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14 July 2022

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 14 July 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

COMMITTEE OF SELECTION

Ordered,

That Christopher Pincher and James Morris be discharged from the Committee of Selection and Kelly Tolhurst and Sir David Evennett be added.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Public Services: Civil Servants

1. **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Whether the Government plan to make reductions to public services to meet their objective of reducing the number of civil servants by 91,000. [901040]

12. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Whether the Government plan to make reductions to public services to meet their objective of reducing the number of civil servants by 91,000. [901054]

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The Government are committed to providing high-quality public services. Over recent years, the civil service has delivered in the face of unprecedented challenges, but the civil service workforce has increased by 25% since June 2016. Given the wider economic pressures we face, it is therefore right that we look again at improving efficiency and reducing the cost of delivering high-quality public services. We will look at options for achieving that.

Geraint Davies: As a result of the Minister's botched Brexit deal, more and more civil servants have been doing border checks for goods, doing trade deals that the EU would have done better and more profitably for the UK, and making up new environmental farming laws for the sake of it when we cannot even pick our own fruit and butcher our own meat, only for thousands of civil servants to be sacked so that it takes 12 weeks to get a passport or a driving licence. Does this not mean that the massive further cut in civil servants will lead to more service delays and more pain from less public services?

The Minister should be taking a lead from his Prime Minister: resign and leave, so that a better Administration can be put in place to run this country.

Mr Rees-Mogg: There is a general rule in public life that whatever the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) says, it is likely to be wrong. Unfortunately, he started his question by saying that we had taken on too many civil servants and ended by saying that we did not have enough, so even within his own question, he was in a deep state of confusion.

The result of Brexit is that we are free to make our own way, to make our own rules, and to diverge from the European Union. That is fundamental and, fascinatingly, it is a freedom that people voted for, including the people of Wales whom the hon. Gentleman tries to represent in this House. What we need to do is to be efficient and spend taxpayers' money wisely, but the socialist confusion always wants to get it wrong.

Chi Onwurah: Passport delays, driving licence delays, benefit delays, visa delays—which bit of backlog Britain is the Minister going to break further in order to slash the civil service? Does he agree that the civil service did not cause the financial crisis, and that it is not causing inflation? The civil service responded magnificently to covid, and it is now covering for a Conservative party that is too intent on squabbling internally to deliver competent government.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am happy to give the credit for the financial crisis to Gordon Brown, formerly of this place—[*Interruption.*] Indeed, he is the famous seller of the gold at a bargain basement price.

The hon. Lady is confusing two different things. There have not been reductions in the Passport Office; these are proposed reductions. What is going on is that too many people are still working from home. We need to get people back in the office doing their jobs, but we can also do more with fewer people. We see that already with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency: when one applies for things with the DVLA online, those things are mainly being returned extremely quickly. There are great efficiency savings to be made by using better technology and turning things around effectively and speedily.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): While Tory leadership hopefuls fight over who can be the most economically incompetent to win their members' favour, the UK's public services are at breaking point. The Passport Office, the DLVA, the courts, and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs are all struggling with huge delays. The public are crying out for the Government to act, and what do we get? A proposal to slash vital civil servants' jobs that will only exacerbate problems, not fix backlogs. The Government could not be more out of touch with the priorities of communities across the country, so I ask the Minister how the public can trust a Tory Government mired in disarray and division, and governed by self-interest rather than public duty, to deliver much-needed, high-quality public services.

Mr Rees-Mogg: What we are trying to do is get back from the covid backlog. It is undoubtedly the fact that people have not been going into their offices. If we take

the DVLA as an example, the mail was not being opened. It was piled up in room after room because people were not going in. Some 4 million envelopes were unopened because people were not going into the office, because of a combination of the requirements of covid and the excessive rules of the socialist Welsh Government that made it very difficult for people to go in. That backlog has to be dealt with, but technology is unquestionably the answer. Try renewing your tax disc with the DLVA, Mr Speaker: you can do it in seconds. You no longer have to go into a post office to do it. That is the type of efficiency we need.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Minister for that very thorough answer, but we have to move on otherwise nobody else will get in, and we all want to hear Lee Anderson.

Veterans Strategy Action Plan

2. **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on implementing the Veterans Strategy Action Plan. [901041]

4. **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on implementing the Veterans Strategy Action Plan. [901043]

18. **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on implementing the Veterans Strategy Action Plan. [901063]

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): A quarter of the more than 60 cross-Government commitments have been delivered to date, with recent achievements including rolling out the Great Place to Work for Veterans scheme, the completion of the scoping study into digital verification, and the appointment of the first Veterans Commissioner for Wales. I will publish a formal update on progress in the autumn.

Lee Anderson: We have thousands of veterans in this country who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, which can affect their ability to hold down a relationship or hold down a job. There is a lot of help out there, but veterans are a proud bunch and many are hard to reach because they are too proud to reach out for help. What more can the Government do to make sure these hard-to-reach veterans are reached and supported?

Johnny Mercer: I thank my hon. Friend for his relentless advocacy for the small but very important cohort who struggle with life after service. We have now established Op Courage, the UK's first single care pathway through NHS mental health services for those who need them. It had 19,000 referrals in its first year last year. I encourage people to engage with the service to talk about their mental health and not suffer in silence. Help is there, and I say to them, "You can get better, and the system is there to look after you."

Scott Benton: I wholeheartedly welcome the Government's ambition to make the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran. To achieve that, we must prioritise supporting veterans with their mental health. Will my hon. Friend set out how the new digital identification service will contribute towards that?

Johnny Mercer: The digital verification service is an extremely important part of being able to identify the veterans cohort, of which no Government have ever really had a true understanding. We are making significant progress. I recognise that individuals want a veterans ID card, which will be a result of it. Alpha testing is going on now and we are looking to do beta testing next year. I am hopeful we will have something online by April next year.

James Sunderland: I have heard lots of accusations over the past few weeks that Veterans UK is both judge and jury; in other words, it operates as the assessor and the awarder of assistance to veterans. Are there any plans to review Veterans UK or to conduct an inquiry?

Johnny Mercer: First, I pay tribute to the staff of Veterans UK, who work incredibly hard in a very under-invested system that is still working off paper records. The Government have committed to a £44 million spend to turn it into a digital service, which will undoubtedly increase and improve its output. I share my hon. Friend's concern, certainly about the data on how many appeals have been overturned. I understand the processes for it, but my very clear view is that the service is not good enough for our veterans at the moment. I will bring forward plans for how we can improve it in due course.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Just how long have this Government been in power, and how many more suicides of veterans will take place before we see firm action to follow through on mental health and get these men the real support that they want? I am the son of a veteran. I know what it is like for someone to finish service, having had traumatic experiences fighting for their country.

Johnny Mercer: The topic of veteran suicides is incredibly serious. The data shows that someone is statistically less likely to take their life if they have served, but every suicide is a tragedy for the individual, the family and the nation that they serve. There is more help available now than there ever has been. Yes, we did start from a pretty low base, but the system is working, with 19,000 referrals through Op Courage last year. The help is available, and I urge all those who suffer in silence to understand that the situation has changed. We will continue to make progress until we have the world-class veteran care that veterans deserve.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): What progress have Ministers made on giving further statutory standing to the veterans covenant?

Johnny Mercer: This is the first Government to have brought in—through the Armed Forces Act 2021—a statutory requirement on health, housing and education. I am clear that that is a floor, not a ceiling. We are looking to expand what that legislation can do at some point. This is all about making sure that veterans are not disadvantaged, which was the whole point of the armed forces covenant. We will see how the legislation goes—it is the first time that this has been done anywhere in the world—and how it plays out in communities, and we will make sure that it delivers for those who need it. We are always prepared to look at doing more to ensure that veterans are not disadvantaged by their service.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the hon. Gentleman back to his place and look forward to his contribution as a Minister on veterans issues. On funding for privately operated rehabilitation facilities, will he confirm his intention to make sustained grant funding available to charities such as SSAFA and Beyond the Battlefield—one of the charities in my Strangford constituency—which provide services that the Government seem unable to provide for veterans they seem unable to reach?

Johnny Mercer: The beauty of Op Courage is that it does precisely that: it brings order to the various charities and enables them to bid in to run contracts, so that they can run the complex treatment service, the high intensity service and the transition liaison service. It gets them on a sustainable footing and away from year-to-year funding, providing certainty not only for those who do the brilliant work in the charities sector, but for those who need it, so that there is some permanence to the system and veterans can rely on that help.

Food Prices

3. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to mitigate increases in food prices. [901042]

10. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to mitigate increases in food prices. [901052]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Kit Malthouse): My Department has been working closely with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to assess the impact on food prices as a result of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and other pressures.

Selaine Saxby: Given the huge increase in costs that farmers are enduring, what is being done to balance the need to mitigate food price increases with ensuring that farmers are paid fairly for their products?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is right to identify an extremely challenging part of the global cost of living crisis that we are trying to confront. Critical in that is the role of farming and the production of food domestically. One key area where we are able to assist and where lots of work is going on is the provision of fertiliser. She is a rural MP, as am I, so she will know that fertiliser is a key driver of overall food prices. I am pleased to say that for some weeks, DEFRA has been running a fertiliser taskforce, which is doing valuable work to stabilise the market and help farmers to optimise their use of artificial fertiliser.

John Lamont: I visited a farm in my constituency in the Scottish Borders last week, alongside the National Farmers Union of Scotland. The cost of feed, fertiliser and many other essential products has skyrocketed, and that is clearly pushing up food prices. What more can the Government do to help our farmers and support this important industry?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend raises a very good point, although sadly the provision of food is devolved north of the border. We are working very closely with

the Scottish Government to make sure that they put in place adequate provision to assist farmers. Here in England, for example, we have introduced the basic payment to help with cash flow. That has been welcomed by the industry, but the key driver of the fertiliser price will dog us for some time. If prices are too high, farmers will use less fertiliser. If they use less fertiliser, there will be lower yields and smaller animals, which means higher prices. Getting that combination right is critical, as is encouraging and supporting farmers through direct subsidy to return to the old-fashioned fertiliser use of animal slurry. We are helping them with their storage capacity and capability, so that they can optimise their yields from the crops that they sow.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): One of the most worrying increases in food prices is for infant formula, some of which is now so expensive that it is security-tagged or kept behind the till, because families have resorted to stealing it. What are the Government doing to make sure that infant formula is available to families who need it? At this price, many cannot afford it at all?

Kit Malthouse: We are monitoring all prices very closely, particularly for vital products such as formula. I know that the hon. Lady will welcome the support that is going to 8 million households on means-tested benefits, starting from today and with another instalment coming in the autumn, on top of the assistance that has already been given. We have now put something like £37 billion into the system to assist families, but we constantly keep these things under review and will act if needed.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Fresh fruit and vegetables are very important to everybody's diet. We would like more people, especially people from poorer households, to be able to afford more. One of the problems is that we do not have enough people in the UK now to pick the British crop of fresh fruit and vegetables. How will we ensure that that happens?

Can we also ensure that fresh fruit and vegetables from overseas can get to supermarkets faster? I do not know what the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster's experience is when he buys peppers, courgettes, onions or potatoes, but my experience these days is that they have all gone off by the time I get home.

Mr Speaker: Come to Chorley market; they are nice and fresh.

Chris Bryant: It's a bit of a long way from the Rhondda.

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about access to ambient and fresh food for all of us. I know that the Home Secretary is in constant discussion with colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the industry about the provision and balance of labour that we encourage to come to the country to help us with summer harvesting, for example. We also need to work hard to ensure that the bulk of our imported fresh food gets here quickly and can enter the supply chain extremely quickly. My right hon. and learned Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office and I will work closely over the summer to ensure that our short, straight supply lines are maintained as efficiently as possible.

I have a small domestic tip for the hon. Gentleman that I learned from a friend who works in the industry. It is extremely important that the chill chain is maintained. If he can get chilled food as quickly as possible into his fridge, it will last a lot longer than if he leaves it hanging around and then chills it again. That is particularly true of dairy products.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Aberdeen Financial Fairness Trust and Bristol University have tracked the fortunes of UK households since the beginning of the pandemic. They report that one in six UK households is suffering serious financial difficulties, and the situation is getting worse. Many households have reduced the quality of the food they eat, sold possessions or cancelled insurance to help them to cope. Single parents, disabled people and larger families are among the worst affected. What steps does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster intend to take to tackle the price rises that are driving this inequality and poverty?

Kit Malthouse: I am sure that the hon. Lady recognises that we are part of an international global food supply chain and are subject to a global fuel and energy market that is broadly driving up prices for pretty much every developed nation, and indeed across the whole of the globe. She is right, though, that we need to seek to assist those who are struggling most in this challenging time. I was very pleased to see it announced in the media that the first of the cost of living payments will go to 8 million households across the country this month, with a further payment of £320-odd later in the year, on top of the £300 extra to pensioners, the £150 extra to those who have disabilities and, of course, the £400 discount on energy bills later this year. We are putting an enormous amount of money—£37,000,000,000—into the system to assist with what is undoubtedly a very challenging period for families up and down the land.

Kirsten Oswald: I hear what the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster says, but I am afraid that in terms of people's real experience in their day-to-day life, it is not enough. It is not good enough. Families across the UK know that the Tory Government here are not doing enough with the powers that they have. Scotland has the lowest child poverty in the UK, and that has been achieved by policies such as the Scottish child payment that help households where it is needed the most. Here, we have Tory leadership candidates promising major tax cuts, which clearly indicates that they believe that there is financial headroom.

Does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster agree that the priority should be the people who are being hit hardest by the cost of living crisis, rather than tax cuts for the wealthy and for corporations? What assessment has he made of the benefits of policies such as the child payment, which could make a real difference to households in need?

Kit Malthouse: I have learned over my years in government, national and local, that one of the key factors that we should have in mind is balance. While the hon. Lady is right that we should always have in mind the ability to assist those who are struggling most in our society, we have to balance that against the health

of the economy and our ongoing ability to provide exactly that assistance. North of the border, as far as I can see, the Scottish Government concentrate on one and neglect the other. I am sure that there are many people who drive the wealth creation effort in Scotland who rue the day that the SNP Government took office, because Scotland has undoubtedly performed worse economically than other parts of the United Kingdom over the past 10 years.

Government Projects

5. **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What progress his Department has made on reducing the cost of Government projects to help ensure value for money in public spending. [901046]

8. **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): What progress his Department has made on reducing the cost of Government projects to help ensure value for money in public spending. [901049]

15. **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What progress his Department has made on reducing the cost of Government projects to help ensure value for money in public spending. [901058]

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Before I reply, I want to make it clear that the figure is 1.4 million envelopes at the DVLA—I misheard a helpful heckle.

I gave part of the answer to this question on 12 July, in reply to written parliamentary questions 29939 and 30195. The Infrastructure and Projects Authority provides expert advice and independent assurance on the Government major projects portfolio. Working alongside HM Treasury, which is responsible for value for money, it develops robust project cost estimates and builds capacity and capability to deliver effectively. The 2022 IPA annual report will set out progress made on the GMPP.

Marco Longhi: As a civil engineer, I was never an enthusiastic supporter of HS2 as the cost-benefit analysis of the project was never completely clear to me. One thing I know as a civil engineer is that project creep, and its related costs, is a very real thing. The Transport Secretary announced—in March—£1.7 billion of potential future cost pressures, so what steps is the Minister's Department taking to ensure that cost pressures are managed pre-emptively rather than reacted to?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is wise to raise these important points, because taxpayers' money must always be dealt with carefully. The Department for Transport is closely monitoring the rate of increase of potential contingency spend on HS2, together with any opportunities to realise cost savings through the monthly ministerial taskforce meetings. The £1.7 billion of potential future cost pressures reported in March is manageable within the phase 1 target cost of £40.3 billion given the level of remaining contingency, noting that that represents less than 4% of the overall budget.

Felicity Buchan: We need to cut the cost of the state and ensure that Government Departments spend our money—taxpayers' money—in a prudent and commercial

way. Will my right hon. Friend undertake to conduct a review of all major Government projects to ensure that we are doing that?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am entirely in agreement with my hon. Friend. It is so important that with the Infrastructure and Projects Authority and the Treasury we ensure that Departments spend money well. You and I, Mr Speaker, managed together to lay the framework for stopping potentially £20 billion, or whatever the ridiculous figure ended up as, being spent on restoration and renewal here when it all got completely out of control. It is so important that all public expenditure is kept under control, and we all have a duty to share in that.

Mr Mohindra: I welcome the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to his place. I know he is sorely missed in the Home Office.

When the Labour party was last in government, it wasted billions of pounds of taxpayers' money, including an astonishing £26 billion on a botched IT project. Does my right hon. Friend agree that only the Conservatives can be trusted to responsibly manage taxpayers' money?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, I agree philosophically and practically, because you will notice, Mr Speaker, that my hon. Friend and I carefully refer to taxpayers' money when the socialists normally refer to it as Government money. There is no such thing; there is only taxpayers' money that we have a duty to protect. When they are in office we see botched IT projects such as the NHS one that my hon. Friend referred to, costing £26 billion, but what have we done? We have an IT project that is working like billy-o, looking after hundreds of thousands of extra universal credit applications through the pandemic. The Tories know how to spend money sensibly.

Mr Speaker: Can I just say that that was far too easy a wicket for the Minister to bat on? Patricia Gibson.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Well, crikey! This Government have a track record of waste and siphoning off public money through contracts given to friends of and donors to the Tory party. The Procurement Bill is an opportunity for them to end that reckless approach by making a cast-iron commitment to maximise the value of every pound of taxpayers' money spent. What is value for money under a Tory Government? Is it an excuse to slash services and leave an open goal for their dodgy mates to profit at the public's expense, or will they take a page out of Labour's plan to buy, make and sell in Britain, which would distribute economic, social and environmental value across the country by boosting British businesses?

Mr Speaker: Order. For the record, may I say that it is easier if I call Members? I was actually calling Patricia Gibson, but do not worry—it is fine: I will come back to her later.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Once again, we hear the socialists calling for two different things, contradictorily, within the same question. First we should be focusing on value for money—yes, I absolutely agree—and then we should be putting all the hobby horses of the left into the procurement process. We want value for money, and that is what is being legislated for in the other place, and the Bill will come to this House in due course.

Mr Speaker: Patricia Gibson!

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was down for a topical question, but as I listened to the sound of an alternative universe being played out in the Chamber with this talk about taking care of taxpayers' money, I felt compelled to get to my feet.

The Public Accounts Committee has described the UK Government's procurement of £4 billion of unusable personal protective equipment during the pandemic—which has had to be burnt—as the result of a “haphazard purchasing strategy”. Governing is all about responsibility, and we know how much those on the Treasury Bench care about looking after taxpayers' money, so will the Minister explain who he thinks should be accountable and responsible for the “haphazard purchasing strategy” which has seen £4 billion go up in smoke?

Mr Speaker: I think the Minister has got the gist.

Mr Rees-Mogg: You are right, Mr Speaker: I have got the point, and it is a terribly bogus point. At the height of the pandemic, all Opposition Members were calling for PPE to be delivered “yesterday”, and the Government managed to increase the proportion of domestically produced PPE from less than 1% to nearly 80%, excluding gloves. The hon. Lady talks as if the Scottish National party, our separatist friends, were any good at this. May I say to her “ferries, ferries, ferries”? That was one of the biggest and most scandalous wastes of money, and it was done by the SNP.

GREAT Britain and Northern Ireland Campaign

6. **Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the GREAT Britain and Northern Ireland campaign to (a) promote UK businesses overseas and (b) encourage investment in the UK. [901047]

The Minister without Portfolio (Nigel Adams): The GREAT campaign promotes the UK's trade and investment to global audiences, creating and sustaining UK jobs by growing the economy. I am proud to have worked closely with the campaign over the past year on various overseas activities which have promoted UK businesses and attracted significant investment in all four corners of our country.

Mr Holden: It was great to see you at the all-party parliamentary beer group event last night, Mr Speaker.

I think it is clear from the Minister's response that the GREAT campaign has been a major success since Britain left the European Union. Does he agree that it is vital that the voices of my constituents on Brexit are heard by whoever becomes our next Prime Minister, and that we drive the GREAT campaign forward to deliver further opportunities from Brexit as a result of our freedoms in global trade?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is spot on. I am in no doubt that Conservative Members, along with our membership in the country, will hold all the leadership hopefuls to account on Brexit delivery. However, it is clear that the voters of North West Durham, who are brilliantly served by my hon. Friend, voted decisively to

leave the European Union, as did the good people of my own constituency of Selby and Ainsty. As sure as night follows day, if—God forbid—the Labour party somehow, through a grubby deal with the Scottish separatists and the Liberal Democrats, got their hands on the levers of power, Brexit and all the freedoms that it affords us would be put at risk and the people of our nation betrayed.

Levelling Up: Social Mobility

7. **Jon Trickett** (Hemsworth) (Lab): Whether he has had discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the effectiveness of the Government's levelling up agenda in increasing social mobility. [901048]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Kit Malthouse): The Government's central mission is to level up the UK by spreading opportunity more equally across the whole country. Representatives of the Equality Hub in the Cabinet Office and the Social Mobility Commission are having regular discussions with levelling up leads and sharing key data on socioeconomic geographic equality, and that includes information on the commission's new social mobility index.

Jon Trickett: But the Government's own social mobility mission drew the conclusion that there was no social mobility in Britain, and in the meantime, levelling up is being used as a way of dishing out funds to Tory marginals. The truth is that in politics, the law, sport, the arts and business, working-class people face systemic barriers to personal progress. Has the Minister noticed that the wealth of the few is rooted in the poverty of the many? Does he agree, on behalf of the Government, that we need a root- and-branch transformation of the way our country works so that every single individual can achieve their full potential?

Kit Malthouse: That was a long question and I am afraid I only agree with the last sentence: we do want opportunity to be spread to every single individual. I find the hon. Gentleman a little churlish, given that in his part of the world £20 million from the levelling-up funding is supporting the Tileyard North development in Wakefield, we have put £24.9 million into the Wakefield town deal and the Mayor of West Yorkshire will get £1.4 billion for transport improvements in the coming cycle. These are all areas of Government expenditure that will improve the area in which he lives. If he wants to see social mobility writ large, I suggest he looks at the current candidates for the Tory leadership.

Value for Money in Public Spending

9. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure value for money in public spending. [901050]

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The spending review 2021 placed renewed emphasis on ensuring that every pound of taxpayers' money was spent well and focused on the areas that make the most difference to people's daily lives. At the spring statement 2022, Her Majesty's

Government also set out plans to ensure that Departments were delivering the highest- quality services at the best value.

Liz Twist: Can the Minister explain to the House why the principles of value for money, public good, transparency, integrity, fair treatment of suppliers and non-discrimination are not on the face of the Procurement Bill, as proposed in the Government's White Paper?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Value for money is on the face of the Bill; it is a crucial part of what will be going on. When the Bill has completed its passage, it will be issued alongside principles of procurement for Government bodies to follow. This will ensure that value for money is put front and centre, which, it must be said, was the essence of the hon. Lady's question. She asks what we are doing to ensure value for money, then when we do something to ensure it, she does not like it.

Government Helplines: Low-income Households

11. **Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the cost of phone calls to Government helplines on low-income households. [901053]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): The Government are committed to answering calls from the public in a timely manner. Where Departments are experiencing surges in demand, performance is being monitored and staffing is being increased. For example, for the weekend of 1 July, the Home Office answered 77% of calls to its helplines within 30 seconds, with an average wait time of one minute and nine seconds.

Kate Green: By definition, women eligible for Healthy Start vouchers are on low incomes, but the cost of making calls to the helpline at local rates is prohibitive for many, contributing to the cost of poverty. Will the Minister undertake to speak to Health colleagues to see what can be done to minimise the cost of that helpline and, more generally, look at the cost of calls to helplines across Government that are specifically designed to enable people on low incomes to reach the services and benefits intended to help them?

Michael Ellis: We are always looking at these matters. The Department for Work and Pensions reviews the forecasted telephony demand and plans its resourcing accordingly to keep wait times down. All DWP customer telephone lines are freephone numbers. Separately, I should say that the DWP is digitising key parts of its service to increase efficiency.

Public Funding: Focus Groups

13. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the value for money of the use of funding from the public purse on focus groups. [901056]

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I am quite surprised by the answer that I will give to the hon. Gentleman, because listening to citizens and understanding their

views from focus groups is more useful than I had thought. Focus group insights helped to drive the extraordinarily high levels of public engagement throughout the covid-19 pandemic. More than 80% of people were aware of key behaviours to keep safe and reduce transmission, and up to 82% said that they trusted the information in our advertising, so although I personally have always been suspicious of focus groups, they showed their value in helping to get the message across during the period of covid.

Mike Amesbury: This week we heard from a voter who had had the unfortunate pleasure of attending one of the focus groups organised by the former Chancellor. He was seething that he had been duped by the former Chancellor's PR machine. Can the Minister explain how many more Government Departments are using taxpayers' money for party political propaganda? Surely that is a waste of taxpayers' money.

Mr Rees-Mogg: It would be quite wrong to use taxpayers' money for party political processes. Focus groups do not do that; they are focused on how Government policy is presented to the voters. However, if the hon. Gentleman has evidence of malpractice, he should always bring it forward to the full attention of the House.

Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests

14. **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Whether he is taking steps to appoint an independent adviser on Ministers' interests. [901057]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Kit Malthouse): The Government were sorry to receive Lord Geidt's resignation and are grateful for his work in the role. Any future appointment will need to be a matter for the new Administration, given that the adviser is a personal adviser to the Prime Minister and is appointed for a five-year fixed term.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): That could mean more delays, then. In two months' time, we will have a new Prime Minister, who will need to appoint a new Cabinet, which in turn will need to appoint a new team of Ministers. There has been a lot of talk of a fresh start, but does the Minister agree that with no ethics adviser to advise the new Prime Minister on the nuances and importance of the ministerial code, all we will see is wallpapering over the cracks? When will the new ethics adviser be appointed?

Kit Malthouse: That is obviously a matter for the new Prime Minister, but the hon. Lady should not labour under the misapprehension that the maintenance of standards and ethical advising is wanting in Government. In the absence of the adviser, that obviously falls to the various permanent secretaries in each Department, who are in any event the first line of assessment for many of those questions. As I hope the hon. Lady will never find out, when one becomes a Minister, one of the key things to do is ensure that the permanent secretary in the Department is clear about one's own personal interests, and maintain a dialogue with them about the standards with which one conducts the job.

Fleur Anderson: Talking of the highest possible standards, will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster confirm whether there have ever been Cabinet-level discussions about the conduct of the right hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher) before or since his appointment as Deputy Chief Whip, and about other MPs who may have conduct records that deserve investigation?

Kit Malthouse: I am afraid that I cannot tell the hon. Lady what we discuss in detail at Cabinet, but Cabinet is minuted and those minutes are available for public contemplation.

Public Sector Procurement: SMEs

16. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to strengthen public sector procurement rules for small and medium-sized enterprises. [901059]

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The Procurement Bill will enable simpler, more flexible procurement processes, increase transparency of planned procurements and ensure that 30-day prompt payment terms flow down the supply chain. This will provide small businesses, especially start-ups, with the time and assurance they need to bid for opportunities.

Mark Pawsey: My constituent is a driver who has suffered from cataracts and is required to take yearly eye tests. He would like those tests to be carried out by his local independent optician, but has been advised that a single provider holds an exclusive contract. I raised the matter with Ministers in the Department for Transport, who have told me that the situation arises because the Government are obliged to offer an exclusive contract because of EU procurement rules. Will the Procurement Bill enable smaller, independent businesses to conduct such tests and promote competition?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an important point—that the Government, to achieve best value for money for taxpayers, will ensure that there are overarching contracts that are at the best price available. He then asks whether it will be possible for smaller companies to be part of that. It will be possible and easier for them to be part of the supply chain, but value for money must remain. In the specific case he raises, were Specsavers to carry on being much cheaper than using individual providers, I expect the Department for Transport would—and would be expected to—go down that route. If, on the other hand, competitive prices could be offered by smaller companies, it would be easier under the Procurement Bill for them to get into the process.

Public Sector Workforce: Derby

17. **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Whether he is taking steps to move parts of the public sector workforce to Derby. [901060]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler): The Government are committed to looking beyond London to all corners of the UK in the relocation of civil service and public sector roles. Through our

Places for Growth programme, circa 6,000 roles have so far been relocated to our locations for growth. This includes more than 100 roles in the east midlands. As of December 2021, there were 980 roles in Derby from Departments such as the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Justice.

Mrs Latham: The Minister will be aware that the east midlands has the lowest concentration of civil servants of any UK region, and Derby is right at the bottom. I have been campaigning to bring the headquarters of Great British Railways to Derby, which would help to solve this problem and would connect this country's private and public sector rail industries. Does she agree that having the headquarters of Great British Railways in Derby would support the Government's ambition to level up the country?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour. As a Derbyshire MP, it is serendipitous that I have the joy of answering this question.

The national headquarters of Great British Railways will be outside London, demonstrating our commitment to levelling up. A shortlist of six exceptional applications, including the exceptional Derby, will now compete to be chosen. A six-week consultation and public vote—I urge everybody in Derbyshire to vote—will run until 15 August, allowing people across Great Britain to make their voice heard. I declare my interest as a Derbyshire MP, as I think I said at the beginning. During the public vote, the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), will visit each of the six shortlisted locations to hear and learn directly from representatives.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It will be York.

Standards in Public Life

19. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to advance standards in public life. [901064]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Kit Malthouse): Before I answer this question, I will offer a small clarification of my previous answer. I think I said that Cabinet minutes are available for public contemplation, which, of course, they are—what I said is technically correct—but not until 30 years hence. Happily, I understand that limit is soon to fall to 20 years, so it will not be long for the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) to wait.

In answer to Question 19, the Government are, of course, committed to upholding standards in public life and reinforcing our system to do so. Tomorrow the Government will make a written ministerial statement detailing our work in response to the reviews conducted by Nigel Boardman and the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

Rachael Maskell: Integrity matters. Integrity and ethics speak of character, character speaks of motivation, and motivation speaks of purpose. We are either on the side of our people in investing everything we have to serve, or we are on the side of ourselves in extracting everything we can get for ourselves. As self-serving Tories have exploited and extracted to the extent of putting this

place into disrepute, will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster assure us that he will not only appoint an ethics adviser immediately but adopt Labour's proposal of an independent integrity and ethics commission so that public trust can be restored?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the importance of ethics and standards in this place and, indeed, in the whole of public life, right the way through from local government, but she is wrong to cast stones from one side of the House to the other. All parties in this House have had their share of issues in this area, and it is right that the system that polices all of us is independent. However, we agree with the Committee on Standards in Public Life that a single ethics commission "seems disproportionate and does not sit well in our democratic system."

When we have a new Prime Minister in the autumn, this will be among the chief priorities in their in-tray.

Topical Questions

T1. [901065] **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Kit Malthouse): I am delighted to have been appointed Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, taking over this key role from my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), who is the new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. He is now looking after the nation's health and I am making sure that the Cabinet Office is match fit so that, in this time of flux in the body politic, the heart of Government is delivering and pumping strongly, primed to pursue our manifesto commitments and support the Prime Minister's priorities, and ready for the incoming Administration.

I am extremely lucky to be supported in this task by some of the most doughty buttresses in our political system. I am also pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) sits alongside us once again, making his welcome return to the Front Bench as the United Kingdom's first Minister for Veterans' Affairs to attend Cabinet.

Lee Anderson: Not every civil servant and local government officer is back at work after the pandemic, which is creating backlogs and is a waste of taxpayers' money, so what more can we do to ensure that every local government officer and civil servant is back in the office as soon as possible?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. He is right to say that we want to see as many people as possible back in the office, not just because it is more efficient and we think it is a better way for government to operate, but because we all, importantly, have a duty to the young. It is impossible for them to acquire the skills and abilities they need when they are working remotely. I own a young man in his 20s, my son, so I know how debilitating it would be for those who are starting their career to operate from their bedrooms, and those of us in senior positions have a moral duty to be present, in person, with them to give them the skills and abilities they need to advance their careers.

Mr Speaker: We now come to shadow Secretary of State, Angela Rayner.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I welcome the new Ministers to their places on the Treasury Bench for what could be their first and last Cabinet Office orals. It is a pleasure to be here with them. Last week, the Prime Minister finally admitted to meeting former KGB agent Alexander Lebedev, a man who was sanctioned by the Canadian Government. This was directly after a top-level NATO meeting and just weeks after a chemical attack by Russian agents on British soil. No officials or security were present. I have written to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster but am yet to receive a reply, so I hope he will answer my questions now. Did the Prime Minister take any papers from the NATO meeting? Was his phone compromised? Why do Foreign Office records show the presence of an unidentified guest? Given his responsibilities for national security and ministerial standards, does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster believe this was inappropriate conduct by the Prime Minister?

Kit Malthouse: I am in receipt of the right hon. Lady's letter. Obviously, a number of those questions have to be answered by No. 10. We will forward it to No. 10 and will be replying in due course.

Angela Rayner: I really hope that that "due course" is very quick, because this is an issue of national security, which is obviously of concern to many of our constituents. Let me move on to another very serious issue. Yesterday, our country reached the dark milestone of 200,000 covid deaths, which is a tragedy for our country and all those who have lost loved ones. The Prime Minister delayed the start of the public inquiry into the Government's handling of the pandemic, with the hearings not expected until 2023, making a full inquiry unlikely before the next election. This week, reports suggest that the Government are trying to block evidence to the inquiry, with Ministers fearful that they could be sued for damages and officials apparently making evidence that could be withheld. There can be no hint of a cover-up or excuses for Ministers dodging scrutiny. Does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster deny those reports that have been put in the press? If not, how can he assure us and the public that the process will be independent?

Mr Speaker: May I remind you that this is topical questions?

Kit Malthouse: The right hon. Lady has her very own brand of toxic, which she attempts to pump into everything that the Government do. *[Interruption.]* No, no, we cannot conduct debate in this House on the, "When did you stop beating your wife?" questions. This inquiry will be independently chaired and thoroughly conducted. It will have statutory powers to summon evidence and witnesses, in the way that others have done. We are determined to learn the lessons of the covid pandemic, notwithstanding some of the enormous, difficult but nevertheless globally important decisions that the Prime Minister had to take, not least acquiring vaccines and researching vaccines before anybody else. Nobody thinks that everything that happened during the pandemic was perfect, but to start her contemplation of this issue by maligning the motives of those Ministers who put their shoulders to the wheel at a time of national emergency is, frankly, disgraceful.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) Just to correct Opposition Members, let me say that we will have a new leader by 5 September—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are getting out of hand. These are topical questions and you should be short and to the point. Do you want to ask your question or not? If not, I will move on.

T3. [901067] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): . The Procurement Bill is being scrutinised in the other place. One issue is how we ensure that new, small businesses get the opportunity to bid for government business, get contracts and demonstrate value for money. What measures will my right hon. Friend take to make sure that we do that?

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): This is a key part of the Procurement Bill. It is simplifying the system so that, instead of 350 pieces of EU law and four different regimes, there will be one UK law and one regime. There will be a pipeline that makes it known to small businesses when contracts are becoming available, giving them a better chance to get involved. Payment terms for small businesses will be improved. Many things in the Bill will be specifically designed to help small and medium-sized enterprises.

T2. [901066] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): Clearly, this Government cannot organise the processing of passports or driving licences on time. There are repeated errors in issuing visas to the correct location. Ambulances are stacked outside A&E units. NHS dentist appointments are as rare as hen's teeth, and now the Minister wants to close the Seaham Department for Work and Pensions office in my constituency. Can the Cabinet Ministers join the dots, and recognise that cutting and undermining jobs in the public service is not the answer?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The reason that some DWP offices will not be needed is that unemployment did not rise in the way that was anticipated. We have the lowest level of unemployment in this country since 1974, and the highest number of people in payroll work, and it is only right that the estate of DWP meets the requirements of the DWP. We get huge efficiencies by implementing technology better. That has become clear in many Government activities. Labour party members always want to keep people on the payroll and then they do not want them to go into work: they either want to be on the picket lines helping them to strike, or they want to have them working at home.

T7. [901071] **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): The two local authorities that serve my constituents—Hillingdon and Harrow—have shared with me how they quantify the savings from efficiency programmes, which helps to mitigate my constituents' council tax and also to reinvest in frontline services. Can my right hon. Friend share with me what approach central Government are taking to demonstrate how savings from efficiency are helping to keep taxes down and focus money on the frontline?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Again, this is a very important point to raise. Central Government—the Cabinet Office's Crown Commercial Service—is saving into the billions of pounds

across Government, which is money that is then available for Departments. That saves those Department's budgets and ensures more efficient procurement. We are also cracking down on fraud. I am looking forward to the launch of the public sector fraud authority, which hopes to be able to save £180 million in the first year of its operation.

T4. [901068] **Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Streatham) (Lab): This week, the Public and Commercial Services Union called on the Government to launch a public inquiry into racism and bullying in the Cabinet Office. It has more than 80 members of staff formally complaining about racial bullying or profiling, the Government giving a six-figure pay-out to a top civil service for racial discrimination and the former Deputy Cabinet Secretary, Dame Helen MacNamara, warning of a systematic problem with race in the Department. I know the Government claim that there is not institutional racism in the entire country, but it is clear that the Cabinet Office has a problem. Before the Minister refers to the review into racism, which has been branded a whitewash, I ask him what steps he is taking to facilitate the public inquiry that the PCS union has asked for?

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): The Cabinet Office is conducting its own review of the matter, as the hon. Lady referred to. Any incident of racism is unacceptable anywhere, and every effort will be made to alleviate and extinguish the problem to which she refers. The Cabinet Office makes every concerted effort possible, and Ministers will continue to do that to eliminate the pernicious problem to which she refers. I do not accept the premise of her question that the Cabinet Office has an endemic problem in this area, but any example is serious.

T5. [901069] **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): On average, two children in every class have a developmental language disorder, which means that they have a two-to-three year language delay. As chair of the all-party group on speech and language difficulties, I arranged a meeting with a Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education. It was then cancelled because he was made Education Secretary. What process is in place to ensure that MPs' meetings with Ministers are sustained, given that they have the support of the civil servants, in order that disadvantaged groups, such as those children with speech disorders, are not further disadvantaged?

Kit Malthouse: As new Ministers take their positions over the summer, their diaries will naturally be reviewed. If the hon. Gentleman experiences significant delays in achieving the promised meeting, he should write to me.

T6. [901070] **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The VIP lane for personal protective equipment procurement and the unlawful activities associated with it was one of the early scandals of this Government, but both the Serious Fraud Office and the National Crime Agency are unable to adequately investigate reports of potential Government procurement fraud. Will the procurement Bill establish a corrupt practices investigation unit to help to investigate potential frauds associated with public procurement?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As I mentioned, the public sector fraud authority will be announced shortly, but I think this attack on PPE is simply misplaced. The fact is that

everybody in the country was calling for PPE—[*Interruption.*] In the world, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General helpfully points out. There was a dire and urgent need. Contracts were issued quickly to build up supplies, and there was not ministerial involvement in the award of contracts. Some 19.8 billion pieces of PPE were delivered; it was a successful effort to meet a dire need where the socialists opposite would have dithered and delayed.

T8. [901072] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Money Saving Expert Martin Lewis has warned that in the UK we may reach a point this winter where we have heat banks, the equivalent of food banks, where people spend their days in public buildings because they cannot afford to heat their homes. Does the Secretary of State share my alarm that that could happen in the 21st century, especially when Scotland is one of the most energy-rich countries in the world?

Kit Malthouse: We all share the hon. Lady's deep concern about the impact of energy prices on all citizens across the UK. As she knows and as I explained earlier, the Government are taking urgent and significant steps to help to alleviate that. In the autumn, there will be a £400 rebate on every electricity bill across the land to assist with those costs. However, as she knows, we are subject to a global energy market and we are working hard to see how we can be less vulnerable to those fluctuations and create more energy self-sufficiency.

T9. [901073] **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): The news that Ministers who resigned last week will receive nearly £17,000 in severance pay has outraged the people of Newport West. Nowhere in the real world do people get such amounts of money for resigning a job, no matter how sensible the decision might be. I have a long list of things we could do with that money in Newport West, so will the Minister make time to meet me next week to discuss it?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I am afraid the hon. Lady should have listened to the answers given at the urgent question the other day—[*Interruption.*] That is absolutely fine, thank you very much. She can read *Hansard*; we went into great detail. It is a matter of statute.

T10. [901074] **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): After all the decades of cover-up and the appalling treatment of those who were infected by receiving contaminated blood, will the Minister now say that interim payments will be made to those people, as recommended by his adviser Sir Robert Francis in his recent review, where he said there was a "compelling case" for them to be paid? Four hundred and nineteen people have died since the announcement of the inquiry. Time is pressing.

Michael Ellis: I heard what the review said and I thank the right hon. Lady for her continued diligence in this area. The infected blood scandal is an appalling tragedy that should simply never have happened. The Government are considering the recommendations and I can assure her that the matter is being given expeditious consideration. We will respond to the recommendations made by Sir Robert Francis QC in his study of a framework for compensation for victims just as soon as possible.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I listened with interest to the excellent question from the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) and I welcome the Minister's answer. Given that his predecessor for veterans, the Minister for Defence People, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), declined to uphold and totally disregarded the decision of this House to hold an inquiry, can I press this Minister further to expand a little more on what he suggested to the hon. Member for Bracknell earlier?

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): My line on Veterans UK has always been the same: it has an incredibly difficult job after years of under-investment by Governments of all colours. It needs to improve its output, and I will be working closely with my colleagues and others—I did receive the hon. Gentleman's letter this week—to ensure that veterans receive a better service from Veterans UK, conscious of the staff who work incredibly hard in that organisation.

British Special Forces in Afghanistan: New Allegations

Mr Speaker: Before I call John Healey to ask his urgent question, I wish to make a short statement about the sub judice resolution. I have been advised that there are active judicial review proceedings in relation to the allegation of unlawful killings in Afghanistan. I am exercising the discretion given to the Chair in respect of the resolution on matters of sub judice to allow references to those legal challenges, as they concern matters of national importance. This applies to today's urgent question and to relevant future business.

10.35 am

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on new allegations concerning British special forces in Afghanistan.

I thank you, Mr Speaker, for your very careful consideration of this urgent question request.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (James Heappey): On 12 July, the BBC broadcast an episode of "Panorama", claiming evidence of criminality allegedly committed by the UK armed forces in Afghanistan. The Ministry of Defence is currently defending two judicial reviews relating to allegations of unlawful killings during operations in Afghanistan in 2011 and 2012. While I accept, Mr Speaker, that to allow today's urgent question you have waived the convention that we do not discuss matters that are sub judice, advice from Ministry of Defence lawyers is that any discussion of specific detail of the cases would be prejudicial to the ongoing litigation, and thus I am afraid I simply cannot enter into detail about specific allegations made on specific operations relating to specific people.

Mr Speaker: I am slightly concerned. I did ask for the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), to be fully briefed by officials within the MOD, so that I would not have to be put in this position. Unfortunately, that has not been forthcoming, so I am very disappointed. I would have thought that a senior Minister, and certainly officials, would have gone through why they will not be discussing this. That did not happen, and I have been put in this position, so I am disappointed that the MOD did not take it seriously.

James Heappey: Let me apologise on behalf of the Department for the fact that you, Mr Speaker, and the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne were put in that position. I was not aware of the request that you had made, but I assure you that, when I return to the Department, I will investigate fully why that was not responded to in the way that it should have been.

We very much recognise the severity of these allegations, and where there is reason to believe that personnel may have fallen short of expectations, it is absolutely right that they be held to account. Nobody in our organisation, no matter how special, is above the law. The service police have already carried out extensive and independent investigations into allegations about the conduct of UK forces in Afghanistan, including allegations of ill-treatment

and unlawful killing. No charges were brought under Operation Northmoor, which investigated historical allegations relating to incidents in Afghanistan between 2005 and 2013. The service police concluded there was insufficient evidence to refer any cases to the independent Service Prosecuting Authority. I stress that both these organisations have the full authority and independence to take investigative decisions outside of the MOD's chain of command.

A separate allegation from October 2012 was investigated by the Royal Military Police under Operation Cestro. It resulted in the referral of three soldiers to the Service Prosecuting Authority. In 2014, after careful consideration, the director of service prosecutions took the decision not to prosecute any of the three soldiers referred. It is my understanding that all the alleged criminal offences referred to in the "Panorama" programme have been fully investigated by the service police, but we remain fully committed to any further reviews or investigations when new evidence or reason to do so is presented.

A decision to investigate allegations of criminality is for the service police. They provide an independent and impartial investigative capability, free from improper interference. Earlier this week, the Royal Military Police wrote to the production team of "Panorama" to request that any new evidence be provided to them. I am placing a copy of the RMP's letter in the Library of the House. I understand that the BBC has responded to question the legal basis on which the RMP are requesting that new evidence, which makes little sense to me, but the RMP and the BBC are in discussions. As I have said, if any new evidence is presented to the Royal Military Police, it will be investigated.

I am aware that the programme alleges the involvement of a unit for which it is MOD policy to neither confirm nor deny its involvement in any operational event. As such, I must refer in generality to the armed forces in response to the questions that I know colleagues will want to ask, and I cannot refer to any specific service personnel who may or may not have served in those units.

We should continue to recognise that the overwhelming majority of our armed forces serve with courage and professionalism. We hold them to the highest standards. They are our nation's bravest and best, and allegations such as these tarnish the reputation of our organisation. We all want to see allegations such as these investigated, so that the fine reputation of the British armed forces can be untarnished and remain as high as it should be.

John Healey: No one doubts the bravery of all those who served in Afghanistan, nor the extreme risks they faced. And the Minister is right: our British armed forces have a proud tradition of upholding the very highest standards of military ethics and professionalism, and the international laws of armed conflict and human rights. This is fundamental to Britain as one of the world's leading democracies, so the allegations reported in Tuesday night's "Panorama" programme could not be more serious—a pattern of suspicious deaths, with newly obtained military reports suggesting that one unit may have unlawfully killed 54 people in a single six-month tour; "drop weapons" planted to fabricate evidence, with the squadron's reports "causing alarm at headquarters"; and those at the top warned, but not acting to stop the pattern of killings and withholding

crucial details from the military police. Verifying the truth in any new evidence should matter most to military leaders and the MOD. This will not be buried.

What action are the Government taking to respond to the growing calls from military figures, including the former Chief of the Defence Staff General Sir David Richards, for a thorough investigation? I welcome the Minister's statement today that, if there is any new evidence, it will be investigated, but how can he argue that the service police can credibly tackle this task when "Panorama" exposes the systemic failures in their investigations, just as the Government's own Lyons review highlighted gaps in capabilities in the military police, and when the new defence serious crime unit, designed to fix the problems, will not be up and running until the end of the year?

There were similar claims from the same period against Australian special forces. However, these have been investigated thoroughly via a special inquiry commissioned by the head of the army, not Ministers. That inquiry had independence, justice and military experience, and welfare support. It had privacy, immunity and compulsory questioning powers to get to the truth. Justice Brereton's report confirmed credible evidence that members of Australian special forces were responsible for the unlawful killing of 39 people. It made 143 recommendations, all accepted by the Australian defence force, and referred 36 matters to the federal police for criminal investigation. Will the Government now do the same and investigate these claims and any cover-up in the chain of command, to secure justice for any of those affected and above all to protect the reputation of our British special forces?

James Heapey: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: this will not be buried. Absolutely nobody in the Ministry of Defence wants to see these sorts of allegations buried. That does no service to our armed forces whatsoever. These allegations will be investigated fully, if the new evidence is handed over.

The investigation by the RMP itself has already been double-checked, as it were, by a recently retired chief constable and a senior QC, and they agreed that the investigation was sound. Further to that, there has been the Henriques review, published in October 2021, which recognised only too well that there were problems—failings, if you like—in the military justice system that needed to be resolved, so ahead of this there has already been a recognition that the military justice system could work better. The Henriques review identifies many of the ways that it could.

The Secretary of State was clear when I spoke to him earlier in the week on this matter that he is not ruling out any type of public inquiry or review if it is clear that there are failings that need to be looked at. The MOD wants this to be as transparent as possible, so that everybody can have confidence in the service justice system and the reputation of our armed forces can remain untarnished.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Minister is right to say that there is scope for a systems review, and we must always keep our processes under review. However, would he agree that it is very important not to make insinuations or suggestions that could tarnish the reputation of parts of our armed forces that are among our finest? Those of us who have

experience of operations know how difficult circumstances can be. Would he agree with me that the overwhelming majority of the men and women of our armed forces serve this country and do our bidding with honour and courage, and we must not seek to disparage them in any way?

James Heapey: Obviously, I very much agree with what my right hon. Friend has said, and we do have to be careful. What was published on Tuesday was a television programme in which some new evidence, allegedly, was brought to light, but the service police have asked the BBC to share that evidence with them so that it can be investigated. Beyond that, a lot of the allegations, particularly those relating to individuals, were very carefully calibrated to reach a certain point without crossing a line that might have got the production team in trouble with libel lawyers. I think we have to be very careful, as my right hon. Friend says, to be clear that what is said in TV programmes is not said in a court of law and has not been investigated by the police. We have asked the production team to hand over the evidence they have, and we must very careful not to impugn individuals based on what a production company insinuated, rather than actually alleged, in the programme.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The overwhelming majority of those who serve in the armed forces do so with honour and courage, and we are rightly proud of their service, but by defending or failing to investigate properly the bad eggs that exist we tarnish everyone's reputation. The "Panorama" programme should concern us all, especially since these accounts were given by those within the armed forces themselves. The documentary described "kill or capture" night raids, the systematic killing of detainees and unarmed civilians, planted weapons, competitions between squadrons on the numbers killed, and cover-ups by senior officers. If senior officers knew of such behaviour, why was no action taken? If they did not know, why not?

The Ministry of Defence has so far treated the allegations with some flippancy, saying the documentary "jumps to unjustified conclusions". The House needs an assurance that the review of this material will be carried out by an independent investigator. Flaws in the investigatory process and potential cover-ups by senior officers should be included. There must be democratic oversight of our special forces, and I would appreciate the Minister's reassurance that this is something he is considering. Finally, how is the MOD investigating failures in the chain of command?

Mr Speaker: Can I remind Members that there are set times for urgent questions? The SNP has one minute, but that was over one and a half minutes. If I am going to grant urgent questions, Members know the rules and they have to stick to the rules. Please can you all take that on board?

James Heapey: I could not disagree more with the suggestion that the MOD has been flippant over the investigation of these events. I think nobody would pretend that Operation Northmoor was not slow to get off the ground in the first place. That is already the subject of what the Secretary of State has asked to be

[James Heapey]

reviewed. When the initial service police investigation was completed, a recently retired chief constable and a senior QC were asked to revisit the investigation to check that the processes were sound.

The MOD, at every turn, has wanted to see this done properly because we believe more than anybody else, especially those of us in the Department who have previously served, that nobody in our nation's armed forces benefits from even the slightest suggestion that there is protection on the basis that they are too special, too brave or too courageous. Our armed forces get their licence to operate around the world from the fact that they are held to the very highest of standards, and everybody in the MOD believes that should be the case.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): My hon. Friend knows, because of his service in the armed forces, how morale can be affected by any form of investigation into units, and it reduces the effectiveness of any fighting force. Although this happened some time ago, does my hon. Friend agree that we must make absolutely sure that soldiers who are serving now within the Special Air Service and the armed forces realise that any inquiry will be done quickly and efficiently, that recommendations will be carried out by the Government as soon as they can, and that the morale of the troops and the units in which they serve will be held at the highest level, to ensure that we are fighting efficient at all times?

James Heapey: Yes, Mr Speaker. We are obviously always concerned for the morale of our nation's armed forces, and investigations such as this can have an impact on morale. At the risk of disagreeing with my constituency neighbour, I think that sometimes morale must come secondary to doing what is right. That is why the Chief of the General Staff rightly removed the 3rd Battalion Parachute Regiment from an operational deployment this summer, and why the Royal Air Force Red Arrows are flying with fewer planes this display season than they would normally do. People in the MOD have the courage to do the right thing, even if it might cause some concern within the ranks. What matters is the institutional representation of our nation's armed forces.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Having met members of our special forces in both Iraq and Afghanistan as a member of the Defence Committee and as a Minister, I have nothing but the utmost respect for them and the difficult job that we ask them to do. These allegations will be appalling to them as individuals, but I say to the Minister that this will not go away. Let me suggest what should happen. We do not want a lengthy inquiry, but I suggest putting in charge of an inquiry a former judge advocate general who understands the military context of this issue, and who could look quickly at the allegations and ensure that those that need investigating get investigated, and that we get answers. This stain on the reputation of those good servicemen who we rely on to protect us cannot be allowed.

James Heapey: This will not go away, we do not want it to go away, and the Secretary of State has told me that he does not want anything to be ruled out at the Dispatch Box today. I am certain that the House will

hear from him in the near future about what he thinks is the right way to do exactly as the right hon. Gentleman suggests.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The sad fact is that it seems that a large number of people died, and the allegations made against the special services are very serious indeed. Does the Minister think it appropriate that the Royal Military Police should be conducting these investigations at all? Should it not be done by an outside body? In response to the question from the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), does the Minister think it is time for special forces to be brought under the same democratic accountability as the rest of the armed services?

James Heapey: I have every confidence in the independence of the Royal Military Police as an independent police force, free of political influence or influence from the chain of command, just as I have confidence that all other police forces are proudly operational and independent. No, I do not think that the special forces should be moved into a position of more overt democratic oversight. The reason for that is that the work that they do is right at the extreme end of the threat envelope. The risk to life and limb is profound, and what they do in defence of our nation's interest is extraordinary. If we were to compromise that even in the slightest, our nation would be at a disadvantage, and brave people would be in severe peril.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): We all understand the dangers, pressures and awfulness of armed conflict, and that is precisely why we have rules of engagement and the Geneva convention, in order to set boundaries. When those boundaries are breached, that has to be dealt with. May I urge the Department to listen to Lord Richards, who had some considerable experience in this, and also to learn from Australia? Will Ministers have discussions with their Australian counterparts, ministerial and military alike, to learn from their effective and successful way of dealing with a not dissimilar problem?

James Heapey: There is a lot that we discuss with our great friends in Canberra, and every day we find new things to talk about. The relationship between the ministerial teams is ever closer. The right hon. Gentleman is exactly right: there is lots to learn from the way that the Australians approach this. It is important to say, again, that this is not the House encouraging us to take a second pass at only one investigation. This was investigated and verified, and we have been clear that if new evidence comes to light, we will investigate that too. As I said to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), the Secretary of State is clear that he rules nothing out, and he will be in touch with the House shortly to say how he thinks this might be further reviewed.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Minister is absolutely right that insinuation is not the same as evidence or proof of guilt, and nobody wants to tarnish the reputation of the British armed forces without due reason, but the allegations are important and serious. Following on from what you said, Mr Speaker, will the Minister ensure that there is a proper briefing for the shadow Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), and perhaps

for the Select Committee on Defence as well, so that people can look at this matter without having to worry about sub judice concerns?

James Heapey: Mr Speaker, I can absolutely promise that there will be a briefing for the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne and for you, Sir. There may be an issue over Privy Council terms for the Select Committee at large, but I will look into that suggestion as well.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): We on the Liberal Democrat Benches also pay tribute to the courage, bravery and ingenuity of UK special forces and all of our armed forces, but of course it is incumbent on them to follow the laws of armed conflict. Does the Minister agree that members of the armed forces will be first among those wanting to see those laws applied and abided by, so that we can continue to call out the war crimes that we see happening in places such as Kremenchuk, Irpin and Bucha?

James Heapey: First, I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the House and to his place as his party's defence spokesperson, and pay tribute to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), who was an excellent defence spokesman before him.

Speaking as a veteran to a veteran, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: nobody who has served in the uniform of our nation's armed forces wants to be treated as if they can get away with whatever they like. We want to be held to a standard, because that gives us our licence to operate when we train other nations' armed forces around the world and when we have to do difficult things in dangerous places. That licence to operate is our most important weapon.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): So many members of our armed forces sacrificed so much in Helmand, yet our armed forces and all of us have to

have confidence in our processes. What discussions have the Minister and the Secretary of State had with our international partners, including those within NATO, about the processes they adopt to ensure objectivity, accountability and independence?

James Heapey: A lot of these matters are governed by international treaties, conventions and laws that all our allies within NATO hold in common, and that we all work to enforce. So much of the outrage over the way the Russians have behaved in Ukraine—to reference the question raised by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord)—is due to the fact that that army has not followed those international laws, conventions and treaties. NATO prides itself on behaving in the way that international law requires, and the British armed forces more than anyone.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I also pay tribute to all of our forces and special forces for their bravery, courage, determination and perseverance. Some 1,281 allegations were made after the closure of the Iraq Historic Allegations Team, and £20 million in settlements was paid out by the Ministry of Defence. Will the Minister confirm that the importance of discharging our duty of care has been taken on board, and that the further allegations made in the programme will be taken seriously, but according to the premise that people are innocent until proven guilty, not simply accused of being guilty?

James Heapey: The allegations in the programme will be taken very seriously if new evidence is handed across to the service police that they can investigate. What we will not do is react to a lot of insinuation and what appears to be a repetition of allegedly criminal events that have already been investigated—that is not in itself enough to say that the service police need to reopen that investigation. Hopefully, the BBC will hand across whatever new evidence it has.

Business of the House

10.59 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer): It will be a pleasure.

MONDAY 18 JULY—Consideration of a motion of confidence in Her Majesty's Government.

TUESDAY 19 JULY—Consideration in Committee of the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill (day 2).

WEDNESDAY 20 JULY—Conclusion of consideration in Committee of the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill (day 3).

THURSDAY 21 JULY—General debate on UK sanctions for human rights abuses and corruption, followed by the Sir David Amess summer adjournment debate. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the summer recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 21 July and return on Monday 5 September.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. I note the pleasure, on all sides of the House, at the forthcoming Sir David Amess debate. I wonder if it will be the opening dispatch from the deputy Leader of the House of Commons, the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), opposite my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden).

I am surprised to see the Leader of the House in his place, as all we can gather from his statement and everything else we have heard from his party this week is that his Government are done. They have given up on governing. Tories are running scared, blocking Labour's vote of no confidence—another new low; morally and constitutionally bankrupt to the bitter end. It is a core convention that the Government must be able to command the confidence of the House and that Opposition motions of no confidence are given time. That has been the case for centuries. Indeed, the Tory party itself tabled a very similar motion on 2 August 1965, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said, which states, and I quote because I have checked it:

“deplores the Prime Minister's conduct of the nation's affairs.”—*[Official Report, 2 August 1965; Vol. 717, c. 1070.]*

That is what we want to do.

So, I ask the Leader of the House, why was that Tory motion acceptable, but Labour's motion is not? I think we know why, Mr Speaker. It is clearly a political decision: a Tory party clinging on to a law-breaking national embarrassment brass-neckery—I am not sure whether I have used that word correctly, but my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) used it yesterday—of a Prime Minister. Labour's motion is entirely orderly and the Leader of the House knows it. I have checked. So, could he please point to the part of “Erskine May” where it says the Government can now choose to accept or reject or dictate the wording of an orderly motion of no confidence purely on a political whim?

The Leader of the House announced today that the Government have tabled a motion of confidence in themselves for Monday. What makes him think that it is right for the Government to dictate to Her Majesty's Opposition which orderly motions we can table? If they do not want any sort of confidence motion, do you know what they could do, Mr Speaker? They could get rid of the Prime Minister now. He should not be in No. 10 Downing Street a single day further.

I am afraid it is the Government's incompetence that means the Online Safety Bill has been delayed yet again. I see just now chaos online between Tory Ministers and leadership candidates in their opinions on that. I am sorry, but the Government have had years to bring in this Bill. I called for it for months from the Dispatch Box. They could have brought it in months and months ago. Delaying it means inaction on making children safer online and on tackling fraud and scams. It is on them, Mr Speaker. How long is the Leader of the House going to delay the Bill this time?

From flagrant breaches of long-standing constitutional conventions to not turning up. After spending all her time deciding whether or not to join the circus that is the Tory leadership contest, the Home Secretary just did not bother turning up to be scrutinised by the Home Affairs Committee yesterday. Can the Leader of the House please tell us what it is about passport delays, asylum delays, rising crime, falling prosecutions, record low rape charges and record high fraud that makes the Home Secretary run away from the Select Committee? Lots of preparation goes into these sessions, not just from Members on all sides but from staff. Will the Leader of the House please remind his Cabinet colleague about the importance of just turning up? We have a Prime Minister hinting that he will not turn up to his last Prime Minister's questions; and with ambulance services in crisis, instead of coming to this House yesterday and telling us what he is going to do about it, why was the Health Secretary somewhere else, tweeting support for a leadership candidate? Will the Leader of the House ask the Health Secretary to take some responsibility, come to this House and make a statement on why the longer the Tories are in power, the longer patients wait?

We can believe the former Chancellor when he said this week that he has no working-class friends, because literally none of them here are doing any work! But this is serious: the Prime Minister has already done untold damage to our country and to standards in public life. He has repeatedly been caught disrespecting the British people, and his pattern of behaviour as Foreign Secretary shows that he is potentially a risk to national security. Those on the Tory Benches are all complicit. They know that he is not fit to govern—they told the public so just days ago—and they are now propping him up until September. He must not be allowed to stay over the summer, when he will have no parliamentary scrutiny and can do whatever he wants.

This situation needs more than challenging the Tory at the top. Conservative Members have failed to remove the man they admitted was entirely unfit for office, and they are all culpable. Labour will act in the national interest and vote with no confidence in this failed and frankly dangerous Prime Minister and his Government, because we need a fresh start with a Labour Government who will reboot our economy, end the cost of living crisis, revitalise our public services, re-energise our communities, unite our country and clean up our politics.

Mark Spencer: I start by welcoming the deputy Leader of the House of Commons to his place. It was a very wise decision to appoint him, and it will certainly make business questions easier for me to have him sitting on the Front Bench rather than on the Back Benches asking awkward questions.

Turning to the weekly rant from the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), let us get to the crux of the matter. The Labour party wants a no-confidence vote and we are supplying it with one. The wording is now constitutionally correct. It is not my fault that the Labour party cannot seem to copy and paste from what is constitutionally accepted, but we are giving it its confidence vote on Monday. I trust she will be in her place—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): How are you going to vote?

Mark Spencer: I hope that I will be with the hon. Gentleman in giving confidence to the Government.

The hon. Member for Bristol West also says that we are not getting on with the job, but that is absolutely not true. Payments are landing in people's bank accounts today to help them with the challenges of the cost of living—£326 is being given to 8 million households. That is the Government getting on with the business of supporting people through the challenges that we face. Rather than being in the Westminster bubble making cheap political points and trying to stir up trouble, the Government are delivering for people on the challenges that we face.

The Home Secretary will be in her place the next time we have Home Office questions. I am sure that she will be very keen to stand by her record of recruiting 20,000 more police officers; we already have 13,500. We have given more powers to the police and are giving them £17 billion extra this year. We are ensuring that our police have resources through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. We produced our beating crime plan last summer. We have a huge track record of defending police officers and pushing down crime. The shadow Leader of the House should pay tribute to the Home Secretary.

The hon. Lady will be aware that we are recruiting even more people to the Passport Office to try to help. The vast majority of passports are now being delivered within six weeks, so progress is being made—*[Interruption.]* It is factually correct that a huge volume of the people who apply for a passport now get it within six weeks.

The hon. Lady mentioned that the Health Secretary was busy; he will be here next week for health questions. I am sure he will point out to her when he gets to the Dispatch Box that although there are challenges following covid and queues that we need to overcome—that is why we are investing in our health service through the social care levy—compared with Wales, the queues are shorter in England. That is because the Conservative party is managing the health service in England whereas the Labour party is doing so in Wales, where the queues are longer and the challenges are not being met with the same efficiency. The hon. Lady needs to stop trying to score her cheap political points and recognise and celebrate what the Government are doing to support people.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): The Ministry of Justice wants to build a large new prison in my constituency, on a beautiful piece of open land between Lubenham

and Foxton. It is completely the wrong place to build a new prison; it will force smaller traffic on to some very narrow country lanes, including in front of a rural primary school. There is also an issue of democracy: Harborough District Council clearly voted against the prison proposal, because it was not in its local plan. I asked the Ministry of Justice not to appeal against the decision, but unfortunately it has done so, as it has done in other locations. I am in favour of new prisons—we need new prisons, because we need longer prison sentences—but this is not the right location. There must be a better brownfield location for the new prison. Can we please have a debate about the new prisons programme? I know that the same issue is occurring elsewhere.

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is a tenacious campaigner for his constituents and I know that he will make sure we get to the right decision. I will pass my hon. Friend's comments directly to the Secretary of State for Justice and ask him to write to my hon. Friend about the matter.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It would be remiss of me not to congratulate the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and welcome him to his place. He is the very epitome of bizarre Brexitism, and he is now finally part of the payroll that up to now he has always loathed. When they have got so far down the pecking order to fill places in this ramshackle Government, we know that they have finally reached the bare Bones.

We need a debate about squatting and forced evictions, because we have a problem here in central London that we need to resolve. At the bottom end of Whitehall, there is someone we just cannot get rid of: Schrödinger's Prime Minister, simultaneously gone and apparently still here. His latest wheeze is this vote on Monday: a Government tabling a vote of confidence in themselves. It would be great to think that they have finally got it and that they will be joining us in relieving this nation of this appalling Conservative Government, but actually it is more ridiculous than that. Knowing that any motion specifying the Prime Minister would probably be passed in this House, they have decided to make it a motion about a Government they can barely fill—a motion of confidence in themselves. Denying Labour's legitimate motion was just shocking; it was against every principle of House democracy. Any Opposition must be able to table a motion of confidence in the Government at any time and in any way they want.

Wednesday was an appalling instance of democracy denial, but at least it was a diversion from the tedious, grotesque Tory anti-beauty parade. The "I'm the Most Right-Wing Candidate...Get Me Out of Here!" franchise is making Margaret Thatcher look almost like Mary Poppins. One of those people is going to be Prime Minister. For the third time in a row, a small group of Conservative party members will determine who governs Scotland. Is it not therefore timely that today our First Minister will lay out the democratic case for an independent Scotland? I do not know what will be in it, Mr Speaker, but I can tell you something: it will be almost the exact opposite of what happens in this place.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. When he had a pop at my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough, I think he lost the Chamber. My hon. Friend is very popular in this place.

Chris Bryant: Division!

Mark Spencer: I am confident that we would win that Division quite handsomely, to be honest.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) wants to pivot to talking about a referendum on independence, because he does not want to focus on the record of the SNP in Scotland. The Government are getting on with the job: we are delivering for millions of people up and down this country, including in Scotland, where people will be getting large amounts of support to help with the challenges of the cost of living. That is what we are focused on.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be here next week to make the same point about the need for a referendum. I will give him the same answer: we are focused on getting on with the job, and we will not fall for his smoke and mirrors.

Mims Davies (Mid Sussex) (Con): The delivery of the urgently needed and far too long-awaited town centre revitalisation in Burgess Hill is an absolute priority for me. Nearby, 3,500 homes are coming forward, supported by Homes England. Our spade-ready pride in place bid for round 2 of levelling-up fund round 2 is ready to go. Will the Leader of the House please make time for a debate in Government time about how levelling up in action is based not on geography, but on the Government responding well to the needs of all our communities?

Mark Spencer: I wish my hon. Friend well with the bid for Burgess Hill and her ambitions to improve that area. She will be aware that there is a £4.8 billion levelling-up fund that I am sure she has been bidding into. I know that Members across the House will be making their bids and putting them in as we speak, and I wish all colleagues well with that process.

Mr Speaker: I call Ian Mearns, Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business, particularly the Sir David Amess summer Adjournment debate next Thursday.

I welcome the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) to his place. He is a former member of the Backbench Business Committee. This is more proof that the Committee is an amazing springboard for ministerial advancement. Conservative Members should therefore be rushing to their Whips Office to volunteer to take the currently unfilled place on the Committee that the Government should have. I am looking forward to that in no short order.

A report issued this week—it is no shock to many of us—shows that a greater proportion of children in the north-east of England are now living in poverty than in any other part of the country. Child poverty is not a new phenomenon in the north-east, but it is getting much worse and rapidly so. Can we have a statement from the Government on what they are going to do to lift children in constituencies across the north-east out of poverty as a matter of urgency?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman, because the Sir David Amess debate was the idea of the Backbench Business Committee and I pay tribute to the Committee

for coming forward with that plan. He referred to the fact that the Committee is the springboard to ministerial greatness. I would say to colleagues on the Back Benches that, like the Deputy Speaker, if you serve on that Committee for 17 years, you too could aspire to ministerial greatness.

On the hon. Gentleman's very serious point about child poverty, the Government do recognise that there are huge challenges out there at the moment with global spikes in the cost of fuel and food. That is why we are coming forward with huge amounts of money. We have unveiled a £15 billion intervention to help households in these challenging times. Today, payments of £326 will be landing in 8 million households. We are also providing one-off payments of £300 to 8 million pensioner households and £150 to individuals receiving disability benefits. We are doubling the value of the October universal energy bill discount to £400 and scrapping the requirement to repay that money. That is a huge intervention to try to help people in these times of global turmoil.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Could we have a debate about the Boys Brigade? That would allow me to congratulate 1st Buckie Boys Brigade on receiving the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, which is the most prestigious award for voluntary organisations and is richly deserved by 1st Buckie, one of the biggest companies anywhere in the United Kingdom, in their 75th year. They are also helped by dedicated officers and helpers, 14 of whom were recently given awards for a combined total of 455 years' service. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating 1st Buckie Boys Brigade and everyone involved who has made this company so successful?

Mark Spencer: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating 1st Buckie. It is a huge achievement that they have been given this award, particularly in the platinum jubilee year. I pay tribute not only to 1st Buckie but to Boys Brigades up and down the country, and to all the volunteers who help them to keep young people busy, occupied and stimulated.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Last Saturday was the Durham miners gala, with this big meeting taking place after an absence of two years. It is magnificent to see the banners flying and the brass bands playing again. I was proud to march behind the banner of Chopwell in my constituency and then to join the Greenside banner, which was an emotional experience as we remembered our dear friend and colleague Jack Graham MBE, who did so much to contribute to our local community and our local mining heritage. Can we have a debate in Government time on the importance of the Durham miners gala to our communities and our local history?

Mark Spencer: I did not myself receive an invitation to the Durham miners gala this year, but I recognise its importance. Nottinghamshire has a huge and proud mining history as well, and there are still a number of banners in my constituency. I know the pride that goes with those communities, and I hope the event went well.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I am delighted that the Government have such an ambitious outlook in seeking to sign as many free trade agreements as possible. Unfortunately, however, they have set in motion the

process under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 in respect of the UK-Australia free trade agreement without allowing our International Trade Committee to present its report to the House and without providing a debate on the agreement. It is essential for all Members of Parliament to be able to give their views on the trade deals that we are signing, and to give our constituents a voice in this place. I know that this is ambitious, given that my right hon. Friend has already outlined next week's business, but may we please have a debate on the UK-Australia free trade agreement before we ratify it?

Mark Spencer: The International Trade Committee had six months in which to examine the agreement before the commencement of the CRaG process. The Government's commitment to holding debates on free trade agreements during that process is subject to the timeliness of requests and the availability of parliamentary time, and my hon. Friend will doubtless appreciate that there is a wide range of competing demands on time in the Chamber before the House rises for the summer recess.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): I am sure you will agree, Mr Speaker, that fish and chips are the great British culinary gift, and that the local fish and chip shop is often the centre of a community. You may not agree that the best fish and chips in the world are made in Yorkshire, but I will concede that the second best are on the other side of the Pennines.

Mr Malcolm Tully has run the same fish and chip shop, feeding the same community, for 30 years, having used his miner's redundancy money to set up the business. However, it is now under threat because of the rising costs of various artefacts that he needs to use, and there are tens of thousands of other small businesses in the same perilous position. Will the Leader of the House organise a debate in Government time so that we can discuss the pressure on fish and chip shops and all the other small businesses in the country?

Mark Spencer: I declare my interest, Mr Speaker.

Let me join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Malcolm Tully on the work that he does. Fish and chip shops are indeed a great community asset, and there are some great ones in my constituency. They do face huge challenges—particularly the price of sunflower oil, which is driving many of their costs—but the Government recognise the great contribution that they make to our communities, and we should support them.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): May we have an urgent debate on the response from both the Government and the local community to the disgusting and abusive vandalism perpetrated by young teenagers in my constituency this week? Some of it was racially motivated, and some of it targeted one of our finest female police community support officers. Does the Leader of the House agree that this requires both a police and a community response? We have a record number of police officers in Bedfordshire—1,411—but they need to be deployed throughout the county.

Mark Spencer: Of course I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and I pay tribute to the work that he does in his constituency. Antisocial behaviour will be one of the primary focuses of the £50 million-a-year safer streets fund. Next week is antisocial behaviour awareness

week, and there will be a debate in Westminster Hall. The deployment of police officers is a matter for the local force, which is operationally independent, but I certainly think that antisocial behaviour is something on which it should focus.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): The independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Telford published its findings this week, providing an opportunity for the authorities to reflect on their failings and take responsibility for their mistakes. Telford and Wrekin Council, however, published a response suggesting that the child sexual exploitation had happened a long time ago, that the council had made improvements, and that many of the inquiry's recommendations had already been implemented. There was no apology for the failings, no reference to having made any mistakes, and no commitment to change. Telford and Wrekin Council is in denial. May we have a debate on the report and the response of the authorities?

Mark Spencer: First, let me pay tribute to my hon. Friend. I know that she has worked tirelessly on this matter, and she is a huge champion for those people who have been victims. The scale of the abuse carried out in Telford and Wrekin was truly appalling. I understand that Telford and Wrekin Council has confirmed that it will accept all the inquiry's recommendations and deliver all the suggested improvements, but we must ensure that the lessons are learned so that victims are protected and offenders are brought to justice. This is an important matter and I am sure that any debate on it would be well subscribed.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Further to the Leader of the House's failure to answer the question from the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), could we have a statement on the whereabouts of the Home Secretary? Along with her failure to appear before the Home Affairs Committee yesterday, she has cancelled a long-arranged meeting on Monday with Tony Cox, the father of my constituent Lorraine Cox, who was brutally murdered in September 2020. It would be an understatement to say that Mr Cox is upset about this, particularly given the Home Secretary's previous admission that the circumstances around Lorraine's murder represented "total state failure", the serious police failings in the murder investigation and the concerns shared by Mr Cox and many on both sides of this House about the lack of Government action generally to improve women's safety.

Mark Spencer: I will of course make sure that the Home Secretary is aware of the right hon. Gentleman's comments and write to her directly on his behalf. She will be here on 5 September, the first day back after summer recess, and I hope that he will be in his place to hold her to account.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Leader of the House has already mentioned the £326 payment that is arriving in the bank accounts of 1.5 million people today and further people in the days to come. The cost of living crisis is the biggest issue we face in this country, so can we have a debate on the Government's wider package on this, which could see low-income households benefiting from £1,200 of help and other macroeconomic measures needed to get inflation down?

Mark Spencer: My right hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the £37 billion of support. That is a huge amount of money that is going to support people in these challenging times. What Putin did in Ukraine has caused huge turbulence across food and energy markets around the world. That is why, as she said, we are making the £326 payments today to 8 million homes, but there also further payments coming. I think it is worth reiterating the £300 to 8 million pensioner households, the £150 to individuals receiving disability benefits, the doubling in value of the universal October energy bill discount to £400 and the scrapping of the requirement to pay that back. That is a huge amount of Government cash going out to support people in these challenging times.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): As the England women's football team reach the quarter-finals of the Euros, I want to raise the lack of recognition for the women who played for England in the first official international women's football match, against Scotland in November 1972. The women in that team have never been awarded a cap by the Football Association, while the Scottish FA has awarded caps to its women footballers for that match. Not only that, but when the England women footballers of the 1970s were invited by the FA to Wembley in 2019 as the "legends of women's football", they were only allowed to walk around the pitch and not on it, and yet the male football legends were paraded on the pitch just a few weeks later. I am calling on the FA to award an official cap to every woman who played for England in that match in 1972, and to give those first Lionesses the same status as legends of football that it gives to the male footballers. Will the Leader of the House join me in this call, and will he make time for a debate on the issue?

Mark Spencer: I congratulate the hon. Lady on raising this matter; I think she carries the support of the whole House. Of course I join her in making those representations to the FA. I will also write to the FA on her behalf making that very point. It is worth reflecting that we have moved a very long way and that now, in 2022, we are in a whole different world. We should celebrate all women's sport and women's football, and I wish the Lionesses all the best for their future matches.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): Peel Group announced yesterday that it is likely to close the award winning Doncaster Sheffield airport, saying that it is not viable. The people of Doncaster and South Yorkshire need that airport to remain open. Not only are 800 jobs at risk; so is our local economy. The airport is a strategic asset, and could and should be the driver to increase prosperity for South Yorkshire as a whole. Will the Leader of the House meet me to discuss the airport's future, whether that be through another private investor or maybe—as our very own Ben Houchen did in Teesside—through the mayoral combined authority?

Mark Spencer: I have not had the opportunity to fly from Doncaster airport, but I know a lot of people who have, and their experience was very good. Regional airports are a key part of local communities; as my hon. Friend said, they support hundreds of jobs. Although this is a commercial decision for the owners of the airport, I hope that after consultation with stakeholders,

they conclude that there is a viable aviation future for the airport. I wish my hon. Friend all the best with his campaign.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Department for Work and Pensions figures that have come out since the House has been sitting show that 359,000 households—1.3 million children—are affected by the two-child limit in universal credit and child tax credit. Shockingly, just to put food on the table, 1,830 women have had to fill out a form to prove that their child was born as the result of rape or coercive control. The two-child limit is driving up child poverty rates right across the United Kingdom, so can we have an urgent debate in Government time about the desperate need to scrap this policy once and for all, and to value every child, regardless of when they were born?

Mark Spencer: These are difficult decisions to take. People up and down the country who are not receiving benefits have to make very difficult decisions about how many children they can afford to have. There is not a blank cheque from the taxpayer to keep funding people. It is about bringing balance and fairness into the system, so that we can protect taxpayers' money and make sure it is spent in the fairest possible way.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Another issue of confidence, on which we need an urgent debate, has come to my attention: Taunton station. The staff there are utterly lazy and incompetent. Those who are young, vulnerable, disabled or need help cannot get from one side of the station to the other, because passengers have to walk around a main road and up a ramp, taking all their suitcases with them; it makes Gatwick and Heathrow look positively balmy. It is beyond belief! Great Western Railway says it is inclusive and stands up for its customers—well, Taunton does not. Can we please have a debate on the issue before somebody gets injured or, worse, killed?

Mark Spencer: There has been huge investment in access to railway stations up and down the country, particularly for disability access to help people get from platform to platform, but I will of course pass on my hon. Friend's comments directly to the Secretary of State for Transport.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Further to earlier questions, MPs on both sides of the House will be acutely aware that the Home Office's MPs' inquiry line for visas and passports is on its backside. Waits are now measured not in minutes, but in hours. Could the Home Secretary take some time to find her way to the Chamber and make a statement on what she will do about it?

Mark Spencer: Perhaps I can help the hon. Gentleman by telling him what the Government are doing. Some 850 additional staff have been brought in since April 2021, with a further 350 arriving before the summer. Between March and May this year, the Passport Office processed approximately 3 million passport applications, 1.5% of which had been in the system for longer than 10 weeks, so the vast majority of passport applications now are being processed within six weeks.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): May I start by wishing everyone a bostin' Black Country Day, as we celebrate the beating heart of the west midlands?

I come here today with some frustration about an issue that I raised with my right hon. Friend's predecessor regarding onerous clauses in council house tenants' contracts and leases that said they would be evicted if they criticised the Labour Administration in Sandwell. After a promised U-turn by the local authority, I found out an hour ago that those clauses have been included in council house tenants' contracts. That is absolutely outrageous. Members of Parliament in Sandwell were given a guarantee by the Labour Administration that this would not happen. We have had corruption, commissioners and now contempt for the most vulnerable. Can we have a debate on the Floor of the House about this reckless council, and put this situation to bed?

Mark Spencer: I am sorry to hear of my hon. Friend's frustrations. He is a tenacious champion, and I know he will continue to hold Sandwell Council to account. I suggest he applies for an Adjournment debate to raise the matter fully with a Minister and get a proper response.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It is 52 years since the contaminated blood scandal started. Since the former Prime Minister announced the public inquiry—five years ago this week—419 people have died. On average, a person dies every four days. The Government's independent reviewer of compensation said there is a "compelling case" for interim compensation payments to be made now.

Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate? I had a wholly unsatisfactory answer from the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General this morning as to when the Government will make an announcement about the payment of compensation. The Government have rightly found time to make interim compensation payments in relation to the Post Office's Horizon scandal and the Windrush scandal. Why has the infected blood community again been left with nothing when people are dying?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady, who has been a strong campaigner on this topic over a number of years. The infected blood inquiry is a priority for the Government, and it is extremely important that all those who have suffered so terribly get the answers they deserve, and for which they have spent decades waiting.

I know the right hon. Lady raised this with the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General at Question Time. The Government published Sir Robert Francis's compensation framework, and I will encourage the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General to keep the House updated as this work progresses.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Leader of the House aware that the World Health Organisation tells us that the biggest killer of children and young people worldwide is not a virus or an epidemic but the roads? Is he further aware that, 40 years ago, an all-party parliamentary group secured the introduction of the Motor Vehicles (Wearing of Seat Belts) Regulations 1982, making the wearing of seatbelts compulsory and saving so many lives? Since then, the UK has been a

leading light in raising road safety standards worldwide. We are having a party today in the Cholmondeley Room to celebrate those 40 years of success, and he will be very welcome. Although we have not persuaded a Transport Minister to come, he would be a very good substitute.

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is very kind. I am a former winner of road safety parliamentarian of the year and, if my diary allows, I would be delighted to come along. I pay tribute to all the work of successive Governments to improve road safety, although we can always do more. The wearing of seatbelts was a huge step forward and, as new technology develops, we should also pay tribute to the car manufacturers for improving the safety of vehicles, too.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I know the Leader of the House will be delighted that Derby County football club have been saved from administration by a local long-term fan, David Clowes. However, serious questions remain to be answered. It was reported this week that legal action has commenced after Chris Kirchner, the former preferred bidder, was not able to pay the staff wage bill, which he guaranteed. I am very concerned that Quantuma, the administrator, could appoint Kirchner—apparently a man of straw—as the preferred bidder and allow him to get close to a deal that all Rams fans can now see would have been disastrous for the club. Can we have a debate in this House about the responsibilities and accountability of administrators, particularly in relation to community assets such as football clubs?

Mark Spencer: I am delighted that Derby County have been saved from administration. I am only sorry that they are now two leagues apart from Nottingham Forest, who are now a premiership club. Maybe we will get lucky in a cup draw and be able to knock them out of a cup in the near future. To be serious, we do know that there is a widespread culture of clubs operating unsustainably. That is not acceptable and we must ensure that clubs such as Derby are sustainable for the long term. I will pass on my hon. Friend's comments to the relevant Department; she raises a very important point.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) on taking his seat on the Treasury Bench. I confess that I hardly recognise him with his clothes on; we often change next to each other in the gym.

May I ask the Leader of the House about two issues relating to the recess? First, there may be substantial changes in the situation in Ukraine in the next few weeks and months, and, obviously, we would want to make sure that all Members were informed of what the British situation was. It may be necessary to recall Parliament, and I hope he would say that that would be possible.

Secondly, the passport figures the Leader of the House gives are simply unrecognisable to my constituency office. Many staff have gone to the Home Office team in Portcullis House, but I gather that that will stop for the recess. What will be put in place to ensure that we can still get things sorted for our constituents? Many families are terrified of losing the first holiday they have had for two or three years.

Mark Spencer: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. Clearly, where people are waiting for their passports, that is enormously frustrating for them. The good news is that they are a diminishing group of people, as the vast majority of passports are now being processed very rapidly. However, I will pass on his comments to the Home Office so that it is aware of them. Any possible recall of Parliament over Ukraine would be a decision for Mr Speaker, but other methods are available to Ministers to keep all colleagues informed as to progress. “Dear colleague” letters would certainly be one method of doing that.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): The levelling-up fund represents a real opportunity to transform areas of Teesside, particularly in the Greater Eston area, where I have signed off an £8 million bid for the redevelopment of Eston Square and another £8 million bid for a renewed Eston baths. May we have a statement from the Government on round 2 of the levelling-up fund?

Mark Spencer: I wish my hon. Friend well with his levelling-up fund bid. This is a huge opportunity for communities up and down this country to invest in their local communities and improve their local economy. I have no doubt that his local authority’s bid will be a very strong one, and I wish him and all colleagues who have put in such bids well.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): This week, the 150th Open championship returns to the home of golf, St Andrews, in my constituency. A record 290,000 spectators are expected to attend. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming the event and the work that the R&A is doing to increase participation, with 20,000 children’s tickets available? Can we have a debate in Government time on how to maximise the benefit of such sporting events, from both a social and an economic perspective?

Mark Spencer: I join the hon. Lady in her comments and wish everyone who is going to attend at St Andrews well. Even the weather might be nice and not too windy in Scotland this weekend for the golf. I hope that the event goes very well; the UK should be very proud that we can host such international events.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Now then, Brian Lee, an 82-year-old from Skegby, in Ashfield, is deeply disappointed with Trentbarton’s decision to axe the 141 bus service, which is a lifeline to Brian and many other people in Ashfield and throughout Nottinghamshire. Will the Leader of the House throw his considerable weight—sorry, his considerable political weight—behind the campaign to provide a service on this route?

Mark Spencer: Now then, first, let me pay tribute to my hon. Friend, as I know he is campaigning vigorously on this matter, and to Brian Lee—I hope he will get the resolution that he deserves. I also want to put on record the efforts of Tom Smith, a local councillor in Sherwood, who is working hard, with Trentbarton, to try to secure the future of the 141. It is a vital bus service to that community and I sincerely hope that Trentbarton changes its mind.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): While the Conservatives have been romanticising about the post-covid return to austerity cuts, I doubt they have noticed this week’s Resolution Foundation report, which highlighted growing inequalities as a consequence of the low wages and low growth that have consistently occurred over the past decade and a bit. We might think that, as a country, we are on a par with France and Germany, but we need to recognise—as one of the conclusion sets out—that, except for those at the top, this simply is no longer true when it comes to living standards. On people on the lowest incomes, we are 22% behind France and 21% behind Germany. That is the record of this Government. That is what levelling down has meant over the past decade and a bit under the Conservatives. Can we have a statement about how the Government might respond to this report?

Mark Spencer: There are huge global challenges that face the United Kingdom at this moment in time. We have seen huge spikes in energy and food prices, which are, of course, bringing challenges to people up and down the country. That is why the Government are investing such a lot of money—£37 billion—in supporting people with the cost of living challenges. There is more that we can do to try to invest in those communities through levelling-up bids, and that is what the Government are focused on doing.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): UK Government proposals to reduce compensation levels for delayed, cancelled or over-booked domestic flights are in place at a time when passengers across the UK face unprecedented disruption. This cutting of compensation can only be bad news for consumers. Compensation levels have been set to deter airlines from running late services. Reducing them opens the door to poorer standards, which will adversely impact travellers. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out his concerns about this wrong policy at the worst possible time?

Mark Spencer: I hope the hon. Lady is aware that the Secretary of State for Transport has done a lot of work with the airlines to try to resolve the challenges that the industry faces this summer. There has been an amnesty on slots, which means that airlines can give an early indication that they may not be able to make their slots so that airports can inform passengers at a very early stage if their flight will not be taking off, allowing them to find an alternative route. We are making progress. I hope that, by the time we get to the summer, those people who have booked holidays will be able to get on those planes and enjoy the summer.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): President Putin said in 2004 that there is “no such thing as a former KGB man”.

Was the then Foreign Secretary Johnson aware of that when he met the KGB’s Alexander Lebedev without officials or security in 2018, which only became clear last week? Can we please have a statement on that, because it is a high security risk for our country?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there was an urgent question on this matter last Thursday. The particular incident to which he refers

was thoroughly debated at that time. We are blessed in this country with some of the finest security services, which keep us safe on a regular basis. I know that all Ministers will want to make sure that their own security and that of the nation is paramount in their minds.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): On Tuesday, Sir John Major appeared before the Public Administration Constitutional Affairs Committee. I asked him about the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill with regards to breaking the law. He said:

“If it is breaking the law, it ought not to happen. You cannot be a lawmaker and a lawbreaker. That is an absolutely flat line. If they are breaking the law, the Attorney-General should be in there saying, ‘This is not legal.’”

I pressed him further, saying, given the Government’s majority, where does Parliament go from here if it passes. He said:

“Parliament ought to see unexpurgated the advice from the Law Officers as to whether it does break the law at home or internationally. If it does not, it is a matter for Parliament. If it does break the law, it is a Bill that ought not to be laid before the House of Commons.”

The Leader of the House is our spokesperson—our person to the Government. It is his duty to be the voice of Parliament. Has he seen the legal advice himself? If so, is he satisfied that Bill does not break the law, or, if not, will he seek to withdraw the Bill?

Mark Spencer: I can give the hon. Lady good news: the Bill does not break the law. The Attorney General has been clear on that. Legal advice of that nature is not published, but the Attorney General has ruled that it does not break the law and I think that is good news.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Two days ago, my constituent sent me a photograph of his 15-year-old daughter Zahida. She was lying in her coffin, because she had drunk poison to avoid a worse fate, living under the Taliban. On 25 August last year she, her mother and her sisters were called to the Baron Hotel at Kabul airport but were unable to board the plane to safety because of the bomb explosion that occurred on that date. Many families of British residents are still trapped in Afghanistan. I wholly applaud all the work the Government have done for Ukrainian refugees and the setting up of the hub, but it seems that the Afghan refugees are absolutely forgotten. Please will the Leader of the House secure a debate in Government time on what the Government are doing to assist Afghan refugees?

Mark Spencer: I am truly sorry to hear the story the hon. Gentleman relates, which clearly is a tragedy. The Government have done a huge amount to help people to escape from Afghanistan and from the Taliban. Operation Pitting evacuated 15,000 people; I know the hon. Gentleman recognised those efforts, but the story he describes is a tragic one and I will make sure his comments are passed on directly to the Minister. I hope we can continue to support Afghan refugees as they escape the Taliban.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Leader of the House has already made a statement about hoping to bring on 300 extra passport staff before the summer. May I point out that we are nearly halfway through the Scottish school holidays and passports

continue to be a huge issue in my constituency? In the case of one individual, the passport was received by the Passport Office on 26 April, but then sat untouched for more than two weeks so that its starting date now is 15 May and the Passport Office will not deal with me because it says the application is less than 10 weeks old. We need a Government statement on this; despite what the Leader of the House says, these cases are increasing, not decreasing.

Mark Spencer: Some 800 more staff have already been recruited, with 300 more to come. There will always be the odd case that does not meet the threshold of six weeks’ turnaround; if the hon. Lady wants to write to me with the specific data, I will raise it personally with the Home Secretary on her behalf.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): As many places through the Homes for Ukraine scheme approach their end, Ukrainian families will face a cliff edge. One mother, her two boys and their grandmother have found it impossible to search in the private rented sector. They need to pay six months’ rent up-front and provide income history and a guarantor earning more than £45,000 a year. The boys have already settled into school, but if the family cannot find a home, their lives will be uprooted again. Can we please have an urgent debate on supporting Ukrainian families so that those who have fled war now do not face homelessness?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to the tens of thousands of families up and down the country who have opened up their homes to support people fleeing Ukraine. The UK has a very proud track record of supporting and looking after those people. I will pass on the hon. Lady’s comments directly to the relevant Minister to ensure he is aware of her concerns, but we should be very proud of what we have done as a nation.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Riverside Drive in my constituency has been subjected to repeated flooding since 2015. The residents live in genuine fear of further flooding. I have raised this matter many times on the Floor of this House, in the media and with anyone who will listen to me. The work was due to start last year, yet the Environment Agency has delayed it again. The total cost is only £5 million, but neither the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs nor the Treasury will stump up the money. Will the Leader of the House use his office to persuade the Chancellor and the Environment Secretary to release the required funding, so that my residents can have the peace of mind they richly deserve?

Mark Spencer: I join the hon. Lady in expressing my sympathy to the residents of Riverside Drive. Having your home flooded is a terrible experience. The Environment Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs work together to prioritise schemes to make sure that they get the best value for money. I will pass on her comments directly to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs so that he is aware of her concerns.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Almost a year ago to the day, the Post Office announced that Neston post office was to be closed, but that it

[Justin Madders]

would be a temporary closure while it found a commercial partner. I warned at the time that that would be a tough ask, and lo and behold, a year on, the Post Office has announced this week that because it has not been able to find a commercial partner, the post office will close permanently. A town of Neston's size, with 20,000 people, should have a post office, and it is unacceptable that the Post Office continues with these flawed business models where they rely on commercial support that clearly is not there. Can we have a statement from the relevant Government Minister about what they will do to ensure that the Post Office can serve all communities?

Mark Spencer: I am sorry to hear about Neston post office. Post offices are great community assets. The Government set access criteria to ensure that services remain within reach of all citizens. I think that 99% of the UK population is within three miles of a Post Office outlet. It is a great resource. It is obviously a shame that Neston post office will not reopen, but we should celebrate all that is positive about post offices up and down the country.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Frequently the Department for Work and Pensions is sending constituents to their MP when a decision has been unfavourable, giving constituents the impression that colleagues in this place, and not the Government, are responsible for policy changes or the decision-making process. This gives constituents false hope and unrealistic expectations. Will the Leader of the House please ask his Cabinet colleagues to ensure that Departments are taking responsibility for the decisions they are taking?

Mark Spencer: I will pass on the hon. Lady's comments to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. I know that the Department does a huge amount of work to support people on benefits and to try to help them get back into work, but I will make sure I pass her comments on directly to the Minister.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): We are told time and time again that this is a voluntary Union of equals, but with the plague of democracy denying and the choruses of "Now is not the time", it certainly does not feel like it. The former Chancellor and current frontrunner for leader, the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) said in 2017:

"It seems hard to block a referendum, but we should push the timing until after Brexit".

The Scottish Government have an unquestionable mandate from the electorate, which was demanded as a prerequisite by the Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar in 2016. We live in a country signed up to article 1 of the UN charter

on self-determination, so can we have a debate on self-determination and the routes available to it in a so-called model democracy?

Mark Spencer: I strongly suspect that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues will continue to press for such debates. I am of the view that there are huge challenges facing people across the United Kingdom, including in Scotland with the cost of living challenge, with children in Scotland being let down by the SNP Government and their education system and with the SNP Government not getting on with delivering ferries. I understand why they want to try to distract from some of the shortcomings of their Government, but there are bigger things to concentrate on at this moment in time.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): After the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland donated £1.5 million to Kenya's drought areas, I was glad to see that the first shipments of that high-density food arrived on Tuesday 12 July. There is no better day to deliver aid. The aid will help support 31,000 severely malnourished children. Sadly, too often, religious minority communities are deprived of such aid, as distribution points tend to be situated far away from such communities. Will the Leader of the House, in solidarity with me and all the communities affected, arrange for a statement on Kenya's drought and the need to ensure that aid is distributed fairly, equally and without discrimination?

Mark Spencer: First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on not being called last in business questions. With such progress, in the next 30 years he might get called first. I draw his attention to the Backbench Business debate next Thursday on sanctions for human rights abuses and corruption, where he may be able to raise the matters. That will be a great opportunity for him, but if not, there is the opportunity in the Sir David Amess Summer Adjournment Debate for him to raise any such matters.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Aberdeen has been a global energy hub for the best part of the last 50 years—something that I am sure the Minister is all too well aware of, given the £400 billion that has flowed from Scotland to the UK Treasury. In order to retain that status, we need to be at the forefront of investment in net zero. On that basis, will he back Aberdeen's bid for a green port, or perhaps go one better and bring the relevant Minister to the Chamber to make a statement to that effect?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to the economy of Aberdeen, which is an important part of the United Kingdom. I will of course pass on the hon. Member's comments to the relevant Minister. The oil and gas industry has a huge part to play as we make our transition towards a greener future.

Point of Order

12 noon

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure that you, like all other colleagues, have staff spending a lot of time in the special queue for the very welcome passport facility in Portcullis House. However, one of my staff recently spent more than two and a half hours in that queue, and yesterday a member of my staff was turned away because there were not enough staff there to deal with the queries, which is unfortunate. This is taking up an awful lot of our office time at the moment.

Hon. Members are, quite rightly, able to go to the front of the queue if they have an urgent case to deal with themselves. However, I gather that a particular complaint has been that hon. and right hon. Members have regularly been going to the front of the queue with an office staff member and then going away, leaving that staff member to deal with the query. That is not the procedure that I gather was agreed, and it is very unfair on the rest of us, whose staff are spending a lot of time there, only to fall further down the queue because other hon. Members are frankly gaming the system. What advice can you give, Madam Deputy Speaker, to make sure that everybody is following the spirit of the rules as well as the rules themselves?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order and for notice of it. I have been to the passport office in Portcullis House in person—I do not have staff members going; I go myself—and I think the staff there are doing a marvellous job in assisting hon. and right hon. Members with their queries. I am sure the hon. Member will understand that the operation of the service is a matter for the Home Office. However, the House will have heard his concerns, and I very much hope that those on the Treasury Bench will report them back as quickly as possible. Perhaps Members could be contacted to explain exactly how the system should work, and what is and is not acceptable, because we obviously must not put pressure on the officials working there. It is for Members to take the responsibility.

Educational Poverty: Children in Residential Care

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Robert Halfon will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Robert Halfon to respond to these in turn. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair, not the relevant Minister. Any interventions should be in the form of questions and should be brief. Front Benchers may also take part in questioning.

12.4 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for the time today, and I thank the officers and members of the Committee for working so hard on this report on educational outcomes for children in care.

We found widespread state failure to ensure that looked-after children receive a quality education. The state repeatedly fails to act as a pushy enough corporate parent when it comes to the education and career outcomes of children in care. The statistics speak for themselves. At key stage 2 for reading, writing and mathematics, just 37% of looked-after children reach expected standards compared with 65% of non-looked-after children. Just 7.2% of looked-after children achieve the grade 5 good pass in English and maths GCSE compared with 40.1% of non-looked-after children. Children in residential care at age 16 scored over six grades less at GCSE than those in kinship or foster care.

Our report has four key findings. First, there is a culture of impunity that enables schools to get away with blocking or refusing admissions of children in care. Looked-after children are less likely to attend the best schools. Ofsted has found that 76% of children in children's homes attended a good or outstanding mainstream state school compared with 84% of other children. Surely the proportion of these children should be 100%, especially given that laws state that good and outstanding schools should be prioritised for children in care. We heard that some schools discriminate against looked-after children, while local authorities are not sufficiently ambitious in getting them into their good or outstanding schools.

Secondly, unregulated education is rife for children in children's homes. Local authorities have a legal duty to ensure that the looked-after children in their care are receiving full-time education in a school registered with the Department for Education, but this is not always happening. Some local authorities are flouting that duty. As a result, vulnerable children are falling through the cracks. Ofsted has identified that 9% of children in children's homes attend unregulated education settings and 6% are not in education, employment or training at all. I think these statistics on children missing from education or receiving unregulated education are a national scandal.

[Robert Halfon]

Thirdly, we heard that over 6,000 children in care are living in unregulated accommodation, which poses a barrier to young people's educational progress. These are vulnerable children often living in unsuitable and unsafe environments, and that negatively impacts on their education and mental health.

Fourthly, too many children in care have poor career and life outcomes due to lack of support. Employment outcomes are bleak: 41% of 19 to 21-year-old care leavers are not in education, employment or training, and just 2% go on to do an apprenticeship. Only 22% of care leavers aged 27 are in employment compared with 57% of others, and even when they are in jobs, there is an average pay gap of £6,000. Thirty-three per cent. experience homelessness, 25% of them are sofa surfing and 24% of those in prison have been through the care system.

What are the solutions? First, we need to tackle the data black hole. The existing data on the educational outcomes of children in children's homes is not good enough. The data is fundamentally unreliable and should come with a health warning. Without the right data on where children in care are being educated, how much education they are missing and what kind of education they are receiving, the Department for Education will fight these issues in the dark. The Department for Education should commit to annual data publication through a data dashboard of looked-after children. We could then disaggregate the information by care placement type, flagging when the child is living in unregulated provision, as well as data on progress, attainment, attendance, suspensions and exclusions.

Secondly, we need to penalise schools that block or refuse admissions of children in care. A clear sanctions mechanism is needed for schools that consistently refuse or delay admissions of looked-after children, with the lever of accountability coming in the form of impacting on their Ofsted judgment. A school should not get a good or outstanding grade if it does not provide good or outstanding support and outcomes for looked-after children.

Thirdly, we need sanctions for local authorities that flout their duty to ensure that their looked-after children are receiving full-time, high-quality education. Greater accountability is needed for local authorities that fail to ensure that looked-after children receive full-time education at a school registered with the Department for Education. We could do that by capping the Ofsted rating of local authorities that fail to fulfil that duty.

Fourthly, we need to extend the pupil premium plus beyond the age of 16. The pupil premium plus is vital extra funding that raises the educational outcomes of looked-after children, but it ends at 16. With unemployment rates so high for care leavers, it is indefensible for children to be left out in the cold after 16, at the beginning of their transition into professional life. Extending the pupil premium plus past 16 to 18 will help looked-after students to do their best at that crucial stage of their education and kick start their careers. Virtual school heads, the local authority professionals with a duty to promote the education of children in care, should be given statutory powers, guidance and control of the allocation of the pupil premium plus grant.

Fifthly, we need to roll out the Staying Close scheme nationally. For too many young care leavers, the transition from care to independent living can feel like a cliff edge. Staying Close is a support scheme for young people in care leaving their children's home, and it provides support and accommodation to help with the transition. Pilots have evidenced significant benefits: fewer evictions, fewer care leavers not in education, employment or training, and better well-being. Further to support care leavers to develop their full potential, the Department should strategically weigh the apprenticeship levy in favour of care-experienced young apprentices under the age of 25. A secure place to live, and a future in the world of work with an apprenticeship, are the first two critical rungs on the ladder of opportunity.

Finally, early intervention spending has fallen by 48%, while spending on the crisis end of children's services and costlier downstream interventions has risen by 34%. Short-changing early intervention is a false economy. It does not provide value for the money for the taxpayer, who ends up funding less effective and costly interventions, and most importantly it means that children are suffering harms that could and should have been addressed earlier. Our report calls on the Government to explore a range of options to funnel excessive care home profits into improving the care system, especially through early intervention. The recent review by Josh MacAlister talked about a windfall tax and the Government should respond to that. Other options include increasing the bargaining power of local authorities and transforming care home businesses into community interest companies.

There is much to be done to support the progress, champion the attainment and raise the life chances of children in care. The number of children in care is rising and could reach the significant milestone of 100,000 children in care by 2025. Our report states that action is needed now to ensure that every looked-after child is properly supported to succeed in education and life. They should have as much chance to climb the ladder of opportunity as everybody else. If levelling up is not about this, what is it really about? The recommendations in our report provide that roadmap for how that can be achieved.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): It was a privilege to serve on the Education Committee and to produce this report. I could not agree more with the Chair about the recommendations. It is important that the Government look at those and react positively to them, because we are letting down children in our care system. When I was a local authority councillor, chaired the education committee and was the lead member for children's services in Gateshead, I took very seriously my role as corporate parent. But it is not just the local authority that is the corporate parent. This House, the Government and the Department for Education are also part of the corporate parenting system and should be taking their responsibilities very seriously. When I see the statistics, outlined in the report, that 41% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 are not in education, employment or training, and that only 2% of those aged 16 to 18 are able to take up an apprenticeship, I feel ashamed of what the governance of this country is doing to the children in our care.

It is important that we do something about this barrier to apprenticeships. Paying youngsters who are living independently after coming out of care £4.81 an

hour while they learn on an apprenticeship is just not satisfactory—they literally cannot do it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I just want to emphasise that contributions should be in the form of questions to the Chair of the Committee.

Ian Mearns: It was a rhetorical question, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Robert Halfon: I thank the hon. Member. He is an incredibly hard working member of the Committee and is passionate about this issue. I am so grateful for his support. He is right—this is unforgivable. I am asking all the leadership candidates what they plan to do about educational poverty in all those disadvantaged cohorts who are underperforming in our education system. The answer, as he will know from our report, is that the levy should be changed to incentivise big business to hire apprentices and care leavers should be paid the national living wage. That would make a huge difference, given the disadvantage that those care leavers have faced.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I refer the House to entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the report. I do not agree with all its findings, but it is a great report. The depressing thing is that it could have been written 12 years ago, when some of us in the Department for Education were trying to grapple with just these sorts of injustices that children in care continue to suffer. We need to be so much better at the concept of the pushy parent.

One issue that has not been resolved is children being placed in care closer to the homes they come from, and the multiple placements that mean they do not get the stability and continuity of being in the same school, which inevitably leads to educational underperformances. Why on earth is that still happening, despite everything that Governments have tried to do over 12 years and more? What new evidence did the Committee take about part of the problem still being the lack of smart commissioning, rather than ad hoc, day-to-day commissioning, in order to provide the continuity and stability needed to get children the most appropriate placements, and not just whatever happens to be available, which may not be in the best interests of that child?

Robert Halfon: On the wider point, there are enough reviews and reports—ours is yet another—and as I said to the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) a moment ago, I hope that the new leadership candidates, and whoever becomes leader of the Government, take these issues seriously. We talk in our report about constant changes of placement, with children being moved around all the time. As my hon. Friend will know, that is occasionally necessary if people have problems in their local area, but children are being moved from place to place, and from school to school—if they are getting to school at all—and that has got to stop. Much more work needs to be done to ensure that children are kept in one place and go to good or outstanding schools. My hon. Friend's second point is more of a matter for the MacAlister review than the Committee, as we focus predominantly on education and employment outcomes.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I welcome the report and echo all that I have heard in the Chamber. I particularly back up the comment about the constant moving around of children and young people, as we know how incredibly disruptive that is to their education and to them forming solid relationships. While children are still being moved around, sometimes quite far across the country, does the right hon. Gentleman think there is more to do to secure good data sharing, and a trail of data that follows the child wherever they may find themselves in care over their childhood? He mentioned admissions policies and the ways in which schools can seek to prevent children from being admitted to schools if they come from care backgrounds. That is also the case for exclusions policies, and I wonder whether the Committee had any particular recommendations on that.

Robert Halfon: I thank the hon. Lady, who is an expert on these issues. I absolutely agree with both the points she made on her first topic, that of placements and being moved around: as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), that has to stop. Children in care should be given a digital passport so that all their qualifications are known, because often they have to start all over again in a different school. If they are moved, there should be a thread, but those moves should not be happening in the way they currently are.

I beg the hon. Lady's pardon: could she repeat her second point?

Kate Green: My second point was about the disproportionate likelihood that a child in care may experience exclusion.

Robert Halfon: Our Committee did a separate report on exclusions a few years ago, just before the 2019 election; as we know, 40 children are excluded every day, which I think is wrong. It is a huge report that contains a whole load of recommendations. The problem is that when those children are excluded, they either do not end up in school at all, or end up in poor alternative provision. Often, that alternative provision is not in the areas where those children are excluded, so I refer the hon. Lady to our report on that issue, which contains quite a few recommendations dealing with some of the points she has made.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chair of the Education Committee for all his hard work, his personal commitment, and his endeavours. I, for one, am very much impressed by all he does, and by the work of the other Committee members who contribute as well.

Can the Chair outline the approach that has been taken to help provide adequate mental health care? Nine out of 10 children who have been abused or neglected at a young age will develop mental health problems by the age of 18. If that is sorted out early, it can give them a better life later on.

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman makes some very powerful points. Sadly, we have a mental ill health epidemic among young people in our country, especially since covid. The Committee has done a previous report on mental health, working jointly with the Health and

[Robert Halfon]

Social Care Committee. The Government are doing some good things, but I believe they need to rocket-boost the programme to have mental health counsellors in all schools, and we need to do more to teach children resilience. I have proposed a levy on social media companies, which I think are responsible for a lot of these issues, especially companies such as TikTok. That levy would raise money to fund mental health resilience programmes in schools.

I also believe in a longer school day: not children learning algebra until 8 pm—although I do not know whether the new Schools Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), would like that—but children being able to do arts, wellbeing and sporting activities, which all the evidence shows improves not just their mental health but their academic attainment. We need mental health counsellors in schools, because obviously some looked-after children—although not all—will need extra support, which is lacking. We in this country need to get a real grip through our education policy on the damage that children have suffered because they have been shut at home for two years on and off, and come up with a proper, serious, well-funded mental health strategy for young children. The damage we have done to their educational attainment, life chances, mental health and safeguarding has been enormous, and of course the most vulnerable children—many of them looked-after children—have suffered the most.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): The report sets out a devastating account of the Government's failure of some of our most vulnerable children, and sits in the wider context of this Government's utter complacency about children's social care. Half of all local authorities' children's services departments are rated inadequate or as requiring improvement, and the Government have been content to allow that to happen. There has been no leadership to get a grip on those failings. Reform of

children's social care is long overdue, but the Government will not publish a response to the MacAlister review until the autumn, despite having known about those issues for years. The report sets out a range of measures that could be delivered now to improve access to education and educational outcomes for looked-after children. Does the Chair of the Select Committee believe it is important that the Government move to introduce those changes immediately?

Robert Halfon: I thank the Opposition spokesman for her question. To be fair, I do not think everything the Government have done is bad: they have done some very good things for vulnerable children, and it is important to mention that. My job as a Select Committee Chair, as well as that of my colleagues, is to provide challenge on some of the things that need to be improved.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, with his Man from Del Monte suit, made the point that there had been a lot of reviews and reports about this issue, and that we need action. Obviously, there will be a new Prime Minister in the next few weeks, but I very much hope that whoever takes the post of Education Secretary looks seriously at the MacAlister review and adopts many of its important proposals. I also hope that they look seriously at our report on educational outcomes and the educational poverty that too many children in care face, and respond to our recommendations as soon as possible and enact some of them sooner rather than later. We have waited long enough, and children in care need help and support. As I said in my statement, they should be given the chance to climb the educational ladder of opportunity along with everyone else, and it is wrong that we have not even brought them to that ladder to help them climb up.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his statement, and for answering the questions in such detail.

Backbench Business

Srebrenica

12.26 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that from 4 to 11 July 2022, the UK marked Srebrenica Memorial Week with commemorations taking place in hundreds of schools, local authorities, places of worship, community centres and police forces to name but a few to mark the 27th anniversary of the genocide at Srebrenica where over 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were murdered by Bosnian Serb forces; expresses concern about the current threat to Bosnia's territorial integrity and sovereignty from secessionists who are operating with the support of Russia and the prospect of a return to conflict; commends the invaluable work undertaken by Remembering Srebrenica in using the lessons of Srebrenica to tackle prejudice to help build a safer, stronger and more cohesive society in the UK; and urges the Government to continue funding this vital work which since 2013 has educated nearly 200,000 young people on Srebrenica, enabled over 1,500 community actions to take place right across the country each year, and created 1,450 Community Champions who pledge to stand up to hatred and intolerance in their communities.

Before I go into the substance of the debate, I wish to say a number of thank yous. First, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting me and the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) this debate to mark the commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide 27 years ago, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who attended the Backbench Business Committee with me to support my application for the debate. Like your, Madam Deputy Speaker, she is stepping down as a Member of Parliament at the next election, and I am truly sad about that.

Secondly, I thank the Speaker for granting my application for a commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide. That commemoration took place at Speaker's House, and I thank him and his staff for allowing us to host it. Thirdly, I thank the Administration Committee for allowing a book-signing commemoration in Portcullis House yesterday. I declare two interests: first, I have been the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Srebrenica since 2013, which I helped found with Baroness Sayeeda Warsi. Secondly, from 2000 to 2002, I worked for the United Nations mission in Kosovo.

Two genocides have taken place in Europe. One was the holocaust, in which over 6 million Jewish people were murdered. The other was the Bosnian genocide between 1992 and 1995, which involved the planned, systematic and industrialised murder of just under 100,000 Muslims, the displacement of 2 million people, and the genocidal rape of up to 50,000 women simply because they were Muslims. Many of us of a certain age will remember seeing images of the war in Bosnia on our television screens during the 1990s. We remember watching with horror the footage of Sarajevo under siege and people being held in concentration camps, and slowly learning about the reports of atrocities being committed across Bosnia, which culminated in a genocide taking place on European soil just 50 years after the world pledged "never again".

This week marks the 27th anniversary of events in Srebrenica where, over a period of just a few days in July 1995, over 8,000 men and boys—Bosnian Muslims—were systematically murdered by Bosnian Serb forces.

The victims' bodies were dumped in mass graves as the Bosnian-Serb soldiers sought to cover up what they had done. Twenty-seven years on, the remains of a significant number of victims are still missing.

Although the anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide gives us an opportunity to commemorate and reflect on what happened, it is important that we understand the reason why commemorating the anniversary is so important. We commemorate it, first, so we can recognise the suffering of the victims, their loved ones and the survivors. In 2018, as a guest of the charity Remembering Srebrenica, I had the privilege of visiting Bosnia and meeting the survivors and some of the mothers. They are inspirational women who, despite experiencing the very worst of humanity, have shown great strength and determination to rebuild their lives and resist hatred. By commemorating the genocide, we help to ensure that the victims are not forgotten. I also visited the genocide memorial centre just outside Srebrenica. Thousands of simple white gravestones stretch across the hillside as far as the eye can see. Even today, the remains of the victims are still being found and identified.

Secondly, commemorating the genocide is made even more important by the continued denial of what happened. To be clear, the events of the Srebrenica genocide have been documented in forensic detail by the investigations of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Despite that, Bosnian-Serb political leaders in Republika Srpska, one of the two entities that make up Bosnia and Herzegovina today, in which Srebrenica is located, continue to deny and minimise the events that occurred. The Serbs refuse to allow the history of the genocide to be taught in schools.

Further afield, we know that the genocide has been an inspiration for far-right extremists and Islamophobes. The Christchurch mosque attacker played a song glorifying Karadžić just prior to the attack and, years earlier, Anders Breivik in Norway also sought inspiration in the Balkan wars and Serb ultra-nationalism. There have been other events around the world in the past few years that reinforce the importance of remembering what happened in Srebrenica.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on securing this debate, which is so important. I speak as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. The week before last, the Government held and sponsored an international conference for those who are persecuted across the world. The conference remembered all the genocide that has taken place across the world, so I commend her on bringing this issue to the House.

I am reminded of a verse from Ecclesiastes:

"Wisdom is better than weapons of war".

Does the hon. Lady agree that the international community must have the wisdom to learn from its errors and finally put an end to repeating the same mistakes over and over? We always hope that this one will be the last, but it never seems to be.

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and commend him on and thank him for all his work on religious freedom and preventing the persecution of people because of their religion.

[*Yasmin Qureshi*]

There are worrying similarities between Srebrenica and the plight of the Rohingya in Burma, or the rise of Hindu nationalism in India—the Hindutva movement under Prime Minister Modi—and the growing tide of anti-Muslim violence. Indeed, there are numerous examples around the world of people being targeted and killed because of their identity or beliefs. That makes it critical that we continue to remember and reflect on Srebrenica.

Even here, the Srebrenica genocide and the events leading up to it contain important lessons for us. Low-level prejudice escalates to crime, violence and hatred. It creeps up on us in stages. It begins with differentiation and discrimination, fostering and fostered by a sense of grievance or perceived grievance, yet at every stage, as we watch hate unfold, we have the opportunity to break into and halt that journey. I hope that the Minister will take note of that for the Government's strategy in tackling far-right extremism. We must actively promote tolerance in and between our communities; work with them and encourage them to educate and share with one another; support individuals bravely speaking out against hate speech; recognise and act on inequality and injustice; and intervene at the earliest possible stage.

I recognise that there are clear differences between Bosnia in the 1990s and the UK today. None the less, these events demonstrate where hatred and the dehumanisation of others can lead.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. I admit to not having been completely up to speed with the horror of the events in Srebrenica—many of us have perhaps been complacent—until I was asked to give a talk at my local mosque as part of a previous commemoration. The horror of just how recent it was—27 years ago—and the blatant way in which those Muslim people were picked out and massacred under an international gaze was extraordinary. Therefore, does she agree that however historic genocides are—I have my Recognition of Armenian Genocide Bill; that genocide goes back 100 years—it is still so important to make sure that we educate current and future generations about the horrors that have happened so close, both in time and geographically? It is also important to ensure that we continue to call out contemporary genocides, such as the one that she and I know is going on in Xinjiang province by the Chinese Communist party against the Uyghurs. This House has voted to recognise that and I hope that the Government, in short order, will appreciate that and do the same thing.

Yasmin Qureshi: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we need to recognise genocide wherever it is happening. As he may know, I set up the all-party parliamentary group on Uyghurs, which deals with the genocide, and I know the enormous amount of work that he and other parliamentarians across the House have done on that. These are not party political issues; they are issues about humanity that affect us all.

Reflecting on what happened can strengthen our resolve to stand up to hatred in our society. The othering and scapegoating of marginalised groups is an everyday reality that has been perpetuated by parts of our media and, I am sad to say, by some politicians, whether that

relates to refugees, immigrants or Muslims. That is why it is so important to remember this genocide. We cannot allow the suffering of the victims and survivors to be forgotten or denied.

Let us face it: when the persecution of Jews in Germany or what happened with the Bosnian Muslims took place, people did not just get up one day and say, “We are going to start killing our Jewish neighbour” or “our Muslim neighbour”. It was because of the perpetuation of hatred, which carried on over many years. A lot of that was carried out by the media, with their narrative about people. I am sad to say that quite a lot of that is happening with the media in our country, in terms of the othering and scapegoating of people who do not look like us. All of us as politicians should call that out and not—as I am afraid happens in some cases—join in with the othering and scapegoating of communities. We have to be vigilant against hatred and intolerance.

We say the words “Never again”, but we are seeing that same rise of hatred, division, sectarianism and the beast of nationalism rise again. We see fears rising and still-raw wounds being opened. Peace in Bosnia is under threat, and the Dayton peace agreement is under enormous strain. There have been warnings about the rise of the same army that was responsible for committing genocide at Srebrenica. The Army of Republika Srpska successfully co-opted civic society through a careful and systematic process of dehumanising Bosnian Muslims so that the agents of death and their collaborators found common and easier cause in achieving their goal of ethnic cleansing.

Perhaps the Minister can update the House today and set out his views on Serbian succession and what steps the Government are taking to ensure that Bosnian Serbs are not rewarded, in their goal of creating a “Greater Serbia”, by being handed the very territory in which they committed a four-year campaign consisting of forced deportations, torture and mass murder. Although the responsibility to prevent the gravest of crimes from occurring is shared by all states, we in the United Kingdom are uniquely positioned to bring essential global leadership to defuse the tension and support a safer and more unified Bosnia and Herzegovina. The UK must do its part to ensure that the violent, dark days of the 1990s do not return.

I am pleased that we have the opportunity today to commemorate in Parliament the atrocities suffered by the people of Srebrenica, but commemoration must be accompanied by action. I urge on Ministers the determination to learn the lessons of how intolerance takes root, be alert to the markers that identify its growth, and be resolute in working with our diverse communities to tackle it early and comprehensively.

I also call on the Minister to work with his counterparts in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to ensure that the escalating situation in Bosnia is closely monitored and that early diplomatic steps are taken to prevent violence from occurring. We know from what we are hearing and seeing in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia that there has been a rise in Serb nationalism and that the nationalists effectively want to take over Srebrenica as part of their territory. Sadly, they are getting a lot of support from the Russians; we know the steps that the Russians have taken in Ukraine. Hon. Members will remember that the second world war started with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Bosnia. I think it is better to deal

with the situation in its early stages than at the end, when it may be too late to do anything constructive. I really hope that the Minister will touch on that point in his response. That would be a fine memorial to those who died in the Srebrenica genocide 27 years ago, the hundreds of thousands of Muslims who were killed in that war, and others who were murdered.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee again for allowing this debate. If you will allow me to digress for just two sentences, Madam Deputy Speaker, I also want to thank my brother, Mazhar Hussain Qureshi, who passed away four days ago. One of the reasons I am here is that he always said that as elected representatives we must do our duty to make sure that evils like this do not happen. I really want to thank him—I do not know if he can hear me—for the support that he has always given me, as the most loving brother anybody could have.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am sure that the whole House will join me in giving the hon. Lady our sincere sympathy for the loss of her brother, who was obviously a great man. We all appreciate what she has just said about him.

12.44 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for coming to this place at such a difficult time. My heart goes out to her and her family and to all those for whom she cares so deeply. She is a true friend to Bosnia and Herzegovina; she has been since she came to this place, and I know that she will continue to be for a long time. I thank her for all her work on the issue and for working with me to secure the debate, which matters because what we say in this place is heard. What we say in this place changes things and can make people safer, so we have a duty to speak today.

I must declare an interest in this debate as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Bosnia and Herzegovina. Our debate takes place during Srebrenica Memorial Week; I thank the Backbench Business Committee for making sure that that could happen. Most of all, I am pleased to be able to speak today because we are joined in the Chamber by my constituent Karen Packwood and her family, who are observing the debate. I thank her for allowing me to tell the story of her late husband Amir, a victim of the Bosnian war—a proud, kind, and loving man.

Before I come to Amir's story, I want to reflect on why today matters so much. We all know that the Srebrenica genocide represents the most extreme case of ethnic cleansing in the long and painful Bosnian war of 1992 to 1995. There are many other atrocities that we should reflect on, and we must take the time to do so, but that one has become symbolic of just how industrialised, appalling and truly evil were the acts that we saw taking place during that time. It was the barbarity in Srebrenica and the failure of the UN's peacekeeping mission that forced the international community to finally put an end to the bloodshed and implement the Dayton agreement, which has prevented a bullet being fired in anger since then.

Back in March 1995, the so-called President of the self-declared Republika Srpska directed his military to remove Bosniaks from Srebrenica. He called for the creation of

“an unbearable situation of total insecurity, with no hope of further survival or life”.

This grim directive was followed on 11 July 1995 by the then leader of the Bosnian Serb military entering Srebrenica and boasting:

“We give this town to the Serb nation...The time has come to take revenge on the Muslims.”

Ten thousand Bosniaks had fled in advance, but many were captured or intimidated into surrendering by the use of terror, murder, torture and rape. The men and boys were rounded up and put into makeshift concentration camps, and then the killing began in earnest.

Over 8,000 Bosniak Muslim boys and men were killed in cold blood, often after mutilation or being blindfolded. Their bodies were not just hastily buried without respect or decency; they were buried and then, weeks later, in came the diggers to dig up their bodies and move them from site to site in what was an obvious attempt to hide a genocide. As a result, many have yet to be buried. Their bodies lie in small boxes in a dark, cold chamber that I have visited in Bosnia, where I could see the many bones that people are working tirelessly to put together so that families can bury their loved ones and finally find some semblance of closure. I remember seeing a funeral when I was in Bosnia. The heartache in that community, as people came together to finally bury one of their loved ones, is something that I will never forget.

This was a deliberate genocide to eradicate the Bosniak population and replace them with a Serbian community that was somehow suggested to be superior to another. Today, we remember the victims. We remember what led to this, and we draw and learn lessons to prevent it from happening again.

I also want to remember all the victims of the Bosnian war, which saw more than 100,000 deaths and 2 million people displaced. Whether they were in Banja Luka, Sarajevo or Brčko, those who faced expulsion, terror and death in the name of ethnic cleansing must always be remembered. That is why I will use their names and the stories of people like Amir, rather than naming those who sought glory in the death of others. Each of those victims is an individual whose story was distorted, tortured and eradicated, cut short by the brutality of ethnic cleansing. We must always keep that truth close to our hearts and remember it, because hearing individual stories matters, no matter how difficult it might be. That is why I want to share the story of Amir, who was only 11 when the war began in 1992.

Amir was a happy boy who lived with his family, played football in the park and enjoyed toy cars and comics, but then the militia came and Amir was evicted. He lost everything: his toys, his comics—everything he loved—and his innocence. As Amir, aged 13, walked down the infamous Sniper Alley in Sarajevo, a Serb soldier took aim and shot him. I am not ashamed of my tears today, Madam Deputy Speaker, because every time we shed a tear we show that we care and that we will not stand for these people being forgotten and silenced. When he was shot, Amir cried out to the soldier: “I'm just a boy, I'm not a soldier. Why are you shooting me?” Sadly, Amir knew the answer: he was a male and he was a Bosniak. This made him a target for annihilation, because according to the Serbs he was not human, did not deserve to live, did not deserve a family, and did not deserve a future. That day, they tried to take

[Alicia Kearns]

everything from him—but they failed. As Amir lay struggling, he noticed a nearby United Nations tank and a peacekeeping soldier. He cried out for help and the soldier did nothing. The soldier ignored his screams of agony and the cries for help of an innocent 13-year-old boy.

We know the international community failed in Bosnia, but there are also many who served with distinction at that time, including British soldiers who were in this place, and those who saved thousands. I particularly commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart)—now known as Bosnia Bob, for exactly the right reasons—who helped to evacuate thousands by helicopter from around Srebrenica, despite being told not to. That is the kind of heroism that we need more of around the world—people who step up, step through bureaucracy and refuse to be told no, because they will save lives and protect those who deserve it.

Despite such actions of heroism, the international community did not do enough. It did not stop the war, it did not prevent the genocide, and it did not do enough for Amir. We have to work harder in this place, within our Government and internationally to help those struggling against hatred and violence, some of whom have been mentioned. The voices of the Uyghur people should have been heard two decades ago, because the genocide is not new, and yet somehow it is only since 2019 that anyone in this place has wanted to talk about it. We have an obligation to do better and to be the voices for those who others seek to silence.

As Amir lay bleeding on the floor, a passing civilian grabbed him and carried him to a car, saving him. In the car, he fainted. He awoke in a Sarajevo hospital, where he was subjected to attempts to save his life that no 13-year-old child should ever have to endure: blood transfusions and operations lasting up to nine hours. Amir had a heart attack and barely survived. But finally he began to recover, only to awaken to discover that parts of his body would never truly be the same again. His colon was attached to a colostomy bag, and he had to see his body in a state that no child should.

After three months in hospital, Amir was barely hanging on. Malnutrition caused his teeth to fall out and his weight to drop to 3½ stone. Then holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel saw him on the news, and, unbeknown to Amir, someone decided that goodness had to win and began to organise his rescue. Elie ensured that Amir was taken to Paris, where, away from the war, he received the first-class care that he deserved and was given the food that his body needed to recover and survive. But he took no joy in being able to eat; he thought only of his family in Sarajevo who still starved under the Serb blockade.

Amir survived, and he learned to thrive and to find joy again. He found love with Karen and he lived a full life. Many of the boys of Srebrenica, and across Bosnia, did not receive this second chance. But the agony of war stretches far into the future, and it was not the bullet that was shot in hatred but the transfusions that had saved his life that ultimately killed him, because they were of contaminated blood. His liver failed him 25 years later, and he became another victim of the Bosnian war. Today, we pay tribute in this place to Amir and his family, and we remember all the victims and all the survivors, whoever and wherever they are.

I have been and remain deeply moved by the strength of those who survived those terrible events, particularly the mothers of Srebrenica, whom the hon. Member for Bolton South East mentioned. These women fight so hard for justice, and for their loved ones and communities, and they have seen the worst of humanity yet demonstrate the best of it. I met them again most recently a few months ago, and they gave me this flower—a memorial of Srebrenica, and one of only 8,000 made—so that I could carry their strength in my heart at all times. Their lack of vengefulness or desire for revenge in the face of such evil, and their drive for justice, is the story of Bosnia and Herzegovina now. From the pain, the people of Bosnia have built a culturally rich, vibrant and beautiful place that is a forward-looking European nation. Positivity out of pain is one of the greatest strengths of the Bosnian people.

But the ability to move forward and heal is reliant on one thing—the truth. Through dialogue and through truth we heal, and we help those who are still searching and still healing. The whole foundation of modern Bosnia relies on truth—the truth that what occurred in the war was a deliberate genocide. That is why genocide denial is not a difference of opinion. No, genocide denial is a deliberate and calculated attack on survivors. It is a weapon that seeks to hurt the people and institutions that have grown out of the ashes, against everything that has been thrown at them. Denial is a continuation of the genocide itself. What begins with violence and killing is continued through the falsification of history. We see this today. I have sat opposite Dodik as he used the word “Muslim” as a weapon. I have sat opposite people who glorify these murders, deny they took place, and still go and intimidate Muslims in Bosnia, lighting up flames and saying that they will drive them out of that country. Language is a weapons system, and there are foreign Governments facilitating secessionist and divisive narratives.

I am pleased that since we last debated this, there has been enormous progress, driven by the all-party parliamentary group. We demanded that the Government raise Bosnia and Herzegovina at the NATO meeting of Ministers, and as a result we were the only country to do so. We demanded sanctions, which have now been put in place and which the President of Bosnia thanked us for again last night. We demanded that disinformation experts be delivered to Bosnia, and they have been. All this is thanks in large part to the amazing Bosnian ambassador, Vanja, and to our ambassador, Matthew Field, who has sadly now moved on to another role.

We know that violence must be combated with strength, but we must also remember that denial is fought through remembrance. That is why this debate matters. The theme for this year’s Srebrenica Memorial Week is combating denial and challenging hatred. So let us be very clear today that the British Parliament and the British people will never forget Srebrenica, and we will never forget our Bosnian friends. We will remember the past, reject hatred and division, and build upon a foundation of truth, and in so doing we can only build a better future. We will be a voice for those whom others seek to silence. We will aspire to adopt in our own lives even a shred of the dignity, compassion and strength that the survivors of Srebrenica and their loved ones show. They are the best of us, and as the spectre of hatred and division is weaponised again in Bosnia, we cannot let them down.

12.57 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a great honour to speak in this debate, and particularly to speak after the contributions of my hon. Friends—if I may say that of both ladies—the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), who has done an enormous amount in her short time in this House to ensure that Bosnia is indeed not forgotten here.

Some years ago, I visited Bosnia with the charity Remembering Srebrenica, and I am very proud to be its ambassador in the north-west. I pay tribute to all who contributed to our commemorative event in Manchester cathedral last Thursday. I was very sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East could not be with us because of her brother's illness, and I give her my deep condolences on his death. I pay particular tribute—I know my hon. Friend will join me in this—to Elinor Chohan MBE, the chair of Remembering Srebrenica in the north-west. She does exceptional work to educate and raise awareness of the genocide and of the need to bring peace to the Balkan region, and to make sure that young people in this country, in particular, understand the horror of genocide and why it must not happen again.

No one who has visited Srebrenica can come away anything other than appalled at the massacre of more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys on European soil 27 years ago. As we have heard, 27 years is not long; many of us still clearly remember those events. We remember, too, that a reason for our exceptional horror was that we had believed in the vow made after the holocaust—never again. Yet Srebrenica showed us how easily and quickly that pledge could be forgotten, and is still in danger of being forgotten, or ignored, today. The actions of Republika Srpska, and the rise of a Serbian nationalist narrative that seeks to rewrite history—to deny the fact of the Srebrenica genocide, despite Srebrenica being one of the most well-documented and scientifically verified atrocity sites in recent history—is a powerful lesson on the importance of the theme of this year's Remembering Srebrenica commemoration: "Combating Denial: Challenging Hatred".

We know that denial is the final step on the road to genocide, and we know today that it is happening all over again. We think of Milorad Dodik's unspeakable claim that the killing of 8,372 Bosnian Muslims was a justified reprisal for the killing of 3,500 Serbs by Muslim forces. We think of the boycott of state institutions by Bosnian Serb politicians in direct retaliation for the decision of the UN High Representative to impose a genocide denial ban—a boycott that is now being used as a Trojan horse for Republika Srpska's ambition for the effective dismemberment of, and its secession from, Bosnia. We think of the charging of a Montenegro mayor for denying the Srebrenica genocide; and we think of Russia's veto, in 2015, of a UN resolution to recognise Srebrenica as a genocide.

In the face of this ongoing pattern of denial, I want particularly to raise the UK's role in supporting reconciliation and peace building. That is hard, but the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton was absolutely right to say that peace building must be founded on truth. We remain an active member of the Peace Implementation Council Steering Board, and in that context I hope that the Minister will describe this afternoon how the UK is

working with international partners to use our influence to support credible democratic and liberal reforms in Bosnia, and to challenge any genocide denial and nationalist rhetoric. Both the Royal United Services Institute and the Aegis Trust have suggested the need for UK peacekeepers on the ground, in partnership with international allies. I should be grateful if the Minister explained how he sees the UK's peacekeeping role evolving even as tensions increase.

Ultimately, of course, peace must come from within rather than outside the region, with the different communities, civil society organisations and civic leaders working together to challenge denial and hate. That will not be easy, but we should not forget that one of the reasons for the horror of the 1990s war in Bosnia was the fact that people who only days earlier had been neighbours and friends found themselves taking arms in brutal opposition to one another. That is horror, but it also shows the capacity for people from different communities to live side by side in peace. Non-governmental organisations and faith groups must be supported and enabled to work together, and with the Bosnian authorities, to bring people together to help rebuild the lives of families and survivors. That work remains sorely needed even today, as families continue to mourn the loss of loved ones, and—as we have heard—as body parts continue to be discovered and identified.

We have also heard this afternoon of the Mothers of Srebrenica, women whom many of us in the Chamber will have had the great honour of meeting. I believe that we should particularly recognise the important role of women in peace building. In every community in every country where I have ever known of conflict, it is women who have been important and instrumental in helping to rebuild the peace. Let me also emphasise the importance of young people in peace building, and their importance to Bosnia's future success. If future generations, from different communities, are to live harmoniously side by side, we must invest in them now. We must invest in jobs in Bosnia, invest in the economy, and invest in education. These too will be vital drivers of peace. Today, the lack of hope for a peaceful future means that Bosnia's economic potential is being harmed by a brain drain of its talented young people. May I ask the Minister what priority the UK Government are giving to investment in the western Balkans to support the region's economy, to support vital sectors such as tourism, and to encourage trade, sharing training and business expertise?

A peaceful and prosperous Bosnia is, of course, in the interests of Bosnians, but peace in the region is in the interests of everyone. The UK has a vital role to play in leading that endeavour, and I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the chance to reaffirm our commitment to that in this Parliament this afternoon.

1.5 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I thank the hon. Members for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) for securing a debate in memory of the Srebrenica massacre in 1995 during this official week of remembrance. Let me also welcome the Minister to his new position. It is a pleasure to take part in the debate, and it is a real privilege to wear this beautifully crafted flower of Srebrenica.

[Margaret Ferrier]

In January we marked Holocaust Memorial Day in this Chamber, as we do almost every year. In those debates we promise never to forget past genocides and atrocities, and the contributions are always moving and insightful. We all pledge to do our part so that never again will something so terrible happen on our watch. 1995 was only 27 years ago: what happened in Srebrenica occurred within our lifetimes, for some of us within our children's lifetimes, or even our grandchildren's. What we in the UK were experiencing during that summer was similar to what we are experiencing now: we were going through a record-breaking heatwave, and a Conservative leadership competition was coming to a head. My point is that history repeats itself. Throughout history we see cycles—sometimes coincidental, like those examples.

We are seeing the resurgence of radicalised far-right extremism across the developed world, despite these memories of recent atrocities being so painfully close. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, that harmful rhetoric is spreading, and has been for a long time. We saw it in Trump's America, the so called free world; France has grappled with the same growing sentiments, and the UK has seen an uptick in right-wing extremism too. It still exists, it is still prevalent, and it is still incredibly dangerous.

Between 1992 and 1995, during the Bosnian war, just under 100,000 Muslims were murdered there, 50,000 women were subjected to rape, and 2 million people were displaced. This was a campaign of terror that was thoroughly planned, and executed with terrifying determination. It was July 1995, though, that saw one of the worst atrocities in post-war Europe. Over the course of just a few days, more than 8,000 people were murdered in this genocide by Bosnian Serb forces. Most of them were Muslim men and boys, separated from their families and taken away to be killed, and buried in mass, unmarked graves. As the Bosnian Serb forces began to panic and try to cover up their crimes, bodies were dug up, moved and reburied, sometimes more than once. Some are yet to be found. Mothers will have passed away in the intervening years, without the closure of knowing their child's final resting place.

1995 was also, by chance, the United Nations Year for Tolerance, and the world year of people's commemoration of the victims of the second world war. That is in direct contrast to the events we are here to remember today, for today in Bosnia and Herzegovina tensions are high once again, and there is a very real possibility of renewed conflict. While it is not the root cause of the tensions, the amendment of the country's criminal code to include acts of genocide denial certainly triggered a reaction from Milorad Dodik. A series of actions and threats that could tear the country apart followed. Secession and upheaval in that part of the world would have a devastating impact on stability in the region, and that in turn would have an impact on stability in Europe more widely.

There is someone else whose influence cannot be overlooked. President Putin has deliberately emboldened Dodik, offering support and courses of action he knows would be deeply damaging because he is focusing on what he personally has to gain. Dodik in turn has emboldened his supporters. Dangerous and divisive

rhetoric is rife in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Hatred left unchecked spreads like wildfire. It has to be controlled or it will consume everything it touches and burn faster and hotter until all that is left is destruction and the charred remains of surroundings that were once warm and familiar, now warped forever. What Putin has done in Ukraine is a frightening preview of his plans. Right now he is testing the waters, seeing how far his power extends. It is a hard reality that some, like Dodik, will have been inspired by his actions and his perceived dominance. Hatred, prejudice and racism dehumanise their targets, and we have to restore dignity to the 8,000 people needlessly murdered at Srebrenica. These were people with lives, families, friends and colleagues; people with faith.

Remembering Srebrenica was set up in 2013 and it has a crucial mission. It leads the yearly commemoration of Srebrenica in the UK and educates on the significance of the events in July 1995. It holds over 2,000 commemorative events each year across the UK in schools, prisons, town halls and places of worship. Its work and support mean that the UK is the only country to mark this anniversary on a national level outside Bosnia and Herzegovina. Internationally, we have a moral duty to play our part in preventing future atrocities. At home, we must focus on eradicating division and hatred in our society and communities. We cannot afford to take our eye off the ball.

Politics is often, by its nature, divisive. What it should do, though, is unite. We all come into it for the same reason: because we care about our communities and our country. When we are elected, we are given a platform, and if we make it into government we are presented with a unique opportunity to push forward a legislative agenda and shape the future of our country. That is why this Government must ensure that they are not feeding into hatred and right-wing extremism. Policy making is important, and this Government have shown that they are willing to tolerate certain forms of discrimination. It is time for that to be corrected. This year's memorial week has the dual themes of combating denial and challenging hatred. I have spoken a lot about the hatred aspect, but combating denial is just as, if not more, important. If we do not learn from history, unfortunately we are destined to repeat it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Scottish National party spokesman, Alyn Smith.

1.13 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): It is a privilege to sum up for the SNP in this debate. I warmly praise the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for her powerful and moving speech and I extend my condolences to her. This is an important thing for us to take account of today. I am also glad to see the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) in her place and I commend her for her deeply powerful speech. She organised a trip to Bosnia for a number of colleagues across the House a few weeks ago and I was glad to be part of it. We visited Tuzla, Sarajevo and Srebrenica, and it was a deeply moving experience. I suspect I will remember the smell of the Tuzla morgue forever. I pay tribute to the work that it does in reconciling the human remains with the still grieving relatives. The truth and reconciliation process is still necessary across Bosnia; it is ongoing and it needs wider support. I was also glad to briefly see the right hon. Member for

Beckenham (Bob Stewart) in his place today. He was on that trip, and he has a deep connection to Bosnia, having served there during the dreadful situation. It was a privilege to spend time with him and hear his stories of the events.

All of us across the House can unite around the fact that genocide denial is an act of aggression. I pay tribute to Remembering Srebrenica, an important charity that does leading work not only to ensure remembrance but to challenge and remind us that the world has not learned the lessons of Srebrenica and other genocides. Sadly, I see the ingredients of what brought us to the dreadful events at Srebrenica present in other places around the world: Syria, Ukraine, Xinjiang, Yemen and other places besides. It is easy for us to say that we need to remember and learn the lessons, but the challenge to all of us in this House is: what are we going to do to prevent other genocides from occurring?

As we see a more unstable world, with resource scarcity, climate instability and all sorts of other pressures, I regret to say that we are going to see more pressure on decency, democracy and international law. We can unite around the need for action, and I extend a hand to the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), whom I welcome to his place, to work together on this. There is a variety of world views and perspectives across the House, but surely we can all agree that more needs to be done to protect civilians, to protect and uphold international law and to protect decency.

I have some concrete questions for the Minister. The peace in Bosnia remains fragile and I would be grateful for an update on just how the UK is supporting the institutions of Bosnia to make sure that peace is maintained. It is under pressure from external forces and also from internal forces that remain dangerous. I have called long since for the adoption by the UK Government of a specific atrocity prevention strategy. There is good work going on, and I pay tribute to that, but crystallising that into a unified document and a unified policy to work across the embassy network would be beneficial for all of us, and for the UK efforts as well.

Alicia Kearns: When I was elected, I fought for the creation of a genocide prevention centre, and the Government did indeed create it, although they called it the conflict centre. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that the conflict centre would be ideally placed to do this work? It is a place of excellence and expertise that could identify very early the markers of a genocide and have experts who could deploy to the FCDO team to advise on the programmes, the social and community group interventions and the sanctions that would work to prevent genocide. Does he agree that that would be the best way to ensure that atrocity prevention was at the heart of the Government's efforts?

Alyn Smith: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention and I warmly agree. There is no shortage of good ideas around and I appeal to the Government and the Minister to take advantage of them, and of the opportunity for cross-party working across the House right now on this sort of issue.

I acknowledge that the UK has done much on ensuring accountability. We discussed this just yesterday in the case of Sri Lanka. We are seeing it in China as well. We

are seeing it particularly in Ukraine. I acknowledge that the UK has done work to support the International Criminal Court and the special prosecutor on Ukraine, but again, crystallising that into a specific strategy would be helpful for all of us in punching up the efforts to increase prominence and clarity across the world.

In closing, I want to make a plea for Remembering Srebrenica and its funding. It does incredibly important work not just for Srebrenica and Bosnia but for these issues as a whole, and it needs a much more certain financial future than it has had, because it has had funding issues. So I hope that an update will be forthcoming from the Minister on ensuring that Remembering Srebrenica is safe to do its work to help all of us in the efforts we want to unite around. It has been a privilege to sum up in this debate.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Minister, Bambos Charalambous.

1.18 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) for securing this immensely important debate today, and Members across the House who have made moving, thoughtful and measured contributions. I also welcome the Minister to his place.

This House is at its very best where we speak with one voice and in defence of the core values that, despite our political differences, we all share: democracy, a commitment to conflict prevention and the defence of human rights. Peace in the western Balkans is a priority for me and our team, and would be for a Labour Government. The shadow Europe Minister is currently in the region and continues to engage with officials to build consensus on achieving lasting stability, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) made a moving speech alongside the President of Bosnia and Herzegovina on Tuesday at the Speaker's House.

It must be recognised that the UK and its armed forces have played a powerful and lasting role in ensuring peace and stability in Bosnia and across the western Balkans. Labour recognises that the UK must continue to provide that critical support during these deeply concerning times. The horrors of the 1990s are ingrained in the minds of so many people across the country, including our armed forces personnel.

I put on record our thanks to and continuing support for Remembering Srebrenica, whose work has been so important in paying tribute to those who lost their lives and in warning us that we can never allow this to happen again. I echo the sentiments of the Leader of the Opposition: let us use this day and the memory of Srebrenica not only to remember those we lost, but to educate future generations and bring communities together. That is why Remembering Srebrenica has done so wonderfully. It has done the necessary and critical work of keeping the memory of the tragedy alive, and educating more than 180,000 young people about the evil that took place. That is integral to building stronger and more cohesive communities into the future, and developing an awareness of contemporary challenges.

This debate, marking the 27th anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica, comes at a particularly salient time for our continent. During Russia's invasion of

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

Ukraine, we have seen some of the most shocking and harrowing war crimes committed on this continent in decades. We must ensure that our collective resolve remains unwavering as the conflict across the east and the south continues to intensify. Labour continues to support the Government's humanitarian, military and diplomatic efforts to support Ukrainians, who face enormous challenges in Putin's barbaric and egregious war.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): A theme seen in Ukraine and in Srebrenica has been not only the killing of civilians and the genocide, but the sexual violence used as a tool of war. As well as those who have lost loved ones, many people are still living with the scars of the events that happened to them—not just in Srebrenica, but in pretty much every conflict across the world. Does the hon. Member agree that we must do more to support the victims of sexual violence in conflict?

Bambos Charalambous: The hon. Member makes an excellent point. Sexual violence is one of the most heinous war crimes that can be committed, and it has a lasting effect. It is unspeakably dreadful. As she says, we need to do so much more to ensure that the victims are supported. I am sure that the Minister will make reference to that in his speech.

Alicia Kearns: It strikes me that there is much that we can learn from Bosnia regarding what is happening in Ukraine at the moment. I fear greatly that all the women, men and children who have been raped in Ukraine will be silenced by shame, because Ukraine has not seen anything like this for a long time. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government could facilitate meetings between the Mothers of Srebrenica and women's groups in Bosnia, which could send a delegation to Ukraine or a nearby safe country to provide advice on supporting women and the mothers of children who are the result of rape to get through the situation, to recover and to rebuild?

Bambos Charalambous: Once again, the hon. Member makes an excellent point. I am sure that the Government will consider that and, if they do, they will have the full support of the Opposition.

For so many reasons, it is crucial to reflect on and commemorate the genocidal crimes committed against more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys in July 1995. More than 1,000 victims' remains are still unaccounted for, and for the families still mourning those lost, every effort must be made to recover them. The massacre at Srebrenica was one of the most heinous and appalling atrocities committed against innocent people since the second world war, and no matter how long it takes, those responsible must face justice. The war in Bosnia resulted in close to 100,000 civilians being killed, 2 million forced displacements and, as colleagues have just mentioned, the systematic rape of more than 20,000 women—all due to ethnic and religious identity. Indeed, the graves at Potočari are a harrowing reminder of what we must work tirelessly to avoid.

When today we see forces across Europe and the Balkans seeking to sow disharmony, spread acrimony and stir up tensions, it is critical that we remember

Srebrenica and how we got there. I pay tribute to the unrelenting work of High Representative Christian Schmidt, who continues to warn of the very real prospect of a return to conflict in the region, given the behaviour of Milorad Dodik and Russian attempts to aggravate the situation further. The task of the High Representative is an enormous responsibility, and it is critical that the Government work with our European allies to support his efforts in preventing a return to the dark days of the past. I also put on record my support for the work of Sir Stuart Peach, the Government's special envoy to the western Balkans, whose experience will be integral to efforts for long-term stability.

Ivana Stradner from the Foundation for Defence of Democracies pointed out just this week that,

“Russia is undermining Bosnia's stability by working with Serbia to exacerbate ethnic divisions between Croats, Bosniaks, and Serbs...What we see in the Balkans is the same playbook Putin is using in Georgia and Moldova, weaponizing secessionist movements”.

In these efforts, Putin has a conduit in Dodik to undermine the hard-won peace and stability across the Balkans. Those seeking to undermine stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, from Dodik to Cvijanović, must face consequences, and Labour will continue to support the targeted measures that the Government brought in in April this year. To that end, I would be grateful if the Minister could set out what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the sanctions, and what discussions he has had with officials across the western Balkans on how we can apply further diplomatic pressure on Dodik and Republika Srpska.

Dodik and Putin share the same goals when it comes to Bosnia; they want to strengthen the Serbian-Russian alliance, block Bosnia from securing membership of the European Union and NATO, and undermine the legitimacy of state institutions that have preserved the delicate balance of peace since the 1990s. Russia's clear intention to undo the authority of the High Representative is a testament to the Kremlin's nefarious intentions for the Balkans. It has become yet another arena to incite conflict and maximise Putin's influence. There are also serious concerns about Russian disinformation operations in the region, including in Bosnia and Serbia. Will the Minister explain whether he shares those concerns, and assure the House that serious efforts are being made to support local partners to tackle fake news and rebut the constant tide of provocations that could further drive tensions?

Russian proxies are integral to secessionist efforts across the western Balkans, and we must heed the warnings of the High Representative, who said last year that a lack of response to the current situation would endanger the Dayton agreement and that instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina would have profound wider regional implications. He has also said that the conflict in Ukraine—not so far away—is a sobering reminder that even in the 21st century another war on European soil is not an impossibility. This would be Putin's dream come true for the Balkans. If we are to honour the lives lost in Srebrenica and the lives being lost in Ukraine today, Britain must be a force for unity, co-operation and democracy on the global stage, as a foil to Russia's ambitions to subvert them.

Today, let us reflect on Srebrenica, the lives lost and how the aggravation of ethnic tensions can lead to appalling evil that should never be forgotten and never

be repeated. There are those who would still deny the scale of the atrocities that occurred in the war in Bosnia and those who have avoided justice. One of the most powerful ways to hold those individuals to account is to remember Srebrenica, to pay tribute to the lives lost, to tell victims' stories and to ensure that the future does not replicate the past. Will the Minister therefore commit to keeping the House informed of developments in Bosnia and the wider region through written and oral statements? What assurances can he provide today regarding countering Russian influence in the region? I appreciate that he has only been in post for just over a week, but what conversations has he had with officials at the Department for Education to ensure that as many young people as possible benefit from the resources and expertise of Remembering Srebrenica?

I reiterate my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East and the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton for securing today's debate, as well as reiterating Labour's commitment to supporting efforts to hold to account those who would see peace in the region break down for their own secessionist ambitions. We must continue to stand firm against both internal and external forces that we know are seeking to destabilise Bosnia and Herzegovina. The collective resolve the House has shown today is critical. The lives lost needlessly and tragically in Srebrenica must be remembered, and their story must be continually told. I am pleased that today we have reflected, remembered and resolved to continue our efforts against division, conflict and hatred.

1.30 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Graham Stuart): It is a great, albeit sobering, pleasure to follow so many powerful speeches from Members on both sides of the House, showing the unity to which so many referred. There is real-world power in standing up for the principles and values that are shared on both sides of the House, and that all of us, including the UK Government, wish to back and reinforce.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) and the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this debate and, of course, the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. It is fantastic to have Members on both sides of the House who not only speak with passion on this issue but have deep personal knowledge and engagement from their previous professional career. I pay tribute to them for their work as the respective chairs of the all-party parliamentary groups on Bosnia and Herzegovina and on Srebrenica. The professional career of my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) also involved him in that part of the world.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am very much involved in Bosnia, so I thank everyone who has taken part in this debate, which is terribly important because it is widely viewed in Bosnia. People pay huge attention to what is happening, because they do not get this sort of debate in their own country. The young people, by the way, do not want another war, and people in Bosnia are watching what we say and do very carefully.

Graham Stuart: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention.

Colleagues on both sides of the Chamber are right to continue drawing attention to the fragile situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and to the lessons we must all learn from the Srebrenica genocide. I am grateful for the contributions made by hon. and right hon. Members, and I will try to respond to the points they have raised.

This debate comes just after the 27th anniversary of the genocide at Srebrenica. As colleagues have said, it was the worst atrocity on European soil since the end of the second world war. Today, as we did on Monday, we remember the victims of those terrible events and stand with the families in their ongoing fight for justice so many years on.

There is no question but that what happened in Srebrenica was genocide. That was the conclusion of the UN International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and of the International Court of Justice after extensive legal processes, yet some individuals and groups continue to deny these events. We have seen this over the past few days in and around Srebrenica, and we utterly condemn this behaviour. Glorifying the perpetrators and instigators of such heinous acts takes us further away from reconciliation and hinders the country's ability to move forward and come together, so it is vital that we deliver justice and challenge the lies and false narratives, as successive speakers have said.

To date, a total of 57 individuals have been tried at the state court of Bosnia and Herzegovina for crimes committed in and around Srebrenica in July 1995. A further 20 individuals have been tried at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and its successor, the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, for crimes related to Srebrenica. We are proud to have supported this work.

Of course, we house Radovan Karadžić in a UK cell as he serves his whole-of-life prison sentence following his conviction for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and for the genocide at Srebrenica. Last month, the UK helped to pass a UN Security Council resolution on the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, extending the term of the current prosecutor. We will continue to fight to end impunity for war criminals, and to see that they are held to account.

As others have said, Bosnia and Herzegovina faces new challenges today. Threats are on the rise, from the knock-on effects of Putin's war to the destabilising actions of Russian-backed secessionists, about which the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) spoke so powerfully.

Alicia Kearns: My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. He is talking about the prosecutions we have achieved, but there have been very few prosecutions for sexual violence. Will he commit to meeting me to discuss whether we can create an international organisation with the sole job of going in at the start of a conflict to collect evidence of sexual violence so that we are able to prosecute and get justice? Waiting until the end of a conflict is too late because, unfortunately, the evidence will have gone.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. She will be aware that, on 16 November 2021, the Government launched a major global initiative to stop sexual violence against women and girls in conflict,

[Graham Stuart]

which included a £20 million fund. We are alive to this issue, and I would be delighted to meet her to discuss how it is not enough to have effective mechanisms afterwards, and how we need to get in early to try to make sure it does not happen in the first place.

The leaders of Republika Srpska have been emboldened by Russia's actions. With Moscow's support, as the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate mentioned, they are using divisive and dangerous nationalist rhetoric. They are encouraging ethnic hatred and genocide denial, and they are pushing for the de facto secession of Republika Srpska, in direct contravention of their country's constitution.

The situation is serious, and we must learn the lessons of the region's history and the consequences of inaction. The west took too long to act in the 1990s, as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary argued when she visited Bosnia and Herzegovina just two months ago. Sarajevo suffered under siege for 1,425 days. We were not bold enough to prevent terrible events such as the genocide at Srebrenica. If the Government and I, and everyone who has spoken today, are serious when we say "never again," and if it is not just empty rhetoric, we must act today to preserve security and stability. That is why we are deploying a wide range of diplomatic, economic and defence support to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

First, we are working to protect the hard-won Dayton peace agreement. In April, in response to their unacceptable nationalist rhetoric and denial of the genocide, we sanctioned Milorad Dodik, the Bosnian Serb member of Bosnia and Herzegovina's state-level presidency, and Željka Cvijanović, the President of Republika Srpska. These designations include travel bans and asset freezes, and they were the first under the UK's Bosnia and Herzegovina sanctions regime. We will keep the situation under review, and we will apply further designations if necessary. We will continue to support Bosnia and Herzegovina's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and we will continue to back the work of the High Representative, Christian Schmidt.

It is fantastic to see total co-operation and agreement, from what I can tell from every word of the speech by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate, between Her Majesty's Opposition and Her Majesty's Government on almost every aspect of this.

Secondly, as has been said, we have to give hope and show that Bosnia and Herzegovina can succeed. We are investing to boost the country's economic security. We are extending our offer of honest and reliable infrastructure investment to the western Balkans, and we aim to mobilise \$100 million of UK-backed investment by 2025. Across the western Balkans there is a nearly £13 billion facility at UK Export Finance, our credit agency, to support and encourage British involvement in such activity, which will help to provide the resilience and capability to counter Russian interference.

Thirdly, we are boosting Bosnia and Herzegovina's ability to counter security threats and malign influences—again, I am directly answering a point made today. That includes training its cadets in world-class British military academies such as Sandhurst. That support, like our support for Ukraine, is about our belief in a simple principle: the right of people to decide their democratic future and to protect themselves. Bosnia and Herzegovina's future lies on that path—it must do—and in greater partnership with NATO and countries such as the UK.

Finally, we are ensuring that the truth about Srebrenica will endure. We have built a strong partnership with the Srebrenica memorial centre, to develop its operational capacity and establish a centre for genocide research, prevention and reconciliation. We are also supporting Remembering Srebrenica, which just yesterday hosted its national commemoration event in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. We have provided £200,000 to that organisation to ensure that it can continue to do its highly valuable work.

Yasmin Qureshi: I am glad that £200,000 has been given to Remembering Srebrenica. I do not know whether the Minister is aware that that charity, which has been in existence for some time, has always struggled to get sufficient funding. Every year, it has to beg for money from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities or the Foreign Office, and the situation has been very difficult for it. In the light of what is happening, should there not be a proper system in place to fund this charity, on a yearly basis, with a decent amount of money to allow it to carry out the work it does across the country?

Graham Stuart: I hear what the hon. Lady says. I think most Members in the Chamber would recognise that £200,000 is a substantial sum and that we in the UK are unusual in having that kind of Government backing. She and I, and the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate and others, attended the events this week, and it is important to see the power they have and their ability to bring people together. Like her, I hope that the charity can succeed and we can ensure that it has a viable future.

Let me have a look at some of the other issues raised and make sure that I am dealing with them all as best I can, given that there is the opportunity to do so. On tackling the destabilisation efforts, I have already mentioned the sanctions on Bosnian Serb presidency member Dodik. On the military aspect, the UK supports EUFOR and wants to see its mandate renewed at the UN Security Council in November. We cannot allow a security vacuum in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and we will work with allies on a NATO alternative should Russia choose to use its veto—the House should be aware of that, as that threat could be there. But if Russia tries to stop EUFOR, we would look to provide a NATO alternative, which the Russians might find less satisfactory. I have stated on the record the importance we attribute to the need for a speedy response.

On Amir and the powerful tale told about him, I thought the most memorable line from a powerful speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton was that

"denial is fought through remembrance."

That is why it is so important that we continue to do this, so that Amir's story is heard and his family feel that it is, and so that it positively contributes to ensuring that there is not a repetition in this part of the world or somewhere else.

On the support for reconciliation, my predecessor as Minister for Europe visited Bosnia and Herzegovina on 16 June, where he met young politicians, Foreign Minister Turković and the Central Election Commission. We are trying to ensure that we have those kinds of ministerial ties. I have also already mentioned that the Foreign

Secretary visited Sarajevo on 26 May, when she reaffirmed the UK's commitment to peace and stability in the western Balkans in the face of Russia's malign influence. I thank the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate for his support for the role of Sir Stuart Peach, which is really important.

On work with the Department for Education, I have not yet had that opportunity, but I hope that, given the general tenor of my speech and the unanimity strongly felt in this place, we have shown that we are determined to ensure that we remember the past but do not see this act of remembrance as somehow separated from current circumstances, as it is anything but. It is part of dealing with the current threats and destabilisation and taking them seriously. On various fronts, diplomatic, civil society and defence, we are trying to make sure that we are an active player. At the heart of what a lot of colleagues have raised is that we must stay focused on this, and that we do not find ourselves asleep at the wheel and failing to respond, alongside allies, when circumstances demand action. I am delighted to conclude the debate, and I hope that I have answered colleagues' questions.

1.45 pm

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank all my parliamentary colleagues for attending today's debate. I reiterate my thanks to Mr Speaker for allowing the Speaker's House to be used on Monday for the commemoration, with my request having been accepted. I see the Chair of the Administration Committee, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker), is in his place, and I thank him for the fact that the Committee allowed for the commemoration and book signing in Portcullis House. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate to take place.

I wish to make a correction, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think I said in my speech earlier that the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand caused the second world war—I meant to say the first world war. That was just a slip on my part.

I am glad that the Foreign Office is recognising that the situation in Bosnia is delicate and that it is aware of it. That is important, because one act can lead to a horrendous situation; the first world war came from

one assassination, and the second world war also led to millions of people dying. Sometimes strong action at the early stages, when the problem arises, is probably the best way forward. I thank the Government and the Minister for acknowledging that this is a genuine, pressing issue at this moment in time.

Again, I thank Remembering Srebrenica for all the work it has been carrying out, and I thank the UK for being the country in the whole of Europe that has been commemorating the Srebrenica genocide. As always, in so many things, we in the UK lead on these things. I thank everyone in our country, and all my political parliamentary colleagues, not for what they have done today, but for all the assistance, advice, help and working together we have done over the years.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that from 4 to 11 July 2022, the UK marked Srebrenica Memorial Week with commemorations taking place in hundreds of schools, local authorities, places of worship, community centres and police forces to name but a few to mark the 27th anniversary of the genocide at Srebrenica where over 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were murdered by Bosnian Serb forces; expresses concern about the current threat to Bosnia's territorial integrity and sovereignty from secessionists who are operating with the support of Russia and the prospect of a return to conflict; commends the invaluable work undertaken by Remembering Srebrenica in using the lessons of Srebrenica to tackle prejudice to help build a safer, stronger and more cohesive society in the UK; and urges the Government to continue funding this vital work which since 2013 has educated nearly 200,000 young people on Srebrenica, enabled over 1,500 community actions to take place right across the country each year, and created 1,450 Community Champions who pledge to stand up to hatred and intolerance in their communities.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Act 2022
Energy (Oil and Gas) Profits Levy Act 2022.

Protecting and Restoring Nature: COP15 and Beyond

[Relevant Documents: Oral evidence taken jointly before the House of Lords Environment and Climate Change Committee and the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee on 20 June 2022 on COP 15: the international biodiversity conference, HC 480; Second Report of the Environmental Audit Committee, Session 2021-22, The UK's footprint on global biodiversity, HC 674, and the Government response, HC 1060.]

1.48 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I beg to move,

That this House has considered protecting and restoring nature at COP15 and beyond.

I am delighted to open today's debate and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for its support in securing this important debate. I also welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) to his new post. I look forward to working with him and hope he will be a champion for nature in the most crucial of years.

COP15 is the most significant biodiversity summit in a decade. As we all know, it has been delayed multiple times, because of the covid-19 pandemic, and it is now due to take place in Montreal from 5 to 17 December, while China still retains the presidency. If the negotiating process has been slowed down, environmental decline most certainly has not. Deforestation in the Amazon, for example, one of the most biodiverse places on Earth, has now reached a six-year high. Recent satellite observation suggests that it could fast be approaching a tipping point beyond which the forest could be lost in its entirety.

The sixth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change from working group II showed that climate change is already causing what it calls "dangerous and widespread disruption in nature."

A new UN report published in April warned that human activities have already altered 70% of the Earth's land surface, degrading up to 40% of it. The truth is that our only home is not only on fire, but being bulldozed before our very eyes. That is why COP15 must agree a framework not just to halt biodiversity loss by 2030, but to reverse it. Our world desperately needs a nature-positive decade, so that by 2030 species and ecosystems are on a measurable path to recovery and biodiversity loss has started to be reversed.

By now, we all know the facts that, globally, 1 million species are at risk of extinction, and that the UK has lost, or I should say destroyed, almost half of its biodiversity since the industrial revolution, more than any other G7 country. A report published just this week by the Environment Agency showed that a quarter of mammals in England and almost a fifth of UK plants are now threatened with extinction.

Let me focus very briefly on what that actually means, because it is very easy to stand here and quote global or national statistics. I want to see it through the lens of one of my favourite species, which is the swift. Since 1995, we have seen a decline of more than a half in the population of that bird. As the Minister may know, in December they were added to the UK's red list of

endangered birds along with the house martin and the greenfinch, joining the cuckoo and nightingale whose songs are now very rarely heard.

Swifts are summer visitors from Africa arriving in the UK in the last week of April or in early May, staying only long enough to breed. They are the most amazing, beautiful creatures and they are the fastest of all birds in level flight, reaching speeds of almost 70 miles an hour. A single bird can fly more than 1 million miles in its lifetime. That is why it is honestly heartbreaking that we are seeing them less and less in our skies, and a profound tragedy that, without urgent action, our children and grandchildren are running out of time to discover the wonders that nature holds.

In that context, it is therefore extremely concerning to hear about the lack of progress at the recent COP15 meeting in Nairobi, with just two targets finalised and ongoing disagreements about finance and the headline nature loss targets in particular. The post-2020 global biodiversity framework, due to be adopted in Montreal, should be setting out a vision of a world living in harmony with nature by 2050 at the very latest. It should be setting out a vision of reversing biodiversity loss, with a series of targets and milestones for 2030. As others have noted, it must be a Paris agreement for nature and mark a turning point in our relationship with the natural world.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the goals that we need to secure at this and future conferences is protection for the world's peatlands, as crucially important carbon sinks and a source of great biodiversity, supporting many species?

Caroline Lucas: I could not agree more with the right hon. Lady. In fact, I will come on to say a few words about peat very shortly. It sometimes feels that with all the focus on planting trees, which is very important, people sometimes forget that, actually, there is far more carbon sequestered in our peatlands than we will replace with our trees.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am listening very carefully to what the hon. Lady has to say. Does she agree that one of the most important things that we can do is reduce the amount of waste that we send for incineration? In that respect, will she welcome the targets set out in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs consultation document of 16 March, which look as if they are taking the Government towards reducing the amount of waste that goes to incineration? Does she agree particularly that the incinerator at Westbury has no place in our waste disposal strategy going forward and does she hope that the Government will place a moratorium on these horrible things?

Caroline Lucas: I am delighted to agree with the right hon. Gentleman about the Westbury incinerator in particular and about incineration in general. He is absolutely right. The sooner that we can move towards a genuinely circular economy, where we are not producing the waste in the first place, the better.

I was talking about the progress at the pre-meeting of COP15 in Nairobi just a few weeks ago. Frankly, it was woeful. In the closing plenary, non-governmental organisations warned:

“Biodiversity and the ecosystems across our planet are on the brink of collapse, and so is the CBD process itself right now. If nothing changes, we are heading towards failure at COP15. We cannot afford for that to happen.”

Indeed, while Nairobi saw positive development on the goal for halting extinctions and the mission to achieve a nature-positive world by 2030, even those proposals are absolutely littered with brackets, meaning that they have yet to be agreed multilaterally. As a reminder, following the earlier talks in Geneva, Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, the executive secretary of the UN convention on biological diversity noted:

“Most of the recommendations...have many brackets. Not few—many brackets.”

According to observers there was an apparent lack of political leadership and urgency in those negotiating rooms in Nairobi, with countries failing to build consensus and with the text as a consequence being described as “messy and lacklustre”. As one campaigner with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds put it, “We have a marathon to finish before we can say that we are close to a successful outcome, but no one seems to be running let alone sprinting.”

As the Minister will know, the world failed to fully achieve any of the 20 UN biodiversity targets that were agreed back in 2010. Here in the UK, we missed a shocking 17 out of 20 targets, again leading the RSPB to declare that we had seen a “lost decade for nature.” The world simply cannot afford another lost decade. It is essential that an ambitious framework is agreed at COP15 and that we learn from the failed efforts of the past to ensure that its targets are met.

Here in Parliament today, there has been far less scrutiny of this summit in comparison with November’s COP26 summit in Glasgow. In some ways that is understandable given that COP26 was a UK-hosted summit, but it is still concerning that, to date, there have been no debates or ministerial statements on COP15 in the House of Commons, all the more so given that Ministers have themselves acknowledged that nature and climate are two sides of the same coin and that we needed a joined-up strategy both for COP26 and indeed for COP15.

While MPs have been able to engage with the COP26 President at COP26 oral questions for which I am very grateful, no parallel mechanism exists for COP15. As a consequence, I just do not think that we have the same familiarity with the UK’s negotiating objectives or, indeed, the milestones in the run-up to that Montreal summit.

I have some crucial questions for the Minister. Ahead of the summit in Nairobi, it was reported that the UK Government were helping to co-ordinate a High Ambition statement, which called for, among other things:

“An ambitious global biodiversity framework to halt and reverse biodiversity loss globally, with goals for 2050 and targets for 2030 and strong reporting and review mechanisms.”

That, of course, is very welcome, but will the Minister provide us with a more specific breakdown of the UK’s negotiating objectives? What steps is his Department taking to secure them? Will he commit to regularly updating this House as we progress towards the summit in December? Will he commit to raising the profile of the summit across government?

I appreciate, particularly this afternoon, that we have no idea who the Prime Minister will be in December, but regardless of who wins the Conservative leadership race, they should attend in person as a practical and

tangible way of demonstrating their commitment to securing an ambitious global agreement. As we know from Glasgow, attendance of world leaders focuses minds and sets the pace of negotiations, and all of the evidence suggests that that will be much needed in Montreal.

Let me highlight several critical elements that will be essential in ensuring that that global biodiversity framework does indeed reverse nature loss. I welcome the strengthening of the 2030 mission, which now includes words on “halting” and “reversing” biodiversity loss, meaning that it is aligned with the Leaders Pledge for Nature, which is a vast improvement on the previous draft that aimed only to put biodiversity on a “path” to recovery by 2030. We also need to see specific and ambitious commitments from Governments to ensure that that mission is delivered, underpinned by robust accountability mechanisms and, of course, the necessary finance.

Looking at the agreement first, there should be a set of 2030 targets to prevent extinctions, recover species populations, and to retain and restore the extent and quality of habitats. Secondly, we need accompanying 2030 action targets that genuinely tackle the key pressures and drivers of biodiversity loss. Thirdly, we need agreement on the prominent target to effectively and equitably protect and conserve at least 30% of land, inland waters, seas, and coasts by 2030. I welcome the fact that the Government have championed this goal in negotiations so far. I hope in their role as a member of the High Ambition Coalition and as Ocean co-chair they continue to persuade others to do so.

Fourthly, in addition to a strong implementation mechanism, the UK Government should also champion a ratchet mechanism similar to that enshrined in the Paris agreement, to encourage countries to strengthen their plans over time.

Fifthly, the framework must recognise the important role of indigenous peoples and local communities in protecting biodiversity. Globally, their lands cover one third of the Earth’s land surface and 85% of biodiversity conservation areas. It is essential that the global framework respects and strengthens their land rights.

Sixthly, while target 16 includes some positive language on consumption, it is notable that the framework is missing a clear target to reduce countries’ ecological footprint. That is particularly crucial for our food systems, which are responsible for 80% of deforestation. The Environmental Audit Committee, of which I am a member, has recommended that the UK advocate for stronger wording on developed countries’ reducing unsustainable consumption and production, but as well as stronger language we need a clear target. I ask the Minister whether the Government will champion the need for an outcome on halving our global production and consumption footprint by 2030.

Then we come to funding. Any framework must be underpinned by the resources necessary to implement the targets and hold countries accountable for their progress towards achieving them, yet finance has been one of the most challenging parts of the negotiation so far. When he appeared before the Environmental Audit Committee last month, the Minister of State for the Pacific and the International Environment in the other place told us that, on finance:

“The UK has a particular role to play, given the networks and relationships that we built in the run up to COP 26... We intend to use and are using those networks to try to plug at least that part of the gap.”

[Caroline Lucas]

That is welcome, but can the Minister tell us what kind of financial figures the Government are looking at? Can he tell us if that will be enough to meet the so-called biodiversity funding gap?

In the final plenary session in Geneva, developing countries called for richer countries to provide at least \$100 billion a year for biodiversity, rising to \$700 billion by 2030. That is obviously a large sum but, as the Minister for the International Environment reminded us, the top 50 food-producing countries spend about the same amount every year in subsidising often destructive land use. Regardless of the final figure, funding for biodiversity must of course be new and be additional to climate finance and overseas development aid and, at the very least, harmful subsidies must be redirected towards nature-positive activities and investments.

It may be that in his response the Minister will point to the fact that the Global Environment Facility saw its funding increase by almost 30% for 2022 to 2026. That is welcome, but let us remember that that funding supports countries to meet their obligations under not only the convention on biodiversity, but several other agreements, including the climate change agreement. Totalling just \$5.25 billion, its funding remains vastly insufficient to respond to the growing crisis.

Domestically, the UK must meet the Paris agreement for nature with renewed commitment and determination to deliver on the ambition of the 25-year environment plan, to leave the environment in a better state. We all know that the Government are not short of warm words when it comes to being a global leader on the environment, but too often the reality tells a different story. Nature in this country is under pressure from every angle: industrial agriculture, climate change, pollution such as microplastics, which are now widespread in our environment, and untreated sewage regularly dumped in UK waters, creating a risk for the environment and public health.

The Government's failure to ban peat burning meant that vital carbon stores were set alight just weeks before COP26, and its Environment Act 2021 targets fundamentally lack ambition, with a target of increasing species abundance by just 10% by 2042 compared with 2030 levels leading some to say that England will have less nature in 20 years' time than we do today. That is hardly a helpful target, and it has led the Office for Environmental Protection to conclude that it

“will not deliver nature recovery”,

or achieve the aims set out in the 25-year plan.

Warm words need to be replaced with meaningful action. Given the scale of the biodiversity crisis, the Government must also go further and faster than the commitment in the Environment Act to halt the decline of species by 2030, strengthening it to reversing biodiversity loss by 2030. Simply stopping things getting worse is no longer enough. The pledge to protect 30% of land and sea for nature was welcomed by the environment sector, but research shows that as little as 5% of land is currently effectively managed for nature, not the 26% the Government sometimes suggest. For 30 by 30 to genuinely deliver, it must ensure that protective areas are effectively managed for nature in the long term, with effective monitoring.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Does the hon. Member recall that we set out a biodiversity target to halt the decline in nature by 2010, and we set out a target again in 2010 under the Aichi targets to halt the decline in nature loss by 2020, but we achieved neither? Is there anything in the papers in advance of COP15 that gives her any hope that our ability to implement a reverse or even a halt in the decline in nature by 2030 is more likely this time than it was in the previous two decades?

Caroline Lucas: I am genuinely struggling to know how to answer the hon. Gentleman's question. I want to say yes, and in a sense awareness is greater now and the general public's anger at seeing nature decline before their eyes is perhaps stronger. However, although there are some good words, unless we get rid of all the brackets in the texts and get them agreed, and unless, crucially, we have both the finance and the implementation, with a real focus on putting this stuff into practice, I am afraid I cannot stand here and tell him with any degree of certainty that we will have a better outcome.

I am coming to the end of my comments, as I am sure you will be pleased to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will touch briefly on the marine environment, because I do not want us to leave that out. I was lucky enough to join Greenpeace as part of its Operation Ocean Witness to see for myself the destructive fishing practices that are still happening, even in our supposed marine protected areas. We came across a French-flagged industrial fly shooter fishing vessel in the Bassurelle Sandbank MPA, and it was shocking to see the destruction in its wake. Fly shooting is hugely damaging not only for our marine ecosystems, but for local fishing communities, including those in my constituency, who are increasingly unable to make ends meet.

Will the Government finally please use their powers under the Fisheries Act 2020 and take action to restore our depleted seas? Will they make all MPAs in UK waters fully protected and immediately restrict the fishing licences of industrial vessels so that they cannot fish in those precious ecosystems?

I also want to underline how crucial it is that we address climate and nature together. They are two sides of the same coin. In Parliament I have championed the climate and ecological emergency Bill, which would address the climate and ecological crises in a holistic way, and I urge the Government to pick up that Bill in this new Session.

Finally, at the core of the climate and ecological crisis is our broken economic model, which prioritises growth above all else, including the health of people and planet. There is a growing body of evidence showing the dangers of our current economic model, with a report from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services by 82 of the world's top scientists and experts saying that the

“focus on short-term profits and economic growth”,

often excludes the value of nature.

The Minister will be aware that the Treasury-commissioned Dasgupta review called for an

“urgent and transformative change in how we think, act and measure economic success to protect and enhance our prosperity and the natural world”.

Yet we are still not really seeing what follow-up there will be to the Dasgupta review. Another inquiry by the Environmental Audit Committee on biodiversity in the UK made it clear that

“Alternatives to GDP urgently need to be adopted as more appropriate ways to measure economic success”.

We must now look to build an economy for the future, following countries such as New Zealand, which is already leading the way with the world’s first ever wellbeing budget. The nature of our economy must be on the agenda at COP15 and the Government should join other countries in showing leadership by urgently introducing alternative indicators of economic success that prioritise the health of people and planet.

Much of this debate is around global challenges, but I want to end by focusing on the local and talking about the round-headed rampion, of which I am a proud species champion. The round-headed rampion is a beautiful blue wildflower, which is known as the “Pride of Sussex” and is the official county flower. However, it is increasingly rare, since it grows only on chalk grasslands such as those on the South Downs, and those chalk grasslands have declined by 80% just since world war two. Its fate relies on the protection, preservation and restoration of these important habitats.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech and I agree with her on protecting habitats, grasslands and other places. However, does she also accept that isolated protection does not really work, and that there has to be a connectivity between preserved areas, just as there has to be a connectivity between forests and natural grasslands?

Caroline Lucas: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He is absolutely right: that connectivity is crucial to a thriving natural environment. Unless we ensure that we have not just isolated protection areas, but a genuinely joined-up corridor of environmental improvement and even widen out from that, we will not be successful in our aims.

I will just wind up by saying that as we head towards COP15, let us remember the beauty of this world and what we risk losing by failing to protect it for ourselves, for our children and for future generations. I urge the Minister once again to do all he can to ensure a positive outcome from this important summit.

2.10 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be speaking in the debate this afternoon. While I do not always share the views of the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), I agree with much of what she said. She is absolutely right to highlight the imperative this year to deliver a good outcome at COP. I very much welcome the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), to his new position. Nobody is expecting him to be able to rewrite the world in one afternoon, but I hope he will be able to secure or stay in his position, and that he will listen to this afternoon’s debate and take a steer on a subject that brings together Members from all parts of the House.

This issue does not divide us—fundamentally, every one of us agrees that the loss of the natural world is a disaster in every respect that has to be reversed step by step. We have to take an approach that begins to rebuild

nature. I happen to believe that we can do that and achieve other things as well—I do not think this is an either/or, as I will explain. This is such an imperative, and this year it is so important that the world acts and, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion rightly says, starts to deliver.

It is a matter of regret to me that the COP summit is not happening in China. In reality, we need the Chinese in particular to take a lead on this, because they are by far the world’s biggest consumers right now. Given the scale of China and the emerging demand for natural products and agricultural products in China—apart from the issues we all know about relating to the parts of the wildlife trade that we all abhor and detest—we need the Chinese to be at the heart of the necessary changes, so it is a shame that they are not hosting the summit. However, I very much hope they will still play an active part in it.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I am listening with interest to the comments that my right hon. Friend has made. It is unfortunate that COP15 was unable to take place in China. Does he not agree that to try to ensure that China recognises the global importance of its chairmanship of COP15, albeit in Canada, we need as many world leaders as possible to attend in Montreal, including whoever is the next Prime Minister of the United Kingdom? They should put the date in their calendar and make it a priority to attend in Montreal, to take part in those negotiations and to demonstrate that we need a Paris moment for nature. The UK’s leadership at COP26, delivering the Glasgow climate pact and also our leadership on net zero have been conditional on ensuring that leaders at the very top take part in negotiations. Does he agree that the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom should also be there in December?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree with that. I hope that he or she—whoever is elected—will do that. One of the questions I have been asking the candidates is, “Will you protect and keep up the agenda that this Government already have on the environment?” We are seen as leaders internationally. Yes, the strategies need to be actioned, but nevertheless we are doing good work in this area. We are targeting aid in the right places, and we are doing as much as any nation on Earth, but that does not mean there is not an awful lot more to do, and that is one of the things I will be talking about this afternoon. I absolutely agree with the point he is making.

Let me start by touching momentarily on what we are doing here, and then I will go on to talk about the international challenge. First, the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion is absolutely right to talk about the decline in native species. She is parliamentary species champion for a sadly rare flower in Sussex. I am parliamentary species champion for the not yet very rare, but much too reduced in number, hedgehog. There used to be 35 million hedgehogs in the UK, and there are now probably 1.5 million. The numbers are recovering in urban areas, but not in rural areas. The decline has been appalling, and if we do not do something to reverse it, they will rapidly move from the vulnerable list to the very endangered list. For a creature that we all love and adore, that must not be allowed to happen.

It is about protecting and extending habitats, a smart approach to the management of our countryside and doing things differently. I happen to believe that we

[Chris Grayling]

have to be pretty robust in trying to change the nature of the pesticides we use. It seems pretty clear that they have been a factor in the loss of biodiversity. We have to do that in a smart way—we cannot compromise our food production.

As we know, we have a crisis in Ukraine that is feeding through to food supplies around the world. Last Monday, I visited a regenerative farm in Gloucestershire, which I thought mapped out a pretty good path towards sustaining our agriculture, but in a much more nature-friendly way, and I am encouraged by those who have started as pioneers in regenerative agriculture, which involves a much closer relationship between farming and the natural world, leaving aside more space for nature, much more careful management of the land and taking advantage of natural approaches to manage pests, rather than simply covering the countryside in pesticides. It is encouraging to see that that movement, which started small, has now grown and the number of people in the farming world expressing an interest in it is growing. We have to protect the interests of our farmers, and we have to look after and support our farmers, but I am yet to meet a farmer who wants to trash the countryside. If we can help them farm in a more environmentally sustainable way, that has to be the right thing.

I very much support the work that the Campaign to Protect Rural England is doing to try to encourage more planting of hedgerows. For a creature like the hedgehog, hedgerows in the countryside are vital, as is a good field margin. It creates the kind of corridors that the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) was talking about. It is no good having wildlife in a little pocket. We need more hedgerows, more corridors and more space for them, and farming does not have to be done in a way that kills everything around. A wider field margin can still be part of a successful field with a successful crop, where the creatures can live side by side with the crops. If we do not take a much more enlightened approach to the management of our countryside, we will not be able to reverse the decline of species that we have sadly seen. That is our task here.

I very much welcome the steps the Government have taken so far. The structures put in place for farming, with a much greater focus on environmental stewardship, are good. There are challenges in the farming world as they adapt to that, but we should not move away from an approach that says, “We will reward farmers who can look after our countryside and we will encourage the use of farmland in the best way to sustain the wildlife that is so important to our countryside.”

I want to focus today on deforestation internationally. To my mind, it is one of the biggest global challenges we face. The destruction already done to forests around the world has had a huge environmental impact. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion made reference to what is happening in the Amazon. It is a scandal and a disgrace. It is mostly illegal, and it is a matter of extreme regret to me that as we in this House continue to challenge the Brazilian Government over what is happening, warm words are sent back via the embassy here, but on the ground nothing seems to happen.

Many of us in this House have met people from the indigenous communities who have told us in no uncertain terms about the illegal logging and illegal mining happening

in those areas. It has to stop. I have said it before and I will say it again: Brazil cannot be treated as a good member of the international community unless this stops, and we should not sign trade deals with the Brazilians unless this stops. All our diplomatic contacts with Brazil should be focused around saying, “If you want us to work with you normally, this has to stop.”

It is not as if there are no alternatives. I know from discussions with people in Brazil that there are 19 million hectares of degraded land in Brazil, and there are programmes to restore parts of it. That is good, but they are still chopping down the rainforest at the same time. Why not focus on the restoration of land in areas where deforestation has already taken place and where that land has become substantially degraded, rather than simply cutting down and cutting down? It needs tough enforcement action and political willpower, and it must happen, because as the hon. Lady said, the consequences globally of the loss of the Amazon rainforest are simply enormous.

It is a matter of enormous discredit to Brazil and the international community that this illegal action is being allowed to take place. Month after month we hear from Brazil that the situation is getting worse, not better. It really has to stop. I praise the Government for the work they are doing to try to protect the other great forest, in the Congo basin. The noble Lord Goldsmith has been at the forefront of supporting efforts to protect that rainforest. We must keep that important work up as the Administration evolve towards a new leadership, but the Brazilian issue has to be solved. We simply cannot go on like this.

The biggest subject that needs to be on the agenda for the discussion at COP about how we should start restoring biodiversity around the world should be the restoration of degraded land. The World Wide Fund for Nature estimates that the amount of degraded land around the world is equivalent to an area the size of South America, and we can see it. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am an active member of the International Conservation Caucus Foundation, along with the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner)—we are very much of the same mind on these issues. I went with the ICCF to Kenya in April to visit projects in the Maasai Mara. As I flew back to Nairobi, looking down from the plane, I could see what has gone wrong. Areas that were forest have been cleared and the land has been poorly farmed. It is now degraded and will gradually dissipate into desert.

That exists all around the world, whether it is that kind of land in Africa, derelict mangrove swamps or areas of arid land in other continents. If we are to solve the issue of biodiversity loss, and at the same time provide livelihoods for the people living in those areas who have chosen to chop things down because they see it as their only option, we will have to start restoring that degraded land. That is the biggest thing that I want to see come out of the COP summit: a global programme to start to restore the land that we have lost, with some of it returning to habitat, some of it used in a proper way for farming—not subsistence farming where people scrape a living, but properly managed agriculture that can create genuine livelihoods—and some degree of sustainable logging and forestry, because that can be done in a nature-friendly way. The key, however, is to bring that land back into proper use.

Jeremy Corbyn: I absolutely agree with what the right hon. Gentleman has just said. Does he not also think that we have to do something about the market for very rare, valuable tropical hardwoods? That market acts as a huge economic incentive for people in forest areas, because it is their only way of surviving economically. We have to do something about that as well, because we are indeed the market for those products.

Chris Grayling: I do not often agree with the right hon. Gentleman, but I absolutely agree with him on that point. None of us in this country should be buying tropical hardwoods for furniture or other purposes.

At the same time—this is perhaps where I differ slightly from the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion—for communities in developing countries where we want to see the restoration of the natural habitats that are so crucial to some of the world’s most iconic endangered species, our starting point should be the people themselves. We have to ensure that there are proper livelihoods, so that people can earn a living and at the same time benefit from the restoration of nature. That means helping them to establish proper, viable farming on part of that land, on a much larger scale and more efficiently, it means ecotourism to bring wealth into those areas, and it means sustainable logging and the sustainable management of forests. All those things are necessary. This is, to some extent, about GDP growth, because that is how we give those people the sense that, by properly managing that land, they benefit from it and also benefit from the restoration of nature.

Caroline Lucas: Just to be clear on the record, I absolutely agree that people in developing countries who would otherwise be deprived of their livelihoods if current unsustainable practices are not stopped should be supported into more sustainable practices. We have an absolute responsibility to do that, but the idea that we should go out there and treat increasing GDP as an overall abstract aim is wrong. If GDP happens to go up, then fine, but surely our aim should be to allow those people to thrive by giving them sustainable livelihoods, not chasing some kind of GDP figure, which is what I worry about both here and there.

Chris Grayling: But if we do not help them to grow their GDP—and do that in a sustainable, nature-friendly way that enables them to derive real benefits from the proper stewardship of that land, the restoration of natural habitats and the restoration of degraded land for other purposes—in the end, we will not create the kind of local ownership that will break the cycle of illegal logging, poaching, the illegal wildlife trade and the rest.

My message to the Minister is this. This COP is enormously important. It is a vital moment for the world. In my view, it is as important a moment for the world as COP26 was last year. The hon. Lady is right: climate and nature are two sides of the same coin. We have played a really important leadership role at COP in securing agreements, which might not do everything we wanted but took us a step forwards. We need to do the same this year. We need to send a senior delegation, we need to push for a proper agreement, and we need to be leaders ourselves in what we do in this country, but we cannot let the global community miss this opportunity. So my message to him, as he takes up this role and as we

prepare for a reshaped Administration—I hope he stays where he is—is this. Will he please do everything he can to ensure that the United Kingdom plays the cornerstone role in the COP discussions this autumn, which will be so important to ensuring that we manage to reverse a global decline in nature that should be a matter of shame to the whole of mankind?

2.26 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I am so glad to be called in this important debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for the debate, and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for opening it and getting the attention of the House.

As has been said, these are twin emergencies. We have a crisis in nature and a crisis in our climate. It is often forgotten that the two are intrinsically linked. We will not be able to play our part in keeping temperature rises below 1.5° C without a plan to restore the natural environment. This is also something that many constituents are concerned about, and there are some great projects up and down the country. In Sheffield, we have had our swift summit this year, which was sponsored by Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust. We have also had amazing opportunities for friends groups, one of which has been doing work—it is called climate work, but really it is nature work—in Whirlow Brook park. The friends group is doing a fantastic job to tackle the issue locally.

But the COP discussions are obviously global, and they are not a peripheral part of the climate diplomacy that we need to see. They are integral to co-ordinating global action to halt rising temperatures. That is why the Government’s failure to deliver the renewal and restoration of nature in the UK is so alarming. The fact that we are such a nature-depleted island is very concerning. I will not say that there has been a lack of action, because the Government have had plenty to announce. Doubtless the Minister will reel off a list of initiatives, strategy documents and pots of money in his response to the debate, but the stream of press releases seems to be driven more by the need to say something than the need to face up to the reality of the challenges ahead and do something.

It is not just me who thinks that. The Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee has said:

“Although there are countless Government policies and targets to ‘leave the environment in a better state than we found it’, too often they are grandiose statements lacking teeth and devoid of effective delivery mechanisms.”

The Environmental Audit Committee has previously commented:

“There is no strategy indicating how new biodiversity policies will work together. Implementation of these policies could be piecemeal, conflicting, and of smaller scale as a result.”

The 2021 Climate Change Committee progress report agreed and said that the Government should

“Publish an overarching strategy that clearly outlines the relationships and interactions between the multiple action plans in development for the natural environment”.

The CCC’s verdict in 2021 was damning: the Government planted less than half of the trees and committed to restore less than half of the peatlands recommended. It is alarming that, after a whole year, the 2022 progress report reads so similarly. Peatland, woodland and hedgerow restoration are not the start and finish of nature restoration, but they are a significant part of lowering our national

[Olivia Blake]

emissions. Since 2021, the Government have made little to no advance in meeting the targets they have set. In the case of peatland, they have actually enshrined into law regulations that leave huge swathes outside protections. Again, it is not me saying this; it is the CCC.

Despite pledging hundreds of millions for new trees, the Government have done nothing to address the skills shortages and the availability of training for new arborists, to ensure that we have the mix of trees we need and to increase the capacity of domestic tree nurseries so that we do not risk new diseases coming into the UK. Ministers even sat on their hands while the Wykeham nursery was closed.

It is shocking that, in its assessment of the Government's policies and plans for agriculture and land use, the CCC can identify not one credible plan to abate emissions. It is a wasted opportunity that emissions have been flat in this area since 2008. We should be using the power of our natural environment to lock away carbon. A lot has been said about our rainforests, but in the UK the peatlands are our rainforests. Other countries would be thrilled to have that natural environment, and we are not valuing it. That means we need a proper plan to restore and protect all our peatlands. It means we need real action to increase tree canopy cover and renew our hedgerows, and it means protecting important water and marine habitats such as salt marshes and seagrass meadows. All these measures will reverse the decline in nature at the same time as developing natural carbon sinks to help us meet the challenge of the climate emergency.

I have one message for Ministers today. They cannot spin their way out of the nature and climate emergencies. A press release for a badly thought through pot of money or a strategy that is light on detail might give them something to say in a debate such as this, but sooner or later the rhetoric will meet reality. It is well past time Ministers started to deliver.

2.32 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I am really pleased that this debate is happening today and that we are able to have a serious discussion about the effects of climate change on biodiversity. We have to be realistic: what is happening now is absolutely unprecedented in known human history, given the rate at which we are losing wildlife, biodiversity and insect life, and ultimately this is extremely damaging to human life itself. There has to be a much more thought through process of linking up all the environmental consequences of our lives, of industries and of the pollution that takes place.

Conferences such as COP15 are very important because they are a way of bringing people together. They are a way of trying to persuade all countries that the issues of CO₂ emissions and their effects on climate change and global warming are absolutely huge, and that something has to be done about them. However, that is not the whole story, because to some extent we are guilty of exporting our pollution and our emissions elsewhere. This country, most of Europe and some parts of north America have increasingly strict environmental protocols—on river waste, air pollution and so much else—which I absolutely support and endorse, but the effect of that is to shift manufacturing and polluting activities somewhere else.

That means we are not actually improving the global environment; all we are doing is shifting the pollution to some other place.

I hope one conclusion from this debate—I am sure the Minister will understand all this—is that we have to be very active internationally in trying to bring about a more sustainable world everywhere. This is about joined-up actions being taken by the UK Government. A very lengthy letter sent to them recently talks about the need for joined-up action by the British Government, as well as reducing the

“ecological footprint, domestically and globally”,

ensuring that

“biodiversity loss has been halted and reversed by 2030, against a baseline of 2020”,

and creating

“robust and well connected natural infrastructure across all UK nations”,

as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) pointed out in her excellent contribution to the debate. If we do not have that sense of joined-up thinking, we will be missing the whole point altogether.

There are many issues we could discuss today, but the one to which I want to draw attention first is water pollution in this country. I grew up with the idea that, somehow or other, the appalling levels of pollution created in all of our major rivers in this country by industrialisation and the industrial revolution of the 19th century were gradually becoming a thing of the past and that we were beginning to clean up our rivers. Yes, rivers in some places are a lot cleaner than they have ever been. The Thames, just outside, was biologically dead at one time, but it was eventually—very slowly—restored quite considerably. There used to be a huge tank in County Hall showing all the varieties of fish now found in the Thames.

Sadly, for many of our rivers, the trend is now going in the opposite direction, as the water companies routinely discharge raw sewage into our rivers, which obviously has a devastating effect on fish and natural life, and clearly becomes dangerous for the rest of the population as well. Yesterday, right on cue, Thames Water sent a very long letter to all of us who represent constituencies within its area telling us how much it is going to do to try not to pollute rivers, mainly the Thames, in the future by better management of the tributary rivers, the drainage system and so on. That is good, if it is actually going to do it, but its record, like those of most other water companies, is pretty terrible. At the same time, the water industry is dragging vast profits out of the water supply and allowing pollution levels to get so bad.

I do think we have to be extremely tough on the water companies and their management of rivers. That includes managing rivers upstream, as well as managing our paved-over areas in our urban communities to deal with the flooding issues in this country. It is not as if any of this is not known, but this is a question of joined-up thinking between planning and local authorities, water suppliers and central Government to try to achieve something much more sustainable.

If we are to deal with increasing levels of unusual rainfall, that obviously means better management of rivers. It is not all going to be done by flood protection. It would be done much better by upstream planting on rivers in this country, which to some extent has been

done in Somerset and the west, and the use of the floodplains as what they are intended for—the key is in their name—so that we end up with less flooding and damage to property through better environmental management of those water resources. This is about the biodiversity of our river systems, which is central to so much of our thinking.

There is a debate everywhere about rewilding. Anyone who has read Isabella Tree's excellent book about Knepp, and the way that that rewilding took place, knows that initially, many of the neighbouring farmers objected to it and said that she was creating a scruffy place that had lots of weeds on it and was damaging their crops and so on—I have heard many of these arguments for a very long time. She reports in a fascinating section of her book that eventually, after the rewilding had grown a great deal and become much more biodiverse, crop production rates went up because of the high levels of pollination by higher levels of insect life surrounding those farms. As the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) said, there is an interesting phenomenon of joined-up thinking on farming, because it is about the biodiversity surrounding crop production as well as the preserved areas that the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion talked about in her excellent contribution. We must think about that aspect.

This is also about how local authorities behave. I have the honour of representing my constituency, which I believe is the smallest urban constituency in the country and, I am pretty sure, the most densely populated in the country. Most people in my constituency have no open space of their own whatsoever, not even a balcony. Bringing up our children in that atmosphere, it is not easy to get them to understand the interaction between human life and natural life, because they live in an entirely concrete environment. What we do in our schools and our parks is important, as is the message that those young people get.

I have always visited each of the primary schools in my constituency as often as I can, usually once a year, and I have been to two primary schools and one secondary school in the past week to hold a discussion with students about their views on the environment. These are children growing up in a very urban environment, but they absolutely get the connectivity between the natural world and themselves, and they get what is possible in the small growing spaces that they have in those schools.

Yesterday morning I was in Ambler Primary School near Finsbury Park. It is a very densely populated urban area, with high levels of traffic around it. We were talking about biodiversity, growing flowers and so on, and one student asked me what I meant when I said that we should not be cutting grass too short. I was explaining about wildflowers and biodiversity, and he wanted to know whether that included football pitches. I explained that there had to be a balance between keeping grass on football pitches the right length and growing flowers and other things—it is a serious practical question if your interest is mainly in football.

Winning people over to these arguments is so important, and today's debate will help us to do that. We must also encourage local authorities to have more permeable surfaces and fewer car parks with impervious layers, and to end the appalling practice in many parts of the country of paving over front gardens to park cars, when

those front gardens are an important point of nature. Indeed, paving them over increases the danger of flooding, and thus the pollution of rivers further downstream. Some local authorities have done well on that. For example, Rotherham Council has done an excellent job in ensuring a huge level of biodiversity on all its roadside borders, and a number of other councils have done exactly the same. We should support them in that.

Those are the things we can do ourselves, through farming policy, the use—or non-use—of pesticides, and building up a sense of biodiverse resilience, which in turn will protect endangered species. Sadly, as the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell pointed out, the hedgehog is not far off being an endangered species. Obviously I hope its population recovers, but it seems to be recovering in urban rather than rural areas. That is deeply disturbing and suggests that it is due to a combination of farming practices and dangers from roads, whereas urban areas seem to be maintaining or even recovering their hedgehog population. We can do an awful lot, and we must bring up our young people to understand that.

I pay tribute to teachers in schools who do their best to achieve that. During a visit that I made recently to another local school, Newington Green Primary School, there was another brilliant set of children who were concerned about these issues. Older students, such as those at the Arts and Media School Islington, who are preparing to do their GCSEs and later their A-levels, believe—this view has also been put forward in the House—that there should be much more environmental education at all stages of our education system, so that children grow up understanding such things.

To add to what has been said already, the loss of biodiversity on a global scale is huge. The number of animal species that are becoming extinct year on year is increasing fast, and there will come a time when the elephant, the tiger, the lion and so many other large species will be on the danger list, as well as very many smaller species that are almost extinct at the present time. As such, I agree with what the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell said about changing the story and the narrative.

In some places, such as the Indonesian, African and Amazon rainforests, there is a huge economic advantage to be gained from selling tropical hardwoods. On the way to get one tree—iron tree, mahogany, or whatever else it happens to be—the whole forest around it is destroyed or, in the case of the Amazon rainforest, wantonly burned down in order to create the short-term advantage of growing soya for a few years, leaving a virtual desert behind. I discussed that issue with a lot of environmental campaigners and others from Brazil, both from Rio and from the Amazon, during the COP in Glasgow last year, and the similarity of views between those from urban Rio and those from the Amazon area was very interesting. The commitment now being made by the putative and hopefully next President of Brazil, Lula, to end all the destruction of the rainforest and promote sustainability there is welcome. I hope he gets elected and is able to achieve that goal, because it would be an enormous step forward.

It is no good western countries lecturing the poorest people in the poorest parts of the world about the need to protect their environment, because we believe it is the right thing to do, when they cannot feed their children,

[Jeremy Corbyn]

do not have a proper education system, do not have a health service, and are living in levels of desperate poverty. Something else has to go with it. Eco-tourism does help, as do sustainable agriculture and our purchasing practices and powers, but this is also about bringing people on board. If we just fence off an area and say, "This is preserved, and we are going to put armed guards in it to protect the animals that may become extinct", we are not sending a very good message to the people who live in that area. The most effective conservation, whether marine or land conservation, is done with the participation, support and involvement of the entire community that lives locally.

I will give one example. In Mexico, the turtle on the Atlantic coast was rapidly depleted in numbers and was not far off extinction. There was an idea to create a protected zone for sea turtles, with lots of guards to prevent people from stealing turtle eggs. What would have happened then? Corruption would have come in, somebody would have started stealing the eggs, and so on. What they actually did was recruit all the turtle hunters to become turtle protectors as a way of making money out of visitors going there. There is nothing like a poacher turned gamekeeper to look after a species that was at great risk. Conservation can work if people bring the population along with them; it does not work if security companies, armed guards and everything else are sent in. It is so important to achieve that more universal buy-in.

I am delighted that we are having this debate. We have to ensure that the generation going through school—the next generation coming up—understands that our lives and the survival of this planet depend on how we interact with nature. That means bringing children up to understand that insects, wildlife, and wild places are not their enemies—that we have to live alongside nature, not destroy it through our activities and our greed. They will then get the message about connectivity: that when a person drops a plastic bag in a river, it ends up in the sea, and we end up eating that plastic with the fish we consume. It is about conserving and preserving the natural world and the environment. Of course, that includes the big global conferences and the international agreements, but environment is basically a state of mind: whether we live with nature, or destroy it and see it as something solely to be exploited. Today's debate is a good example of how we can advance both of those agendas at the same time, ensuring that we get the international agreement that is essential, but bringing that debate into all the other actions of our lives and all the services that are administered by the public in this country.

2.49 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on securing the debate and on making such a terrific speech. As she said, the forthcoming COP matters enormously for all the reasons she set out. We need targets so we can measure progress—that is the great benefit of them—and we need funding to help make that progress. We need every country that makes a commitment to have a plan back home to deliver it. We need progress to be measured and above all we need

leadership. We need leadership internationally, leadership domestically in communities and leadership by us as individuals.

The decline in biodiversity and the loss of species across the world is well documented, but sadly not well known enough. I should declare my interest, as one or two other Members have, as the water vole species champion. That is an extremely grand title, especially when it is held by someone who, despite his best efforts, has yet to see a water vole in the wild. I did once hear the characteristic plop sound that water voles make—I know Ratty well from reading "The Wind in the Willows" to my grandchildren—when they come out of their mud tunnels in the riverbank and drop into the water. Perhaps it is very hard to see them for the very simple reason that since the end of the 1990s, a nationwide survey showed that water voles had disappeared from 90% of the sites where they were found a decade before—90%! There has been a further decline in the decade thereafter. In the case of water voles, one particular problem is predation by mink, who need to be controlled. What is really needed, however, is to improve water quality and to encourage farmers to restore and protect healthy waterways—in other words, places and rivers where water voles can thrive.

The heart of the problem we must address—colleagues touched on this in their contributions—is that we as humankind have been making use of the earth's gifts, those on the land and those beneath the seas that surround us, as if there was no consequence and no end to nature's bounty. That is what we have been doing and the pace at which we have done that has accelerated enormously in the last century or so. Just as with the climate crisis, we know now that that is not true: there is a limit and we have to start taking proper care, because we rely on the natural world and biodiversity for our very existence, including our economic welfare. We should applaud the work of Pavan Sukhdev—I had the privilege to meet him when I was the Environment Secretary—and Sir Partha Dasgupta, who have taught us about the economic value of biodiversity, if we wish to measure it in that way, just as Nick Stern told us about the far greater cost of not dealing with dangerous climate change, as opposed to the far lower cost of dealing with it, saying, "You make the choice."

As we know, the natural world provides us with the very essentials of life: clean air and water, and food and fuel. It regulates our climate and helps to deal with pollution. It stems floodwaters and produces medicines. It is the very foundation of our economic and social wellbeing. A few years ago, I had the honour and privilege to visit the World Agroforestry Centre in Nairobi. We went into a lab and there was a range of plants on a bench. I went along, asking "What's this? What's this?" One was a small artemisia sapling and another rather odd-looking bit of bark apparently came from the *prunus africana* tree. I happened to know, because of my job, that artemisia is essential to making combination anti-malarial drugs more effective. I learned that pygeum—I do not know if I have pronounced that correctly—from the bark of the *prunus africana* tree has properties that help to treat prostate cancer.

We stood there discussing malaria, which is predominantly a disease of the poorer world, and prostate cancer, which has been a disease predominantly of the better off world, although that is beginning to change. We rely on both those plants to treat those diseases. Let

us imagine that some clod-hopping human being millions of years ago had walked through the forest and decided to pull up to examine the only artemisia sapling and the only prunus africana sapling on the planet—think what we would have lost. That is why there is such a strong argument for looking after both what we have and know about and the plants that surround us of which we have not yet discovered the properties.

Despite the gravity of the crisis in biodiversity, it is important to try to address the task with optimism, because in the end, making ourselves depressed about the scale of the challenge is not, in my experience, a great motivator for action. We know that we can make progress. We can look at the creation of the national parks: that extraordinary bit of legislation from the post-war Labour Government came out of a time of great conflict, economic crisis, debt and so on, with the support of politicians right across the House who were legislating to preserve beauty for posterity.

We can look at the size and commitment of the wildlife trusts. They have about 870,000 members, look after 2,300 nature reserves and provide some of the connections that my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who spoke so well, was talking about. Bits can be looked after, but the connection between them will help us truly to restore nature, which is why, towards the end of my time as the Environment Secretary, I asked Sir John Lawton to produce a report precisely on how those connections can better be made.

We can look at the marine conservation zones, which were created thanks to the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009.

Jeremy Corbyn: My right hon. Friend's point about connectivity is very important. Is he aware of the agreement between a number of central American countries to create a wildlife corridor for the jaguar to survive, because it travels over a huge range? If it is cut off in certain isolated bits, it will simply die off.

Hilary Benn: I was not aware of that—I am now—and what a great idea for countries to work together in that way.

When we were taking the Bill that became the 2009 Act through Parliament, I was really quite surprised to discover how little we appeared to know about what was on the seabed surrounding these islands. Some very intrepid divers, some of whom I met, went down and took photographs. If the photos were shown to me or to anybody else and the question was asked, "Where was that picture taken?", most people would say, "Is that the Great Barrier Reef?" No—it was under the murky waters of the North sea.

One thing we know about nature is that although we have been destroying it at a rate of knots, if we give it the chance, it can recover with astonishing speed. The North sea was originally covered abundantly in oyster beds, coarse peat banks and rock deposited by glaciers, and it was home to a rich community of marine species. A lot of that was sadly destroyed by bottom-trawl fisheries over the past century and it is now a relatively poor community of species.

Let me say a word on bottom trawling. It is an incredibly destructive practice, but it is unseen because it takes place beneath the waves. To make a slightly

absurd analogy, let us imagine that to collect apples, someone decided to drag a net across the countryside taking with it all the hedges, tree saplings, bird nests and the trees on which the apples hang just for the purpose of collecting the apples in the process. People would be outraged and appalled, but that is what we have been doing on the surface of the seabed for a long time and no one sees it happening. It is about bearing witness to what is going on. The right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), who is not in his place, talked about the deforestation of the Amazon. The thing about technology is that, with satellites, we can see how the rainforest is reducing over time. It is really important that we use all those means to bear witness to what is taking place in order to motivate change.

We find the recovery of nature in some surprising places. There has been a lot of debate about the impact of wind farms on birds, but research has shown that, in effect, wind farms act as artificial reefs. They can host a very wide range of marine species once nature has had a chance to recover.

My final point is about the contribution that nature makes to our health and wellbeing.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am sorry that I could not be here for the beginning of the debate. Is there not a concern that although many marine protected areas have been designated, they are really just paper parks because things like bottom trawling are being allowed to continue? Does my right hon. Friend also share my concern that there is now a move towards deep-sea mining, which could be hugely environmentally damaging?

Hilary Benn: Yes, I do. There was cross-party support in the House of Commons for the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 and the creation of marine conservation zones. We basically have a planning framework; we have had one on land for a long time, but we did not have one for the sea at all. We are now confronted with a choice about what we permit. The ability to understand the consequences of what is happening beneath the waves is important. We now have the means to do something about it, but we cannot just say "We've got the designation—job done," and move on to something else. That is not sufficient at all.

Yesterday, my wife and I were discussing what I might talk about in this speech. Apart from telling me, "You must mention the water voles,"—I have now duly done so, and I hope that she has noticed—she said, "Tell them about our oak trees." For the past 30 years or so, we have been planting oak trees from seed, along with ash and silver birch trees. "Nature reserve" would be a very grand title for the eight acres of former farmland in Essex that my mother set aside, where nature has been left to do its work. The tallest oak tree is probably about 20 or 25 feet now. Over the years, the trees that we have planted—the trees that nature has brought—have brought with them cuckoos, owls, adders, foxes, muntjac deer, the odd badger and white campion, as well as loads of brambles that I attempt to do battle with whenever I can. Every time I walk on that piece of land, I feel the same sense of anticipation about what has changed, what has grown and what is different.

[Hilary Benn]

Why do we feel like this? Because nature is part of our very soul. It is about who we are and where we come from. Think of how we encounter it—looking out of the window of a train as it rushes through the countryside, seeing the first crocus of spring, encountering the wonders and glories of the Yorkshire dales, seeing a view of Ditchling Beacon or a view of Scafell Pike from Great Moss, or hearing the buzz of a bee at the height of summer. We do not hear that buzz as much as we used to, or see as many moths. I remember when moths were really common in the summer. When did I last see one? There was an extraordinary experiment in which people were asked to put a bit of sticky plastic on their number plate, drive around and count how many insects were caught. That showed that there has been a catastrophic decline.

Chris Grayling *rose*—

Hilary Benn: Ah! The right hon. Gentleman has returned.

Chris Grayling: I apologise for popping out briefly for a family call. Last summer, I went to the far north of Scotland. The further north we got, the more insects hit the windscreen. As more arable farming happens in the south of the country than in the north, that seems pretty clear evidence of the link between the disappearance of insects and pesticides. That is one reason why I was so attracted by the regenerative farming model.

Hilary Benn: I agree completely. There are one or two insects in the north of Scotland—midges in particular—that can cause a certain amount of distress, but just think of the glory of the Scottish countryside and the mountains. Who does not feel a sense of awe and wonder as they contemplate the astonishing biodiversity and landscape that our small islands reveal unto us?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman for the planting that he has done on his acres of land. He spoke about the changes that he has seen. I am fortunate to live on a farm, where we have had the opportunity to plant trees directly. We have planted some 3,500 trees, retained the hedgerows and put in two ponds. We regularly see bees, moss and lots of wildlife. The Government have committed to replanting across the whole United Kingdom. Does the right hon. Gentleman feel that there should be more of a commitment to tree planting, to ensure that we can become the lungs of the world?

Hilary Benn: I agree completely. There should be no limit to the number of trees that we can plant. We can each play our part if we have the opportunity. As MPs, because of the nature of our job, we probably get invited to plant the odd tree in our constituencies.

The point that the right hon. Member for Islington North made about front gardens is really important. One of the things we did after the floods of 2007 was to change the planning rules. People cannot hard pave over their front gardens any more unless they use permeable paving, because if we pave, tarmac and concrete over all the land in a town or city and huge quantities of rain fall out of the sky, of course the water is going to flood into people's homes. That makes us realise the inter-connection between our choices as human beings and the consequences of not paying sufficient attention to nature.

I would argue that to be disconnected from nature is to be disconnected from the Earth itself, so it is not just self-preservation that should urge us to confront the threat of climate change and biodiversity loss, which are absolutely connected, but our love for the soil from which we all came and to which one day we will all return—but not just yet.

3.5 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I am delighted to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), whom I congratulate on securing the debate.

Here is my perspective. Life on this planet has been going for 4.5 billion years—4,500 million years. Human beings have been on this planet for 6 million years. That means that we have been around for 0.013% of the time that life has existed on this planet. We are cashing in 4.5 billion years of planetary saving bonds and blowing it on bling, and nothing but our own hubris gives us the right to do so. Exponential growth within a finite system leads to collapse, and that is what is happening—collapse. We know it is happening. Only last weekend, as I was in Durham, the IPBES report set out again what we already know: the global rate of species extinction is between 10 to 100 times higher than the average rate over the past 10 million years. We are living in the Anthropocene—the sixth great extinction event. Human activity is actually being compared to the asteroid that obliterated the dinosaurs—except that unlike the asteroid we know what we are doing. We know that 12% of tree species and over 1,300 wild mammal species are threatened by unsustainable logging and hunting, more than 25% of the world's forests are subject to industrial logging, and 34% of marine wild fish stocks are overfished—but the plunder goes on.

We politicians are strange creatures: we say we want to do the right thing but so often we end up doing the easy thing instead. We spend our lives trying to win, but in this struggle between ourselves and our planet, there is always going to be just one winner: planet Earth will continue in a new form long after we have made it impossible for our own species to live on it. Reversing the trend of biodiversity loss requires urgent, transformative change. That is code for saying that we need to consume less, because at the current rate of consumption, we would need three planets-worth of resources by 2050. That means that we must examine our economy. It is not just about reducing our consumption; it is about changing our economic accounting model in order to account properly for the free goods and services that we are destroying. Pollination services, clean air, the purification of water by forests and the protection of coastal cities by mangroves are all regarded as externalities by classical economics.

Let me now enter into the earlier debate between the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion—my hon. Friend on this side—and the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), whom, certainly in terms of conservation, I am happy to call an hon. Friend on the other side. Our obsession with GDP suggests that the coastal surge that destroyed cities such as New Orleans—under hurricane Katrina—resulted in the growth of GDP owing to the economic activity when all the new levees were built. The disaster that destroyed so many

lives and so much wealth is counted in our economic system, GDP, as a positive, but the loss of the tupelo and cypress forest swamp, which had previously—when the trees were not being taken down—reduced the surge swell and protected the city, was not counted as a negative in any economic calculation.

The Dasgupta review, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central referred, set out with great economic force the consequences of what Professor Dasgupta termed “impact inequality”: the imbalance between humanity’s demand and nature’s supply, and the need to reconstruct economics so that nature is an essential part of it and ecosystem services are properly valued. It was disappointing that when the then Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch), appeared before the Environmental Audit Committee to discuss the Dasgupta review, it became clear that she had not read it. Yesterday, when the chair of the Committee on Climate Change appeared before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and was asked about DEFRA’s plan for net zero, it was notable that he said not only that there was no clarity for others, but that there was no implementation that it was possible to judge because the metrics were not there. Just as the Government should implement net zero stress tests for all budgets, so they should implement net nature tests against all expenditure to ensure that alignment with our post-2030 biodiversity framework is maintained.

That brings me to the importance of data. We are extraordinarily blessed in this country to have more than 250 years of amateur scientific data-gathering. We have baselines against which we can say, with real confidence, that 41% of all UK species have declined in the past 52 years, since 1970, but under-employed Church of England vicars and other gentlefolk going back to Georgian England provide us with a database that other countries can only dream of. May I ask the Minister to ensure that our support for COP15, and the financial assistance that we make available to countries, focus on enabling them to have an accurate dataset of their own natural and biological assets.

Kerry McCarthy: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jeremy Corbyn: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Barry Gardiner: I will give both ways, but not simultaneously. I will give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy).

Kerry McCarthy: I thank my hon. Friend. What he is saying about data is a huge issue for the small island developing states, because there is so much biodiversity, particularly in the territorial waters, and populations of perhaps a few hundred are somehow expected to manage a vast space. I agree with what he said about the importance of supporting them, and our overseas territories, so that they can do that work.

Barry Gardiner: My hon. Friend is entirely right. One of the constant problems, particularly in our overseas territories, which do not have the resources to be able to establish their own datasets, is the gaming between them and the Foreign Office, because technically, through the convention on biological diversity, we are responsible for the biodiversity in those overseas territories.

It is a great tragedy that this palming off of responsibility between the two continues. I know that the Minister is new in post, and I welcome him to his post, but I hope he will have robust discussions with his colleagues in the Foreign Office about this. Perhaps he could whisper something to that effect in Lord Goldsmith’s ear, given that he is Minister of State in both DEFRA and the Foreign Office. This really does need to be sorted out. The overseas territories need that support to get the database.

Jeremy Corbyn: I absolutely agree that there has to be a measurement of the effect on the natural world and the environment, measurements of human inequality and all the normal GDP measurements. Would it not be better if the UK Government set an aim to come away from the next round of discussions with an agreed position on how we will measure the effect on the natural world of economic activity as part of the whole measurement of GDP? In that way, it would be factored in and give a legal status and entity to the environment and the natural world, as opposed to just discussing it as a separate thing as a consequence of our own activities.

Barry Gardiner: Indeed. One of the things COP15 is grappling with at the moment is how to reconcile the different metrics that different countries use to assess their national biodiversity and sustainability action plans, and how to integrate them into a common measure. It is much more difficult to do this with biodiversity than it is with climate change. We know the common measure in climate change—it is CO₂—but we do not have an easy common measure for biodiversity. My right hon. Friend is right. It is one of the things that COP15 really has to grapple with.

I mentioned the national biodiversity and sustainability action plans—NBSAPs—that are produced by many countries. The truth is they are simply inadequate, not from a lack of goodwill on the part of those countries but often because of a lack of the robust scientific data we were speaking about.

We also know that, even when NBSAPs are based on sound scientific data, they have to be implemented. There is no point in simply putting them into your action plan and not implementing them. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central spoke about the Lawton report. Professor John Lawton set those principles in place over 15 years ago and those principles are clear. We have to act. Whether it is in the UK, sub-Saharan Africa or south-east Asia, we have to act at a landscape scale. As John Lawton suggested, we need “bigger, better, more joined-up” habitat. That in effect is the response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) on the metrics. We need to see at a landscape scale that that is happening.

The COP is setting out its target to halt the loss of biodiversity, but as I said earlier, sadly that has been our 10-yearly target for nearly three decades now. For effective implementation, we must ensure that there are key staging posts to show that we are on the right track to achieving the long-term objective. Interim objectives around the amount of reforestation and the amount of marine protection zones must be used as staging posts in the same way as we in this country use the five-yearly carbon budgets as staging posts towards our 2050 net zero target.

Chris Grayling: This is why my argument is around a real focus on the restoration of degraded land. Semi-desert subsistence farmland will never deliver anything for anyone except an impoverished lifestyle and poor biodiversity, but the restoration of land is a tangible that can be addressed in the COP because it can be measured and tracked.

Barry Gardiner: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's intervention. He is right that we need to look at land restoration as one of the key indicators. It is particularly the case in sub-Saharan African countries, which are facing an increasing challenge of desertification from climate change, which they are having to fight against, rather than just looking at the land that is already semi-desert and trying to see how to restore that. It is a huge problem. The NBSAPs must be living documents, which is why they need to be ratcheted up, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion said, every five years between major COPs.

Let me turn to finance. I pay tribute to Mia Mottley, the Prime Minister of Barbados, who spoke at the beginning of COP26. For my money, she was the most powerful speaker at the whole event. She pointed out to the politicians assembled for the launch of COP26 that the promise we had given was for \$100 billion a year to be put into the global planet fund to help the global south to cope with climate change and to take effective mitigation efforts. We have not delivered that, and we are nowhere near delivering it. She pointed out that it was not because we could not afford it, because we had just spent \$9 trillion—trillions, not billions—bailing ourselves out over the covid pandemic. The funds are available and they must be made available.

The extent of quantitative easing that the global north has allowed itself since the 2008 global financial crisis has been more than \$36 trillion. What is COP15 asking for? It is asking for the same as was promised at COP26: \$100 billion a year, rising to \$700 billion a year. That is essential. If we are to enable those developing countries in the global south to do exactly what the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell was talking about with regard to the restoration of degraded land, and if we are to deal with these problems, we have to be serious. As the human species, we do not have the right not to be.

Kerry McCarthy: On the amount of money we need to give to help countries in the global south to cope, those countries are often faced with crippling debt—we had the whole jubilee debt campaign. Belize, for example, is a small island state that is right in the forefront of the impacts of climate change. It has incredible biodiversity that needs protecting, but is crippled by debt repayments. If we do not deal with that side of the equation, there is not an awful lot of point giving such countries money to help them invest in the sort of projects my hon. Friend is talking about.

Barry Gardiner: I am delighted that my hon. Friend made that intervention at precisely that moment, because it enables me to talk about green finance, and the importance of involving the private sector and ensuring that critical private finance is coming in. Green bonds and debt-for-biodiversity swaps are innovative and fundamental ways in which we should facilitate countries such as Belize to tackle the environmental problems

they face. It cannot be done without money, and it cannot be done simply with public money. In fact, green bonds are now classed as more attractive than ordinary, vanilla bonds, because they tackle not one issue, but two; they mitigate risk on two factors. The secondary market in green bonds has really taken off.

I want to talk about the way in which the financial sector needs to be regulated and guided through the issue. The right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell spoke about the way in which our financial sector was incentivising deforestation, particularly in Brazil. He is absolutely correct. We should not simply say, as is the Government's position, that companies need to declare their climate and sustainability actions in their mandatory annual reporting, and that they should not fund any activity, such as ranching in Brazil, that drives illegal deforestation. That is not good enough. When those stipulations were put in place, countries such as Brazil simply changed the law to make it legal so that they could continue to receive the finance. There must be objectivity about whether something is or is not deforestation.

I am conscious that I should not take up too much more time, but it is critical that COP15 addresses access and benefit sharing. We will not have global agreement and global co-operation on the environment and our failing global biodiversity unless biopiracy by pharmaceutical companies is addressed. These companies must not go into communities—my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central referred to this—and say, "We are going to take the genetic sequences of these two trees and use them in our pharmaceutical products, but you will not get any advantages from it." That is why the UK must be foursquare behind access and benefit sharing at COP15.

An ecosystem has the right to exist, to flourish, to regenerate its vital cycles and to evolve naturally without human disruption. Nature has rights. We often think that rights apply only to us, but trusts and institutions have rights, and those rights are safeguarded by trustees and guardians. That is us. Nobody else is here to argue for nature. We must be the guardians of that trust. We have been on this planet for only 0.13% of the time that biodiversity has existed. We have no right to destroy the world around us.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the SNP spokesperson, Deidre Brock.

3.27 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for securing this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing it. She began with a typically well-informed and passionate speech, and one thing among many that struck me is that our only world is on fire and being bulldozed, which set the scene for a debate that can only lead those viewing it to agree entirely.

The hon. Lady spoke of the recent negotiations in Nairobi, and how the proposals are littered with brackets, as they remain to be ratified. We all devoutly hope those brackets will be removed, because Governments must provide robust commitments, with action targets, at COP15. Governments cannot be allowed off the hook and to fudge the commitments with warm words; they must have the targets, monitoring, enforcement and funding required to achieve them.

I also commend the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) for highlighting how alarmingly quickly this is happening. The speed of biodiversity loss, even among wildlife in the UK, is terrifying. We are clearly guilty of taking biodiversity for granted.

So the COP15 biodiversity conference in December comes at an extremely critical moment. As we have heard, biodiversity is declining more rapidly than at any point in human history. The Aichi biodiversity targets set in 2010 have largely been missed, and nature continues to decline, with more than one in five species globally at risk of extinction. In the UK alone, more than 1,000 of the more than 8,000 species assessed in the 2019 state of nature report are threatened with extinction. As we have heard, once common species such as the swift, the house martin and the greenfinch have been moved on to the red list in the latest “Birds of Conservation Concern” list for the UK, meaning that they are in critical decline and in need of urgent action.

Scientists are warning that the Amazon rainforest is at a dangerous tipping point that could trigger a mass and irreversible loss of trees. Warming seas and ocean acidification are wreaking havoc on coral reefs. As any of us who heard Sir Patrick Vallance and his colleagues’ evidence the other day will know, biodiversity loss and the biodiversity emergency are intrinsically linked with the climate crisis. It is therefore imperative that all countries at COP15 recognise the scale of the biodiversity crisis that faces us all and that international leaders use the conference to urgently set the most ambitious targets possible for biodiversity and nature protection.

The IPBES—Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services—assessment report on the diverse values and valuation of nature, released this week, bears stark witness to the catastrophic extent to which humans are overexploiting wild species and habitats, and concludes that a key driver of biodiversity loss is the failure of national Governments to include nature and wildlife as a consideration in their decision making. It also found that where nature has been considered, it has been primarily for its economically productive aspects, such as food production. That is why it is such a disappointment to see the UK Government’s recent abandonment of wildlife protection conditions for farm subsidies in England in favour of sheer food production capacity. We all recognise, of course, the food security issues we face globally, but in addressing those we cannot ignore the pressing need for action on these matters.

Whoever the UK Prime Minister is in December, they must attend the conference and fully commit the UK Government to addressing this biodiversity emergency. The fight against climate change and the biodiversity crisis cannot be abandoned to placate uninformed naysayers, and we fully support the call by a range of non-governmental organisations for the new Prime Minister to convene a meeting of leaders in advance to help foster international consensus. I would be very interested to hear the Minister’s response to that suggestion.

If the UK Government need an example of how to demonstrate global leadership on this issue, they do not need to look far. The Scottish Government were among the first globally to declare a climate and biodiversity emergency. Scotland was also the first country in the world to complete and submit a full report on all 20 Aichi targets, doing so in 2016. Scotland’s national

economy and its marine economy will be vital to securing a net zero future, with nature-based solutions accounting for about 30% of the emissions reductions needed. But in turn, we must ensure it is protected and enhanced.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD)
rose—

Deidre Brock: I had not noticed the right hon. Gentleman coming in, but of course I will give way to him.

Mr Carmichael: I have been here for quite a while now—I am just a quiet presence, so I would not be noticed.

With all that the hon. Lady has set out being the case, does she agree that it remains incomprehensible that the Scottish and UK Governments both continue to allow industrial-scale fishing with gillnets, which not only leaves a massive amount of plastic pollution but is an utterly unsustainable way of catching fish?

Deidre Brock: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his contribution. Absolutely, these are things that the Scottish Government are of course looking at—I am not sure about the UK Government’s position. He will know that Marine Scotland and its partners have developed a Scottish marine protected area monitoring strategy, which will look at issues such as he has raised. It also intends to add to the existing marine protected areas network, which will cover at least 10% of Scotland’s seas, and is introducing a strengthened framework to help address situations such as the one he describes. I am well aware of the issues associated with gillnet fishing and the accumulated debris that it results in. We should certainly continue to press all Governments on that matter, at all times. I am very much aware of that.

I know that Members here quite often roll their eyes about these sorts of things, but I have to say that Scotland is pressing ahead on this matter. It is taking action, and it would be useful if we all shared best practice rather than rolling our eyes and thinking, “Here’s Scotland talking about itself again.” We can all learn from each other at all times.

Barry Gardiner: I certainly would not roll my eyes, and I pay tribute to the Scottish Government for setting up the natural capital convention. It must be almost 10 years ago now that the first natural capital convention in the world took place, so Scotland has shown leadership on these matters. The point is that we must all try to learn from each other and make sure that we get the best out of it.

Deidre Brock: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Further to that, a global partnership led by the Scottish Government produced a statement of intent known as the Edinburgh declaration, calling for transformative action to be taken at all levels to halt biodiversity loss. With signatories from every continent, the declaration called for greater prominence to be given to the role that regional Governments, cities and local authorities play in delivering a new global framework of targets. The Scottish Government are backing this up by enshrining nature protection in law and prioritising biodiversity across a range of policy areas.

The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), who is no longer in her place, and other Members who have spoken in this debate, will be pleased to hear that, since 2012, the Scottish Government have

[Deidre Brock]

funded the restoration of more than 25,000 hectares of degraded Scottish peatland, with further plans for the next 10 years, backed by £250 million of funding. Peat stores more carbon than all other vegetation types in the world combined and is a vital nature-based solution to protecting biodiversity.

In Scotland, we are also revitalising our woodlands and forests. In 2019 alone, 22 million trees were planted in Scotland, comprising nearly 84% of the UK's mainland tree planting. The Government are supporting the restoration and expansion of Scotland's rainforest and establishing a national register of ancient woodlands.

The preservation of marine habitats, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion mentioned, is equally crucial. That is why the Scottish Government plan to designate a suite of highly protected marine areas covering at least 10% of Scotland's seas. That will provide additional environmental preservation over and above the existing MPA network by establishing sites that will be protected against extractive, destructive or depositional activities.

We have talked about biodiversity spreading across a range of sectors, but it is also one of the main principles of the new Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, under which Ministers, relevant authorities and organisations must have regard to halting and reversing the loss of biodiversity when preparing national food plans, as planned under the Bill. One of the everyday ways that we can halt biodiversity loss is by reducing food waste. Currently, about 30% of all food produced globally goes uneaten.

Last month, Scotland also became the first part of the UK to implement a ban on many of the most problematic single-use plastics. Plastics and waste, as we know, can wreak havoc on our natural environments, as Everyday Plastic and Greenpeace highlighted just yesterday as they launched the results of their big plastics count.

By the end of 2022, the Scottish Government will publish a new biodiversity strategy for the next 25 years, which will propose to halt biodiversity loss by 2030 and reverse it by 2045. That will help guide the way that Scots use and manage land and Scotland's approach to protecting habitats and ecosystems, which will mean a substantial restoration and regeneration of biodiversity across our land, freshwater and sea. Vitality, a series of outcomes will be developed across rural, marine, freshwater, coastal and urban environments. The plans to introduce a natural environment Bill will put in place a robust statutory enforcing, target setting, monitoring and reporting framework. Those targets will be based on an overarching goal of preventing any further extinctions of wildlife, halting declines by 2030 and making real progress in restoring Scotland's natural environment by 2045. The Scottish Government will also ensure that a review of environmental justice and the case for an environmental court takes place during this parliamentary Session.

At COP15, we need to see similar transformational action targets from all the world's Governments. As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) notes, it is important that we address the task with optimism. That is where we need the UK Government to step up, raise the political profile of biodiversity to the highest level, show global leadership and press hard for international commitments to halt and start to reverse biodiversity loss by 2030. Ministers should listen

to their chief scientific adviser on this. At COP15 we must see a commitment to sustainable solutions that offer real results.

3.40 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I rise today in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who is on an Inter-Parliamentary Union visit to Kosovo and hence is not able to be in the Chamber today. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), the shadow Secretary of State, is visiting Yorkshire, so I am afraid the House is stuck with me. I thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for securing this debate and for her speech. I have enjoyed listening to all the powerful, interesting, educational and unifying calls for action among the speeches we have heard here.

When we were notified last week that this motion would be considered by the House, many of us were concerned that we would be Minister-less, but our fears have thankfully been calmed, because the people's business must go on despite a caretaker Government and its outgoing Prime Minister. We are also relieved to find the Secretary of State safe in his caretaker position at DEFRA. I welcome the Minister formally to his place; I look forward to his completing his eight-week job interview, and I hope he will be able to stay on.

I place on record my genuine thanks to the hon. Members for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) and for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) following their resignations from the Front Bench last week. We did not always agree, but we developed a respectful working relationship, and more than once we joked that we saw more of each other than we did of our spouses, children and loved ones, due to the constant flow of DEFRA-related business in the House.

It has been a very quiet week here in Westminster, with not a lot going on at all. As such, I was grateful to be able to use this time to reflect on the critical work required to preserve our planet and protect our environment. I am very clear that we need the upcoming COP15 summit to do more than just contribute to global warming through lots of hot air; we need it to deliver for the planet's wildlife and for its people. It will be no surprise to the House that I am here to reiterate Labour's approach to the environment, which has always been driven by those twin priorities. We on the Labour Benches believe that those priorities are even more important now, because in a time of such cost of living desperation, both internationally and here at home, we cannot deliver for one without the other. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) for his stark example of GDP versus biodiversity with Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

Delivering for the natural world requires social and economic justice. That is something that the Leader of Opposition recognises, and I hope the Minister will recognise it too. The approach of protecting a few isolated green spaces and relying on markets is failing and gets us nowhere near far enough, and certainly not fast enough, as the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) highlighted earlier.

In any case, we are seeing protections eroded because commercial demands for land are insatiable and some in this House have the wrong spending priorities. Time and again, across the world and at home, we see the

most disadvantaged communities suffering the worst impacts of environmental degradation: their homes flooded and swept away in deadly landslides, their fields and livestock left parched by drought, their homes left draughty, cold and damp through lack of insulation while fossil fuel-dependent energy bills soar, their children's health blighted by fossil fuel-generated air pollution, sewage pumped into their local rivers and over playing fields, and their neighbourhoods devoid of the green space and nature that lockdown surely taught us are so essential for human mental and physical wellbeing.

The United Kingdom has been among the most nature-depleted countries for decades. The Natural History Museum's biodiversity intactness index revealed that the world has crashed through the "safe limit for humanity" level of for biodiversity loss, and saw the UK's 53% score place it in the bottom 10% of countries.

That is well below China, and humiliatingly we are last in the G7—so much for global Britain. In practice it means that even some of our most iconic and much loved animals are being added to the growing list of endangered species. Eleven of the 47 mammals native to Great Britain are at imminent risk of extinction, including the red squirrel, wildcat, water vole, dormouse and hedgehog. I pay tribute to the Members who have declared their animal championing pedigrees, such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling). A further five native mammals have a realistic possibility of becoming threatened with extinction in the near future, including the mountain hare.

Kerry McCarthy: I was under instruction, had I been able to make a speech, to mention that I am parliamentary species champion for the swift and to make a plea for us to protect and to increase their habitats by ensuring that there are swift bricks in every new building. I have got that on the record.

Ruth Jones: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the great work she does on biodiversity and as a swift champion. I will add that to my list of champions in the House. We know that puffins are projected to decline across Britain and Ireland by up to 90% within 30 years, and they are among 14 seabird species regarded as being at risk of negative climate change impacts. The shadow Minister for the natural environment, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West recently visited RSPB Bempton Cliffs, renowned for its puffins, but was not able to find a single one.

Ministers, notably Lord Goldsmith, often pat themselves on the back claiming they are doing all they can to advance the environmental agenda, but the fact of the matter is that our nature teeters on a cliff edge. I hope when the new Prime Minister takes office on 6 September that she or he will set out clearly how they will pull nature back from the brink. Under this caretaker Prime Minister, we all see a Tory Government consistently making the wrong choices, failing to engage with stakeholders properly, delaying action and ducking the urgent challenges facing us all.

Rather than setting the international agenda on biodiversity and leading the debate, the Budget last year—delivered as world leaders began to arrive for COP26—did not even mention climate change. The former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Richmond

(Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) found time to give a tax break for domestic flights and fell woefully short on the investment needed to deliver green jobs and a fair transition. It does not bode well for how he would approach the top job.

The Conservatives' Environment Act 2021, which was well known as the "missing in action" Bill as it worked its way through the House, set a target on species abundance, and the Minister will recall that DEFRA Ministers were forced to concede that action was needed. Sadly, they only went as far as promising to halt the decline in species by 2030. Just halting the decline is not good enough—our ambition should be nature-positive here at home and in our work with colleagues on the world stage through COP15.

In 2020, the Government managed to deliver less than half their target of 5,000 hectares of new trees in England, and we had empty words from Lord Goldsmith that they would do better. The planned spending on tree planting is dwarfed by subsidies to Drax to ship and burn wood pellets from around the world, particularly from the US, with a lack of due diligence to make sure it is not from virgin forest. Meanwhile, the Government are doing far too little to protect the trees we do have. Deforestation is increasing across the planet and our consumption in Britain is driving deforestation abroad, which impacts here and across the world. Here, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central for his dogged tree-planting over the past 30 years.

In the Environment Act 2021, the Government's due diligence measures cover only illegal deforestation. Why are we agreeing trade deals with countries such as Brazil, Australia, Indonesia and Malaysia while they continue to destroy rainforests? Just yesterday, we saw reports that deforestation of the Amazon is at its highest level for six years. The right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell highlighted that in his speech earlier. We must remember that human rights are always threatened when rainforest deforestation happens, and the best stewards of those rainforests are the indigenous people who have cared for them for thousands of years and for whom they are home. Funding men with guns to guard empty rainforest is not a sustainable or ethical policy, but sadly it appears to be one that this Prime Minister and DEFRA have pursued up until now.

Action has been inadequate across DEFRA policy for far too long. Water companies have continued to be allowed to pump sewage into rivers, and that has only hastened the decline of endangered species. After the Government finally got an ivory ban on the statute book in 2018, their dither and delay meant that it did not actually come into force until years after many other countries had acted. They have failed to deliver promised wildlife protection legislation to ban trophy hunting and fur imports. Last week I had a very good meeting with former President of Botswana Ian Khama, who, although out of office, is a really doughty and dogged campaigner for the rights of animals. Obviously he backs a global ban on trophy hunting.

Meanwhile at home, thousands and thousands of badgers continue to be killed. The Government have also authorised bee-killing neonic pesticides and have failed to act to stop illegal hunting or effectively limit peat extraction and moorland burning, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) outlined in her speech. Of course, I cannot forget foxhunting. The killing of any animal will have an

[Ruth Jones]

impact on our natural world and biodiversity, and hunting is no different. We have so many more priorities; I urge the Government to clean our waters, clean our air and protect our green spaces as a starter for 10.

Labour will deliver the change that we all want to see. Action at home must showcase for the world how a positive nature policy can practically be delivered across Government. The shadow Chancellor has committed a Labour Government to a robust net zero and nature-positive test for every policy. That will be backed with a £28 billion a year investment to meet the challenge of the climate and nature emergency, create certainty for business, and provide leadership as we seize all the opportunities before our United Kingdom.

Earlier this week I attended the online meeting with Patrick Vallance. Nobody who was there could have failed to leave fired up and ready to do whatever is necessary to protect our planet and preserve our environment. We can address both the cost of living crisis and the climate crisis. I say to the Government: if they cannot do both, they should get out of the way because we will. The truth is that, when we want them to, Government can and do make real change to the lives of people and our environment, too. The clock is ticking on the Prime Minister's time in office, and it is ticking on our mission to save our planet, too. Now is the time for transformational change for our people and our planet. I wish COP15 well and hope that all those round the table will heed the warnings, wake up and smell the coffee, and get back to work.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I welcome the new Minister to his position.

3.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Double): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for enabling this debate to take place and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for the way she opened it. It is truly an honour to respond to this my first major debate in the Chamber since I took up this post. It has been great to see such widespread agreement across the House on the importance of COP15 ahead of the conference. This is a vital moment for nature around the world and a real call to action.

We are reaching the culmination of a three-year-long nature campaign, and we are not taking our foot off the pedal now. In fact, just last week my hon. Friend Lord Goldsmith was in Gabon discussing the actions needed to halt forest loss and seeing the remarkable work being doing in the Congo basin.

All the evidence shows us how rapidly nature is in decline. Between 1990 and 2015, we lost 290 million hectares of native forest cover globally. That is more than 10 times the size of the UK. Live coral cover of reefs has nearly halved in the past 150 years, with dramatically accelerated decline in the past 20 to 30 years, and a million species face extinction. We know that so many things are reliant on nature, from food to security, clean air to water, and our health and wellbeing to our very economies, so reversing these trends is vital.

That is why this Government have committed to leaving the environment in a better state than we found it in, and the good news is that we know we can turn

things around. There is someone, somewhere in Government, who is leading the way on all the changes that we need to see. It is this innovation that we need to champion, and global platforms such as CBD give us the opportunity to share these ideas and build momentum behind them. This is a colossal challenge. Even as we confront the impacts of conflict and the ongoing effects of the pandemic, we know that we need to deliver an ambitious global biodiversity framework at CBD COP15 that will help us to bend the curve of biodiversity loss globally by 2030.

COP15 should, and indeed needs to be, the Paris moment for nature. If we can agree, and we must agree, an ambitious post-2020 global diversity framework in Montreal in December—with a clear mission to halt and reverse biodiversity loss globally by 2030, including targets to protect at least 30% of the world's land and at least 30% of global oceans by 2030, and to see ecosystems restored, species' population sizes recovering and extinctions halted by 2050, with mechanisms to enable us to hold countries to account—then we will be in a strong position to make this the decade we put nature on the road to recovery. This is why the global biodiversity framework is so important, and we are leading from the front to ensure that we have the policies and finance in place so that this ambition is realised.

Olivia Blake: Given the significance of COP15, will the Prime Minister—whoever that may be—be attending it on behalf of the UK?

Steve Double: I was going to come to that later, but I will respond to it now. I am sure the hon. Member would not expect me to be able to speak for whoever may win the election to be leader of our party and the next Prime Minister. However, I can assure her that I know that our party is committed to this issue, and that is not going to change suddenly. The Conservative party is very aware of its importance, and I am sure that, whoever takes over as Prime Minister in a few weeks' time, we will continue to champion nature recovery globally and that there will be a senior level presence at COP15. I would not dare to say whether that will be the future Prime Minister, but I join her in saying that I would certainly like that to be the case.

Deidre Brock: The Minister is obviously not able to give an indication yet of whether the Prime Minister will be attending COP15, but can he indicate whether a role equivalent to that of the COP26 President will be created to reflect the importance of that summit?

Steve Double: I am slightly disappointed that the hon. Member does not think that is me, because it is very clearly part of my new role as a Minister to take up this cause. To be serious, I take her point. We do need to take this issue seriously, as this is a critical moment for nature globally. The UK is proud to be playing a leading role, and I am sure that, whoever attends and whatever title they have, we will continue to play a global leadership role in ensuring that we set the world back on the road to nature recovery. We recognise the importance of COP15 as a key moment in that.

Barry Gardiner: Will the Minister confirm that, even though COP15 is taking place in Montreal, the presidency is still with China and the Chinese Minister will be the president of the COP?

Steve Double: Yes, the hon. Gentleman is right about the presidency, which goes with the host nation, but I think the SNP spokesperson was talking about someone in the Government having that prominent role. I think that is correct.

Deidre Brock *indicated assent.*

Steve Double: As I was saying, we are leading from the front to ensure that we have the policies and finance in place so that these ambitions are realised. As leader of the Global Ocean Alliance and ocean co-chair of the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, we have worked closely with Costa Rica and France to bring together over 100 countries in support of the 30 by '30 target. I am very proud, and I believe we should all be very proud, of the UK's leadership to date in bringing parties together and building consensus through partnerships such as the leaders' pledge for nature, which has now been endorsed by more than 90 political leaders.

We are determined to work with fellow countries to translate our joint ambitions into action on the ground, by building consensus and finding solutions to help agree a strong global biodiversity framework. To secure not just 30 by 30, but all the targets that are so necessary to protect nature, we need urgently to demonstrate our collective seriousness about closing the large funding gap over the course of the next decade. The UK brought nature from the margins of the global climate debate into the heart of our response at COP26. Ensuring that promises made in Glasgow are honoured in full, that we build on them, and that they are translated into effective action as soon as possible are huge priorities for the UK in the year of our presidency and beyond.

Making sure that aid is aligned with our goals is also hugely important. Indeed, we are leading by example, by doubling our international climate finance, investing at least £3 billion of that in nature, including nature-based solutions, urging other donor countries to do the same, and launching a pipeline of new programmes that will help people to protect and restore biodiversity on land and sea. We are calling on multilateral development banks to mainstream nature across their entire portfolios, as well as supporting countries when fulfilling their commitments to the Leaders Pledge for Nature. We are also pulling every lever we have to get private finance flowing in the right direction, from reducing risk to increasing investment.

Adopting a new framework at COP15 will not be sufficient if we do not also put in place mechanisms to ensure that countries can implement it. Frameworks need to result in action on the ground. The global failure to achieve the Aichi targets was driven by partial and insufficient implementation. That was arguably because parties found it challenging to translate international targets into effective national action that could be delivered at the scale and pace needed. The post-2020 global diversity framework must be underpinned by enhanced planning, reporting and review mechanisms that will hold parties to account for their commitments and support implementation—that was the point about data raised by the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner). It is so important that we help countries to develop those capabilities.

The UK, in partnership with Norway and the UN environment programme world conservation monitoring centre, has led a programme of workshops to support

discussions between parties to enhance mechanisms for planning, reporting and review, with the aim of strengthening the implementation of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework and achieving the ambitious 2050 goals and 2030 targets. To summarise, the UK remains committed to securing an ambitious outcome at COP15—one that sets the direction and leads to action to halt and reverse biodiversity loss globally by 2030. We will work closely with China as the presidency, and support Canada as host in achieving those outcomes.

Many excellent contributions from across the House have raised many important points, and I will try quickly to respond to some of them. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion asked about the UK's goals, and I tried to outline those in my response. We are clear about the goals that we need from COP15, and we must ensure that they are actionable. We need to see action. We do not need just more targets set or policies agreed; we need them to be put into action on the ground. She asked whether I would commit to keep Parliament updated, and as long as I am in post, I will be more than happy to do that. She also asked about the next Prime Minister attending COP15, and I have already addressed that issue.

The hon. Lady also raised the important matter of the maritime environment. As an MP who represents a coastal constituency—one of only three constituencies that has two separate coastlines—I am absolutely aware of just how important that issue is. We have made great progress on protecting our maritime environment, with over 100 maritime protection areas now in place, but I accept that we need to do more, and that we need to improve enforcement of the protection of those areas. I am more than happy to look into what more we can do to make sure those conservation areas are protected effectively—that it is not just a paper exercise. I would also point to the work we have already done in banning microplastics and the other measures we have taken to prevent maritime pollution, so I take the hon. Lady's point, but she can be assured that the maritime environment is something I take very seriously.

Barry Gardiner: I think the whole House understands why the Minister is unable or reluctant to commit the Prime Minister to attending COP15, but is it possible for him to commit that either the Secretary of State will attend it, or he or his successor will do so as the Minister responsible for biodiversity?

Steve Double: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman appreciates, I cannot do so, for the very same reason that I cannot commit the future Prime Minister: none of us knows what is going to happen in the coming weeks. What I can say is that if I am still in post, I would be more than happy to attend, but that decision is for another day. We will see what happens.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) made an excellent contribution to the debate. He made the point—with which I wholeheartedly agree—that we understand why China is not able to host the COP this time; it is a shame, though, because it would have been excellent if China had been able to do so. He also made an excellent point about farmers; I am dismayed that comments are sometimes made casting farmers as the enemy of biodiversity and nature. My experience is completely the opposite, and I

[Steve Double]

would say the same about the vast majority of our fishermen, including the small under-10-metre fleet. They all understand the importance of producing food for us in a sustainable way, and protecting and enhancing the natural environment. It is right that we say that more often, and work with our farmers and fishermen to enable them to achieve that end.

Jim Shannon: The Minister is absolutely right: the two fishing organisations in Northern Ireland, the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation and the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation, all want a policy that gives sustainability for the fishing sector. If that sector is not sustainable, the people who work in it will not have jobs for the future. My constituents who work in the fishing sector I represent want a deal that works for them and for the environment.

Steve Double: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: most farms and fishing businesses are passed down from generation to generation. That is how they operate, and they understand that if they do not operate sustainably, they will have nothing left to pass on to future generations, so I welcome his comments.

I was delighted to hear that the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) is a fan of "The Wind in the Willows". I do not know whether he knows this, but "The Wind in the Willows" was written by a great Cornishman, Kenneth Grahame. He based the story on the River Fowey, which I am delighted to represent, as it is in my constituency. I invite the right hon. Gentleman to visit Fowey and see that river for himself, and just maybe, he will see his first ever water vole. There is much more I could say—

Jeremy Corbyn: Has the Minister had a chance to look at the comments made yesterday by Emma Howard Boyd, the chair of the Environment Agency, concerning the behaviour of water companies and the pollution in rivers, and her recommendation that instead of fining the chairs of the water companies that grievously pollute our rivers, consideration ought to be given to putting those people in jail for the damage they are doing to our environment? Is he going to respond directly to the Environment Agency and wish it well in that endeavour?

Steve Double: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for raising that very important point. I am, of course, absolutely aware of the Ofwat report and the comments of the Environment Agency.¹ It is a matter that deeply concerns me as a representative of a coastal constituency. I regret to say that one of the worst offenders is my local water authority. This morning, I asked my office for a meeting with it, and to speak to the Environment Agency, because we need to do better. The Government have put measures in place to better hold water authorities to account. I am determined that we find a way of doing that and that we bring to an end the unacceptable level of untreated sewage being discharged into our rivers and seas. I can assure him that I take it very seriously.

I thank all Members who contributed to this excellent debate. As I said, it was great to hear such agreement across House on the importance of COP15, and on protecting and restoring our environment. As right hon.

and hon. Members will be aware, and as the shadow Minister said, I do feel like I am on an eight-week job interview. However, I assure Members that I am determined, however long I am in office, to take these matters very seriously and ensure that the UK does all it can and continues to lead the world in bringing together real action to protect and enhance our natural environment for the future.

4.11 pm

Caroline Lucas: I am hugely grateful to all hon. and right hon. Members who have taken part in this debate. What we have not had in quantity of contributions, we have certainly more than made up for in quality. One theme that has come out is individuals' love for nature. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) talked about how it is central to our souls—nothing less. That, to me, is hugely important. I am struck by the words of the US writer Richard Louv, who said:

"We cannot protect something we do not love, we cannot love what we do not know".

Therefore, getting more access for young people and all of us to nature, the kind of young people the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) spoke about, is absolutely crucial to protecting it.

While we talked about our love for nature, we had some hard economics, too. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) for reminding us that we will not have the transformative change we need unless we change our economic system.

I am very grateful for the Minister's response and for his commitment to work for the success of COP15 and, in particular, the funding necessary to make it a success. He explained why he cannot commit future Ministers to future actions, which I completely understand. What I hope he can do is undertake to urge his Conservative leadership colleagues not to step away from net zero. There have been some deeply worrying statements in the last few days around that. I hope he will play a role in trying to urge them not to put net zero in question.

A number of questions still remain unanswered about the detail of the UK's negotiating objectives, for example its position on the global ratchet when it comes to policy ambition and on increasing our domestic environmental targets in the Environment Act 2021. We need to be more ambitious at home if we are to have credible leadership abroad. I look forward to the opportunity for further conversations with the Minister over the coming weeks and months to ensure we can make a success of COP15. All of us have said, from every angle of this House, how important that is. It has been underlined by today's debate and I am very grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me to hold it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered protecting and restoring nature at COP15 and beyond.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The *Health Service Journal* is reporting that the Minister of State, Department for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) incorrectly told the House yesterday that a contract was in place to provide surge capacity for ambulance services, despite the contract not having

1. [Official Report, 15 July 2022, Vol. 718, c. 8MC.]

been awarded yet. Have you, Mr Deputy Speaker, had any notification from the Minister that she plans to come to the House to clarify the record?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order and for forward notice of it. I have not been given any notification of any statements likely to be made by any Ministers. As he knows, the Chair is not responsible for the content of any statements that have been made. If inaccuracies happen, I expect them to be corrected as soon as possible. However, if the Minister's interpretation of what has happened is not quite the same as the hon. Member's, then clearly that is a matter for debate. The Treasury Bench will have heard his point of order and I am sure they will pass it on to the Minister.

British Glass Industry

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*David T.C. Davies.*)

4.14 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I am delighted to have secured this important debate on the British glass industry and I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and Mr Speaker for facilitating it. Glass is synonymous with St Helens, the town I represent. I am also very pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) here—she may represent a constituency in the north-east, but she is a St Helens lass through and through, born and bred.

Glass made here in Britain is renowned across the globe and much of our daily lives depends on products that use it. From energy-efficient glazing in our windows to optical technologies that make internet communication and barcode scanning possible, this ever-evolving, innovating industry has—past and present—truly been a catalyst for progress in this country.

We should make no mistake: glass in Britain is giant. With 3.5 million tonnes of glass melted a year, the industry contributes some £1.3 billion to our economy annually. The industry employs 6,000 people directly and supports around 150,000 additional jobs—many located in my region of the north-west—across a diverse, dynamic supply chain. It remains a world leader, with UK manufacturers at the cutting edge of global efforts to develop sustainable glass for use in fields as wide as medicine, navigation, energy and power generation. I will use my remarks to celebrate some of the successes and to highlight, on the industry's behalf, some of the urgent challenges that it faces.

The rise of glass as a powerhouse is a rich story and one that St Helens and the north of England is fiercely proud to be at the heart of. In 1773, the British Cast Plate Glass Company was established at Ravenhead. In 1826, the St Helens Crown Glass Company was founded by the Pilkington and Greenall families and, in 1845, its name was changed to Pilkington Brothers. Fondly known as Pilks, it remains a byword for excellence and innovation to this day. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), on whose behalf I am also speaking, worked for many years at Pilks and feels, like so many families in our town, a very special affinity for and connection to it.

In this country, 2022 marks a milestone year for glass. For one, it is the UN International Year of Glass—a celebration of the essential role of glass in society around the world. Along with other hon. Members, Ministers and industry representatives, I was very proud to celebrate that occasion at a special reception here in Parliament at the end of March. I know that more is planned with the Government and with us in Parliament before the end of the year.

This year also marks the 70th anniversary of the revolutionary float glass process, pioneered by Sir Alastair Pilkington. The method quickly became the worldwide staple for manufacturing high-quality flat glass and remains one of the most important post-war innovations not just in Britain, but globally. If any Member would like to know more about glass, its history and its role in Britain, they can visit the excellent World of Glass in St Helens. We have plans, too, for the historic Cannington

[Conor McGinn]

Shaw No.7 bottle shop—a place of history for our town and the whole country, which is right at the forefront of what we are doing on regeneration.

The glass industry in Britain today is using that spirit of innovation—that rich heritage and history—to adapt to and shape the modern world and to address the challenges that we face as a country and planet, many of which we heard about in the previous debate. Nowhere is that clearer than in the industry's imperative to reach net zero carbon emissions. As a product, glass will be critical to the national effort on that, whether we are talking about double or triple glazing for household insulation; glass for use in our solar products; or continuous filament glass fibres used in wind turbine blades and in lightweighting vehicles.

As an industry, too, glass is leading the way, supported by the industry body British Glass, to which I pay tribute for its work, and underpinned by its own ambitious net zero strategy, which was released just a year ago. That work is building on the industry's recent success in reducing combustion and process emissions and in improving efficiency. Over the past 40 years, the energy efficiency of glass furnaces has increased by 50% and firms have significantly invested in technology to increase efficiency and reduce carbon emissions. Recycling has also been key: each time 1 tonne of glass is recycled, about 580 kg of carbon dioxide is saved through the chain.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. On recycling glass, does he agree that the deposit return schemes that are being planned could be problematic for the glass industry if we have such schemes in Wales and Scotland, say, but not in Northern Ireland and England? Does he think that could be a problem for the industry?

Conor McGinn: My hon. Friend demonstrates the unity of purpose and message discipline on the Opposition Benches, because she anticipates the very point that I was just coming to. In 2020, 76% of container glass was recycled, and the industry has set an ambitious target of a 90% glass collection rate by 2030. To help those efforts, British Glass has called for glass bottles to be excluded from the scope of the UK's deposit return scheme, which my hon. Friend alluded to, and to be collected instead through an improved system of extended producer responsibility.

Independent evidence has shown that kerbside collections are the most effective route to achieving closed-loop bottle-to-bottle recycling in the UK. The sector was pleased by the recent decision to exclude glass from the upcoming England scheme, but the industry remains concerned about the prospect of multiple diverging schemes across the UK, which would increase complexity, cost and confusion for the public and businesses alike. I wonder whether the Minister might address that point and say what work the Government are doing, alongside regional and devolved authorities, to address those concerns.

The challenge of ensuring that glass making can be built on high-value and sustainable zero-carbon products requires new solutions that fuse elements of research, design, collaboration, innovation and partnership between industry, academic life and political leaders. Not for the

first time, we in St Helens are leading the way. A beacon for that is the cutting-edge project that we are working on with Glass Futures, Liverpool city region and our partners in industry to deliver a £54 million centre of excellence, in the heart of the town and our borough, for the sustainable manufacture of glass globally.

Having turned the first sod on that project in February, we are already making huge progress on delivering the 165,000 square foot state-of-the-art facility, which will be capable of producing up to 30 tonnes of glass a day and will include the world's first ever openly accessible multi-disciplinary glass-melting factory. It will give researchers and industry leaders from across the world a unique space to collaborate and experiment with different energy sources, including electricity, biofuels and hydrogen, raw materials and other emerging technologies to demonstrate solutions leading to sustainable energy usage in glass making.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I spoke to him beforehand, Mr Deputy Speaker.

At a time when prices are soaring across the world for deliveries, containers and the movement of products, it is good to hear that St Helens is doing so well. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that now is the time to emphasise the best of British produce and manufacturing? For that to happen, the Government—perhaps particularly the Minister, who is always amenable to such ideas—should be funding the relocation of factories and firms back to our shores, as he refers to. That would give local people jobs and give consumers what they want, which is superior British goods.

Conor McGinn: I entirely agree. When the Labour party is in government, we are committed to putting at the heart of everything we do the idea that we make, we buy and we sell British. That is hugely important to our economy, not just at a national level and not just for asserting our new place in the world, but for bringing jobs to cities, towns and villages across the whole United Kingdom. I know that that is a sentiment that the hon. Gentleman very much shares.

We are very proud that these ambitious efforts locally put St Helens and the Liverpool city region front and centre at the recent COP26 summit in Glasgow, where we showcased the product not only for its environmental benefits but its social and economic ones. The boost that this will bring to St Helens and our wider region is clear, with, initially, 80 new permanent jobs, over 700 apprenticeship hours, and 100 volunteer hours committed to local green projects. In addition, 50% of project spend will be local, alluding to the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and 50% of those working on it will come from our city region. So we are thinking globally and acting locally, benefiting our area and its economy, and the environment.

Our efforts do not stop there because, in August last year, working alongside HyNet North West, we carried out a world-first trial with hydrogen on Pilkington's famous float line that demonstrated that hydrogen, and other low and no-carbon fuels, could be used to fire a float glass furnace safely and effectively. The industry is ambitious to blaze a trail towards the future and those are just a couple of examples of how it is successfully cutting that path.

However, there are some urgent challenges in the present that risk putting the brakes on that and need to be addressed if the British glass industry is to continue to thrive. First, as the Minister will not be surprised to hear, the issue of spiralling energy costs is of significant concern. Like all other energy-intensive sectors, glass manufacturers have seen energy prices skyrocket at an alarming pace, experiencing gas and electricity costs as high as quadruple and triple their usual amount respectively, with prices remaining volatile. Energy already accounts for about a third of overall glass manufacturing costs, and in some cases production costs are now exceeding the price of goods themselves. Put simply, this is not sustainable and the risk to the financial viability of the sector is grave.

Yet little support has been made available by the Government to help firms crying out for short-term assistance, with, for example, the decision not to include flat or container glass in updated eligibility criteria for the compensation scheme to deal with indirect carbon costs. British Glass, on behalf of the whole industry, has written to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy for clarity on that decision, as the assessment was based on data from 2016 to 2018, which represents a time before significant changes to imports. British Glass believes that the container sector should also be eligible. I ask the Minister to address that—if not today, then to come back to me on it and to look into the response that the Department has given to the industry. The industry is also awaiting the publication of the renewables exemption scheme consultation, which has been delayed. That is hugely important to the glass sector, which believes that increasing the relief from 85% to 100% would help to reduce electricity prices.

Secondly, energy security and supply, in and of itself, is critical. Glass production remains energy intensive and always will. Glass furnaces must fire continuously to make product in order, essentially, for the industry to survive. Indeed, with the UK's furnace asset value estimated at in excess of £1.4 billion, closures would be devastating for the industry and wider society. Due to the shortage of refractories and workers, it could take over two years to rebuild a furnace if it lost gas supply. Labour Members have called for a £600 million contingency fund that would boost energy-intensive firms in glass, but also steel, manufacturing and other industries at the same time. I urge the Government to look at this again, as they did with our plans for a windfall tax to help domestic customers with energy costs. In the absence of any forthcoming policies of their own, we are always happy to provide some for them to take. Glass manufacturers need to be protected from shortages in fuel, and the industry has called on the Government to help to ensure this, especially over the coming winter, which is predicted to be a real crunch point. The industry strongly encourages the publication of the National Grid's "Winter Outlook" without delay to help with preparations.

Finally, there is the challenge of competitiveness. The glass industry is recognised as being at risk of carbon leakage, which means that imposing full UK carbon costs could make manufacturing in the UK globally uncompetitive. We already have higher allowance prices than the European Union, for example. I ask the Government to look into that, and to ensure that the industry is able to remain competitive.

Past and present, glass has always been ingrained in the very fabric of our country. It is part of what makes Britain great, especially in proud communities such as mine in St Helens, where it remains a source of—indeed, a catalyst for—jobs, opportunities and economic growth. It is a symbol of this country's manufacturing excellence and our rich past, and it remains part of the change and progress that we want to see Britain achieving. That is evident in the way in which this ever-evolving industry is using technology to address the defining issues—for instance, the climate emergency—faced by us as a society, and indeed by the world as a whole. We need concerted support from the Government to tackle the huge challenges that the industry faces, while taking the opportunities that are available.

St Helens glass is the best in Britain. British glass is the best in the world. Let us keep it that way, and let us shout it from the rooftops.

4.30 pm

The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands): I am grateful to the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) for securing the debate and for outlining so comprehensively the importance of glass to the UK. I welcome the opportunity to address the priorities and challenges faced by the UK glass sector, and to explain what the Government have done, and will do in the future, to support it. As the Energy Minister, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Department recognises the value of glass manufacturers, and takes their concerns very seriously.

In his excellent speech, the hon. Gentleman pointed out that British-made glass is renowned around the world. I always love a good bit of history, and he took us back to 1773 and the foundation of the British glass industry—indeed, probably the world glass industry—at Ravenhead. Glass has of course been around for centuries, but that was when it was turned into an industry. The hon. Gentleman told us about the 3.5 million tonnes that are produced each year and the 6,000 people employed directly in the industry, but he also talked about the much wider impact of the sector. As a former Exports Minister and a former Investment Minister, I know that it is industries of this kind that will enable global Britain to compete on the world stage and will continue to attract foreign direct investment, which plays such an important role in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Let me now deal with a few of the points that the hon. Gentleman raised. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs leads on glass recycling and direct deposit schemes, but I will pass his comments on. DEFRA has undertaken extensive engagement with the glass sector, and will do so in the future. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree that the Government want to make recycling as easy and efficient as possible, but we need to ensure that that does not include any perverse incentives, or any element that is likely to damage some of our key industries.

The subject of energy-intensive industries will constitute the main part of my response, but I was pleased to hear the hon. Gentleman report that energy efficiency is up 50% in glass furnaces. That is an encouraging sign as we move towards net zero. Obviously some industries will be harder to decarbonise than others, but it is good to hear that glass has made significant progress in that regard.

[Greg Hands]

The hon. Gentleman mentioned HyNet North West. I was delighted to visit some of the participants in the HyNet North West carbon capture, utilisation and storage cluster last autumn. I circled near the hon. Gentleman's constituency: I was in Runcorn and Warrington. We are moving forward with HyNet in a very good place.

Conor McGinn: It was remiss of me not to invite the Minister to St Helens, and I apologise for my rudeness. He should not be afraid to visit us, and perhaps he will visit Glass Futures before the project is completed or come when we open it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): On your way to Ribble Valley, Minister.

Greg Hands: Gosh, I am getting multiple invitations—was that an intervention on an intervention? In any case, I will happily have a look at the forthcoming visits schedule. It is obviously an important part of the world for our overall energy policy and energy future.

The hon. Gentleman invited me to be drawn on the energy profits levy, but I think I will avoid that for the moment. Not only is it part of a Treasury lead, but I feel that we want to concentrate on glass and energy-intensive industries. He mentioned carbon leakage, and obviously the UK is an important participant in the debate on carbon border adjustment mechanisms, which I also know about from my days at International Trade.

I shall deal in my response mainly with energy-intensive industries, particularly in relation to glass. The Government recognise the wider importance of all EIIs to this country, and their particular significance to local economies and communities, which all of us here today represent. I agree that strong and sustainable EIIs are hugely important to our national economy, particularly as we secure new global opportunities and continue our drive towards a green economic recovery. From offshore wind farms to building electric cars, we know that steel, ceramics and glass are three important EIIs that will play a big part in our low-carbon future and low-carbon industries.

In my time as a Minister in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, I have witnessed at first hand the skills and dedication of workers, and through my and colleagues' engagement with the various business and trade associations, we have seen their drive to work with the Government to find a sustainable solution for EIIs that works for us all. I am sure we can all agree that the last two years or so have been particularly difficult for everybody, and EIIs have been no exception. Many workers in those industries have been engaged in activities that could clearly only be carried out on site, and in some cases they were operating equipment designed specifically for continuous use without shutdown. I would like to take this opportunity to put on record the Government's appreciation of all those who work in those sectors in what can be challenging environments ordinarily, let alone in the middle of a pandemic. I would like to thank the essential workers who continued going to work on site and kept production going and sites safe during the pandemic.

The energy price rises that we have seen internationally in 2021 and 2022 have not helped business, particularly those with high energy usage. Increased energy demand

globally as lockdown and restrictions lifted, increased demand for liquefied natural gas in Asia, upstream maintenance last year and increased demand for gas for electricity generation on the continent have all contributed to those high prices. Many large energy users will have hedging strategies in place that help to shield them from some of the effects of gas and electricity price rises, while others may be more reliant on spot market prices. We will continue to engage with businesses while higher pricing continues, and thereafter. My ministerial colleagues have regularly met the Energy Intensive Users Group, and we will continue to engage with the impacted sectors.

The energy price rises that have been seen internationally have not helped recovery from the problems caused by the pandemic, and global events in the last year have added yet more pressure—most obviously the barbaric Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, as well as facing these challenges, we are also now in a place where new global opportunities are presenting themselves, and we need to ensure that the UK is at the front of the queue with innovative ideas and solutions. Our energy-intensive industries—and notably glass—are well placed to be part of this.

This Government are determined to secure a competitive future for our EIIs. In recent years we have provided extensive support, including more than £2 billion to help with the costs of electricity and to protect jobs. This support includes electricity price relief schemes for eligible energy-intensive industries such as paper and pulp, glass fibre, iron and steel manufacture and batteries. The energy security strategy, published in April this year, set out how we will accelerate homegrown power for greater energy independence. Among the many proposals in that strategy, we committed to increasing the support we provide for EIIs over the next three years and effectively doubled the financial support that we provide. We will consider other measures to support businesses facing high energy costs, including increasing the renewables obligation exemption for eligible EIIs to up to 100%.

Furthermore, there are several other funds in place to support businesses with high energy use to increase efficiencies and reduce emissions, including the £315 million industrial energy transformation fund. Examples of sectors that have seen benefits have included the ceramics sector, which last year secured £18.3 million for the Midlands Industrial Ceramics Group from the Government's strength in places fund to help establish a global centre for advanced technical ceramics. That will ultimately lead to the creation of 4,200 new jobs by 2030. The glass sector has also been awarded £15 million from our transforming foundation industries fund to establish Glass Futures, a state-of-the-art glass facility in St Helens, to which the hon. Gentleman referred. The co-operative work being done by Glass Futures and NSG Pilkington is already bearing fruit.

Recent trials using 100% biofuel in the production of float glass has created a product with a reduced carbon footprint of 80%—the lowest-carbon float glass ever made. This is truly innovative and exciting work, which I know the hon. Gentleman celebrates in his constituency. The Government will continue to work with Glass Futures to further support and deliver on our important objectives, and to foster an innovative, cross-sectoral working relationship. We will also continue to engage with the various councils, businesses and the Energy

Intensive Users Group to ensure that their priorities are understood. The industrial decarbonisation strategy and the net zero strategy that we published last year outlined existing and new support for industrial decarbonisation that companies would be eligible for.

The Government and my Department are taking a number of steps to address the challenge of ensuring we have a secure supply of energy. We are in constant dialogue with business, National Grid and Ofgem to ensure that we get our approach right. I have outlined the energy intensive industries offering from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. However, many more initiatives across Government aimed at addressing these challenges are set out in the British energy security strategy, which was launched by the Prime Minister in April.

In my capacity as an advocate for British business, I am happy to use my platform to promote the exciting opportunities that are now presenting themselves to

UK companies, including in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I remain committed to working with stakeholders to understand more about what can be done. I thank the hon. Gentleman and everyone here for participating in the debate, and for providing an opportunity for us to celebrate the contribution made by the British glass industry. We look forward to dealing with some of the energy and other challenges facing the industry, and to ensuring that the industry thrives, exports more and plays its proper part in our global Britain branding.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): An Adjournment debate that we can all raise a glass to.

Question put and agreed to.

4.43 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 14 July 2022

[CHRISTINA REES *in the Chair*]

Access to Cash in Scotland

SCOTTISH AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

1.30 pm

Christina Rees (in the Chair): We begin with a Select Committee statement. Pete Wishart will speak on the publication of the Second Report of the Scottish Affairs Committee, “Access to cash in Scotland”, for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members, if they stand, to ask questions on the subject of the statement. I will call Pete Wishart to respond to those in turn. Questions should be brief. I will begin Mr Shannon’s debate at 1.50 pm promptly. I call the Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Thank you, Ms Rees. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me to make a statement on our report, “Access to cash in Scotland”, which we published on Monday. It is great to see so many colleagues from Scottish constituencies here today. *[Interruption.]* And of course from Northern Ireland—I cannot possibly forget the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I look forward to their questions.

We know that lack of access to cash continues to concern many of our constituents, and it impacts on some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people we represent. The Scottish Affairs Committee has taken a long-term interest in the issue: our predecessor Committee released a report in 2018. We looked at the issue in the round and made a number of recommendations. We have also taken an interest in banking infrastructure right across Scotland, publishing reports and holding sessions on that subject over the past few years.

Our inquiry took evidence from representative groups and organisations; we also invited members of the public to complete a public survey on access to cash in Scotland, noting their own experiences and views. We of course thank everyone who contributed to our investigation, as well as those who responded to our public survey.

A key recommendation of the previous report, which the Committee published in 2018, was that the Government consider legislating to ensure that communities continue to have access to vital banking services. We are therefore delighted that the Government have done just that, by including a Bill in the Queen’s Speech to ensure that happens. The financial services and markets Bill is a positive development and a constructive response to the efforts of the Committee and the many representations that have been made by colleagues from across the House. If we have any disappointment, it is that the Bill may be a bit too late because we have lost many elements of our banking infrastructure in the intervening years. We understand that the Government want to conduct a

wider and all-inclusive consultation prior to publishing their Bill, but it concerns us that we have lost so many bank branches in the intervening years, and we know that banks are now considering rushing closures ahead of any legislation being passed by the House.

The picture today looks considerably different from when the previous Committee investigated access to cash. The pandemic has changed everything, and the rush to digitalisation and the increased use of digital facilities for personal and business banking have continued. The pandemic accelerated that move, but cash payments are still the second most used form of payment and account for 17% of all transactions.

Currently, 5.4 million people, or about 10% of UK adults, are reliant on cash. In Scotland, that is equivalent to around 500,000 people—half a million of our over 5 million population. In 2019, the “Access to Cash Review” found that over 8 million adults, or 17% of the UK population, would struggle to cope in a cashless society. That was reflected in the public survey I mentioned. The majority of our respondents held very negative views about the potential for the UK to become a cashless society. Some 67% of those who responded to our survey told us they thought it would be “very negative” if the UK became a cashless society.

The other thing that concerned our Committee was the sheer volume of bank closures that we have seen across the UK—specifically in Scotland, of course—over the past few years. Since 2015, Scotland has lost 53% of its bank branches; we have experienced the greatest percentage of loss out of all the UK nations. The figures for the automated teller machine or ATM network are just as bad, with 20% of Scotland’s free-to-use ATMs closing since 2018.

Obviously, the banking industry contributed to our report and inquiry. It told us that it is merely responding to falling customer demand, and that many bank branches and ATMs are no longer commercially viable. I think that all of us understand, appreciate and respect the fact that many more people have taken advantage of the useful digital services that are now available to each and every single one of us. However, we were told by Which? that the impact of bank branch and ATM closures is most severe in remote and rural areas of Scotland, due to challenges around connectivity. Often, people must travel greater distances to reach the nearest cash access point and I am pretty certain that hon. Members will want to raise that issue with me this afternoon.

Which? also told us that the covid-19 pandemic resulted in an increase in the number of retailers refusing to accept cash as a form of payment. There is no doubt that the pandemic forced a number of businesses to adapt and accelerate the move to digital payment. On top of that now, there is the cost of living crisis. We heard in evidence that increases in the cost of living may result in more people choosing to use cash to manage their finances and budgeting. We were told that there is limited publicly available data on retail cash acceptance, but the report of an increase in the number of retailers refusing to accept cash is concerning. We recommended in our report that the UK Government consider asking the Financial Conduct Authority to investigate and monitor cash acceptance levels across the UK.

We also note in our report that the banking industry has undertaken several impressive initiatives to protect consumers’ access to cash. One example is LINK’s

[Pete Wishart]

financial inclusion programme, which ensures that the most rural and deprived areas in the UK continue to have access to cash. That effort is very welcome, but the programme's success is reliant on the voluntary membership of card issuers and ATM operators, so we also recommended that the UK Government mandate membership of LINK for card issuers and ATM operators, to ensure that LINK's initiatives are not simply enacted on the voluntary basis that they are today.

We also heard about the benefits that the introduction of universal deposit-taking ATMs would bring to consumers and especially businesses across Scotland. Such infrastructure would contribute to the sustainability of the ATM network, while providing a secure location for customers and businesses to deposit cash. However, attempts to introduce this sort of infrastructure have been constrained by a lack of progress on the part of the UK Government and the banking industry. Our predecessor Committee considered deposit-taking ATMs, and we repeated its recommendation that the UK Government set up a working group with industry to introduce network-wide deposit-taking ATMs.

Throughout our inquiry, we heard about the substantial role of the Post Office and its increasing provision of banking services, and it continues to provide consumers and businesses with access to basic cash and banking facilities. However, despite the positive interventions made by both the banking industry and the Post Office, the current provision of cash via post offices rests on the short-term and voluntary banking framework agreement. We recommend in our report that the UK Government seek a long-term commitment from the banks to maintain appropriate banking services for their customers using the post office network.

As I said earlier, the Committee of course welcomes the Government's commitment to protecting access to cash through legislation, but we are concerned that measures may be needed now, until that Bill is introduced and the legislation enacted. Nevertheless, we look forward to working with the Government to ensure that the Bill is a success when it is introduced.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): As a humble Back Bencher, it is always a privilege to be able to question a leading member of the British establishment in Parliament.

I very much welcome the Committee's inquiry, because this is a serious matter. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) touched on a number of subjects, although he did not mention an issue that is important to my constituents, which is the ability to deposit cash. That, as well as access to and use of cash, is a significant issue.

I want to touch on the hon. Gentleman's point about banks taking pre-emptive steps ahead of any legislation, which I experienced in my constituency recently when the Bank of Scotland closed branches in Innerleithen and Lockerbie. From my discussions with the bank, it seems that the only basis for that action was to pre-empt legislation that it anticipates the Government bringing forward. In their work on the report, did he and the Select Committee consider how that practice could be prevented ahead of the Government bringing forward the legislation to which he referred?

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman and I am pleased that he showed sufficient deference when questioning a member of the establishment. I am always glad to accept questions from him in any setting, so it is good that he is here.

On the right hon. Gentleman's specific questions, he obviously did not hear me point out in my contribution that we looked at deposit-accepting ATMs. We see them as a really valuable introduction and something that could help businesses in rural areas, which find it difficult to deposit their cash in the evening. On that basis, we proposed that a working group should be set up, chaired by the Government, to see what could be done to facilitate that.

Throughout the inquiry, we recognised from the evidence that we heard that that would be a positive development particularly for businesses in rural areas such as the one the right hon. Gentleman represents. When he looks at the report, I hope that he will see the conclusions and recommendations we made on that. I know that the Minister is listening and taking notes, so I hope that we might be able to see that in the legislation in due course.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee for this comprehensive report. We continue to wait for action from the UK Government, as we have for a long time, on legislation to protect access to cash. Page 11 of the report makes it clear that

“Ministers have not had a clear picture of the implications of bank branch and ATM closures on communities in Scotland.”

Those of us who have repeatedly raised the impact of greatly reduced access to cash in our communities know all too well the damage that it is doing. It is vital that the UK Government do all they can to develop a clear picture of the implications of reduced access to cash in advance of any legislation to protect access to cash. Will the Committee continue to pursue that? Otherwise, as I am sure he will agree, the long-promised access-to-cash legislation that we are waiting for will simply not be fit for purpose. It is urgent, as the report makes clear.

Pete Wishart: We put those questions to the Minister when he appeared before the Committee. He made it clear, very legitimately, that the Government cannot get involved in commercial decisions on closures of branch operations, but that does not mean that they cannot do anything. The Access to Cash Action Group recommended several things that the Government could do so that banks were able to proceed, particularly around consultation with local communities, which is available now.

Data is indeed important ahead of legislation. The Government have an opportunity to find out how much cash usage there is across the UK, how many retailers refuse to accept cash at salepoints, and exact data on bank closures, which does not exist in any tangible or useful form. As the Government head towards the legislation, they have an opportunity to look at that and, hopefully, enable Members of Parliament on both sides of the House to be better informed when they are contributing to discussions about the legislation and to know exactly the state of play when it comes to bank closures and the use of cash.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is fair to say that the Chair and I do not always agree in the Scottish Affairs Committee—indeed, outwith the Committee, we almost

never agree—but I pay tribute to the way that he has led this inquiry to the conclusion where we unanimously agreed the content of the report with no changes. That is also credit to our Clerks and it is right to thank them for their work in evidence gathering and report writing.

Does the Chair of the Select Committee agree that it was clear from a number of the evidence sessions that many of the banks are frankly morally bankrupt in the way that they treat their loyal and dedicated customers with contempt? In Forres, we have seen all four of the bank branches close in recent years. Just this week, the final bank—the Bank of Scotland—closed its branch. I held a meeting with my right hon. Friend the Minister and senior managers to discuss the issue, but they refused to come to Forres and speak directly to the customers they were leaving. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there should be far more engagement between the banks and their customers? Does he also agree that there is an opportunity to have banking hubs? If individual banks do not believe that they have the customers to keep a branch open, they should work together so that a town the size of Forres can still have a banking footprint.

Pete Wishart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks—I am sure we will be back to business as normal on Monday, when the Committee meets again.

The hon. Gentleman's substantive points were very useful. I agree that banks need to properly explain to local communities the reasons behind closures. I remember a protest in Aberfeldy. It takes a lot to get people protesting in Aberfeldy, but they protested in large numbers about the closure of the Royal Bank of Scotland branch there. Communities get very upset about this issue, and they look for reasons and answers. They want to understand why banks in the heart of the community have been closed, and more could be done to explain that.

There is, of course, a code of conduct that the banks are expected to fall in line with, but I think most people find that insufficient. Again, there may be a role for the Government to intervene and to make sure that we have proper thresholds and guidelines for where banks are to be closed. The previous Government had legislation about the last branch in town, but that seems to have gone and is no longer a feature of the Government's thinking about this issue. The Minister is listening, and that may be something that he might want to think about as we look forward to the Bill being introduced.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Like others, I offer the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) all the deference that he deserves.

The hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) said that the banks are “morally bankrupt”. Let us not forget that, but for the taxpayer, they would also be financially bankrupt. We have recently seen the withdrawal of the Bank of Scotland from Stromness in my constituency—the last bank in town. If we now hear that there is a rush of banks seeking to avoid the incoming legislation, does the Chair of the Select Committee agree that that is simply acting in bad faith, which the Government should not be tolerating and in respect of which they should be acting?

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. He and I are the “Faithers of the Hoose”, given that we were both elected in 2001. [*Interruption.*] I know that

he signed in before me, but I still claim that I was elected before him—we will fight that one out at some point in the future.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I think we are all concerned about the intervening period and what happens now to the legislation being introduced. There are several things that I believe the Government could do. A “cease and desist” instruction could be enacted to tell banks very clearly that there is an expectation that no branches should be closed in the period between now and the legislation being introduced. The Government could make it retrospective and say that the clear intention of the legislation is that there should be no branches closed until the Bill has been considered. Again, this is something that could be done in advance of the legislation being introduced. It is really a matter for the Government, but I think the Minister is hearing very clearly.

Looking around the Chamber, most of us represent rural or semi-rural constituencies, and we have this very clear problem. We remain greatly concerned about what happens now. The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that there now seems to be a rush to close branches ahead of the legislation coming in. It is almost perverse that the banks would choose to do so, knowing that we are coming to some sort of solution about how this matter could be taken forward. I really hope that something can be done in the intervening weeks and months.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve on the Scottish Affairs Committee with the Chair and the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross). I too have had a number of bank branch closures in my constituency. What came through very strongly when we were hearing about the Post Office is that the banks often offload their responsibilities on to post offices, but we are seeing closures of them across our constituencies as well. I have certainly seen that in North East Fife. Although I welcome the hubs, does the Chair agree with me that there is a risk that banks' overreliance on the Post Office to deliver access-to-cash services prevents it from delivering the wider services that it provides to our communities?

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who is an assiduous member of the Scottish Affairs Committee and who makes very valuable contributions to our reports and inquiries. She is right to suggest that the banks may look at the Post Office as a convenient get-out clause from their responsibilities, and there is no doubt whatsoever that the Post Office has offered a substantial and significant resource when it comes to banking services.

The hon. Lady mentions hubs. I should have said to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) that the Committee found that banking hubs are the way forward. We saw a couple of the experiments that have been carried out in the past few years—particularly Cambuslang bank hub, which people are finding useful. What we are looking at is an arrangement where there are joint services—

Christina Rees (in the Chair): Order.

1.50 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

NHS PPE Supply Chains: Forced Labour

1.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered forced labour and NHS PPE supply chains.

Thank you, Ms Rees, for the opportunity to lead this debate. I applied for it some time ago—long before the Health and Care Act 2022 was brought to the House—so I want to take the opportunity today to do a follow-up with the Minister. I know she is incredibly assiduous on this issue and is, like me, keen to ensure that the progress continues to be made.

I thank the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is a special envoy for international freedom of religion or belief, for co-sponsoring this debate. She told me earlier in the week that, unfortunately, she has another engagement: I understand she is a guest speaker at Chester cathedral. An apology has been sent to the Minister and the shadow Minister. I hope they have both received it, because it is disappointing that the hon. Lady cannot be here. She sends her best wishes, and I know that we would have been greatly encouraged by her presence and her contribution.

Without the hon. Lady's tireless work on international freedom of religious belief, the world would be a much more unjust place. The international conference, which she was instrumental in bringing about, took place last week and the week before. I want to put on the record my thanks to the Minister and the Government, and also to the Prime Minister, who is still there, for his commitment to ensuring the conference took place. There were 1,000 delegates from all over the world—from probably more than 60 countries. It was a marvellous opportunity to highlight issues across the world.

I declare an interest: I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary groups for international freedom of religion or belief and for Pakistani minorities. Both issues are very close to my heart, as they are for the hon. Member for Congleton.

I thank everyone in Parliament who has faithfully championed the rights of the Uyghurs since we first learned of the horrific reports of what is happening in Xinjiang province and the atrocious scale of systematic persecution that they face. There is not one of us who is not pained in our hearts at what is taking place. We feel for those people who, like everyone else, were just trying to make a living. The Chinese Government—the Chinese Communist party—took it upon themselves to persecute them and force their religious beliefs out of their minds. I will speak about that as I work my way through my speech.

This debate is about forced labour and the NHS personal protective equipment supply chains, and it is no secret that the Uyghurs are the main group being horrifically exploited. The obscene violations of human rights that have occurred in China warrant endless debates—not just this debate, but many more. As a nation, as human beings and as beneficiaries of the many supply chains with ties to China, we must not rest while China continues its despicable practices across the world.

The House will be aware of the amendment to the Health and Care Act tabled by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), which obliged the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make provisions to ensure that the procurement of all goods and services for the NHS avoids modern slavery. I welcomed the amendment very much; I spoke about it in the Chamber and I welcomed the Government's commitment. It is important that we do not forget why it was needed. The covid-19 pandemic was a national emergency and a time of special need—a time when the Government, the Prime Minister and the Ministers responsible had to respond urgently to the national and global emergency. There was suddenly an unprecedented need for the procurement of personal protective equipment and intense national pressure to provide it.

Reports show that shortcuts around standard procurement procedures were taken. I understand why. During that time, Her Majesty's Government gave out PPE contracts worth £150 million to Chinese firms with links to forced labour abuses in Xinjiang. That included £122 million to Winner Medical, which uses cotton produced by forced labour, with links to the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, the state-backed paramilitary organisation—the very organisation responsible for running the region's so-called re-education camps. I know the Minister understands why we feel angered and annoyed that such a thing should ever happen.

An additional £19 million was provided to China Meheco, and another £16.5 million to Sinopharm. Both companies have strong links to the Chinese Communist party's Xinjiang labour transform programme, which relocates Uyghurs from Xinjiang as slave labourers across China. We do not see as much about that now, or perhaps there is not so much focus on it as there should be, but that is what is happening—people are being moved to other parts of China, so slave labour continues not just in Xinjiang but elsewhere.

I understand that there was a pressing need for PPE, but it is disgraceful that NHS staff had to use protective equipment made in the slave labour camps of Xinjiang, let alone that taxpayers' money was used to purchase that equipment and therefore fund abhorrent abuse. It is even more disgraceful as the abuses were well-known during the pandemic. A report from the British Medical Association notes serious concerns about the role of Uyghur forced labour in the production of PPE. An investigation by *The New York Times* came to the same conclusion, as did multiple reports and briefings from the United Nations dating as far back as 2010.

This is not just something that happened in the last couple of years, during covid. It has been happening for several years. It was exacerbated during covid, and has been exacerbated even more so now. I am thankful that the Health and Care Act has made NHS procurement policy more consistent with the United Kingdom's obligations to prevent and punish acts of genocide, and more in line with the Modern Slavery Act 2015. PPE is just the tip of the iceberg.

Since 2003, nearly 20 years ago, China has sought to eradicate Uyghur culture from China. It has been happening for more than 20 years and has been exacerbated in the last two to three years. For 20 years, a systematic approach to Uyghurs has led to mass forced labour, driven Uyghurs from their homes to abuse camps, forced

detention of up to 2 million people and enacted arbitrary torture, as well as forced sterilisation, executions and even organ harvesting. There have also been reports of sexual abuse, murder and torture.

China widely denies the mass incarceration and forced labour and cites terrorism as the cause of security measures in the region. I think most of us can agree, however, that that is ridiculous and entirely insincere and untrue. There is overwhelming evidence that shows a systematic approach to destroying Uyghur culture, language, and faith.

Most recently the “Xinjiang Police Files”, released in May 2022, highlighted the internal view of China’s Communist party that Uyghur culture was incompatible with Chinese culture. Those documents include memos and speeches from President Xi Jinping and other senior leaders of the CCP, describing an active objective to rewire the thinking of the Uyghur Muslims. My goodness—to change the whole way in which people think. People have a right to express their religious view, and it is for that reason that I sought to secure this debate through the Backbench Business Committee—I thank it very much for giving me this opportunity. The Chinese Communist party’s objective was to be achieved through indoctrination and interrogation, transforming the Uyghurs into secular and loyal supporters of the party. The party takes away their right to think and believe, and make them something else.

Uyghurs and other minorities in China face intense monitoring and severe persecution, which have led to credible accusations of genocide and crimes against humanity. As China commits those crimes, it also seeks to profit from the detention of the Uyghur Muslims. As the arrests have increased, so has the economic output of the region. The Chinese Government have a group of people they detain and work long hours—to use terminology from back home, they work them to the bone. Goods produced by the forced labour of Uyghurs are not confined to PPE; they also include fashion, sugar, cosmetics and 40% of China’s coal, and organs are forcibly harvested for use in China’s organ tourism industry.

The Xinjiang region also produces 20% of global cotton production and 45% of the world supply of polysilicon—an essential material in solar panel construction. Today, it is deeply tied to global supply chains, from fashion to renewable energy, and that builds on the profits of ongoing crimes against humanity and, as this House has often claimed, genocide.

To put that in context, one in five items of clothing made with cotton has its origins in Xinjiang province. One in five suits, pairs of trousers and dresses is made with cotton hand-picked by Uyghurs detained in Xinjiang province. If we are to distance ourselves from the horrific abuse of Uyghurs, we must do more to distance ourselves from supply chains involving China.

I am always pleased to see the Minister in her place, because I know she has a deep interest in these issues, and that she will come back with the answers we are seeking. I look forward to what she and the shadow Minister will say. Perhaps the Minister will tell us what must be done next to address the issue of supply chains, which goes far beyond the NHS and into society.

Some have argued that legislation is already in place to prevent such goods from entering UK supply chains. It includes the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which encourages

businesses to take action to eradicate modern slavery from their operations and supply chains. I believe that the Act is a nudge strategy; it does not have any teeth. It asks businesses with a turnover of more than £36 million to make statements describing the steps they are taking to address modern slavery. We need a lot more than statements; we need action.

The Act has been championed as providing measures that could help restrict imports from Xinjiang province. However, in February 2021, a review from the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre concluded that it had failed to eradicate modern slavery from UK supply chains. What is being done to ensure that words become action that makes a difference?

Companies can choose what to include in their statement. They can adopt a tick-box approach and provide only general information. They can also state that they have taken no steps at all to eradicate forced labour and still be compliant with the Act. It is not a verbal commitment that we need; it is action on the ground.

Despite that minimal approach, there has been persistent non-compliance by 40% of companies. We really need to turn the screws on them and ensure that they do more than give verbal commitments, and we also need to act upon the ones that do not. After six years of non-compliance, there has not been one injunction or penalty for any company that has failed to report, so it seems that the Act is toothless.

Clearly, more legislation or more pressure is needed to make the change. In the Queen’s Speech, Her Majesty’s Government outlined plans to increase companies’ and other organisations’ accountability for driving out modern slavery from their supply chains through a new modern slavery Bill. I hope that that Bill will strengthen existing legislation, but the Government need to lead by example. Will the Minister give us some idea of how the new legislation will make a difference?

If we are asking British companies and the NHS to take steps to ensure that procurement is free from modern slavery, we must lead and not be complacent with legislation that does not achieve what it sets out to do.

It is right to pay tribute to the many parliamentarians who have advocated and worked physically and emotionally in both Westminster Hall and the main Chamber for the Uyghurs in Xinjiang province. A great deal of parliamentary time has been given to the topic, and rightly so. I want to recognise that because I believe that the efforts of both Back and Front Benchers has made a difference. In the last few years, there have been no fewer than 16 debates and 446 written questions across both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. That gives an idea of the magnitude and significance of this issue and the strength of commitment and interest from Members. There have been multiple urgent questions on the matter, and Parliament has stated that it believes there is overwhelming evidence of genocide in Xinjiang province by the Chinese Communist party. The Foreign Affairs Committee has published two reports recommending that the Government

“accept Parliament’s view that Uyghurs and other ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang are suffering genocide and crimes against humanity, and take action to bring these crimes to an end.”

We know that Christians have suffered in China. They are persecuted, their churches are knocked down, and they are continually spied upon. Those of other

[Jim Shannon]

faiths and ethnic groups, such as Falun Gong, are also subject to this incredible persecution by the Chinese Communist party. In short, there can be no doubt of the extent of support for more to be done to combat the practices of the Chinese Communist party.

It is worth noting that the efforts of this Parliament, our Government and our Ministers, as well as others in the international community, have borne fruit. Let us recognise some of the things that have happened and the good things that have been done. We often lament the dire situation in China and human rights violations more broadly, but we should take encouragement that not all efforts are in vain. Next week, at about this time, there will be a debate in the main Chamber on human rights across the world. I may have an opportunity to highlight this matter in a different way, along with many others.

China is changing its narrative on Xinjiang—at least outwardly. It has now acknowledged the existence of the re-education camps and claimed that students at those camps have graduated, focusing significant propaganda efforts to try to justify its policies. Those are only for the world and the media; the reality is very different. China is aware that there is growing awareness of its corruption, but further international action is essential. I am mindful that the Minister present is responsible for the NHS, not the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. However, I ask her what discussions she has had with the FCDO on other steps that we can take outside her Department.

In January 2021, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office announced its intention to introduce measures to ensure that

“British organisations...are not complicit in, nor profiting from, the human rights violations in Xinjiang.”

The then Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), stated that compliance with those measures will be mandatory for central Government and that:

“This package will help make sure that no British organisations, Government or private sector, deliberately or inadvertently, profit from or contribute to the human rights violations against the Uyghurs or other minorities in Xinjiang.”

It is now 550 days—more than a year and a half—since that announcement, and those measures have yet to be implemented in their totality. I therefore seek an assurance that that action will be taken and, if possible, a timescale for when that will happen.

The will of this Parliament is clear: action is needed, and action works. The Health and Care Act 2022 highlighted the scale of the problem of forced labour in the NHS, but that legislation impacts on just one Department. The import ban for the NHS is an encouraging step, but I am sure we all agree that no Government Department should procure goods produced by slave labour, whether that be in Xinjiang province in China, which is living off the backs of the Uyghurs, or in any other part of the world. No Government Department should allow China the opportunity to profit from the genocide, brutality and violence that it is carrying out against good, decent, ordinary people.

I am very proud of this country’s commitment to upholding human rights internationally. I am also proud to be a member of the United Kingdom of Great Britain

and Northern Ireland and to be MP for Strangford. I am proud and happy to support our Minister and her Department. During the UK presidency of the G7, one focus area was addressing forced labour in global supply chains and making commitments to uphold human rights and international labour standards, but we are in danger of losing that reputation.

Since the Brexit referendum, human rights standards and obligations have been removed from negotiations and the texts of trade deals. That does not fall within the remit of the Minister’s Department, and I do not expect an answer from her—I cannot ask her to answer for Departments where she has no responsibility—but will she do me the kindness of asking that question of the correct Minister? It is important that we have an idea of what has been done to address that issue, because these standards are the norm around the world. Global Britain has much to offer the world, but that cannot be at the expense of Uyghurs in Xinjiang province or of other religious or belief minority groups around the world, whether they are in China or further afield.

Her Majesty’s Government have refused to accept Parliament’s view that it is highly likely that genocide is happening in Xinjiang province, despite reams of evidence from many people, including video evidence and personal evidence from within China. That evidence has been provided by the Uyghur tribunal, United Nations monitoring trips, the Xinjiang police files, the Foreign Affairs Committee and many more. It is time to change that and to follow the example of the United States of America in recognising what is happening to the Uyghurs and others in Xinjiang province as genocide. I wish we had done the same, and I hope it can still happen.

Just this week, the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act came into force in the United States of America. The Act introduced a ban on imports from Xinjiang province following the overwhelming evidence of forced labour abuses. They had the evidence and we have access to that same evidence; we need to take the same action that they have taken. All companies have to prove they have taken due diligence of all possible steps to ensure their supply chain does not contain goods made through Uyghur forced labour.

The Act introduces penalties for companies, the ability to seize goods that originate in Xinjiang province and a testing requirement, which can include genetic testing of cotton and other goods to find out where they have come from. I hope that the Minister will ask other Departments to urgently endorse the strategy of the United States and do the same here. I am proud that the Act was drafted as a result of the G7 summit in Cornwall, in our own United Kingdom, which shows the influence we have. It is now time to follow the example of the United States. A similar ban on imports from Xinjiang province should apply not only to the NHS but to all Government Departments and further afield.

In drawing my remarks to an end, I want to highlight the next steps. First, we must ensure that the measures announced by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office on 12 January 2022 are enacted swiftly. The Government have set down some policies and some ways forward, and I would like to see them happening, and happening soon. I also seek a timescale for those policies. We must ensure that these measures, existing legislation and the new modern slavery Bill are robust enough to address reports that Uyghurs are

being moved out of Xinjiang province and into other parts of China. They are dispersing them throughout China and it is going to be hard to find out what is happening in other parts of China. It is wonderful how information seems to leak out. The Chinese Communist party is trying to hide the abuse across all parts of China. It is doing something absolutely despicable and dastardly.

Secondly, Her Majesty's Government must lead by example. The Health and Care Act sets a precedent. Each Government Department should conduct an urgent review to ensure that its supply chains do not source products from Xinjiang or have links with companies that support detention camps in the region. No Government Department should allow China the opportunity to profit from a genocide that the rest of the world has recognised and that I believe we must recognise as well.

Thirdly, the Government should introduce a central list of goods and resources that have a high risk of being produced by slave labour in Xinjiang province and implement testing requirements for Government procurement contracts that involve items on that list. At a minimum, the list should include cotton and polysilicon.

Fourthly, we need to reintroduce basic human rights standards into the negotiations and the wording of post-Brexit trade deals. That is a norm in international trade deals and, if Britain is to maintain its leading role in championing democracy and human rights, as I hope it will, we cannot sever the link between trade and human rights. The central theme that came through the international conference held last week was the connection between freedom of religious belief and human rights. The two are closely linked, and cannot be severed. Nor can we sever the link between trade and human rights, especially as younger generations put greater emphasis on corporate responsibility. The parallels are evident and should be heeded. The conference made that point.

Finally, Her Majesty's Government should revisit the outcome of the parliamentary debate that decided that it is highly likely that genocide is happening in Xinjiang province. I know that the Minister will respond by stating that it is the long-standing policy of the British Government not to make determinations in relation to genocide and that that is instead down to a competent court or tribunal. As such, I gently remind the Minister—although I am also trying to be persuasive—that the UK's duty under the 1948 convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide is to prevent genocide, not just to punish the perpetrators after the event. What is being done to prevent the genocide that is most likely going to occur, if it is not already happening?

There was a debate in the main Chamber earlier on Srebrenica. That offers a reminder of the many places across the world where massacres and genocide have been carried out. We always hope that each one will be the last, but unfortunately that is not the case. I am very pleased that this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a leading voice on the international stage, well known for its advancement of human rights, particularly that of freedom of religion or belief. Let us not damage that reputation by failing to act.

At last week's international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief, a quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer was repeated, over and over again, in different seminars and fringe events. Many will know it:

"Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."

Those words are as relevant today as they were many years ago.

Parliament has spoken. Her Majesty's Government must lead by example. Will the Minister address the need that all Government Departments—she can speak for her Department and the discussions she has had with others—should not procure any goods whatsoever made in Xinjiang? What steps will Her Majesty's Government take to reach that goal? What discussions have taken place with other countries to do the same?

I look forward to hearing from the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar). I think we are a tag team, as he is always here in Westminster Hall, as is the Labour party's shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West).

I am pleased to see the Minister in her place, and I look forward to her response. I also look forward to the remarks of others, because they, like me, believe that what happens in Xinjiang province is unacceptable and that we have role to play in that. I am very pleased to have had the opportunity to come along and make my comments.

2.20 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Rees. I applaud the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this vital debate and, more importantly, for informing us all so well about the subject. It really is abhorrent to think that, in the 21st century, we are still discussing the plight of slave workers and forced labour practices. This can and will only change when the Government change and their outlook on human rights changes too—becoming one of sympathy and compassion, not of collusion and indifference.

From the very start of the covid-19 pandemic, the UK Government's remaining morals were unfortunately diminished. With the desire to sustain a harsh Brexiteer stance, the then Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), refused to take part in an EU-wide scheme to obtain necessary PPE and ventilators in a legitimate manner, choosing instead to favour companies responsible for committing some of the greatest humanitarian rights offences of recent times. Various pieces of evidence have emerged over the past two years, and I would like to share a few of them with the House.

In November 2020, *The Guardian* reported that the Government had sourced PPE from factories in China where hundreds of North Korean women had been working in modern slavery conditions. In December 2020, the BBC revealed that a charity set up by the *Daily Mail* to buy protective equipment for NHS staff donated 100,000 face masks that were suspected of being made via forced Uyghur labour in Xinjiang province. In February 2022, it was revealed that the UK had bought around £5.8 billion-worth of lateral flow tests from China, where the use of forced labour in re-education camps is a known UN human rights concern.

Even the British Medical Association report of July 2021 confirmed:

"Many of the masks and aprons distributed in the first six months of the pandemic were sourced from China and the majority of the 1.9 billion examination gloves were sourced from Malaysia",

[Steven Bonnar]

and that there are

“serious labour rights concerns in the production of PPE.”

No matter the circumstances and the dire need for equipment, purchases of any form cannot and should not occur when unethical practices are at play. Surely that is the very least that a compassionate Government should be ensuring.

I welcome the steps taken in recent months to combat this issue. The UK Government recently announced that NHS England would be barred from using goods and services linked to slavery or human trafficking. Although we in the Scottish National party agree with such action, the question remains as to why more concrete action was not taken sooner. To fully rectify the issue of unethical supply chains, the UK Government could insert a “duty to protect” clause within the parameters of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, meaning that all procurement agencies would be legally obliged to ensure that all products imported into or sold in the UK were not obtained through unethical supply chains.

On top of that, the UK Government still have a questionable track record on their efforts to deter forced labour products. In 2021, the Government opposed the so-called genocide amendment to the Trade Act 2021, which would have seen the High Courts of England and Wales establishing preliminary rulings on the occurrence of genocide in states, and then requiring the UK Government to revoke any trade agreements with countries where potential genocide was found by domestic courts. The UK Government have still never given an adequate answer to why they opposed the genocide amendment, so perhaps the Minister will enlighten us. From a human rights perspective, I believe there is no clear justification for the Government’s position.

The Scottish Government have worked hard to ensure that PPE supply chains in Scotland are safeguarded from forced labour products. From the outset of the pandemic, the Scottish Government have worked with the NHS and Scottish suppliers, and on a four-nation basis, to ensure that Scotland has adequate stocks of PPE. In Scotland, 88% of PPE is produced locally, and overall costs of pandemic procurement were a third less than those in the rest of the UK. That proves that the Scottish Government have worked to significantly enhance domestic production of PPE to mitigate global supply chain problems that emerged during the pandemic.

The SNP is committed to retaining powerful safeguards on the use of public money in healthcare through strong procurement rules. We are fully committed to the safety and wellbeing of medical staff and healthcare professionals, while also ensuring ethical supply chains for all medical and protective equipment. I cannot urge the UK Government enough to follow suit and replicate this truly ethical model. More importantly, the Scottish Government did not engage in the cronyism and corruption of this Government in the acquisition of PPE. While the Conservative party flogged PPE contracts to party donors and friends of Ministers in their unlawful VIP PPE lane, the Scottish Government kept robust processes in place to ensure value for money, meaning that the Scottish Government paid a third less for PPE than the UK Government did.

Where possible, all PPE acquired will be used in Scotland’s hospitals, care homes and other healthcare settings. Our stockpile of unused PPE is therefore vastly

smaller than that of England. Instead of selling off unused PPE to Government contacts for pennies—as the Tories are doing—the much smaller amount of unused PPE in Scotland is being either maintained for use or donated to charities and shared with nations, such as Malawi and Zambia, which desperately need it.

I will end by saying that the fight against the covid-19 pandemic is a global one, and it is right that the Scottish Government support international partners and less well-off nations in their tackling of the pandemic. Donating excess PPE is one way of achieving that, and it is a model example that I hope the UK Government will also take forward.

2.26 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing it. He is, of course, well known in the House for his commitment to the defence of human rights and the freedom of religion or belief. Given the ongoing Conservative party leadership election, and the comments made by some candidates in recent days regarding policies and views relating to China and human rights, this debate is particularly timely.

Having a new Prime Minister and a fresh ministerial team this autumn will give us a real opportunity to do the right thing, not only in purchasing PPE but in applying pressure on Governments and in legislating to ensure that private sector organisations do their bit to promote human rights. The number of human rights staff in overseas posts has been cut back severely since 2010. I sincerely hope that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will replace them, because that is how we know exactly what conditions are like in manufacturing and overseas supply chains.

We know that there are many concerns about supply chains that arise from the Xinjiang province of China, with the Chinese Government being routinely accused of using the Uyghur minority population as slave labour. As the hon. Member for Strangford has said, at least 20% of all global cotton and 80% of Chinese domestic production, has its provenance on the Xinjiang region. The scale of the problem is why this issue is so important.

It is vital that the NHS, as one of our proudest national achievements and a large purchasing unit, is not implicated, either directly or indirectly, in forced labour or questionable supply chains. But we know, sadly, that that is often the case. Pre-pandemic, PPE global supply chains were already known to be riddled with trade union and human rights violations, but it has worsened in the past 28 months. However, many of the companies supplying PPE have vastly increased their profits.

Forced labour has increased but this is not just a story about forced labour. Authoritarian Governments have used the pandemic to further restrict workers from organising into trade unions. All over the world, in all sectors, collective bargaining agreements have been ripped up and thrown away. In a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific area, wage theft is sadly a feature of the production of PPE basics such as rubber gloves, gowns and surgical masks.

I acknowledge the ongoing work of the trade union movement, not least Unison, which has been campaigning on this issue for some time. Labour’s position has

always been clear and consistent—that we must remove any suggestion of forced labour from the NHS’s PPE supply chain.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), the shadow Health Secretary, has spoken clearly about Labour’s support for legislative measures during the passage of the Health and Care Act 2022, particularly given the significant amount of public money that has been wasted through crony contracting. The Government should resource adequately the checks on procurement and bring to book any companies that fail to follow guidelines on supply chains. We cannot allow public money for our NHS to pay for questionable contracts, to enable forced labour, or to be part of our entering trade deals that contradict the spirit of the UK’s obligations under the genocide convention.

The issue is not new and today is not the first time that it has been raised. As we are aware, there is a requirement on Governments that are signatories to the genocide convention to act even when there is only a suspicion that genocide might have occurred, and not to turn a blind eye to human rights infringements.

As the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned in his opening remarks, the House has voted that the evidence that has been brought to light about slave labour in the People’s Republic of China amounts to evidence of a genocide. There is some debate in wider terms around that issue, but the genocide convention bypasses that point and that debate about definition by saying that even when there is just a suspicion that there could be some form of genocide, Governments who are signatories to that convention ought to take action. Consequently, I am pleased that following the passage of the Health and Care Act 2022, there has been some movement by the Government.

I urge the Minister to respond to the points that have been made in this debate, to clarify the position today; the 2022 Act completed its passage only a short time ago. What cross-departmental work is being undertaken to apply the guidelines that we have discussed across other Government procurement practices? What guidelines have been issued to local government, for example? The average local authority in inner London has a £1 billion turnover. Other large purchasing units at Government level also ought to be aware of the duty to prevent potential human slavery or potential genocide. What discussions has she had with the trade union movement to ensure that its views, expertise and research are integral to the formation of any strategy to clean up our supply chains?

2.32 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees.

I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate and on all his hard work, alongside Members such as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), on this significant issue. It is important to debate the supply chain for NHS PPE, to learn lessons from the past and to ensure that robust systems are in place for the future. I reassure him, and all hon. Members, that this matter is a priority for the Department and we continue to take steps to ensure that there are robust systems to safeguard against the coming into the system of supplies that may be

linked to slavery or forced labour. I am pleased that this issue was debated during the passage of the Health and Care Act 2022, and further legislation will be introduced to address it.

However, I must put it on the record that our priority during the pandemic, as Members will understand, was to protect our frontline staff. This was a global crisis, in which we were competing against many countries to secure PPE for our frontline workers. Nevertheless, we had and still have a responsibility to those across the PPE supply chain to make sure that when PPE is procured, it is done responsibly and does not put people in any part of that chain at risk. It is absolutely important that we do that both globally and domestically, because although the hon. Member for Strangford rightly mentioned the Uyghurs in China, we have heard only too well this week from Mo Farah that slave labour and slavery exist in this country as well.

I take the point that the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) raised about his concerns about the Government’s approach, but I will gently say that the *Herald on Sunday* stated that during the pandemic, half a billion pounds-worth of procurement in Scotland did not go through the usual scrutiny process, either—and that was just one report. That reflects the fact that all countries during the pandemic had to make tough decisions to get supplies through, safeguard frontline services and ensure that those pieces of equipment were in place. Where lessons need to be learned, we absolutely will do so. Since the pandemic, almost 40 billion items of PPE have been ordered and almost 20 billion were distributed by March 2022. We are still distributing over 600 million items a month. That shows the scale of the amount of PPE that we have had to distribute. Hon. Members will be aware that covid rates are still high at the moment, so PPE is still very much needed by our frontline staff.

Global chains were used to procure many supplies, whether aprons, gloves or masks, but where possible we have tried to escalate domestic supply, because while it is not 100% failsafe against slavery, it is more likely that there are robust systems in place. To effectively distribute the supply across health and social care settings, we have built a distribution network from scratch and adopted a sophisticated sales and operations planning system to regulate supply and distribution. We have a clear understanding of where the stock has come from and the processes in place to ensure that slavery or forced labour was not used in any part of that chain. Part of the network is using technology to track and trace where that supply comes from, and if there are queries or concerns in the future, we are able to look back and see where those supplies came from. Since April 2020, over 6.9 billion PPE items have been ordered through that e-portal system.

As we move to living with covid, the decision has been made to step down some of the Department’s work on the PPE programme, and we are handing that over to the NHS supply chain more generally. Safeguards in the Act ensure that some of that work will continue to happen. Modern slavery encompasses the offences of slavery, servitude, forced and compulsory labour and human trafficking. The NHS has a significant role to play in combating modern slavery, including by taking steps to ensure that the NHS supply chains and business activities are free from labour abuses. The Government

[*Maria Caulfield*]

rely on their suppliers for the delivery of many important public services, and we expect high standards of business ethics from our suppliers—and their agents. They will be routinely checked for that.

The Department follows a procurement approach, as set out in the UK Government modern slavery statement, that includes a zero-tolerance approach to modern slavery and a commitment to ensure that respect for human rights is built into all our contracts, self-assessments, audits, training and capacity building. I reassure the hon. Member for Strangford that if there is a complaint or a suggestion of any supply being involved in slavery or forced labour, we can lock down that stock until an investigation is concluded. We can then unlock it if no evidence is found, but we can stop some of those contracts if there is evidence of forced labour. We look at what happens in other countries—he touched on the US—and if other countries are finding evidence of slave labour used in any part of the supply chain, investigations will start on UK stock as well.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for her positive response. Clearly, the United States has taken a line of legislative action. Has the Minister had a chance to discuss or get ideas from what the States are doing and what drove them to do that? I posed that question and both hon. Members who spoke asked the same question. If they can do it in the States, we can do it here.

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely. We have secondary legislation coming forward that will enact what was agreed in the Health and Care Act 2022, which will look at some of this issue. The Procurement Bill is also passing through the House of Lords and will come to our Chamber. It will look at procurement more generally, not just NHS procurement. If he and other hon. Members with a keen interest in the subject, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, have specific questions on NHS procurement, I am happy for them to write to me and we shall see whether we can look at them as part of scrutiny of the Bill as it progresses. He is right that we want to ensure that we are learning lessons and sharing best practice across the board. I cannot speak for other Departments, but we are keen to get that right for the NHS where possible.

We are taking steps to achieve greater supply chain visibility, particularly where risks are highest, with the recognition that workers in the lower tiers of supply chains are often the most vulnerable. In line with that, we ensure that all contracts placed by the Department adhere to standard terms and conditions that include clauses requiring good industry practice to ensure that there is no slavery or human trafficking in supply chains.

Suppliers appointed to NHS supply chain frameworks must also comply with those standards or they can be removed from consideration for future opportunities. All the suppliers of PPE frameworks let in conjunction with the Department were registered and required to complete a modern slavery assessment and a labour standards assessment. Our purchase process includes safeguards to strengthen due diligence and to terminate a contract should there be substantiated allegations against a provider.

We are not content to rest on the status quo, which is why the Health and Care Act contained a regulation-making power that will come into force, designed to eradicate the use in the NHS of goods or services tainted by slavery or human trafficking. The regulations will set out the steps that the NHS should be taking to assess the level of risk associated with individual suppliers and the basis on which it should exclude them from a tendering process. Those regulations will help to ensure that the NHS, the biggest public procurer in the country, is not buying or using any goods or services produced by or involving any kind of slave labour. It represents a significant step forward in our mission to crack down on the evils of modern slavery wherever they are found. We are grateful to the work of modern slavery campaigners, who hailed the regulations as

“the most significant development in supply chain regulation since the Modern Slavery Act 2015”.

Alongside those regulations, the Health and Care Act also requires the Secretary of State to carry out a review into the risk of slavery and human trafficking taking place in NHS supply chains and to lay before Parliament a report on its outcomes. That review will focus on NHS supply chain activity, as well as supporting the NHS to identify and mitigate risks with a view to resolving issues. The review and the regulations will send a clear signal to suppliers that the NHS will not tolerate human rights abuses in its supply chain; they will create significant incentives for suppliers to review their practices; and they will block, if necessary, any suppliers that are found to be using human trafficking or slave labour.

I was moved to hear the cases of the Uyghurs that the hon. Member for Strangford raised. He is right that that goes far beyond the NHS, which is why the Procurement Bill, currently passing through the other place, is an important piece of legislation. I am sure that he and other hon. Members, such as my hon. Friends the Members for Wealden (Ms Ghani) and for Congleton, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who are assiduous campaigners on the issue, will take a keen interest in that.

I conclude by thanking all hon. Members for their contributions. Modern day slavery is a deplorable practice that causes irreversible harm to those affected. We all have a responsibility to call it out. As a Department, we take it extremely seriously. I hope that, by sharing what is happening, I have given hon. Members confidence that we will do all we can to root it out and take out of our supply chains any affected pieces of equipment.

Catherine West: The Minister is being generous; I recognise that she is speaking from a health perspective. Will she undertake to write to hon. Members present about the Government’s progress on cross-departmental best practice sharing from her Department?

Maria Caulfield: I am very happy to do that. While I have been able to highlight what the NHS is doing, some good cross-departmental work is also being done on procurement and on identifying where slavery is happening both globally and domestically. I highlighted the evidence from Mo Farah this week. We must not take it for granted that slavery is not happening in this country. I am happy to write to the shadow Minister and those who have taken part in the debate to highlight

the work that is happening across the Government. It has to be a cross-Government initiative to make sure that we are all working together to root this out. Much remains to be done to ensure that we deliver the message that modern day slavery is completely unacceptable. I look forward to working with MPs across the House to make sure that we all do our bit.

Christina Rees (in the Chair): Jim Shannon, would you like a couple of minutes to wind up?

2.45 pm

Jim Shannon: I would. I shall be only two minutes. I thank the two shadow spokespeople. I thank the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) for his always helpful contributions. He and I seem to be in all the debates together. It does not lessen our interest in these issues, because pursuing them is what brings us together. He referred to the serious labour rights concerns that a compassionate Government need to respond to. We all agreed on genocide, including the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West). She referred to the scale of the problem. It almost takes our breath away sometimes when we realise how massive the problem is. She also mentioned the trade unions, which have worked throughout the world; I recognise that. Trade unions play a critical role around the world; we thank them for all that they do.

In trade deals, human rights must be protected. I think the Government are already doing that, but it is good to call for it again. Hon. Members also mentioned cross-departmental work and the roles that must be fulfilled. In a late intervention, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green made an important point. When the Minister gets feedback from the other Departments, perhaps those who have participated today, and my

hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and I, will take the opportunity to express our views and have a chat with the Minister.

The Minister was helpful, as she always is. I wrote down some of the things she said. The Procurement Bill is coming through and we will all be able to feed into that process. The Government have made a commitment to use the modern slavery Bill to take significant steps against human trafficking and to block activities if necessary. I like the idea that if there is an accusation, there is a block right away until the matter is checked out evidentially. If it is proven to be true, it is stopped. That is positive stuff, and I welcome that.

I also mentioned the importance of following best practice when evidence is found. I understand—I think we all do—that the Government responded to covid-19 in the way that they had to. It is not a criticism: perhaps corners were cut—but that had to be done because otherwise we would never have got things in place. Now that we have got past that stage, it is time to get procurement right. This debate has been about getting it right.

I thank everyone who participated—the hon. Members for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill and for Hornsey and Wood Green, and the Minister. I also thank you, Ms Rees. You are always very gentle but firm, and I thank you for your chairmanship of all the debates. I also thank the civil servants, who make sure that the debates go smoothly and get Ministers the answers, and I thank all the staff. Thank you so much, everyone.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered forced labour and NHS PPE supply chains.

2.49 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 14 July 2022

CABINET OFFICE

Presidency of the G7: UK 2021

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): I would like to update Parliament on the outcomes of the UK's G7 presidency in 2021 and the costs of the 2021 G7 summit in Carbis Bay, Cornwall.

As the most prominent grouping of democratic countries, the G7 has long been the catalyst for decisive international action to tackle the greatest challenges we face. Alongside leaders from G7 nations and the EU, the Prime Minister also invited leaders from Australia, India, the Republic of Korea and South Africa to attend the summit as guest countries. Between them, the leaders represented almost two-thirds of people living in democracies around the world.

The summit in Cornwall was the first in-person gathering of G7 leaders in almost two years and was a crucial opportunity to build back better from the covid-19 pandemic, uniting to make the future fairer, greener and more prosperous.

Under the UK's leadership, the G7 made major achievements during the course of last year's presidency, both through the leaders' summit and through a series of ministerial policy tracks. These include:

Ending financing for coal power, which was then adopted by 25 nations and major finance institutions at COP26;

A global commitment to protect, conserve or restore 30% of land and ocean areas by 2030 (the 30 by 30 initiative), which was then adopted by 70 countries at COP26;

Establishing the G7 partnership for infrastructure and investment which will support the developing world to invest in clean, green infrastructure;

A commitment to provide a combined total of 1 billion covid-19 vaccines to poorer countries in order to vaccinate the world by the end of 2022, support for a "global pandemic radar" to spot pathogens before they spread and develop the ability to create new vaccines, treatments and tests in 100 days;

A collective G7 pledge of at least \$2.75 billion funding over the next five years for the global partnership for education replenishment, and a G7 endorsement of two new global girls' education targets to ensure that, by 2026, 40 million more girls are in school and 20 million more girls are reading by the age of 10 or by the end of primary school.

More than 130 countries (representing more than 90% of world GDP) signed up to a new international corporate tax framework, including working to implement the 15% minimum global tax rate.

Benefits to the UK

The benefits to Cornwall of hosting the G7 summit in Carbis Bay and the international media centre in Falmouth were felt across the duchy.

Local suppliers were used for food, drink, hospitality and gifts enjoyed by leaders and their delegations. Local artisans were profiled as a result of their contribution to the event. Her Majesty's Government estimate that a minimum of £28.7 million was provided to Cornwall

through Cornish suppliers and businesses, Cornwall Council and Cornwall Police. This includes a significant investment of £7.8 million in Cornwall Airport Newquay to improve its facilities and support its transition to becoming one of the UK's first licensed spaceports, directly creating 200 high-skilled jobs and forecasted to bring £200 million to the Cornish economy by 2035.

Visit Cornwall estimated that the value of the international spotlight on Cornwall was at least £50 million through increased bookings from international travellers.

In addition, £2.16 million was provided for legacy projects throughout Cornwall, including nature recovery, creating opportunities for young people and supporting local regeneration.

Sustainability

The Government were committed to hosting a green summit, and successfully achieved both carbon neutral certification and the International Organization for Standardization 20121, an international standard for sustainable event management.

Costs

The total estimated cost of putting on a safe and secure G7 summit at Carbis Bay in Cornwall was £90.7 million, split between the costs of the event itself and the costs of policing and security in Cornwall. This was under budget and cost less in real terms than the previous UK-hosted G8 summit at Lough Erne in 2013. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office managed the logistical arrangements for the summit.

The Home Office co-ordinated policing and security for the G7 summit with Devon and Cornwall police, other security partners and Whitehall Departments. The total costs of the police and security operation were approximately £52.7 million. DCP were responsible for the operational delivery of a secure summit, involving almost 1,500 DCP officers and staff supplemented by 5,000 mutual aid police officers from police forces in England and Wales, and Scotland.

The experience of hosting the G7 summit also supported savings for COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021, the largest event of its kind that the UK has ever hosted.

Additional information

The UK presidency of the G7 also included work across seven ministerial tracks, run by relevant Government Departments with support from the Cabinet Office G7 taskforce, as well as six official G7 engagement groups and two advisory panels: the economic resilience panel and gender equality advisory committee. Costs for these elements are not included in this statement.

[HCWS203]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

People with a Learning Disability and Autistic People: Sixth Annual Report

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): Since becoming the Minister for Care and Mental Health in September 2021, I have had the privilege of engaging and meeting with many people with a learning disability, autistic people and their families, carers and many dedicated health and social care staff. It deeply saddens me to hear some of the stories they have shared of experiences of poor health and care service provision and the premature loss of a

loved one. That is why today I would like to acknowledge the publication of the sixth annual report of the “Learning from lives and deaths—People with a learning disability and autistic people” (LeDeR) programme compiled by the King’s College University and its partners (University of Central Lancashire and Kingston and St George’s Universities). A copy of the sixth annual LeDeR report will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

The annual LeDeR report remains a crucial source of evidence that enables us to build up a detailed picture of the key improvements needed, both locally and at a national level, to tackle existing health disparities faced by people with a learning disability. It is an important step that as of January 2022, LeDeR reporting will be inclusive of the deaths of autistic people. This new information will be included in next year’s report.

It is encouraging that the sixth LeDeR report found that the life expectancy of a person with a learning disability has improved by one year for both males and females in 2021. The report also highlighted the phenomenal work of learning disability liaison nurses whose role in acute hospital settings has been

“valued as a bridge between the principles and the provision of good care”.

This signals some improvement in the right direction, but there is much more to be done, such as reducing the number of avoidable and excess deaths of people with a learning disability.

I must acknowledge the unique circumstances that the pandemic presented in 2021; for the second year in a row covid-19 remains the leading cause of death for people with a learning disability. The LeDeR report highlights that during 2021 the rate of excess deaths from covid-19 was more than two times higher for people with a learning disability compared to the general population.

The report shows that people with a learning disability who were unvaccinated were nine times more likely to die of covid-19 than another cause compared to those who were vaccinated. These findings highlight the importance of the vaccination programme and the sustained focus on its roll out and uptake. NHS England have continued to engage on the delivery of reasonable adjustments in the vaccination programme and are offering a further booster in autumn 2022 for adults who are in a clinical risk group following the success of last year’s autumn booster programme.

We have made it clear throughout the pandemic that blanket application of “do not attempt cardiopulmonary resuscitation” (DNACPR) decisions is never appropriate. Concerningly, the report highlights an increase in the proportion of deaths in which the reviewer was unable to determine whether the process for making a DNACPR decision had been correctly followed. Whether the process for DNACPR decisions were correctly followed and completed properly were unknown for around a third of people whose deaths were reviewed in 2021 due to insufficient data. We will continue to monitor this closely and measure the impacts of steps already taken and planned to address inappropriate DNACPR decisions and recording of decisions, including the new requirement which came into force on 1 April 2022, requiring GPs to record conversations about end-of-life care and DNACPRs as part of annual health checks.

There have been recurring themes in previous years’ reports that have prompted action, and some are present

once again in this year’s report. Amongst these, the most prominent were the need for greater learning disability and autism awareness training, and the significant under reporting of deaths and increased health disparities among people from an ethnic minority.

I am pleased that we are taking action to address these issues. As of June 2021, NHS England have begun carrying out focused reviews for every death of a person from an ethnic minority that is reported to LeDeR.

The Government have introduced a new requirement in the Health and Care Act 2022 requiring Care Quality Commission registered service providers to ensure their employees receive learning disability and autism training appropriate to their role. Significant progress has been made on the Oliver McGowan mandatory training programme to support this new requirement, with over 8,000 people participating in the trials in 2021. A final evaluation report was published in June 2022 which will inform next steps. This action will help to ensure health and social care staff have the skills and knowledge to provide safe, compassionate, and informed care.

NHS England has published its action from learning report alongside the sixth LeDeR report, setting out a range of work taking place to improve the safety and quality of care to reduce early deaths and health disparities. We will continue to work with all our partners to ensure we are tackling the issues raised with urgency.

[HCWS204]

People with a Learning Disability and Autistic People: Support Action Plan

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): Today I am delighted to announce the publication of the “Building the right support” action plan. This action plan aims to reduce reliance on in-patient care in mental health hospitals for people with a learning disability and autistic people of all ages by building the right support in the community.

People with a learning disability and autistic people should live in their own home and have the right support in place to live an ordinary life. This includes access to education, employment and other opportunities which help people to fulfil their aspirations. We know these aspirations are not currently being met.

The action plan brings together the commitments that have been made by different partners to realise this aim.

We want this action plan to support the NHS long-term plan commitment to achieve a 50% net reduction in the number of people with a learning disability and autistic people being cared for in an in-patient unit by the end of March 2024. There may be times when admission to a mental health hospital is necessary and has a therapeutic benefit. Where this is the case, we are clear that this care should be of high quality, the least restrictive possible and for the shortest time possible. It should also be close to home so that a connection can be maintained with family, friends, and their local community.

Too often we have heard that the care of people with a learning disability and autistic people in specialist mental health in-patient care has fallen far short of the standards we would expect. Instances of abuse or poor care, as seen in appalling cases such as Winterbourne

View, Whorlton Hall and Cawston Park, are unacceptable. I am determined that, working with our partners, we do everything we can stop this from happening again. I am pleased the NHS is taking action to avoid admitting people with a learning disability and autistic people to hospital settings rated inadequate by the CQC unless, in exceptional circumstances, it is in the best interests of the individual and their family and is being done with their involvement.

In the manifesto, we committed to improving how people with a learning disability and autistic people are treated in law and to making it easier for them to be discharged from hospital. Our proposed reforms to the Mental Health Act will support this by ensuring people with a learning disability and autistic people can only be detained where there is a clear mental health need and by creating new duties on commissioners to ensure that there are sufficient community-based services in their local area to support people with a learning disability and autistic people.

Delivering “Building the right support” is a joint endeavour—no one organisation can make this happen on their own. The “Building the right support” delivery board, which I chair, brings together organisations with the levers to make change happen. The board will have oversight of the implementation of this plan.

The action plan includes:

- work to ensure that people with a learning disability and autistic people receive high quality care and support, and are safe;
- a commitment to make it easier to leave hospital when people are ready;
- what is being done to enable people to live an ordinary life in the community, for example with the right housing and support;
- specific activities to enable a good start to life, including early diagnosis and positive : experiences of education;
- reforms across Government to make wider improvements, such as the Mental Health Act and adult social care reforms; and,
- work and changes to deliver increased integration and join-up across systems.

We also recognise that the way that funding flows through and across the health and social care system can impact on the provision of support and people’s overall experiences of care. To support this, we commissioned an independent consultancy organisation to undertake a rapid review of funding flows. I am pleased that we have been able to publish the report alongside the plan today and I will work with the delivery board to take forward action in response to the findings.

[HCWS202]

Petitions

Thursday 14 July 2022

PRESENTED PETITIONS

Petitions presented to the House but not read on the Floor; received 13 July.

Schools Bill

The petition of residents of the constituency of Nottingham North,

Declares that the petitioners reject the imposition of an expensive, disproportionate, invasive and ill-judged registration and monitoring system for home educated children, which undermines the long-standing statutory recognition of the primacy of parents in determining the education of their children.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons remove parts 3 and 4 of the Schools Bill and urges the Government urgently to conduct proper independent research into the outcome of home educated

children and further, that the Government provide tangible support for home educating families including in the provision of access to examinations.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Alex Norris.*]

[P002755]

The petition of residents of the constituency of Eltham,

Declares that the petitioners reject the imposition of an expensive, disproportionate, invasive and ill-judged registration and monitoring system for home educated children, which undermines the long-standing statutory recognition of the primacy of parents in determining the education of their children.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons remove parts 3 and 4 of the Schools Bill and urges the Government urgently to conduct proper independent research into the outcome of home educated children and further, that the Government provide tangible support for home educating families including in the provision of access to examinations.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Clive Efford.*]

[P002756]

Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 14 July 2022

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE Sri Lanka

The following is an extract from the urgent question on Sri Lanka on 13 July 2022.

Sir Stephen Timms: When David Cameron was Prime Minister, he visited Sri Lanka in 2013. After that, the UK, with Sri Lanka, jointly moved a resolution at the United Nations Human Rights Council setting out a mechanism for resolving the legacy of the issues that we have heard about. Sri Lanka has largely ignored its obligations under that resolution since then, and it has not even paid lip service to them in the past three years. Will it be a requirement of the medium-term support that will be needed for Sri Lanka that it comes back into compliance with its obligations under the decisions of the UNHRC?

Amanda Milling: Through our leadership in the UN Human Rights Council process, we have been encouraging Sri Lanka to respect democratic and international human rights standards as it makes its political transition. In March this year, the UK Government and our core group of partners led an ambitious new resolution on Sri Lanka at the UNHRC.

[Official Report, 13 July 2022, Vol. 718, c. 350.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Asia and the Middle East:

An error has been identified in my response to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms).

The correct response should have been:

Amanda Milling: Through our leadership in the UN Human Rights Council process, we have been encouraging Sri Lanka to respect democratic and international human rights standards as it makes its political transition. In **March last year**, the UK Government and our core group of partners led an ambitious new resolution on Sri Lanka at the UNHRC.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from questions to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 11 July 2022.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I know what the Government have said they are doing to increase the uptake of pension credit, and that is good;

I do not want to hear it again, though. I also know that people can backdate their claims for pension credit, so anyone who makes a successful application by 24 August this year will receive the £650. However, I have been campaigning for the deadline to be extended to the end of the fiscal year, because I think that as we go into the winter, that is what will concentrate people's minds when they have to make the very real choice between heating and eating. I am not asking the Minister to commit himself to doing this today, but will he commit himself to at least considering extending the deadline to 31 March next year?

Guy Opperman: The uptake of pension credit is clearly to be applauded, and I sincerely hope that the hon. Lady was behind the pension credit day of action and is behind the messages that we are all trying to put out. That is not all, however. On Thursday we will make the £326 cost of living payment, which will drop £1 million in payments every single working day, and there will be a further £324 payment in the autumn. We are also providing the energy support grant of £400, which will go to every individual in the country, as well as the £300 winter fuel payment, the council tax rebate, and various other household support grants. All those are available to individuals up and down the country, and will also support pensioners.

[Official Report, 11 July 2022, Vol. 718, c. 20.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin).

The correct response should have been:

Guy Opperman: The uptake of pension credit is clearly to be applauded, and I sincerely hope that the hon. Lady was behind the pension credit day of action and is behind the messages that we are all trying to put out. That is not all, however. On Thursday we will make the £326 cost of living payment, which will drop £1 million in payments every single working day, and there will be a further £324 payment in the autumn. We are also providing the energy support grant of £400, which will go to every individual **registered household** in the country, as well as the £300 winter fuel payment, the council tax rebate, and various other household support grants. All those are available to individuals up and down the country, and will also support pensioners.

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