measures since 2016-17 has particularly impacted these families.

However, the two-child policy can only drive child poverty higher, as more children born since 2017 come within scope of the policy. As we have heard, the Resolution Foundation's modelling shows poverty for children in these families rising precipitously, with half of those children already in poverty in 2021-22. The Government should respond to that by ditching the two-child policy now. That would be the correct response to the evidence and would remove from our social security system the obscene requirement for rape victims to provide evidence to the Department for Work and Pensions of what the Government term "non-consensual conception." It would remove the perverse incentive for couples with separate families to maintain two separate households and it would help to address the rise in child poverty, restoring the principle that our welfare state treats all children equally.

2.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe; we have seen a fair bit of each other this week. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on securing this debate, on a subject on which I know she has campaigned at length. In fact, we have sparred on a few different issues, because this is not the only subject she has concerns about.

The Department for Work and Pensions is committed to supporting families and helping parents into work. Since this has come up in the debate, it is worth reminding colleagues of the 1.3 million vacancies available for people to find work. We want there to be strong work incentives to help people to fill the opportunities that are available, while providing support for those who need it. We also need to ensure that there is a sense of fairness for the taxpayer; many working families who do not receive benefits do not see their incomes rise when they have more children. That is why we judge

that the policy to support a maximum of two children, whether that is with universal credit or child tax credit, is a proportionate way to achieve those aims. Our overall approach is working, as evidenced by the fact that between 2016 and 2021, the number of couples who are in employment and have children increased by 460,000; that is a 2.3 percentage point increase in the employment rate for that group.

The two-child policy was introduced five years ago. Since April 2017, families have been able to claim support for up to two children. There may be further entitlement for other children if they were born before 6 April 2017 or if an exception applies—I will come back to that in a minute. The child element of universal credit is worth £290 for the first child born before 6 April 2017. It is worth a standard rate of £244.58 per child for the second and any other eligible children. Child benefit continues to be paid for all children, plus the additional element in child tax credit or universal credit for any disabled children. The 2021-22 rates for the disabled child addition in universal credit are £128.89 per month for the lower rate and £402.41 per month for the higher rate. Additional help for eligible childcare costs through working tax credit and universal credit are also available, regardless of the total number of children in the household. We discussed that at length in the Work and Pensions Committee yesterday—although that feels like quite a long time ago.

We recognise that some claimants are not able to make the same choices about the number of children in their family. That is why exceptions have been put in place to protect certain groups. Exceptions apply to third and subsequent children who are additional children in a multiple birth; an extra amount is payable for all children in a multiple birth other than the first child. Exceptions also apply where the child is likely to have been born as a result of non-consensual conception, which for this purpose includes rape or where the claimant was in a controlling or coercive relationship with the child's other biological parent at the time of conception. A further exception applies to any children in a household who are adopted when they would otherwise be in local authority care, or who are living long term with friends or family and would otherwise be at risk of entering the care system. Another exemption is where a child under the age of 16 who is living with their parents or carers has a child of their own—until they make a separate claim upon turning 16.

Statistics from the Office for National Statistics show that in 2020, 85% of all families with dependent children had a maximum of two in their family. For lone parent families, the figure was 83%. Based on the latest figures, 62% of households with a third or subsequent child who are in receipt of universal credit or child tax credit are not affected by the two-child policy.

Hywel Williams: The Minister has given a long list of the benefits available to people and some of the ameliorative procedures that have been put in place, but what is the actual effect of the two-child limit? Is he saying that it has no effect at all or that its effects have been ameliorated? What is the effect on the kids in those families?

David Rutley: The point that I am trying to make is that the benefits system is important—it provides support—but it is not the only thing that we are trying to do for people and for claimants.

As the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) has highlighted, many of those people are working while on benefits. We want them to get into work and, when they are in employment, to progress. As has been debated long and hard in this Chamber, we have recently introduced work coaches who focus on in-work progression; we have 37 champions across the country who are helping to push that agenda forward. That is vital so that people can progress. People do not depend just on the benefits system; we want them to see more in their wage packet, and we have provided work incentives to do that, be it through the UC taper rate changes that have been put in place or through the increased work allowances. Those are vital incentives.

Alan Brown *rose*—

Ms Buck *rose*—

David Rutley: I will give way to the SNP spokesperson, but then I will make some progress, because others have made many points and I have several to make myself.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for giving way. On the point about helping people's wage packets and making work pay, does he not agree that the minimum wage should reflect the national living wage so that people get a proper, fair wage?

David Rutley: As I think the hon. Gentleman knows, the national minimum wage has gone up to £9.50—*[Interruption.]* There is a bit of head-shaking going on; it is very disturbing. The national minimum wage is now £9.50 and is projected by many to reach £10. The £9.50 figure is a 6.6% increase, which is very welcome. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will join me in welcoming that significant increase.

A few things have been said about the non-consensual conception exemption. We recognise that it is a difficult and sensitive issue, and we have put in place procedures that are mindful of the sensitivities involved. Third-party professionals include healthcare professionals, registered social workers and relevant specialist charities, which can also signpost claimants to further support, so claimants will get the support that they need and be assisted through the light-touch processes in challenging circumstances. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central made a point about rape conviction rates. I reassure her—I think she knows this, but let me put it on the record—that the criteria for the non-consensual conception exemption is much wider than just conviction. The third-party professionals can assist in those circumstances as well.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who I think everybody in this Chamber loves, highlighted many situations—nearly all of them, actually. I agree with him that there are a few exceptions, but clearly, we will have differences of opinion on this point. He and I share a love of ensuring that people can express their faith freely—that is a fundamental part of our democracy—and the policy does not seek to get in the way of that vital democratic right and freedom that we all cherish. The Government have published an impact assessment noting that ethnic minority households may be more likely to be impacted by the policy because they are, on average, more likely to be in receipt of child tax credit or universal credit, or to have larger families. That could also be the case for households of a particular religion, but the DWP has insufficient data to confirm that. I highlight

that the Supreme Court found that the two-child policy was lawful and not in breach of the European convention on human rights.

Points have been made about abortion and fertility rates. The Nuffield Foundation's research consortium on larger families has this month published a report outlining that fertility rates for those claiming, or eligible to claim, benefits have changed very little since the introduction of the policy. That would seem to refute the evidence from the British Pregnancy Advisory Service that was discussed earlier. The policy was never designed to affect fertility rates; it is fundamentally about seeking to provide fairness with those who are unable to access benefits, when it comes to the choices that they have to make.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central also asked the question—

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

David Rutley: I do not think that the hon. Member was here for the whole debate. I will take interventions from others, who have had the courtesy to be here for the whole debate, but I will carry on for now.

On the point about monitoring, we are keeping all our policies under review, but this policy seeks to strike the right balance between supporting those in need and fairness for taxpayers and those who support themselves primarily through work, who do not see their incomes rise when they have more children.

The hon. Members for Arfon (Hywel Williams) and for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) made some points about poverty and whether this policy is impacting it. I am sure they are assiduously following the latest households below average income statistics, which show that the support we put in place around benefits and incentives for people to get into work—creating a vibrant labour market so that people can get into work and progress—means that 1.2 million fewer people were in absolute low income, before housing costs, in 2020-21, compared with 2009-10. That included 200,000 fewer children and 500,000 fewer working-age adults. Furthermore, there are now nearly 1 million fewer workless households and, very importantly, almost 540,000 fewer children living in such households than in 2010.

Ms Buck: Can the Minister confirm that he accepts the point I made in my speech—that the number of families with three or more children that are in absolute poverty has gone up significantly?

David Rutley: Our policy is to seek to ensure that we get more children out of workless households, which we are succeeding in doing, and that there are more employment opportunities for people. We are moving that agenda forward very successfully in the current labour market, and we need to continue to move it forward.

The most sustainable way to lift children out of poverty is by supporting parents to get into, and progress in, work wherever possible. The Government have consistently said that the best way to support people's living standards is through good work, better skills and higher wages. We have provided significant work incentives, which I have already highlighted, through universal credit, but also through our plan for jobs and the

[David Rutley]

kickstart and restart schemes, which demonstrated the Department's commitment to supporting families to get into, or to progress in, work. We have a range of policies that support people and families across the tax and benefits systems, and the household support fund for those who are particularly vulnerable.

I would highlight, one final time, that on 9 July 2021, the Supreme Court handed down the judicial review judgment on the two-child policy. The court found that the policy was lawful and not in breach of the European convention on human rights. The policy to support a maximum of two children strikes a balance between providing support for those who need it and ensuring a sense of fairness to taxpayers.

2.53 pm

Alison Thewliss: I thank all hon. Members who came to today's debate. I am grateful to them for their support and to those who came to speak or make interventions, because this issue has not gone away. It will continue to get worse as more families move into the scope of the two-child limit. I give particular thanks to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), because he has been at my side through all of this debate, right from the very beginning, and I am particularly grateful to him for that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) made the point that at a stroke—by getting rid of this policy—we could lift 250,000 children out of poverty tomorrow. If the Government had the power to lift 250,000 bairns out of poverty, why would they not do it? Why would you deny those children the dignity and fairness of having a warm meal in their tummy and having the heating on at night? Why would you do that? I do not understand.

I will continue to campaign on this policy. I will not let it be forgotten, because there are constituents in Glasgow Central, as there are in every constituency up and down these islands, who are being affected by this, and there are more and more of them every single year. I will be there until this policy is gone. I will keep campaigning on it, because it remains an injustice—it was always an injustice. To value some children more than others cannot be allowed to stand in a moral society. I thank everybody who has come to contribute to this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the two child limit of working tax credits and universal credit.

2.55 pm

Sitting suspended.

Foster Carers

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the Backbench Business Committee and the supporting Members who made it possible to secure this debate. I also thank the Fostering Network, Home for Good and one of my local authorities, South Tyneside, for organising meetings and relevant briefings for me and my team, which were very useful for this debate. I put on record my thanks to those bodies for their work in championing the overlooked and neglected fostering sector. I am sure all Members present will want to join me in welcoming the Fostering Network and foster carers to the Public Gallery. It is great to see them here.

One cannot overestimate the important role fostering plays across child protection and safeguarding. In a climate where, over the last 12 years, local authorities have been forced to adapt their operations through cuts to local expenditure, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, the demand for foster carers has never been greater, with many children needing emergency support. That is why I will focus my opening remarks on why the fostering sector and carers need increased recognition and wraparound support from local authorities and independent fostering agencies.

While the debate is centred on the recruitment and retention of foster carers, we also need to look at the challenges faced by the sector more broadly, and at where we can share experiences of local authorities and constituents to not only platform the sector, but raise its profile and actively encourage people to enter into fostering.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The Welsh Government's initiative Foster Wales has created a network of local authority fostering services across Wales, showing a clear national commitment to the cause. Does the hon. Lady agree that England and Scotland would benefit from a similar national call to action?

Kate Osborne: Yes, I agree, and I will refer to a similar point in my speech.

As I was preparing for this debate and looking at the statistics, two particular facts on recruitment stood out to me. First, the number of initial inquiries to foster is at an all-time high. There were 160,635 initial inquiries from prospective fostering households in the year ending 31 March 2021. In contrast, only 10,145 applications—a mere 6% of initial inquiries—were actually received. Secondly, according to the annual fostering statistics published by Ofsted, the number of foster carers in England has increased by only 4% since 2014, while the number of children in foster care has increased by 11%.

Those statistics show a crisis in recruitment and retention. Members on both sides must ask why those significant shortfalls in the fostering sector are occurring and what we in this place can do to help to alleviate this recruitment and retention crisis. I believe that we need

to champion foster carers, but central to that must be deeds, not just words: we need to make sure that foster carers are fairly paid and respected as workers.

Set out in its 2021 “State of the Nation’s Foster Care” report, the Fostering Network’s findings on pay are damning:

“Over a third of foster carers said that their allowances do not meet the full cost of looking after a child.”

That is certainly something I can give personal testimony of, from my experience as a foster carer before entering this place; it has also been said to me today by some of the foster carers present.

Secondly, the report notes:

“Fourteen local authorities reported that their foster care allowances were below the NMA for at least one age group across England. Of these, two were in London, four were in the South East and ten were in the area of the rest of England.”

While I thank the Children’s Minister for writing to 13 local authorities on the specific issue of the national minimum allowance, that has to be weighted against this Government’s political decision to put the burden of inflation and the cost of living crisis on the backs of ordinary people.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a meaningful speech, including about her own experiences as a foster carer. She may or may not know that I used to be a manager in fostering, and for as long as I can remember there was an issue with the retention of foster carers and with those carers not being valued enough. Does my hon. Friend agree that the severe cuts to local government funding have had an indirect impact on the support that social workers can offer foster carers, which in turn has an impact on their ability to continue fostering and how they can look after, or manage the welfare of, a child?

Kate Osborne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we cannot keep taking money out of local authorities and expect them to still deliver the same level of services. The impact, unfortunately, is felt by the children and young people who are in the fostering system or child services.

The financial pressures and stresses felt by carers, highlighted by the Fostering Network’s research, are only set to get worse. The Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers believes that the Government should urgently make a pay award to foster carers, both within local authorities and independent fostering agencies, to preserve and protect this precious resource for children and young people in need. This would be an important signal to foster carers that the Government really do value their contribution.

Another critical issue that we have to be aware of is the responsibility local authorities and IFAs have in providing vital—often emergency—wraparound support for foster carers and their families. I put on record my thanks to South Tyneside Council, one of my local authorities, for its progressive outlook in prioritising this area. First and foremost, we have to recognise that each child currently being supported through fostering services has different and complex needs, which must be met from the first moment that child comes under the care of their carer. That is why South Tyneside’s model of training carers to degrees, whereby they can be matched with the child best suited to their level of training—a model that is in the best interests of all

parties and, most importantly, those of the child or young person—is highly commendable. In this, it is vital that children are kept as close to the local authority as possible. This approach means that at crisis point there is no delay in support, and any crisis has a better chance of being mitigated, as tailored, traumatic and therapeutic support can be accessed quickly.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech on this important issue. Regarding the role of local authorities and the point about funding, does she agree that the crisis with children’s social workers and the shortage that we have is exacerbating the problems, and will impact on the very commendable operating model she is talking about?

Kate Osborne: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. As has been said, the funding that is being taken out of the system means that, unfortunately, we are not continuing to provide the support that is needed, in terms of both social workers and the many other people who are involved in children’s care.

The system South Tyneside Council has in place means that if a breakdown occurs between the child and foster family, the local authority is accountable, thus upholding the fostering standards to improve outcomes. With such support mechanisms in place, more people will be encouraged to become foster carers.

However, we must recognise that South Tyneside’s model relies on factors for which the responsibility lies truly at the feet of Government Ministers. The cuts to local authorities over the past 12 years, along with the present day record levels of children needing emergency foster care mean that my local authority, like most others, must turn to independent fostering agencies to plug the gap. The money local authorities have to spend from Government grants, council tax and business rates has fallen by 16% since 2010. That means that local authorities have an increasingly limited capacity to respond to significant inflationary pressures.

While I respect the work that members of IFAs do to alleviate the pressure felt by local authorities, those agencies have the ability to add another complex, unnecessary layer between the child and the local authority, meaning that when crisis hits, unnecessary delays, which are detrimental to all involved, are often hard to avoid. In South Tyneside Council, 50% of children are placed into IFAs.

We also need to break down the popular perceptions of fostering, which undermine the diverse and varying shapes that it can take. Fostering should not be compared with adoption, although it often is. We need to break through the perception that fostering is a means, whereas adoption is the end, because one size does not fit all. We also need to recognise that circumstances in the lives of carers can change. The value of a carer fostering one child needs to be recognised as the same as a carer who may foster many children.

Finally, we need to appreciate that, more often than not, foster carers can be thrust into a situation at extreme short notice. Their presence in the safeguarding process can often be to provide emergency care.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. The House is always at its best when Members draw on their personal

[*Tulip Siddiq*]

experience and my hon. Friend's speech shows that she knows what she is talking about. I add my thanks to Fostering Network, who I have worked with a lot in the past and who I have found to be incredibly helpful.

I want to pick up on black, Asian and minority ethnic foster carers and children from BAME communities. BBC analysis shows that two thirds of councils in England have a shortage of BAME foster carers, but 23% of children on the waiting list are from BAME backgrounds. Black boys are left longest on the waiting lists. I wondered whether my hon. Friend might comment, and I hope the Minister will also pick up on that point.

Kate Osborne: That point came up in my meeting with the head of children's services in my local authority. As my hon. Friend says, we are desperately short of BAME foster carers.

Often children arrive into foster care with nothing apart from the clothes they are wearing. The responsibility lies firmly with the fostering family to pick up from there, otherwise the child would have nothing.

What do we need from the Government? I would like the Minister to look at and seriously consider the Mockingbird strategy as adopted by South Tyneside and many others, and to listen to best practice from my and other local authorities. I hope we will hear more on that today from other Members.

The Mockingbird model is based on the idea of an extended family. The strategy focuses on a fostering hub, where satellite carers work in sync to provide specialist and centralised care to children along with real-time support for those satellite carers. Mockingbird means intervention can take place without the need to necessarily remove children completely from their support network, should an emergency occur. Depending on circumstances, the programme can be adjusted to include birth families and adoptive families, and to provide support for independent living, while giving assurance to foster carers and those in care that a secure and close support network is at hand.

I also want the Minister to listen to the recommendations set out by the Fostering Network, which with others is calling for a fully funded national fostering strategy, a national fostering leadership board and a national register of foster carers. In addition, the Government need to carry out a comprehensive review of the minimum levels of fostering allowance, using up-to-date evidence to ensure foster carers are given sufficient payment to cover the full cost of looking after a child.

There is no one quick fix to address the issues relating to the retention of foster carers. The themes of carers feeling unsupported, making a financial loss and not being treated as workers would lead to a high turnover rate and chronic difficulties in recruitment in any workforce. I hope that today's debate acts as an opportunity to address Members' concerns from their constituencies and encourages the Minister to put recommendations in place.

3.16 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in Westminster Hall once again, Mr Robertson. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing

this important debate and sharing her personal experience. As Members from across the House have said, it is truly inspiring.

My partner and I hope one day, when our children are slightly older, to offer a home and an opportunity to young people. For eight and a half years before entering this place, I worked as a head of year, dealing with behavioural and pastoral issues in the secondary education sector, and I had direct contact with some of the fantastic foster carers of the children I was proud to look after. It was an enlightening and warming story. Looking at how to spend money from the budget to invest in those young people and give them exciting opportunities outside the school gates, as well as pushing their learning and educational outcomes, was something that I thoroughly enjoyed.

I want to focus on the great work that is being done in the constituency I am proud to serve, Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, and across the wider city of Stoke-on-Trent. Since 2019, Stoke-on-Trent City Council has made it very clear that children and young people need to be its No. 1 priority. A complete overhaul is needed, as the challenge in 2019 was, quite frankly, immense. Children's services in Stoke-on-Trent have never been rated good or outstanding. An Ofsted inspection in early 2019 showed that the situation was dire—that is the only word I can use to describe the quality of services available to more than 1,000 of the most vulnerable young children in our city, who required us to look after them. Children's services received the worst possible rating of inadequate from Ofsted, and inspectors uncovered multiple failings, which left youngsters at risk of harm.

Since May 2019, Councillor Dave Evans, who was appointed to the children and young people portfolio, has been working with Councillor Abi Brown, the leader of Stoke-on-Trent City Council, and has made big strides to improve fostering services across the Potteries. Aably assisted by team manager Kate Bailey and recruitment officer Marie Plant, Councillor Evans and his team have radically changed the council's approach. The council has been pushing hard to get as many organisations signed up to the fostering friendly scheme, the Fostering Network's programme to encourage employers to support fostering and, in particular, foster carers. Stoke City Football Club, Bet365, Staffordshire police, Stoke-on-Trent City Council and health groups are all now signed up to the scheme. That effort is part of the team's new approach to running family services.

To be recognised as a fostering friendly employer, the council has had to demonstrate support for employees, make the workplace friendlier for foster carers to benefit the children in their care, and also make it easier for people to consider fostering. In 2020, the council launched a new fostering friendly policy for all its employees, setting out benefits for any staff member who decides to come forward to become a foster carer. They include flexible working arrangements and paid time off for those going through the foster care approval process. Councillor Evans and his team are urging organisations and businesses across Stoke-on-Trent to become fostering friendly, as part of the push to become recognised as the first fostering friendly city in the United Kingdom.

Part of the new approach that Stoke-on-Trent City Council is taking is making fostering more visible and spreading the word. Social workers now go to events across the city such as Stoke-on-Trent Pride and the

Better World Festival, and they hold coffee shop drop-in sessions. I am pleased to say that the new approach that the council has taken is paying off. Recruitment of foster carers is up, with 33 recruited last year compared to 30 the year before, and the council is now the fifth biggest recruiter of social workers in the country.

As well as getting more organisations signed up to the fostering friendly scheme and boosting recruitment, Councillor Evans and the team have worked to improve retention of foster carers, which is important as there are more than 1,000 cared-for children in the city of Stoke-on-Trent. Fosterers have been given a stronger voice, with increased representation on the corporate parenting panel to give them a say on key decisions across children's services in the city. All of this progress has been reflected in Ofsted's latest monitoring report.

Even the Stoke *Sentinel* has had to be positive about the turnaround. As Councillor Evans has said, the clearest sign of improvement is that Ofsted has found that children in Stoke-on-Trent are now safe—Ofsted had previously found that they were not. Of course, there is still a long way to go. As I said earlier, the council has never been ranked as good or outstanding for children's services, but that is the goal, and I am 100% confident that thanks to the new approach adopted by Councillor Evans and his team, when Ofsted carries out its next full inspection this autumn, that goal will be achieved.

Before I close I want to give the fostering team a shout-out for running the Potters 'Arf marathon last year, and again this year. This is something I know my hon. Friend the Minister will be proud to hear. Having seen and walked the hills of Stoke-on-Trent, I will not be anywhere near that race, apart from standing on the sidelines and cheering with a cheesy oatcake in my hand. I warmly congratulate all those taking part to raise awareness and money for good causes, and I look forward to cheering the team on.

3.21 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for securing this enormously important debate, which is a personal debate for me. My contribution will not be about policy. I have a responsibility and a privilege to give a fraternal address from Scotland.

The route into care in Scotland is very different, but the needs and complexities of the children are similar, and they always must come first. I will talk a little bit about my route into foster care as a carer. I will not talk about our family because I am fiercely protective of my children.

My partner and I have been together for nearly 30 years. We lived in London for many years and we spoke often about our options to have a family. We had three protracted and ultimately failed surrogacy attempts, but it was always clear to me that the genetics of the child were not important. What was important was the provision of a loving home and providing a role model or someone who would believe in the child. I do not know whether there is evidence for this principle, but I believe it. Just one person believing in a young person who has experienced trauma or difficulty in their early years can lift them out of that dreadful dark hole and give them a bright future.

I have been involved, in one form or another, in the care of children and young people since being a volunteer with the then Scottish Society for the Mentally Handicapped when I was at school. I have been a nurse for most of my career, specialising in adolescent cancer. When we returned to Scotland, as a gay couple we discovered that we could foster and adopt, so we threw ourselves into that process and ultimately chose to foster. There are two principal reasons why we made that choice: the support that would be available to us directly through Barnardo's, which is now a partner organisation, and the support that would be available, because no one can know what will happen with a placement, to the young people that came to us. I would be lying, which is not in vogue at the moment, if I did not say it was an enormous challenge. The first two years really stretched us. I am not talking from personal experience with our kids, but children who have been through multiple placements, suffered abuse and neglect, lived in deprivation and been traumatised come with complex needs. Foster carers have to surrender themselves to that, because if they expect a child to come into their home and surrender themselves to the carers, but they are not prepared to make that commitment themselves, then ultimately the placement could fail.

There is lots of support to help foster carers through that, and we have been incredibly fortunate with the team around the child, the relationship with our social workers and the tremendous gift that having a family has been. The rewards are immeasurable. We participate in three principal areas of care: short-term care, respite care and ultimately long-term permanent care. I could not have had a better experience. It has been the most humbling and enriching experience of my life, without any question or equivocation.

Young people who come into care arrive with difficult challenges to face, whether developmental delay or academic deficits. It is grounded in evidence that young people who are care-experienced can struggle academically, but what will surprise many people who make assumptions is that in reality if people invest their time, energy and commitment in that young person, they can turn that right around. Achieving that depends on more people coming forward, because without good-quality foster carers, there is no placement. The main focus of my comments is to support that drive from the Fostering Network.

I just want to tell a little story. Co-incidentally, yesterday morning on Radio 4 there was a piece featuring Sinéad Browne, a care-experienced person who studied law and threw herself into her education to find solace from her experience. She has formed a fantastic organisation called Compliments of The House. I can only precis what a wonderful story it is, and I thoroughly recommend anybody who is interested to catch up on that piece by listening to it on the BBC Sounds app.

To go back to what I said at the beginning of my speech, it takes only one person to believe in a young person in order to make a difference, but the biggest and most important challenge is getting that young person to believe in themselves, that they matter and that their future matters. For me, that is the essence of what it has meant to be that person. It is not about providing a physical space. It is about providing a home where there is parenting, love, safety and care. The policy parts around that are obvious—funding, training, recruitment and stability—but the journey can be exceptional, and I just want to share that with everyone. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

3.28 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I commend the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) who introduced the debate and who set the scene for us with her knowledge, interests and life story. I thank the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) for his personal story. It was good to hear those personal stories from the hon. Lady and the hon. Gentleman because they help us all to enjoy, endorse and support the theme under discussion. I am not leaving out the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), by the way. He brought his own experiences as a teacher, which I thank him for.

The covid-19 pandemic has had many side effects. I will give the Northern Ireland perspective; I know that is not the responsibility of the Minister, but it adds to the debate and it complements what has been said and what will be said. Increasing numbers of children and young people in Northern Ireland are urgently in need of a loving and safe home. For many families on the brink, covid was the final straw, and familial relationships bore the strain of it all—I noticed that over the past couple of years, and others probably did too. I am aware that there are many foster parents in Ards and in my constituency of Strangford who already give a home to children and young people. I know from discussions with them that some of those young people come from very difficult homes, and just being part of a family unit is very important to them. They receive the warmth that the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath referred to—the love that is so vital for them—in abundance in their foster homes.

I have a very good friend, whose name I am not going to mention. He and his wife have three of their own children and foster five or six. That is a massive family, by the way; whenever they go on holiday, it takes a minibus to take them away, and whenever they jump on the plane, they take up a large section of that plane. The point I am making is that that couple in Portavogie in my constituency give love, affection, assurance and confidence to vulnerable young children who are quite challenging. They have told me some stories; I am not going to repeat them, because they are very personal, but there are people who have the capacity, the understanding, and perhaps the patience that is needed to make that happen.

The number of foster carers is low at the moment, and the need for them is great. I welcome the news that Robin Swann, the Northern Ireland Minister responsible, is prepared to recognise that and to provide greater support. More than 3,000 children and young people are currently living with foster carers or supported lodging hosts in Northern Ireland, and the funding package will provide an additional £25 a week for each child or young person who is being looked after in those settings during the term of the Assembly. Obviously, that will be reviewed again whenever the Assembly is up and running—in May, all being well.

Northern Ireland is also due to carry out a review of children's services, ostensibly to further highlight the challenges in foster care and to work collaboratively to achieve change for the benefit of all cared-for children. We have a policy and strategy, which I am sure is very similar to what the Minister will speak about shortly; it may even be better. I know that the Minister has a real interest in this matter and that his response will be very helpful.

We have difficulties with care homes, especially in my constituency at present. Local shops are being tormented by children shoplifting alcohol and taunting the shopkeepers and staff on the way out, saying that they cannot touch them. The workers in the care homes feel that their hands are tied, as they cannot restrain those children unless they are in danger, and the Police Service of Northern Ireland—our police force—does not have the manpower to station bouncers or have a full-time presence at local shops. We have derelict buildings that are known to be used by kids for drinking and doing drugs, with their care workers standing outside and begging them to come back.

Let me be very clear and straight: I have ultimate compassion for those children, because they are sometimes from very difficult homes, and the difficulties in their wee lives have brought them to this point. I cannot, in all conscience, place the blame entirely at their feet; they have been let down by many people and bodies, of which we are one—by “we”, I mean that the Government and our regional Administrations have let them down. We all understand the benefits of foster care compared with children's homes. Underfunding and a lack of support for foster carers means that many people are simply unwilling to take on that mammoth task. In every case, the losers are these lost children who want to be independent and make their own choices but simply are not old enough to understand the consequences of their independence.

We ask for all the things that the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath referred to—for funding, for training, and for foster caring to be built up and for more foster carers to be encouraged to come forward, because we need them, both in Northern Ireland and here on the UK mainland. When I was a young fella—that was not yesterday, Mr Robertson—my mum used to say to me, “You need three things. You need a lot of potatoes”—usually, they were Comber potatoes—“you need water, and you need a loving, firm hand.” We have provided for these kids' physical needs, but the loving, firm hand that is as vital here as in any other area is missing, and they are desperately unhappy, lashing out and hurting their community. How do we help them? We help them by giving them opportunities for foster care. We help them by making sure that the funding, the opportunities, and the love and affection that the hon. Members for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath and for Jarrow have referred to—both of them from their experiential knowledge—are there.

I believe that a strong foster care system with early intervention is the way forward, but that can only come if we encourage kinship care with support. I have heard of so many grannies who do not get a break and cannot cope. We need options available to allow for respite in the short term to keep a good placement in the long term. I ask the Minister: can we get that short-term respite to keep a good placement in the long term? I think that is something that we can do UK-wide. We are trying to do it in Northern Ireland; the Minister will probably come back and say that he is doing it here. I am sure that will encourage us. A review of foster care support is also urgently needed.

For the sake of our most vulnerable children, we have to do something differently; we have to look at this differently, and we have to understand what it is that children want and what we need to give them. We need to give them the love, the affection and the future that

the hon. Members for Jarrow and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath did. That is what we are trying to do—to get a different outcome, or to add to the outcome that we have at the moment.

3.35 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Mr Robertson, as Chair, you have a very privileged position, because you hear in Westminster Hall debates some truly remarkable stories. We have heard some today. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for the work that she has done on this issue and for securing the debate, but that is trite—there is no merit in securing a debate. The merit lies in what she said and in the experience that she brought to it. Similarly, I was hugely moved by the words of the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey). That is what is remarkable: sometimes, we learn so much more about our colleagues in this Chamber than we ever expected to. We also heard from the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), who spoke of his own experience in secondary school.

We have heard today about the power of love and how it can transform lives. It can change a child's life and set it on a new path. I pay tribute to all those from the Fostering Network who are here in the Public Gallery for the work that they do. I salute them. That service often is not in the vanguard of the public's imagination, but clearly, what we have heard today means that it should be. It is extraordinary work and it takes extraordinary strength, resilience and compassion to do it. That is what this debate has brought out.

Let me turn to the debate itself and look at the annual fostering statistics. Ofsted has told us that the number of children in care is at its highest ever level in England. I know what the Minister will say. He will no doubt tell us that the number of carers is also at an all-time high, but he knows that the number of children in need of care is at an all-time high. The question that he must answer is not a technical one of provision and so on; it is this: why are so many children in need of fostering care? What is breaking down in our society that means that we have an all-time high and we need even more places than we have? What stress are families experiencing and what pain—social and economic—are they going through that means we need so many more fostering places because families cannot cope on their own?

I contacted my own local authority and asked for its experience. It told me about the ageing profile of the foster care workforce. In Brent, we are finding it difficult to recruit newer and younger foster carers. Of course, in a city context, that is a function of the demand for housing. If someone wants to be a foster carer, they need a room for the child. The cost of living pressures in London, where both adults in a household need to work simply to maintain a property, are reducing the availability of people who would otherwise desperately wish to become foster parents, as we have heard. For our more vulnerable and needy children in care, having a carer at home for most of the time makes a huge difference to the stability of the placement. That is very difficult if both potential parents have to go out to work simply to maintain their rent or mortgage commitments. In Brent, we are actually turning away people who want to foster and have good skills because they simply do not have the physical space in their homes to accommodate a child.

The Competition and Markets Authority carried out a study of children in social care. I have to say that I found it difficult to read about the final report of its study of the “children's social care market”. “Market” is not a word I want to use about children or the care of children—“service”, yes, but not “market”. However, on recruitment, the CMA said:

“The difficulty...is greatest for carers needed to look after children with more challenging needs... The degree of challenge also varies geographically.”

The study considered not only areas such as my own in London, but rural areas and the challenges faced by parents there. It is clear that not everyone who wants to be a foster carer has the resources—whether that is a spare room, the spare time or the financial stability—to be able to do so.

The Social Market Foundation has said that, in the next five years, we need 63,000 new families to make their homes available to children, yet it predicts that at current rates there will be 40,000—23,000 short of what is required. I hope that the Minister will say how the Government are preparing to meet the problems of recruitment and retention. How is he ensuring that his Department will assist local authorities with the pressures that they face, and how will it assist potential foster families with the pressures that they face in taking on that responsibility?

I hope that the Minister will also turn his attention and that of his Department to why this is happening—why there is an ever-increasing need. There has been, I think, an 11% increase over the past seven years in the number of children needing foster care. We are seeing an economic crisis and a cost of living crisis, and that will put increasing pressure on families. Over the next 18 months, I think the projected need for 63,000 families will be blown out of the water, because so many families will be in crisis and will not be able to cope, and the result will be increasing pressure on fostering services.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): My hon. Friend asks why the numbers coming into care are so great. For four years running, Barnardo's and the other children's charities came together and argued the case for additional resources for local authorities for early intervention to support families. They say that the withdrawal of that intervention has resulted in record numbers of children coming into care.

I have another point to make. Like me, my hon. Friend is a London MP. The CMA report states that 20% of children in foster care—the percentage is higher for residential care—are in placements more than 20 miles away from where they live. That is exacerbated in London by the housing crisis, with many local authorities in London having to go as far as Kent and elsewhere to find foster placements. That problem is identified as part of the housing crisis in which local people are prevented from having a spare room available to assist in fostering.

Barry Gardiner: I am so glad that my right hon. Friend makes that point. I wrote on a piece of paper comments about geographic dislocation, but I have been unable to find it. It is important because this debate is about connectivity with the child's environment—with his or her roots—and making sure that there is stability and continuity, which are undermined in exactly the way he describes.

[Barry Gardiner]

The funding of local authorities is absolutely central to this question. My local authority has lost £180 million in Government support over the past 10 years. That is the scale of the crisis local authorities are facing. I am not saying this to make a plea for my local authority; I am saying it because we have an increasing crisis in caring for our children. The Government have to have a co-ordinated response that covers more than recruitment and retention, because that is just patching up the problem afterward; they must have a proper response to why so many children and so many families need this support.

3.46 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Robertson.

A wide range of issues to do with children's services have been raised in the debate, but for me an important starting point is to recognise that the UK care system is among the highest performing in the world. In all the debate that goes on, especially when a distressing case hits the headlines, it is often easy to forget that our foster carers, our adoptive parents and our children's social workers are all part of something that research demonstrates is among the safest care systems in which to grow up anywhere in the developed world.

We know that the drivers of children coming into that care system are many and complex, with neglect continuing to be the No. 1 driver, but as we have seen over the years, the crises of confidence that follow cases like that of Victoria Climbié and Baby Peter Connelly and the consequent toughening of Ofsted criteria result in a consistent pattern of local authorities becoming more risk averse and taking more children than before into the care system; and in due course, the Government begin to look at whether those criteria are correct. As we consider the system as a whole, we must recognise that foster carers are a crucial part of it, and that they, child protection investigations and organisations such as the police and schools, where my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) spent many years, are all part a system through which the state has eyes on children and seeks to keep them safe.

In my contribution, I will draw on my experience with the Local Government Association and with a variety of local authorities, both as a lead member and as one who has done a good deal of work in this space over the years. It is clear that recruitment and retention of foster carers throw up different sets of issues that the Government need to consider. I have met many, many foster carers over the years. I have met people who have been fostering for 30 or 40 years and who have fostered dozens of children. Some talk of specialising in children who are violent and who have been through difficult times, or children who may be sexual abusers of other children and require very intensive and specialist support.

It is clear to me that they are owed a huge amount of respect by our society for the work that they do. I acknowledge that foster carers are paid for that work, but they provide support not just by fostering a child but, in some cases, by fostering a parent as well, so that a parent who is struggling can learn from a foster

family how to nurture and support a child, preventing that child going elsewhere in the care system or even into adoption. The job should rightly command a huge amount of respect.

Pretty much every local authority that I have come across tends to have regular opportunities to celebrate the contribution that foster carers make and to thank them for that work, and it is important that we do so here at a national level. There is a national leadership board for adoption, but we have not seen the same focus on fostering by central Government over many decades, despite the fact that a much greater population of our children are in foster care.

From conversations with foster carers, it is clear that their experiences of being foster carers vary enormously. Some are engaged by local authorities; some are engaged by agencies; and some will change between those two types of engagement during their time as foster carers. A number of Members have highlighted reasonable concerns about the role that agencies have played over the years.

Most local authorities use independent fostering agencies to a significant degree, and many agencies provide a high-quality service to vulnerable children in the system, but it is striking that, as a recent report highlighted, the 10 largest children's services providers have made £300 million in profits from that market in the last year. As a Tory who likes taxpayer's money, I am concerned that taxpayers are paying £300 million in profits for something that is part of the care market.

I thank BBC journalist Sanchia Berg for the work that she has done over the years to bring to wider attention the role that private equity has played both in foster care specifically and in the children's care market generally. We need to ensure that, as we develop the quality, we are able to have an effective handle on how good that market is at providing support for children. It is important not to criticise independent fostering agencies, or IFAs, as simply profit-seeking providers. We need to ensure that a limited resource is being spent as effectively as possible, with a real eye on quality of experience for the children who are fostered.

When it comes to recruitment, foster carers have told me many times that the key thing for them has been word of mouth. Although most local authorities have stands in shopping centres, put out leaflets and put things on their websites, hearing what the system is like from somebody who has been through it is crucial. The more central Government promote the stories of foster carers at a national level—so that other people can hear what an attractive opportunity it can be—the better. Those who go to local authorities as potential adopters but are perhaps not ready to take that step are often people who might consider fostering and perhaps go on to do it for a long time.

Fostering is one of those unusual roles. I am aware that there has been legal action in Scotland about whether foster carers should have the status of employees. They are paid to do it, but at the same time, it is flexible and, depending on the circumstances of the child being fostered, some foster carers are able to hold down a full-time job. For others, fostering the child is absolutely a full-time job because of the child's complex needs. It is crucial to recognise that complexity and what it means to a family and a household to become foster carers, without putting people off.

On retention, I pay particular tribute to my soon-to-be-former Hillingdon Council colleague Councillor Alan Deville, who has fostered many children, some of whom are from very difficult backgrounds. He also been active in creating a foster carers' association; it is independent of the local authority, but it is there to support foster carers in that local authority area by organising events for the children and opportunities for foster parents and families to get together and share their experiences, and by providing really effective feedback to the local authority and IFAs about the things that make a real difference.

Often, those things were quite simple things. They were about making the "job" part of being a foster carer more straightforward, including knowing that there was someone there who could help them if they had an emergency situation with a fostered child in their household, 24 hours a day and seven days a week. It was also about a foster carer knowing very quickly how they could get consent if a child brought home a form from school to go on a school trip, or if the child needed a haircut or some expenditure over and above the costs that would normally be incurred, or how to get a bank account set up, so that the child's savings element contained within the fostering allowance could be secured for their future. It was about making sure that those basics were taken care of really well. We hear stories, both from foster carers who have been engaged by local authorities and from IFAs, about how that aspect of fostering could be improved to make the role so much more straightforward.

In conclusion, I have several asks of the Minister and of Government. As we know, the care review is looking at our care system and will come forward with some recommendations. However, the comments that a number of other Members have made certainly resonate with the experience I had during my time in local government and it seems to me that it would be helpful for us to have a more strategic approach to the way we support foster carers, rather in the way that we support those who adopt.

The issues include things such as access to appropriate housing. Local authorities are quite tightly controlled under local government finance rules in terms of what can be done for people who want social housing and assessing their level of need versus the cost of supporting children. We have to make sure that that resource can be deployed as flexibly as possible, so that foster carers who need an extra room, for example, are able to have larger accommodation within the local authority area, thereby removing the need for a high-cost care placement.

Council tax is another example of where the need for flexibility comes to mind. Again, complexities may arise where a local authority offers to pay the council tax for a foster carer; the foster carer may be resident in another local authority area. So how does it pay out?

Of course we must also recognise that sometimes young people are placed 20 miles or more from home, which I appreciate is an issue that the Department keeps a very close eye on. That situation may well arise because the child is being taken away from risks proximate to their local area—from their family, from a drug dealer or from somebody else who is targeting them. So there may be good reasons for such a move.

I hope that a strategic approach will come from the care review. If it does, it will make a transformational difference in the next few years to the quality of the experience that our foster carers have.

3.57 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson.

I start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for securing this vital debate on the foster care system. I reiterate much of what she said. Although Members in the main Chamber have rightly been debating the very serious issue of whether the Prime Minister is fit for office, it is equally important that other serious issues of the day are not forgotten, and there are few matters more important than the impending foster care crisis.

As a councillor, I served on Gateshead Council's adoption panel, which is closely linked to the foster care panel, so I have some knowledge of the foster care system. First of all, I must say that I have an enormous amount of respect for foster carers and, having been a carer myself, of a daughter with severe disabilities, I particularly thank those foster carers who look after and care for children with additional needs.

Like all carers, foster carers fulfil a role on behalf of the state, offering children a safe home, and often providing them with a nurturing environment and a surrogate family. At times it can be challenging, but when it is supported properly, it is a role that is deeply rewarding, giving foster carers the knowledge that they have made a real difference in the lives of the children they welcome into their home.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for securing this debate today. I also thank and pay tribute to all the wonderful foster families in my constituency of Liverpool, West Derby, and indeed beyond.

Does my hon. Friend agree that fostering can bring much fulfilment to the lives of all involved? I say that with total confidence after speaking to my good friend Kevin, who has become a foster carer, with his family. He said that it was indeed positively life-changing.

Mary Kelly Foy: I could not agree more, and I am sure my hon. Friend will join me in thanking Kevin and the foster carers here today, and indeed the Members here who have been foster carers themselves, as well as foster carers up and down the country. Given the importance of foster carers and the difference they make to society, the data on the number of foster carers makes for difficult reading and lays bare the scale of the impending crisis. Simply put, there are not enough foster carers to meet the demand.

There are two main reasons behind the shortage. The first is the rising number of children entering care. We have touched on some of the reasons for that today. A 2021 report by the Social Market Foundation found that, based on an average of 2.9% year-on-year growth in the number of children requiring foster care over the last five years, the number of children in need of care could rise by 33% by 2030. Combined with that is the equally pressing issue of the number of foster carers leaving the system, with 30% of deregistrations taking place within the first two years of approval for foster care. Those issues are as significant in County Durham as they are in local authorities across England, and we now face a huge deficit in foster carers.

[Mary Kelly Foy]

Research by the Social Market Foundation suggests that more than 63,000 new foster carers need to be recruited in England by 2026 to meet the demand of the rising numbers of children entering care and to replace the foster carers leaving the system. Estimates suggest that fewer than 40,000 new foster families will be recruited in that time, leaving a recruitment deficit of around 25,000 foster care families. I truly worry that we are sleepwalking towards a foster care crisis.

With those issues in mind, it is clear to me that much more needs to be done to improve the recruitment of new foster carers as well as retain existing ones. Although there is much that can realistically be done, I want to state my support for two measures in particular. On the issue of recruitment, it is worth noting that there is not necessarily a lack of interest. In 2021, 160,000 individuals inquired about fostering, yet only around 2,200 were approved as foster carers. It is important that we recognise that not everyone who withdraws from the fostering process does so because they are disqualified. Many do so because personal circumstances make them temporarily unsuited to the role, yet they remain open to foster caring. We cannot allow those people to believe that they are unwanted by the system. We should make it clear to them that the door is not closed to them. It would therefore be useful if the Government could work to develop mechanisms for keeping in touch, with the permission of those involved, with those who inquire about becoming foster carers.

On the issue of retention, we should all be concerned by the fact that a third of former foster carers aged 18 to 54 cited a lack of training and support as the reason they stopped fostering. At the minute, the quality of the training provided to foster carers lacks consistency, and often fails to prepare people for the specific challenges of the children who will be placed in their care. It is therefore important that the existing training process is improved, both during the assessment period and throughout people's time as foster carers. The training and support must be tailored to the needs of the children in their care so that foster carers feel valued and supported by the system and not forgotten about.

To finish, I want to reiterate my concern that the Government are sleepwalking into a crisis in foster care. People get into foster care for many reasons, but chief among them is a desire to provide a safe and nurturing environment for vulnerable children. Yet instead of that desire being nurtured by the authorities, foster carers are too often met with a lack of support and are weighed down by the challenges of the role. If we do not treat this problem with the severity it deserves and take steps to tackle the issues now, it is the most vulnerable children in society who will suffer the most.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speeches. I would like to leave a couple of minutes at the end for the mover of the motion to sum up.

4.4 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for securing this important and timely debate, and for speaking powerfully about her

experience. This debate is a welcome opportunity to pay tribute to foster carers across the country for all they do to provide safety, stability, kindness, love and care to looked-after children.

Foster carers are the bedrock of the care system and provide more than 70% of care placements. Fostering is challenging and demanding, but it is also deeply rewarding and can quite literally change the course of a child's life. Foster carers are both hugely generous and highly skilled, and fostering relationships can last a lifetime—well beyond the duration of a placement, with all the benefits that a stable, long-term relationship of trust can provide.

I am grateful to the Fostering Network for all it does to support foster carers, and for bringing a group of experienced foster carers to Parliament today. It was a great pleasure to meet them earlier, and very moving to hear about their experiences. I thank them for all they do.

We have heard today about some of the benefits and rewards of fostering, but also about the challenges. This has been an excellent debate, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part. I do not have time to mention everybody's contribution, but the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) spoke movingly about his experience as a foster carer. I thank him for mentioning Sinéad Browne, my constituent, whose organisation, Compliments of the House, is also based in my constituency. She is an absolutely remarkable and inspirational young woman.

There are some very significant challenges with the recruitment and retention of foster carers. The Fostering Network estimates that fostering services need to recruit at least a further 8,100 foster families in England in the next 12 months alone. Nine in 10 fostering services report a shortage of foster carers to meet the needs of children in the local population, with particularly acute shortages for teenagers, large sibling groups, children with disabilities and parent and child placements. More than a third of foster carers said that their allowances did not meet the full cost of looking after a child, and only 53% described the support they received from their fostering service as excellent or good.

Although the interest in fostering has been growing in recent years, the current recruitment process for foster carers has an astonishingly low success rate and the number of applications has been decreasing. In the year ending 31 March 2021, there were 160,635 enquiries from prospective fostering families, but only 10,145 foster carer applications were received. Thirty-two per cent. of those applications were approved, so just 2% of expressions of interest resulted in an approved foster family. The Education Committee has highlighted a lack of diversity among foster carers and the urgent need to recruit new foster carers from a more diverse range of backgrounds to meet the needs of looked-after children.

Those challenges must be considered in the context of a wider children's social care system that, after 12 years of Conservative government, is in a state of crisis. Almost 50% of children's services departments are rated by Ofsted as inadequate or requiring improvement. That is a national, not just a local, issue and it requires the Government to show leadership to sort it out.

The Competition and Markets Authority has revealed the scale of the scandal of profiteering among some providers of residential placements for children, with

the 10 biggest providers of children's homes and private fostering placements making profits totalling £300 million. Across the country, social workers are raising concerns about workload and burnout, and councils are struggling to fill vacancies.

All those issues have an impact on the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Poor-performing and under-resourced children's services departments will struggle to provide the level or continuity of social work support that foster families need. Millions of pounds of public money is being siphoned off in profit by private organisations and is not being spent on the wellbeing of vulnerable children.

Foster carers are clear about the things that make a difference. It is absolutely essential, and indeed acknowledged by the Government, that all the costs to foster carers of providing a placement should be covered in full. With that in mind, I ask the Minister how he calculated the new fostering allowance rates, which took effect at the beginning of this month. The allowance for looking after a two-year-old has gone up by £1 a week in London and not at all in the rest of England. The allowance for looking after a child aged 11 to 15 has gone up by just £5 a week. There is a cost of living crisis bearing down on families across the country, with food, fuel and energy costs all increasing rapidly, and inflation set to reach 9%. Can the Minister explain how he thinks such a paltry increase will help with the recruitment and retention of foster carers?

In addition to financial support, foster carers need to be able to access support in many other ways. Foster carers have told me that the continuity of relationships with social workers is vital, both for them and the children in their care. However, all too often they face a constant churn of new social workers, making it really hard to build relationships and trust and for practical support to be provided when needed.

Peer support is also vital. I would like to pay tribute to the Mockingbird constellation model developed by the Fostering Network, which builds networks of foster families in a local area who provide support for one another, replicating the benefits of a large, extended family for children and foster carers alike. Mental health support is also vital. Looked-after children have often suffered significant trauma and need to access therapeutic support. However, across the country, children are waiting months and even years for children and adolescent mental health services. The Government must fix CAMHS so that foster families can access mental health support as soon as their child needs it.

It is no exaggeration to say that we could not do without foster carers. They are absolutely critical to the role of the state as a corporate parent and to the tens of thousands of children for whom they provide a loving home. Foster carers urgently need more recognition for their vital role. Most importantly, the Government must urgently fix the crisis in children's social care, so that foster care takes place within a system that can readily deliver the wider network of support that children and foster carers should be able to rely on.

4.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Will Quince): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. First, let me congratulate the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing

a debate on this very important subject. I thank her for the constructive and collegiate way in which she presented the debate and for sharing her own personal experience—one I may call on in the future, if she will permit me.

Fosterers play a tremendously important role in the lives of so many looked-after children up and down our country. The hon. Member for Jarrow made a point about championing foster carers. We all have a responsibility to do that. Across the country, too few people know what foster caring actually involves. We all have a part to play in celebrating them and ensuring that those throughout our country understand the important role that they play.

It is the dedication and compassion of foster carers that ensures those children who are unable to live with their birth parents for a variety of reasons can find permanent and loving homes that will support them to reach their potential. I use the word "loving" intentionally. Only a handful of weeks ago I was in Cumbria, where I met with a foster carer who had provided a loving home for six or seven babies. She had pictures of every one on the wall. She keeps in contact with as many as want to. There was no question that in that household there was a huge amount of love for every single child she had fostered.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) for his incredibly powerful contribution—I apologise if I mispronounced his constituency. His message was clear: it is often about love. In too many cases, these children have not experienced that prior to the fostering placements.

I very much recognise the skill, patience and resilience that fostering requires. I pay tribute to all those who take on this hugely vital role. I am also clear that, in order to carry out that role, foster carers must be supported, valued and respected. The Government's ambition is to have enough foster carers from a broad range of backgrounds and with the right potential to enable children to be placed with a carer who can meet their needs. It is vital that as many people as possible from every walk of life are encouraged to think about fostering. We must ensure that existing, experienced foster carers are valued and supported to continue providing the care that we know can make such a difference to the lives of some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children up and down our country.

There have been so many brilliant contributions today. I will try to answer as many of the points as possible. The hon. Member for Jarrow made a very powerful opening contribution. I very much welcome a cross-party approach on this issue, where we are talking about some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in our country. I welcome all voices to this debate on how we can improve the system, not just for foster carers but also for the children in their care.

The hon. Lady made three asks of me. The first was about the Mockingbird strategy, which she rightly references—it is a hugely important peer-to-peer support programme. It is now in 36 local authorities and in development in a further 26, but of course I want to go further and faster on that, and I will touch on that point later.

The second point is the Fostering Network recommendation. I met the Fostering Network a little bit early on and I committed to meet its representatives again and hold a roundtable. I would be very happy for

[Will Quince]

hon. Members who clearly have an interest in this area to join it, if the Fostering Network would be happy with that.

The third ask is on funding and allowances. I will look very closely at the recommendations of the independent review of children's social care that is being led by Josh MacAlister and will report in the coming months.

I will turn briefly to the contribution by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis). I visited his constituency recently, and we discussed this and other issues. Just in passing, I will, given that he is often one to issue challenges to others, challenge him back. If he does choose to enter the Potters half-marathon next year for the Fostering Network, I will join him in doing so. He has a year to prepare for that.

My ambition is for all children to experience safe, stable, loving and happy homes, so I want to help more people to understand fostering and to encourage more people from all backgrounds and communities to come forward to foster. At the heart of that is improving the number and diversity of foster carers. That will help to provide those strong, long-lasting placements that meet the needs of each and every individual child.

We have heard the Scottish perspective and the Northern Irish perspective. I will, if the House permits, focus on the English perspective, because we do have the independent review of children's social care being led by Josh MacAlister; I meet Josh regularly. It recognises the need for change—the points that hon. Members across the Chamber have made today. I want us to be more ambitious. We have to encourage more people to step up to be foster carers—people who have not previously considered doing so. This is a once-in-a-generation review. It will be published in late spring. I know that Josh MacAlister has met and spoken with a number of people who have huge experience, both as foster carers and as care-experienced people, and I very much look forward to the recommendations. This is a very timely debate in that respect.

The role of foster carers is a unique one, as the hon. Member for Jarrow pointed out. We have to change the perception of foster carers that is out there. Foster care can be an emergency placement. It can be short; it can be long; it can be pretty much for the whole life of a child and young person. It can be for babies, teenagers or sibling groups. Every single instance of foster care is unique and different. Foster care offers children the opportunity to be part of a family when they cannot be with their birth parents for a multitude of reasons. Foster carers are not employees or workers. It is very much a loving family home that they provide—that support and nurturing in an environment that is as close as possible to a child's own family.

In that respect, foster carers should be respected as critical members of the team and the support network for a child. They often know what is best for that child. Too often—not just in children's social care, but more broadly—we do not adequately listen to the voices of children and young people. I say this as a parent myself, not that the children would always agree with me, but quite often I do know best, because I spend the most time with them and I spend that time listening to them. In that respect, we have to listen to the voices of foster carers and ensure that they are a very important part of the child's life and that, when it comes to case reviews

and meetings with social workers and others, their voice is heard loudly around that table. They are the experts and we should ensure that they are valued and supported.

The hon. Members for Jarrow and for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) touched on the shortage of foster carers. Although data nationally shows that we have enough foster families to look after the children who need a home now, it does not give the full picture, as has rightly been pointed out. We have to ensure that there is the right foster place at the right time and in the right area, where it is actually needed. We do not want people to be travelling many miles away from their school, their wider family and their support networks.

There are other challenges, as has rightly been pointed out. The situation is difficult for some groups and cohorts of children, be they teenagers, sibling groups, children with special educational needs and disabilities, children with more complex needs, or, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who is no longer in her place, children from BAME communities. We therefore have to ensure a diversity of backgrounds. We also know that more children are entering the care system later, as teenagers, and those can be more challenging placements to find. I want local authorities and fostering services up and down our country to have a choice—to have a number of potential foster families—so that they can get the right placement for the right child that will best suit their needs.

The hon. Members for Jarrow and for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) rightly pointed to recruitment and retention. It is important to recruit the right people with the right skills, motivation and passion, and with the resilience needed to meet the often complex needs of those children. It can be challenging, there is no question about that.

To assist local authorities, we have put more than £1 million into seven local authority-led partnerships. That is to test new approaches to models of commissioning. We have invested in behavioural insight studies and distributed toolkits. However, there is no question that it is an ongoing challenge and that we need to engage. We will continue to engage closely with the sector to look at what more we need to do.

On applications and approvals, we know that the process can take six to eight months. That is too long—it feels long, instinctively—but we must also get it right. That is hugely important, not only for safeguarding, but to ensure there are high-quality placements that meet the needs of each and every individual child. Yes, there are regulations around checking accommodation and experience of care, having the children speaking with other household members and so on, and I would love to speed up the process, but it is more important to get it right.

Members have rightly referenced the difference in the number of expressions of interest and the actual number of successful applications. The figure of 160,000 was referenced, with 10,000 actual applications. However, we must be a little careful with that figure, because I understand that the 160,000 includes multiple applications and expressions of interest to multiple organisations. Nevertheless, this is clearly an area we need to look at very closely. The conversion rate certainly suggests there is much more that we can do.

Importantly, we must ensure that people are provided with support through the process so that where they are the right people, with the right skills and experience to be brilliant foster carers, they are not put off by delays and process, and, where necessary, their hands are held through that process. In that respect, I very much welcome today's debate, so that, alongside the outcome of the independent care review, we can work together to identify some of the solutions to ensure that foster carers up and down the country feel prepared and supported as they start that fostering journey.

Support for foster carers was raised by a number of Members across the Chamber, and it is crucial that foster carers receive the support they need. That is underpinned by legislation and guidance in the Children Act 1989 in relation to local authorities. There is clear statutory guidance, whether that is through Fosterline, which is funded by the Department for Education, or Mockingbird, which we have discussed.

I have had conversations with Josh MacAlister, and there is no question that we must do more and go further, given the extent of the challenge we face in the coming months and years. We know there is a challenge and that we will need to step up to that. I look forward to the recommendations of the review.

Barry Gardiner: I noticed that the Minister was coming to the last couple of pages of his notes, and I just wanted to ensure that he addressed the point about the independent fostering agencies that was put to him by the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). Indeed, his colleague, the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), also made the very same point. That point is crucial, because those agencies are offering higher rates to a diminishing number of foster carers. That is putting an inflationary pressure on the whole system, which is feeding through to local authorities and making it extremely difficult for them to find the number of carers required. Can the Minister say specifically what he and the Department are doing to address that issue?

Will Quince: I was going to come on to that point, I promise, because it was also made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds). I am alive to the CMA report. It is something that Josh MacAlister and I have discussed at great length.

Like my hon. Friend, I am a Conservative; I have no issue with profit, as long as good quality services are being provided, leading to good outcomes—in fact, great outcomes—for children up and down our country. What I am not happy with is profiteering. What I see in areas of the children's social care market sector is profiteering, and I am looking very closely at that. There are lots of reasons for it, with charities that exited the sector just a handful of years ago for all sorts of reasons—we are where we are, but we need a plan to address that, looking at it closely as part of the independent review of children's social care. I will come to a close shortly, Mr Robertson; I am conscious that we ought to leave some time for the hon. Member for Jarrow to conclude.

On financial support, foster carers have a unique role. They are not employees, and I very much believe that no foster carer should be out of pocket due to their fostering role. There are clear national minimum standards, which

is an allowance that covers the full cost of caring for a child. We set that, but most local authorities go considerably beyond it. It is uprated annually in line with inflation. Again, we are looking at that closely as part of the independent review of children's social care, because we know that we need more social carers. I will look carefully at the outcome and the recommendations.

I thank the hon. Member for Jarrow for tabling this important debate. Being a foster carer can be hugely rewarding, but it is not easy, and we recognise that. I am absolutely committed to ensuring that those who want to offer a loving and stable foster home are encouraged and properly supported to do so. I will do all I can while in this role to raise the important role of foster carers, and I look forward to considering the outcomes of the recommendations that come from the independent review of children's social care.

Foster carers often do not get the recognition they deserve. I want to put on record that they are hugely valued. They are incredible people. They make an enormous contribution to our society, and they should never underestimate the impact they have on some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in our country. I conclude by thanking every single one of them.

4.26 pm

Kate Osborne: I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions. I also thank the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and the Minister for their comments. He rightly acknowledged the important role that foster carers play, and I welcome his intention to work with the Fostering Network and to look at the allowances. To allow foster carers from all backgrounds—as is necessary and has already been stated—to continue in their role, we have to have the correct support in place. I reiterate how much there needs to be a fully funded national fostering strategy. We have one in place for adoption, and we need one for fostering.

There is an urgent need to support fostering at a local level, with the appropriate funding and right structures regionally and nationally. We need to determine where different functions should sit depending on where they are most accountable and effective and bring the most innovation to children's social care. There is also a need for a national fostering leadership board. The establishment of a fully funded national leadership board would provide visible leadership, drive forward the national strategy and provide oversight for the sector to ensure a co-ordinated, collaborative and strategic approach to support and drive improvements.

Fostering services and foster carers have long been under-supported, under-financed and undervalued. We now need to address these issues to make a real difference to foster carers, the many people who support them and, most importantly, the children and young people who desperately need and deserve the best from us all.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

4.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 21 April 2022

EDUCATION

Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker):

As the House will be aware, at COP26 the Department for Education launched its draft sustainability and climate change strategy for the education and children's services systems. Since then, we have engaged widely with young people, educators, academics, sector leaders, and governing bodies in developing the finalised version of this strategy. I am delighted to inform the House of this strategy today.

The UK requires the education sector to play its role in positively responding to climate change and inspiring action on an international stage. The Department for Education and the education sector have a joint responsibility for preparing children and young people for the challenges and the opportunities they will face, with the appropriate knowledge and skills and opportunities to translate them into positive action and solutions. The vision in the strategy is that the United Kingdom is the world-leading education sector in sustainability and climate change by 2030. In England we will achieve this through the following strategic aims:

Excellence in education and skills for a changing world: preparing all young people for a world impacted by climate change through learning and practical experience.

Net zero: reducing direct and indirect emissions from education and care buildings, driving innovation to meet legislative targets and providing opportunities for children and young people to engage practically in the transition to net zero.

Resilient to climate change: adapting our education and care buildings and system to prepare for the effects of climate change.

A better environment for future generations: enhancing biodiversity, improving air quality and increasing access to, and connection with, nature in and around education and care settings.

Several major initiatives bring together activity to drive our strategic aims to increase opportunities for climate education and access to nature and increase biodiversity and climate resilience, co-ordinating and leading a whole-setting approach to climate change and sustainability.

First, by considering the physical education estate as one large entity, a virtual national education nature park, we have a unique opportunity to deliver improvements in biodiversity, contribute to the implementation of the nature recovery network, play our part in halting nature's decline and drive greater climate resilience.

The national education nature park will engage children and young people with the natural world, directly involve them in measuring and improving biodiversity in their nursery, school, college or university, helping reinforce their connection with nature.

Secondly, a climate leaders award will complement classroom learning and allow us to celebrate and recognise education providers, children and young people for

developing their connection with nature and establishing a sustainable future for us all. This award will provide a structured route through existing awards, and will be designed to support progression to employment and further study.

Across five key action areas, the strategy commits to ambitious activity that responds to recommendations for education from the Committee for Climate Change, the Dasgupta review, the green jobs taskforce report, and supports the delivery of the Government's 25-year environment plan and net zero strategy.

The first of these action areas is climate education. In line with our wider commitments in the schools White Paper, we will support and empower teachers to provide excellent, knowledge-rich education about matters relating to climate change and sustainability. By 2025 we will aim to introduce a natural history GCSE, giving young people a further opportunity to engage with and develop a deeper knowledge and understanding of the natural world.

To support excellent teaching, we will include climate change and sustainability in science teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) to ensure all young people receive high-quality teaching on the scientific facts about climate change and environmental degradation. Furthermore, when DfE tenders new continuing professional development (CPD), we will include content on sustainability, where it is relevant to the subject area. We are also providing free climate education resources so that teachers of all levels feel confident in teaching this subject.

The second area where we will take ambitious action is in green skills and careers. It is critical young people and adults have the green skills that will allow them to build careers and participate as Britain leads the world into the green industrial revolution and strives for nature's recovery. In addition to the extensive skills reforms set out in the net zero strategy, the strategy sets out how we are increasing the opportunities for young people and adults to engage in wider green skills and jobs needed to deliver the Government's 25-year environment plan. We will actively support young people and adults to understand the training and careers opportunities available to them and we will support existing organisations in their endeavours to promote green careers.

The third area where we will drive change is in our education estate itself. A green, sustainable education estate that is resilient to the impacts of climate change will inspire young people to live sustainable lives, with impact felt widely in their families and communities. All new school buildings delivered by DfE (not already contracted) will be net zero in operation. The implementation of ultra-low carbon education buildings will be accelerated and by 2025 at least four schools and one college will have been built via the gen zero platform that we demonstrated at COP26.

The strategy also sets out action to ensure our existing estate is resilient to the effects of climate change. A strategic approach to piloting new building technology will also be launched in order to support the future retrofit of the education estate and act as catalyst to the construction sector for implementing new technology. Our building technology pilots will support action to adapt the existing estate to protect against the current and future effects of climate change. Our approach will be to innovate, test and invest.

Equally, we have set out action to ensure our operations and supply chains are sustainable.

Here, we have a valuable opportunity to drive change by introducing children and young people to more sustainable practices such as the circular economy, waste prevention and resource efficiency. We will start rolling-out carbon literacy training for at least one person in every locally maintained nursery, school, college and university to build their knowledge of climate change, access to public funds, engagement with the nature park and climate leaders award, understand emissions reporting and how to develop a climate action plan. By attending carbon literacy training, sustainability leads will be able to share learning and training within their own setting as appropriate—such as leaders, support staff, caretakers, cooks and teachers.

The final area where we will make a difference is in the international strand of our strategy. We will work closely with multilateral institutions (UNESCO, UNEP, OECD and in the G7 and G20) and youth partners for exchange of good practice, through global discussions on climate education, learning and sustainable development. We will identify appropriate export opportunities for our climate learning programmes including the national education nature park and climate leaders award, sharing

our expertise on flood resilience and flood risk assessments, and to export innovative sustainable products such as the gen zero platform and biophilic primary school.

This strategy thus encompasses actions and initiatives that will put climate change and sustainability at the heart of education, and I commend it to the House.

The attachment can be viewed online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2022-04-21/HCWS777/>.

[HCWS777]

PRIME MINISTER

Intelligence and Security Committee: Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism Report

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): The Intelligence and Security Committee will publish its report on extreme right-wing terrorism in due course.

[HCWS778]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 21 April 2022

TRANSPORT

Urban Transport: Future Funding

The following is an extract from the debate in Westminster Hall on Urban Transport: Future Funding on 31 March 2022.

Trudy Harrison: With regard to zero-emission buses, there are currently nearly 2,000 zero-emission buses on the roads, and we have £198 million to support 943 zero-emission buses.

[Official Report, 31 March 2022, Vol. 711, c. 375WH.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison).

An error has been identified in my response to the debate on Urban Transport: Future Funding.

The correct statement should have been:

Trudy Harrison: With regard to zero-emission buses, **funding has been made available for nearly 2,000 zero-emission buses for our roads**, and we have £198 million to support 943 zero-emission buses.

ORAL ANSWERS

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